


Nick Cave, Dolly Parton, and Sojourner Truth Walk into a Bar...

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...tended by Immanuel Kant. They ask him: “So, tell us, Kant, according to your philosophy, what the hell are we and life all about?” To understand Kant’s answer, as I believe it could have been, we must first know a little more about each of Kant’s patrons and his philosophy.

Nick Cave recently explained that it was not until he experienced the worst of losses—the death of his two children—that he understood love of humanity, kindness, and deep joy in the fact of life.¹ He also said that music has an amazing capacity to bring us—humanity—together, and that because of this immense power, we need to learn to use it well. Cave is not the first musician to realize their best self both in the face of the world’s cruelties and in the power of music for experiencing and creating good, deep love of humanity, and profound joy in the world.

Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee’s *Dolly Parton’s America* recounts two stories in particular that speak not only to Parton’s musical genius but also to how she became herself.² In the first, Parton recalls a woman in her town whom adult men whistled at when she walked down the street; they both desired and denigrated her for her perceived promiscuity. Parton remembers her child self simply finding this woman utterly gorgeous and deciding that she wanted to be just like this woman when she grew up.

Parton was raised in a strict evangelical Christian community she did not experience as deeply committed to anything recognizable as good. Instead, in the name of goodness and God, the community was prejudicial, life-denying, and hypocritical. Parton, according to the second story, found refuge singing in an old, abandoned church with a partially functioning piano and walls scrawled with sexual graffiti, some of which she authored. One day, after singing in the dilapidated church for hours, Parton felt the presence of deep goodness, of bottomless, all-encompassing love, which for her is spirituality. And as she walked out of the church that day, she had found herself, Dolly Parton: a life-affirming (including sexuality-affirming) musician whose creative work is aimed at a better world; whose embodied, social appearance is deeply inspired by the woman who was loved and hated in her town; and who experiences herself as grounded in a good, loving spirituality. When Parton feels she is losing her way a little, she returns, emotionally, to that spiritual room where she first found herself to let herself be filled with deep love of life.

For me, Cave and Parton call to mind Sojourner Truth, who found herself—including her name—in 1843 when she experienced God as having called on her to go into the world to give hope. Truth became famous for, among other things, being able to move people toward goodness through song. For many, she was able to create spiritual spaces in the way that not only Black churches but also many Black women musicians and singers after her, such as Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin, are so well known for.³

It is near impossible, in my view, to imagine the best of America and the world without bringing to heart and mind these incredible musicians—and others like them. Through their music and songs, they move people across political, religious, and cultural boundaries anywhere on the planet. For example, as we also learn in *Dolly Parton’s America*, toward the end of Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment at Robben Island, the prisoners were permitted to occasionally play music over the speakers. A favorite of Mandela’s was Parton’s “Jolene.” And on the other side of the world, one of my best musical childhood memories, also set on an island—Osterøy, in Norway—is of listening to Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers sing “Islands in the Stream” on our TV in

¹ <https://youtu.be/G8qmV6MYCF4?si=niJzYZdHr3vsa3qs>

² <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america>

³ Sojourner Truth also had an incredible academic mind; in my philosophy circles she is famous for giving one of the most powerful political speeches of all time, namely “Aren’t I a Woman.” For more on this speech, see: <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/>

1983. This song still has the power to call to my mind one of my brothers, who without exception had my back when things got rough and life appeared overwhelmingly difficult.

I experience the philosophy of Immanuel Kant in the same way many people, myself included, experience music. Each time I come to understand something brilliant in his theory or see how something in it can help make better sense of the world we live in, my mind becomes wide open: I am thrilled and amazed and then feel a meaningful, grounding peace. A recent one of these realizations helped me understand why holding a spiritual, existential commitment to amazement and awe of the world can be experienced as necessary to holding on to oneself and to goodness—and maybe especially so if one is as incredibly, creatively talented as Cave, Parton, and Truth are—and why this might only become evident to us when the world shows us its horrific side.

Kant thinks that the highest good—that is, the best, most meaningful kind of life we can live—is to pursue happiness within the bounds of morality: We should treat others and ourselves as having dignity—as ends in ourselves. We should also try to improve ourselves when life allows. And we should assist others in their pursuit of happiness. Living in this way is the only one that makes deep sense; it is the one we can morally and emotionally own all the way, including when facing death. This is why, Kant thinks, that sometimes we must act in ways that will not make us happy and yet we must so act because it is the right thing to do. To illustrate, consider Nelson Mandela, who stood up against the South African apartheid regime and he did so not because it would make him happy but because it was the right thing to do. This is why, on this approach, he is a moral ideal for us, for humankind. Also, when, toward the end of his life, Mandela was happier again—after prison, after being reunited with his family, after having found affectionate love again, and after being able to engage with politics in productive ways—we responded by being deeply happy for him; he deserved to be happy. And, so, he could face death peacefully too; he could own what he was all about.

There is a puzzle, however, that arises with this conception of the highest good. To get it more starkly into view, imagine that there was no good, last phase of Mandela's life, that he died on Robben Island. Alternatively, think about all those who do bad, even horrific things and who seem to live happily ever after. Or think about the many good people who live deeply unhappy lives or innocent children who suffer or die meaninglessly. In other words, we might worry that Kant's proposed idea of the highest good is suitable to a world in which people are actually happy in proportion to their virtue, but this is not our world. In our world, bad people often appear to get away with the worst of things, including abusing, assaulting, killing, or starting wars while good people become their victims and die without justice, and accidents and bad health appear to strike indiscriminately. Maybe, in other words, it is foolish or naive to conceive of the highest good as pursuing happiness within the constraints of morality.

