Collaboration as Human Destiny

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These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing... (Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”)

When Sisyphus, in that touchingly paradoxical “existentialist” rewriting of his life story by Albert Camus, finally starts cooperating on the fulfillment of his originally dismal destiny, so that his torment—pushing the proverbial boulder uphill again and again—becomes his meaningful blessing, simply by filling up and structuring his otherwise empty human days, the concept of collaboration receives one of its most eloquent, poignant, and even laudatory, modern twentieth-century expressions. The only way the gods could spite this new, awakened, Sisyphus would be to separate him from his boulder, but this seems so senseless to any typical tormentor, that they cannot even imagine such a solution. Thus, Sisyphus collaborates with his tormentors, pushes on, and “we must assume that he is ultimately happy.”

In order to comprehend this curious, and yet apparently profound, happiness, one should accept that in the world of the eternal dichotomies that we have inherited, deconstruction is a basic building technique and principle. For, whatever one utters can be understood only by assuming what one does not utter; the totality, the whole, is always seen as only one half, a section trailing behind its unfinished and obscure forms their illuminating complements, the eternal Others, the other halves, the entities offering explanations, while, at the same time, ramifying into many more puzzling directions. “Construction” needs, nay, demands, “deconstruction” and, of course, vice versa...

This simple rule is also fully operative in the Concept of Collaboration; its vast complexity promises an exciting archeology, and, like all ar-
cheology, it is simultaneously both breathtaking and terrifying. The primal curse of the Tower of Babel reverberates in this one mostly sweetly sounding word no less ominously than in any other verbal or nonverbal signum of the human discourse. To collaborate is to work together on a project, to respond to a call for unity, to transcend one's ego for the sake of the universal good, or, more cynically, to find a safe and cozy niche for that ego within a meaningful structure of society. But, to collaborate also means, often in a more narrowly political sense, to betray the positive community principles and to join and support the opposite ones, for the sake of “survival,” or the simple, elementary “joy” of power, to give up the purity of individual idealistic motives for the feeling of security within the collectively defined good or objectives, and to succumb to the intoxicating temptation of becoming “free,” “independent,” and thus “powerful.” Non serviam! — the primordial expression of the radical cancellation of collaboration — becomes ironically the war-cry of all those who, through their lack of understanding, promote negative collaboration. “the collaboration to end all collaborations...” For even negativity and nihilism cannot be alone and hate the profound pain of non-participation.

One should be reminded, in this connection, of Paul Tillich’s brilliant analysis of participation, in his essential study The Courage to Be. Discussing human “courage to be as a part,” Tillich reminds us that “the self is self only because it has a world, a structured universe, to which it belongs and from which it is separated at the same time.” “Self and world are correlated, and so are individualization and participation,” continues Tillich, bringing us to the essence of what we, in one of its forms, call collaboration: “For this is just what participation means: being a part of something from which one is, at the same time, separated.” For us today, living at the end of the much vaunted 20th century and straining our eyes, in order to discern, in the prevailing mists of all etiologies, the promised golden bridges into the next century and the millennium, Tillich’s short and pregnant historical analysis of the ideas of individualization and participation might come as a healthy warning and an enlightening lesson.

Starting with the so-called Dark Ages, in which, according to Tillich, participatory powers were strong, healthy, and beneficial, stopping at the next psycho-sociological stopover, in which the Reformation and Renaissance accents on the primacy of the individual, were responsible for impressive individual achievements, but also for the very modern prevalence and tyranny of anxiety, we are brought to the neo-collectivist phenomena of this our century, which, with the names like Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, bring into this world some of the worst collaborative evils recorded in the entire human history. He does not mention Consumerism, though some of its ultimately debilitating influences, masked as pleasure-inducing and socially beneficial, might be no better than those of the above mentioned totalitarian forms of collaboration. The chilling reality of such “perfectly” organized forms of collective participation, collaboration, gazes at us from W.H. Auden’s celebrated poem, “The Unknown Citizen,” a searing satirical piece describing the posthumous destiny of a collectively “ideal” citizen, the one whose very name reality only a number... he is expected to do... and who for the sake of...
indeed, in this connection, an analysis of participatory power. In his classic book \textit{The Courage to Be}, Tillich declares, "One cannot be a part," Tillich tells us, "without a self; self is self only because it is separated from the universe, to which it is related and participation means: being a part of a whole."

