What matters to me and why

This is a regular lecture series at Carleton, organized by the College Chaplain, Carolyn Fure-Slocum.

Fairness

Michael Flynn
January 21, 2016

Thanks to Carolyn for that nice introduction, and thanks to all of you for coming this afternoon. It is certainly a privilege to have this opportunity to speak to you today, and I'll try to say something controversial to make it worthwhile.

I think people in this context often discuss their religion and politics. Though I'm not religious at all now, and haven't been for many years, I will mention an early experience in Catholicism that led me to focus much of my life on fairness.

But before that, let me say something about my politics, since I've never done that, or hardly ever done that, in a classroom in my thirty years at Carleton, and now I have a chance. I'm very liberal, more liberal than Bernie probably, so I like most of what he says. If he's the nominee, maybe he can carry places like Ohio, Colorado, and Florida and win, and if he did win maybe he would actually be able to do some of the things he says he would. But I'm a little dismayed by liberals who say they won't vote for Hillary under any circumstances. I mean, Hillary isn't perfect, but she's far far better than anyone in the other party, on issues like immigration, reproductive rights, taxes, health care, good manners. If we Democrats lose the presidential election it will be I think an unmitigated disaster from which the country would not recover in my lifetime and probably not in yours either. So, if you are a citizen I want you to vote for whoever is the Democratic candidate even if that person isn't your first choice. It's really important. There. I've gotten that off my chest.

Let me return to something less controversial, less sensitive like religion. As I said I'm not religious at all, but I was raised Catholic, went to a Catholic grade school and a Catholic university. It was an early experience with the nuns at my grade school that led me since then to be sensitive to fairness.

It's hard to say what fairness is, but it is something like you get what you deserve, and no more. Unfairness, maybe, is holding people responsible for things they bear no responsibility for, in either direction. If you go looking for unfairness, you will find it, because it is everywhere. So many of our properties, biologically determined or acquired from the environment, are unfair in this sense, that if you focus on this it will drive you

crazy, or at least make you cynical and mean. My advice about this is to ignore most of the unfairness in our lives, and focus on those that are most relevant to your personal agenda and that you can do something about. But more about this later.

When I was a young boy, it was the responsibility of my teachers, the nuns, to convey how one should interact with the Church. I don't remember much of this but there is one episode that seems so clear to me, as if it happened last week instead of more than half a century ago. It had to do with, and I'm sorry about this term but please remember that this was a long time ago, people we called Pagan Babies. Here's the story about them. As the nuns explained, there is a rule which says one cannot go to heaven, talked about as if it is a place extended in space-time, if one were not baptized. Luckily, everyone in my class had been baptized, but what, we asked, about children who, through no fault of their own, happened to be born in a place where there were no Catholics to baptize them? Indeed, what about all the children born before the time Jesus lived, when there was no such thing as baptism? *What about the Pagan Babies?*

There was a story to be told about this, something like there was this other place, not quite as nice as heaven, but still not bad, where all the Pagan Babies could go when they died, so long as they were good of course, and at the end of time God would sort things out somehow.

I was having none of this, and I wasn't alone. We were, all of us I think, shocked and dismayed about the case of the Pagan Babies, which was clearly so unfair. I think this planted the seed of doubt in many of our young minds. Something was clearly wrong here. Maybe God Himself was unfair. Or maybe the Church had misconstrued His wishes. Or maybe even someone in the Church just made this rule up, so as to attract new church members. In any event we felt something had seriously gone off the rails with this case, and for many of us, including me I think, it was the beginning of the end our allegiance to the Catholic Church.

You are wondering perhaps, why, if by the time I was a teenager I had abandoned Catholicism, I went to the University of Notre Dame, probably the most famous Catholic University on earth. I will digress briefly to explain this.

I am first generation, in fact since I was the oldest of three boys I was the very first person in my family line to have the chance to go to college. I didn't have the faintest idea of what I was doing. My father was a Chicago Irish Catholic (my mother a Chicago Polish Catholic) and it was the dream back then at least of every Chicago Irish Catholic to send a son to Notre Dame. So when I had the chance to go, I went.