Kant proposes that the only way to solve this puzzle philosophically is to postulate, first, the existence of a good intelligent maker of the world and that will even the score eventually – ultimately happiness will be proportionate with morality – and, second, that our souls are not limited to our time on planet earth. This perhaps strikes us as even more puzzling than Kant's conception of the highest good. At least at first. So, what is his point and how does it relate to Nick Cave, Dolly Parton, and Sojourner Truth?

What I have realized lately is that Kant's proposal is that we cannot know or prove that a good, intelligent creator exists—we simply do not have the cognitive powers this requires—but we do know that we cannot create the universe, including ourselves and all the things we deem good, wonderful, and even amazing. And yet, of course, in our best moments, that is exactly what we experience in life: deep love, joy, playfulness, laughter, admiration, beauty, and awe. Hence, Kant thinks, if we give up on linking the awe of all things amazing to the postulate of a good intelligent maker—if we stop assuming that the world is good despite all evidence to the contrary, that being creates and badness destroys—we make it harder for ourselves, for no good reason, to stay committed to what we undeniably do experience as deeply good about our lives, ourselves, our loved ones, humanity, life on planet Earth, and the universe.

Returning to the stories of Cave, Parton, and Truth, it may, in other words, not be accidental that they needed to constitute themselves at some point through the assumption of goodness—spirituality, so understood—and create their very best music on that assumption. Whether it was the moral badness (Parton) or even moral horror (Truth) of the situations they grew up in or the devastation life's accidents brought them (Cave), letting themselves be constituted spiritually on goodness and awe of what is good was how they were able to hold onto themselves and use their creative powers (again) for good. And because or insofar as they have been able to do that, we are moved to connect to our shared humanity through their music and songs.

Cave emphasizes another important thing that all knew first-personally—that being able to move others through music or song is a tremendously powerful tool. In fact, I understand him to be saying that it is temptingly easy to want that glory for oneself, to be adored as a god or goddess. But if we give into that temptation, as musicians or as anyone doing creative work can, we are apt to lose our way and fail, not only in life (by doing damage to ourselves and others) but in creating something beautiful that can reach and move humanity together in and toward goodness.

None of the above requires any specific conception of what the intelligent maker is, and it doesn't presuppose or entail that our moments of goodness should be understood as giving us hope of being saved. Also, there are many religions on the planet and, unlike Truth and Cave and like Parton, many of us find in none of them our good, spiritual home. Indeed, it is not impossible that Truth found her spiritual home in the Black Church because it was created as such for Black people who lived subjected to the horrific wronging involved in or following European colonialization, including Black slavery in the US. It is also not impossible the Cave finds his in the Anglican church because he finds there a structure to the musical and textual experiences

that is deeply in tune with what he needs.⁴ And it is most certainly the case that others of us find our spiritual homes in the mountains, on the high seas, in art, in small communities' caring ways, and even in dilapidated churches. There is no one answer to where we can find a spiritual home; thinking that there is is one of the mistakes we are liable to make precisely because the one we find best feels so deeply good to us. That's what a home is. Regardless of where it is, however, art, including music and song, made from those spiritual places can reach, unify, and move us in ways that make it easier for us to hold onto ourselves and goodness with hope for a better world.

One might think that going through such moments of constitutive goodness that Cave, Parton, and Truth report or what we with Kant could call moral character moments—would make one easy to be around. I don't think this is the case. For the person going through it, it is existentially necessary—it is experienced as constitutive of becoming oneself in a morally reliable way—and it does make one morally reliable also for others. This also does not mean that one never makes mistakes, of course; rather, one no longer finds doing bad things quite so tempting and one wants to own those mistakes, including by changing one's ways and apologizing when appropriate. But it doesn't make one easy to be around; indeed, it does tend to make one unwilling to compromise what is good with what is pleasant, convenient, or likeable by others.

Cave, for example, simply rejects any flattering suggestion that his earlier (also famous) self was simply an OK guy; he thinks he was an arsehole a lot of the time and a frustrated, immature youngster at others. Parton, Truth, and Mandela were or are all quite tough on anyone who did wrong and who do not want to own it. Always truthful, and also caring, loving, forgiving, generous, etc.—and yet with a distinctive moral toughness. And, as I hear them, they each need or needed persons close to them who would hold them with deep kindness. That's the water they need(ed) reliably to be able to lean back, rest, and float in so as to be able to go out there again and do what they can do for all of us, namely help us hold on to goodness and hope for a better future.

Kant-the-bartender, then, I imagine, might have answered his patrons' query by saying: "According to my philosophical theories, the character moments in which you became yourself were moments you integrated into yourself not only your distinctive creativity in an authentic way but also your deep commitment to morality. And like all incredible art, your music and song can communicate universally to human beings because it can make our minds flow in seemingly purposeful ways, ways that are deeply pleasant and that can allow us to emotionally experience the amazingness of the fact of earthly life itself, or help us when life is not good, or let us feel life and our existence more fully, or do better than we currently are. Importantly too, however, what your stories help me realize is that my version of my theory isn't good at explaining why it is so important for you to have (had) reliable kindness surrounding you; your loved ones were or are distinctly kind. Indeed, once I realize that from your stories, I realize that that was true also true in my own life. I just never recognized that truth when I was still alive; I wish I had—I think it would have made me a better, more vulnerable—and, so, stronger—person, live more fully, and be a better philosopher. So, thank you!"⁵

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/programs/nick-cave-loss-yearning-transcendence/>

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