"For participation means: being a part of something and being self only because we are related to that world of which we are a part," Tillich reflects further. "The self is self only because it is related to the universe, to which it is separated at the same time and participation, to us, to the essence of what we are, call collaboration: "For participation means: being a part of something and being self only because we are related to that world of which we are a part," Tillich reflects further. "The self is self only because it is related to the universe, to which it is separated at the same time and participation means: being a part of a whole."

In his book \textit{The Courage to Be}, Tillich explains the idea of participation, stating, "Participation means being a part of a whole." He goes on to say, "For participation means: being a part of something and being self only because we are related to that world of which we are a part."

Tillich's analysis of the ideas of participation might convince us to the essence of what we are, call collaboration: "For participation means: being a part of something and being self only because we are related to that world of which we are a part."

The prevailing mists of a proto-culture and golden bridges into the millennium, Tillich's celebration of the ideas of participation might convince us to the essence of what we are, call collaboration: "For participation means: being a part of something and being self only because we are related to that world of which we are a part."

The terrible anonymity and shallow happiness of such proto-clones, who dream their consumer dreams in too many parts of the world today, shake the foundations of numerous modern-day theories of happy participation and collaboration. To those who might be surprised, even scandalized, by such disturbing interpretations, the only answer is that this has always been a world of paradoxes, or, perhaps, that what we call a paradox is, in fact, the only real truth, if you try hard to understand. Traditional Positivist Science, of course, "has nothing to do with that," or better, it is perhaps still groping unwillingly towards that unscientific "discovery." The late Carl Sagan's immoderate encomium of the incredible happiness of "this generation," in comparison to the relative misery of all the previous ones, in the introduction to his \textit{Broca's Brain}, some twenty years ago, makes this myopic, self-complaisant "vision" perfectly clear; stressing the exhilaration of "the time in which we pass from ignorance to knowledge," as if that is a discreet temporal event, Sagan concludes his encomium nearly in an emotional falsetto: "In all of the four-billion-year history of life on our planet, in all of the four-million-year history of the human family, there is only one generation privileged to live through that unique transitional (ignorance to knowledge) moment: that generation is ours."

This ultimate narcissism, which requires at least something like the first of "The Beatitudes" for an antidote or explanation, and this tone, which evokes Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in the most ardent days of 1917, both suggest triumphantly the ultimate (redemptory?) collaboration between the human cognitive powers and the Cosmic Abso-
lute, as they seem to whisper, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness..." Now that Ignorance has gone, and Knowledge is here to stay, life will probably be increasingly boring, as all the traditional drama of life is based (again!) on the dichotomy of opposite principles, and life without drama, they say, is not life at all. We shall have to rack our brains and come up with something really new, something fun! Collaboration being a post-Lapsarian phenomenon, for labor is located East-of-Eden, the scientific cancellation of the lapsus will also cancel the need for collaboration.

This reasoning takes us inevitably to some metaphysical regions, in which, in the Judeo-Christian tradition at least, Collaboration assumes some significant theological attributes and accents. The famous Michaelangelo's reclining Adam, in the Sistine Chapel, stretching effortlessly his index finger, in order to meet and touch the Finger of the Creator, is not a belabored human being; what he is experiencing is pure coexistence with the Divinity, not collaboration, for collaboration requires effort. Collaboration comes later on, when the unperturbed coexistence has gone.

And, indeed, it is through Adam's sweaty labor, and Eve's painful and sweaty labors, that the ultimate, heroic Collaboration is being performed, its final result being the Salvation of the World. The project is in full swing, and the academic world, often symbolized by "the burning of the midnight oil," a laborious effort to enlighten the world, is deeply and passionately engaged in the numerous ramifications of that Project. Any possible aspect of the academic work is, in fact, profoundly collaborative, nearly symbiotic. Teaching, lecturing, reading, grading, examining, writing, translating, discussing, delegating, corresponding, fumbling with the computers—with the accompanying utterances, committee serving, reviewing, evaluating, and dozens of other typical procedures; all these are possible only through collaboration. Somewhat in the vein of Carl Sagan, the academic project has frequently been seen as a Savior, a miraculous way to a better, nay, perfect and fully redeemed world. It explains the curious fact that laboratories have grown all sorts of immoderate sizes and amounts of money into even Swiftian, grandiose projects, which, by the way, have turned the world... The story of great philosophers and grandiose projects, which, by the way, have turned the world... The story of grandiose projects, which, by the way, have turned the world... The story of grandiose projects, which, by the way, have turned the world...
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whisper, “After such knowledge...” Now that Ignorance is here to stay, life very frequently boring, as all the true knowledge is based (again!) on the principles, and life wi the value of which the value of knowledge is much more expected, than of the learned: the rest of the world have almost always agreed, to shut scholars up together in colleges and cloisters; surely not without hope, that they would look for that happiness in concord, which they were debarred from findings, in variety; and that such conjunctions of intellect would recompense the munificence of founders and patrons, by performances above the reach of any single mind.