I didn't like it very much, but something happened there which changed my life. I was a terrible student at the beginning, and on top of that I had a girlfriend from St. Mary's College, the women's college across the street from Notre Dame. By the middle of my sophomore year, I was a B- student and completely lost. My girlfriend, perhaps sensing this, terminated our relationship, and after that I had nothing to do but study. But it wasn't just that, it was also that I had really good teachers who cared about me. And one

day I wrote a paper about Jonathan Swift's Tale of a Tub, and my teacher told me he thought it was brilliant and he suggested I publish it. What? Yes, he said, maybe you should put it in PQ. I think he might have meant Philosophical Quarterly, but I had no idea what he was talking about. I went to the library and wandered around in the PQ section, pointlessly.

But this was the thing, I had discovered the thrill of intellectual inquiry. It was intoxicating. I was an English major and I wrote feverish papers on Shakespeare and Keats and Eliot. And just to round this story off, I became disillusioned with literary studies, because it seemed to me back then that there were no standards for evaluation of arguments, other than the politics underlying the discussion of the text. I had taken one linguistics course which I liked very much and when I graduated I applied to seven law schools (the default profession at the time) and one linguistics graduate school, UMass Amherst. I was shocked when UMass admitted me, and decided I would try it since I figured it was easier to go from linguistics to law than the other way.

Of course a lot happened between then and now. After I got my degree, I got seven one year jobs in linguistics and finally was in the right place at the right time and was invited to come here to build a linguistics program. It was the chance of a lifetime, and lot of my energy and enthusiasm has been devoted to this project. I also got married to Angelique, we have two wonderful daughters, my Linguistics Department is awesome (I think), and I go to Japan a lot. So though there were many obstacles and challenges along the way, I'm happy, and not a little surprised, about how things have turned out so far.

But let me return to fairness. As I mentioned before there is unfairness everywhere, and it really isn't right. I think some religions are sensitive to this, and have doctrines that go some way toward correcting it. One day I was walking down a street in Kyoto, Japan, which for me is one of the really great things to do. I came across a small Buddhist temple, and went inside. It turned out to be the nail-puller temple, or Kuginuki as it is called. Here's a picture.

Of course, one immediately wonders why there are so many nail-pullers in this small temple, and here's the story, at least the story I read somewhere. The Jizo bodhisattva, in Japanese Buddhism as I understand it, is a figure who is a helper and a guardian of all those striving for enlightenment. In this temple, the Jizo was famous for healing the sick. One day, a man came in with terrible pain in his hands, and prayed to the Jizo. The Jizo said, the reason you have pain in your hands is that in a past life, you had an enemy. You made a doll representing that person, and stuck pins in the dolls hands, in order to do harm to your enemy. That's why you have this pain today. The man went away and brought back a nail puller, and expressed his profound regret for things he had done in a previous life. And the pain went away.

The idea here is that so far as the man was concerned, there was no reason for him to have pain in his hands. It was unfair. But the Jizo revealed that there was a causal chain between an unkindness performed in a past life and his current discomfort, so it was not unfair after all. More generally, there's this idea the your current state, rich, poor, healthy, prone to illness, and many other properties, positive and negative, that seem unfair are actually caused by things you've done in your past lives, and so you actually do bear

responsibility for them, and so they are not unfair at all. Furthermore, how you behave now will determine your happiness or sorrow in future lives. I find this doctrine quite optimistic and I wish it were true, and for all I know, maybe it is.

By the way, here's Jeff Bergland, a member of the Carleton class of 1970. Jeff has lived in Japan for decades, and has become a television star, introducing famous places to Japanese and English speaking people. I visited him once in Kyoto, where he lives in a traditional Japanese house on the Kamo River. The next day when I went to the office I asked one of the women who works in the International Center if she knew about Jeff Bergland, and said I had visited him the day before. "Jeff Bergland, Jeff Bergland" she says. "I don't think so." I say that he's on TV a lot and he talks about famous places in Kyoto. "Ah, Jeff-san! Yes! *You* know Jeff-san?! I must tell everyone." My status in the office immediate rose several notches. People I didn't know would come by my office and peak in the door, just to lay eyes on someone who personally knows Jeff-san.

But regardless of how the idea of past and future lives turns out, I think a lot of unfairness stems from ignorance, and I want to give two examples of that from areas that I think a lot about and are close to my heart, linguistics and Japan.

The first example concerns African-American Vernacular English, sometimes called Black Vernacular English, or BEV as I will call it here. People who grow up surrounded by BEV become speakers of BEV, just like kids growing up Tokyo speak Tokyo Japanese. Nobody chooses this, certainly not childen. But speakers of BEV have been called lazy and stupid because of their language, and this has negative consequences for their well-being. This would be okay maybe if BEV *were* the result of laziness and stupidity, but it isn't. So the accusations are unfair. Let's have a look at one case:

> … an interview conducted on a stoop in Harlem. The interviewee is Larry, the roughest member of a teenage gang called the Jets. (Labov observes in his scholarly article that "for most readers of this paper, first contact with Larry would produce some fairly negative reactions on both sides.)

> You know, like some people say if you're good an' shit, your spirit goin' t'heaven…'n' if you bad, your spirit goin' to hell. Well, bullshit! Your spirit goin' to hell anyway, good or bad.
>
> [Why?]
>
> Why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause, you see, doesn' nobody really know that it's a God, y'know,'cause I mean I have seen black gods, white gods, all color gods, and don't nobody know it's really a God. An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t'heaven, tha's bullshit, 'cause you ain't goin' to no heaven, 'cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to.
>
> from Steven Pinker (1994) *The Language Instinct.* p. 29

I'm going to focus on the *it* is this quotation.

> An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin'
> t'heaven, tha's bullshit, 'cause you ain't goin' to
> no heaven, 'cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to.

We need to know two things about English. One is that the nature of subjects has an effect on the form of verbs.

I bark
You bark
Kiki barks

Students in my Intro Syntax class will fondly remember this case, I am sure. To take a more interesting case,

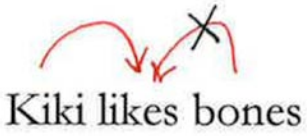
> How Ann Salisbury can claim that Pam Dawber's anger at not receiving her fair share of acclaim for *Mork and Mindy's* success derives from a fragile ego escapes me.
>
> *How Ann Salisbury can claim that Pam Dawber's anger at not receiving her fair share of acclaim for *Mork and Mindy's* success derives from a fragile ego escape me.
>
> Gleitman, Lila R. (1981) "Maturational Determinants of Language Growth," *Cognition* 10: 103-114. The sentence originally appeared in a letter to the editor of the magazine *TV Guide*.

Mork and Mindy, in case you don't know, was popular sit-com which aired from 1978 to 1982. I never saw it myself, but I think the premise is that Mork, an alien from space, played by Robin Williams, comes to Earth to learn about Earth culture. He happens to land in Colorado, and meets Mindy, played by Pam Dawber. Much hilarity ensues.

The idea is that when the subject is third person singular, English speakers have to put a little 's' on the end of the verb, as in *I bark* vs. *Kiki barks*. It's a totally useless rule in current day English, since the 's' tells you that the subject is third person singular, but you already know that since you just heard the subject. Nevertheless, little English learners absorb this rule without complaint, even producing such novel utterances such as

Kiki gots to eat her dinner!

Notice that the agreement is from left to right, and not from right to left.



Why we have this rule is an interesting story that we'll have to leave for another day. It's maybe worth observing that it is by no means universal that agreement phenomena like this always go from left to right. Right-to-left agreement is actually quite common. One language that has it is Chukchi, spoken in Russia just across the Bering Strait from Alaska.

It's these people that Sarah Palin sees when she stands on her porch and gazes westward.

You can see them here poised on a Russian tank, obviously preparing to attack.

The example sentences tend to mention reindeer, since there's a lot of them in area.