But Discord, who found means to roll her apple into the banqueting chamber of the Goddesses, has had the address to scatter her laurels in the seminaries of learning, with its great hopes and its inevitable disappointments: There is no class of the human species, of which the union seems to have been more expected, than of the learned: the rest of the world have almost always agreed, to shut scholars up together in colleges and cloisters; surely not without hope, that they would look for that happiness in concord, which they were debarred from findings, in variety; and that such conjunctions of intellect would recompense the munificence of founders and patrons, by performances above the reach of any single mind.

Writing in April of 1753, in his celebrated magazine, The Adventurer, about these ironic implications of human collaboration, Samuel Johnson, the famous Dr. Johnson, the Augustan author, critic, editor, and public figure, demonstrates conclusively how any collaborative human project is only partly successful and is often doomed because of the opposite pulls in human psyche and mind, frightened that too close a collaboration threatens the extinction of one's ego or one's self. In the essay entitled “The Difficulty of Forming Confederacies,” he also mentions the academic world, with its great hopes and its inevitable disappointments:
Johnson points out that in such academic set-ups, highly and fiercely competitive by definition, the fear of comparative inferiority becomes a positive spur and urges the participants/collaborators towards the “incessant endeavors after great attainments”:

These stimulations of honest rivalry, are, perhaps, the chief effects of academies and societies; for whatever be the bulk of their joint labors, every single piece is always the production of an individual, that owes nothing to his colleagues but the contagion of diligence, a resolution to write because the rest are writing, and the scorn of obscurity while the rest are illustrious.

One might perhaps emend Johnson in some of his theoretical assumptions, by pointing out that paradigms do change and that not only individuals, but also groups or teams, can, and do, also produce collaborative results. Today, this is, more often than not, the rule, especially in the fields of the pure and applied sciences, and, then, even in his own times, at least one great example of scholars’ collaborative efforts was highly visible and influentially present in the world, namely, that proverbial, exemplary collaboration published some 150 years before Johnson’s essay, The King James Bible. However, to redress the balance, even that great work concedes significantly that what is going to be Johnson’s judgment is true, when, in its florid "Epistle Dedicatory" to the Bible, the team of scholars-translators point out to “the Most High and Mighty Prince, James, etc.” the danger of “the self-conceited Brethren, who run their own ways, and giving liking unto nothing, but what is framed by themselves, and hammered on their anvil.”

This question of one’s own creative “anvil” is still totally open, for, in the last analysis, despite our present-day, often strongly politically motivated, adoration of the cult of the collective, group, team, nation, Dr. Johnson might be more in the right than we care to see. Paradigms are, after all, mighty chains and humans not infrequently sacrifice lives (particularly, in these so comforting and reflections of the world, is polemical exercise, and, therefore, polemical (Polemos) in fact, requires at least a library. Collaboration is truly a subject, but that is, one of the fundamental polemics.

Can, indeed, the planets not to collaborate? Thus, ever, amassing examples, inevitably, in the end, the constructive-decorative frames of the portentous polemical law, but adding the already prepared anvil, into the situation beautifully presented by another Alexander Pope, in his classic:

While from the bounded lev'n Short views we take, nor see But more advance'd, behold New distant scenes of endle's.
So pleas'd at first the tow'r Mount o'er the vales, and stand
Th' eternal snows appear and stand
And the first clouds and mists.
But, those attain'd, we tremble
The growing labors of the mind
Th' increasing prospect tires
Hills peep o'er hills, and Alp.

In order to leave the mighty prospect of “the Alps” one might recourse into the world, the realm of a poetic tale. This might smack something, then, even the most scientific, theological, or ethical territory have been conveyed to vehicles. The powerful and
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quently sacrifice lives (preferably others’) rather than these so comforting and so tyrannical icons and reflections of the world in our minds. Thus, this polemical exercise, and finally conclusion, like any polemical (Polemos!) experience, deserves, in fact, requires at least a book length study or a library. Collaboration is truly a huge, inexhaustible subject, but that is, of course, only normal for one of the fundamental principles of the universe.