Chukchi is what we call an 'ergative' language, meaning that subjects of intransitive verbs and objects of transitive verbs have the same case marking, as distinct from the subject of transitives. This is different of course in 'nominative-accusative' languages like English:

Ergative:

subject verb object

subject verb

Nominative-accusative (like English):

subject verb object
subject verb

She likes her
She barks

But in an ergative language this would be:

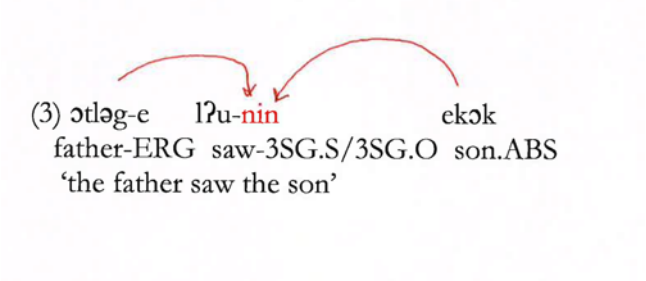
She likes her
Her barks

What matters for both nominative-accusative languages and ergative languages is that the subject of transitives is marked differently than the object of transitives, so that you can keep track of which is which. Of course in English we know subjects from objects from word order, so the case marking in the pronominal system is another pointless exercise. Why we have it as again a story for another day, but once again three-year old English learners follow the rule enthusiastically.

Here's some examples from Chukchi:

> from "Incorporation in Chukchi" by Andrew Spencer. *Language* 71.3 (1995)
>
> (1) ɔtləg-ən kɔtgəntat-gʔe
> father-ABS ran - 3SG.S
> 'The father ran'
> (2) ekɔk kɔtgəntat-gʔe
> son.ABS ran - 3SG.S
> 'The son ran'
> (3) ɔtləg-e lʔu-nin ekɔk
> father-ERG saw-3SG.S/3SG.O son.ABS
> 'the father saw the son'
> (4) ekke-te lʔu-nin ɔtləg-ən
> son-ERG saw-3SG.S/3SG.O father-ABS
> 'the son saw the father'

But what's interesting for our purpose is that Chukchi, like many other languages, has right-to-left agreement:



That little ending on the verb encodes the fact that in this case the subject is third person singular and the object is also third person singular.

English, has left-to right agreement, as we've seen. But there's an exception:

There are dogs in the kitchen
There is a dog in the kitchen

Here, it looks like the verb is agreeing with the noun phrase that follows it, rather than the subject which precedes it. Scientists hate exceptions, and when confronted with them will either try to change the theory in some way or, more often maybe, try to explain the exception away. Some linguists are inclined to say that these agreeing NPs are not really exceptional at all. They "start out" in normal subject position

dogs are in the kitchen
a dog is in the kitchen

the rule of Subject-Verb Agreement then applies as normal, and then the NPs are moved around the verb:

___ are dogs in the kitchen
___ is a dog in the kitchen

Now the second fact about English we need to know is that subjects are obligatory in tensed clauses. This isn't true in all languages. Spanish and Japanese, for example, allows what we might call "empty" subjects:

Llueve (Spanish)
Furimasu (Japanese)

It's raining.

But English is stubborn. You've got to stick something in the subject position. In the case we are considering, it is *there*. Notice this is not what we might called the locative *there*, a word which indicates a location. If I say,

There are infinitely many prime numbers.

you won't answer:

Where?

So this is a meaningless "dummy" subject, inserted to satisfy English's weird requirement that most sentences must have explicit subjects. In other contexts, like the raining example, we use *it.*

So if you've ever wondered what the *it* means in *it's raining* the answer is that it doesn't mean anything at all. It's just a dummy subject, stuck in there to satisfy English's peculiar demand that tensed clauses have subjects. Sometimes we use *there*, sometimes *it*. I don't know of any good explanation for why which dummy subject is chosen in any particular case. And so now we see what is happening with Larry's speech. He uses the meaningless *it* where the "standard" dialect uses the meaningless *there*. It's a perfectly rational choice.

> An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t'heaven, tha's bullshit, 'cause you ain't goin' to no heaven, 'cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to.

There are many other aspects of BEV that have been carefully studied, and the language is just as careful and complex as any other language you can think of, including the so-called standard dialect. So if someone criticizes a person because they use BEV, it's an unfair criticism, based as it is on ignorance about the language.

The last case I want to consider is President Harry Truman's discussion of the detonation of an atomic weapon over Hiroshima in his radio address of August 9, 1945. I need hardly say that almost everything I will say here is controversial. My OCS program visits Hiroshima, and since this summer I have been doing a fair amount of reading trying to understand why the bomb was used in the way it was. I have a long way to go, I think, but I have made progress, and hope to make a lot more by the time I speak to our group about Hiroshima next April. Here, I want to focus on Truman's statement, which I will suggest is very unfair (and in part, false):

The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. But that attack is only a warning of things to come. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her war industries and, unfortunately, thousands of civilian lives will be lost. I urge Japanese civilians to leave industrial cities immediately, and save themselves from destruction.

…

Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and

beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans.

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/?pid=104 accessed January 13, 2016

In passing, I want to note that the first sentence, about Hiroshima being a military base, is simply untrue. The bomb exploded over, and was aimed at, the most densely populated part of the city, killing some 70,000 people instantly and causing immense unspeakable misery and death for tens of thousands more. I think Truman must have known this, because the US had been intentionally bombing civilian populations in Japan for months, including of course the firebombing of downtown Tokyo in the previous March in which 100,000 civilians died.

But let's turn our attention to the second paragraph I quoted. There is no question at all that the Japanese military were savagely brutal, and in frequent violation of international law, not only to American prisoners of war but also civilian populations throughout the Pacific theater. But, and I'm maybe going out on a limb here, none of the people who were responsible for those atrocities were in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The bomb incinerated, mutilated, and disfigured carpenters, streetcar drivers, grocers, housewives, school children, and infants. The suffering among civilians the bomb caused was staggering. One can argue of course that it had to be done to shorten the war, as Truman claimed. I personally think this is very doubtful, since there are to my mind persuasive arguments that it was the Russian entry into the war on August 8 that was the decisive event from Japan's point of view. But in any event I believe there is no doubt the bomb viciously punished thousands of people unfairly, for cruelty they were not only not responsible for, but almost certainly knew nothing about.

As I said earlier, we cannot prevent all unfairness, even unfairness that we ourselves cause. But nevertheless we are, I think, morally obligated to try to reduce or eliminate cases in which people suffer consequences unfairly. And one way, maybe the most important way to do this, is to know more, to work to understand more about the world and the people we share it with. In the case of BEV, understanding how the language works should eliminate unfavorable attitudes towards its speakers and maybe even induce admiration. A clear-eyed look at it reveals a precise, subtle, and complex system.

In Truman's case the message is not so clear, but I believe that if he had something other than a cartoon version of the Japanese people, if he knew more about them and their brilliant culture, he would have been very reluctant to detonate the bomb, at least in the way that he did. His War Secretary Henry Stimson actually knew a fair amount about the Japan, and had visited there in 1926. In what I have read, you can see Stimson trying unsuccessfully to pull the Truman administration towards a more sensitive and humane conduct of the war. (He removed Kyoto from the target list, for example, on the grounds that post-war Japan would be healthier if the ancient capital was intact.) Stimson was in charge of the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb, but he worked hard

to give Truman a different, less violent way to end the war. Of course he failed, but he did it, I think, because of what he knew about Japan.

To conclude, here's what I believe. It's important for all of us to do what we can to make the world more fair. And one effective way to do that is to simply learn more. Yes, it's important that you acquire skills to enable you to make a living. But, to be a fully ethical member of society, you have to know as much as you can about everything. It's why we learn and think about the things that we do. It's why, for me, I study languages and take young people to Japan.

Knowing everything is too much to ask, of course, so we are doomed to being unfair sometimes. But we here in this place are lucky. We are in one of the very best places on earth to follow this moral principle, the principle which requires us to understand as much as possible. It's kind of unfair, when you think about it, that we get to be here at Carleton, and other equally deserving if not more deserving people do not. This is one of the things we can't change. But while we're here, let's make the most of it. Learn as much as you can, so that you can be fair to as many people as possible.

Thank you.