Can, indeed, the planets and the stars choose not to collaborate? Thus, one might go on forever, amassing examples and evidence, and always, inevitably, in the ever lengthening shades of the constructive-deconstructive flickering flames of the portentous principle of dichotomy. Traveling, moving on, is no doubt another fundamental law, but adding numerous new icons to the already prepared array would only bring us into the situation beautifully metaphorically presented by another Augustan thinker, Alexander Pope, in his celebrated Essay on Criticism:

> While from the bounded level of our mind,  
> Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind;  
> But more advanc’d, behold with strange surprise,  
> New distant scenes of endless fire rise!

So pleas’d at first the tow’ring Alps we try,  
Mount o’er the vales, and seem to tread the sky,  
Th’ eternal snows appear already past,  
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last:  
But, those attain’d, we tremble to survey  
The growing labors of the lengthened way,  
Th’ increasing prospect tires our wand’ring eyes,  
Hills peep o’er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

In order to leave the magnificent and dreadful prospect of “the Alps” rather imperceptibly, one might recourse into another metaphorical world, the realm of a poignant anecdote or parable. This might smack somewhat of obfuscation, but, then, even the most significant philosophical, theological, or ethical messages in human history have been conveyed by the use of such vehicles. The powerful and typically paradoxical parable with which Professor George Steiner of Geneva and Cambridge ends his Death of the Tragedy might help us to see clearly, and to feel viscerally, the ultimate interpretative openness, mysteriousness, and even joy, of the ubiquitous principle of collaboration. The anecdote describes, with wry humor, a terrible pogrom somewhere in Eastern Europe in the 18th century, one of the many such horrible events. It is a moment of a painful and slow agony; the village (stetl) is largely burned down by the Russian troops; the horrified Jews are bemoaning and burying their too many dead... In the dead of the night, the rabbi goes to the smoldering remains of the synagogue in order to pray, but, even more, to argue with Yahweh about the justification of all that horror—a singular, collaborative action, for collaboration is always give and take. In the deep shadows of the still standing walls of the badly charred building, the rabbi sees a trembling, crouching, huddled figure of an old man he sees a trembling, crouching, huddled figure of an old man...
Humor is, of course, also a form of collaboration, the one that functions through the mollification of the cruel and the painful, or through subversion. If Yahweh cannot understand and solve the mystery of evil, who are we to claim that we can? Yahweh's plight here is grotesquely funny, but, then, ours is, by the same token, much easier too, as we collaborate in pain, share the fear. Collaboration is, after all, a strong proof and method of faith, hope, and love, the Three Great Ones.

If Sisyphus manages, by curious abracadabra and a psychological somersault, to turn his curse into a blessing, are we, even unpunished, to stick to the old grumpy, masochist ways and to deny an exciting alternative that seems to work? Probably not. The very fact of our choosing, even accepting, the total openness of experiences, judgments, ideas, is tantamount to collaboration, collaboration with the forces that be, collaboration with our human destiny. There are, perhaps, various alternatives, but this one is so simple and, in the last analysis, ultimately so logical. And, furthermore, they say, it does not lead into a senseless defeat. .. Not a bad deal.

As for the logic of things, direct or paradoxical, let us conclude with a vignette from a recent e-mail message (Collaboration galore there!) from my friend Stan K. Writes Stan: "I can barely finish this message because our cat Jack is all over my lap and keyboard, trying to ghostwrite this or collaborate and share the credit." The image of the purring tomcat Jack collaborating unwittingly in an act of friendly communication is an amusing and instructive mythos or parable stressing the creative openness and benevolence as the main prerequisites in the Redemption, or perhaps Recreation, of the World. Only a simple cat, Jack is a creature whose collaborative effort, instinctive, spontaneous, is recorded so lovingly and memorably in a personal history...

This beatific vision brings us thus to yet another peak of "the Alps," the one that typically makes us gasp with marvel and shudder with dread and holy fear: Is collaboration ever fully and clearly, or even partially, understood by the participants? How often do we happen to collaborate without even sensing it? Who is, really, in charge? We or the paradigm? Camus does not indicate anywhere that the monumental paradigm shift of his Sisyphus was the result of a purposeful action. Did Sisyphus ever know what he was after?

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, And filter and fibre your blood. Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you... (Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself")