A Love of One's Own: How the Good Touches Ground in National Belonging

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Abstract: This essay explores George Grant's use of the phrase "a love of one's own" as describing a basis for political community. Drawing on Grant's use of Plato, I seek to understand how an idea of shared goods possessing both eidetic stability and some claim to universality can touch ground in beautiful, distinguishing particulars. Given Grant's critique of the possibility of Canada existing independently of a powerful neighbour to the south with, in his words, no history pre-dating modernity, what can Canadians appeal to as being distinctly our own? Within the wash of liberalism, what kinds of autochthonous belonging can be intimated here so as to answer the perils of our time, without resorting to some form of mythologized ethno-nationalism?

Keywords: George Grant; Plato; national identity; political community; American empire; Canada

Given the rise of decidedly illiberal regimes, social movements, and insurgencies of various religious and ideological stripes, given animus by pushback against globalization and critiques of liberalism, George Grant's lament at the impossibility of Canadian nationalism in 1965 now seems quaintly sage. His concern at the time was that, in practical terms, Canada was incapable of charting an independent foreign policy given its reliance on the United States for defence, and that ideologically, there was little left of Canada's founding nations to distinguish Canadian values from the wash of liberalism, and a shared devotion to the realization of human freedom as the highest good. In the absence of such distinctions at the levels of practices and perceptions, there would be little reason to balk at the suggestion that Canada should be willfully annexed by its neighbour, in order to enjoy greater material prosperity by doing away with that supposedly anachronistic border.

And yet Grant was clear in his insistence that his lament at the fate of Canada was by no means a tragic assessment; that the lament bore out a remembrance of something good, even if that calling of memory was felt as an intimation of deprival. He repeatedly called his readers towards a "love of one's own" as a means by which the Good as such could touch ground, and manifest in beautiful, distinctive particulars, even as those differences were being levelled and homogenized.

This essay will explore Grant's use of this phrase—a love of one's own—as a way of countering the shallowness of liberalism as public faith, as in a secular belief in prog-

ress that is no longer sufficient for the purposes of social cohesion, lacking shared aspirations towards a common Good, which is what any national community needs.

A LOVE OF ONE'S OWN

What is one's own, in its distinguishing uniqueness, such that its defining form, the singularity that holds together its granular particulars, can participate in a universal good? For every community is constituted by its shared goods, and all human, historical communities are temporal phenomena, held together for a moment in what Plato calls a moving image of eternity (*Timaeus*, 37d). This is the great paradox at the basis of possibility for transcendence, both noetic and emotional. That is, the unchanging must somehow move a human being, this most temporally-oriented, historical and rhythmic of living beings, while remaining unmoved itself. And the particular must somehow participate in the universal, without diminishing or taking away a part of the universal as such, while at the same time retaining its particular beauty and goodness. A beautiful paradox, and for that vexing reason a perennial question in the history of ideas, from the time of Plato to the present.

For if what is one's own in a political sense is not to be somehow reductionist, say to a biologically deterministic racism, as in some kind of ethno-nationalist, blood and soil belonging (impossible in North America except for its First Nations, though apparently possible elsewhere, as in illiberal democracies and various populist, racist nationalisms), then that which is most our own must be considered with this quality of transcendence, or experience of otherness built into it. A love of one's own demands this, because love implies the knowledge that something essential to one's being is beyond oneself. All communities are predicated on this basic need for others. This basic attachment to and consideration of one's neighbours implies that they are not entirely like us, and that we need each other precisely because of this.

Plato tells this story about love in the *Symposium*, which has a younger Socrates being instructed and questioned by the priestess Diotima. The priestess tells Socrates an origin story for the god Eros, which has him being born of two other deities, Need and Resource, and with love thus implying lack and the desire for some needed other, and the means of finding some fulfillment with them (*Symposium*, 203b-204c).

This Platonic love is born out of incompleteness, what Grant would call our "intimations of deprival", including the needs that we carry with us as living animals, along with the resourcefulness of intelligence by which the human race meets those living, breathing needs. We direct our intelligence to solve the problems of the world, because we are such needy creatures, needing first and foremost a political community in which we can each be born and gather together with others for decent, hopefully prosperous, and happiness-making lives.

The paradox at the core of this idea of community in terms of a love of one's own is that human desire lays claim to a universal, as in a common good that a community can share in, while at the same time touching ground in beautiful particulars. For although this Platonic idea of love is premised on the possibility of transcendence, finding something essential to one's being beyond oneself, still the object of erotic attention must entail this specific beautiful person, or this particular political community.

This mode of participation of the particular in the universal, and the temporal in the eternal, culminates in Diotima's teaching to Socrates concerning that which is "alone by itself and with itself, always being of a single form; while all other beautiful things that share in it do so in such a way that while it neither becomes anything more or less, nor is affected at all, the rest do come to be and perish" (*Symposium*, 21a).

Perhaps there is a measure of grace in this paradox, that would save political identities from the overdetermination of just what is loveable as one's own. For if what is one's own is given at the level of reductionist level of, say, race, then there would be a strict, unquestionable identity between members of that community. It would be in the blood, the skin colour, hair and eyes. National community at this level would be no more of an open question, no more open to constitutive deliberation and collective choice, than the choice of who one's parents are.

Rather, what is so wonderful about this idea of a love of one's own as the good is that there always remains a gap in that moment of appeal, a kind of open synapse between how the good lights up particulars and how it transcends them.

And yet, in desiring to know what Plato means by the Good as such, that source of the being of beings inasmuch as they are what they are, true to their innermost self-same form, it is quite possible to get the idea wrong, and in precisely an opposite manner to what Plato intended. For the notion of the Good as the singular, defining idea, by which all things share in some specific, archetypal form of goodness, whether it is to be a good horse, or a good regime, or a good person, or a good law, is easily confused with an imposition of anthropocentric ideals.

It is a lapse in dialectical thought to be sure, to leap from the assurance that there are universal and eternal truths that undergird and make sense of our temporal, worldly, particular experiences, to some kind of assumption that those universal and eternal truths can be known in an ideologically fixed way. But it is easy to see how one could be misled in this way, in a synaptic leap between particular and universal, or temporal and eternal, especially if the question of the good is framed within the specific context of historicism, with all ideas conceived as specific and relative to their time and place, or as mere moments in a progressive history of ideas. Or in the terms of radical historicism, the good is less loveable when conceived as an open-ended overcoming of horizons, with ideas of the good re-jigged as values tested by their improbability, as means of self-overcoming for the human will, rather than standards by which our wills are to be guided and tested.

Indeed, post-modern interpretations of Plato from Nietzsche to the present have characterized the radical re-jigging of the Ancient Greek *eidos* as a defining moment in the history of ideas: from *eidos* as the mere outward looks and visible aspects of a thing in Homer, an *eidos* dwelling in a mythic cosmos where being is characterized by shifting forms, power and the appearance of power, to its defining essence and source of being in Plato, where the *eidos* is what is real because it does not change.

Plato's ontological emphasis on eidetic stability as the measure of beings is thus cast as the logo-centric turn in the history of ideas, a turn that diminishes a world of appearances in flux to being mere shadows on the cave-wall of mass opinion, in an over-weaning imposition of ideals onto reality. For if the fundamental principle underlying Plato's substitution of *muthos* for *logos* as the true word is true, namely the principle of non-contradiction, that a being cannot be both itself and other than itself at the same time, then historicism is wrong in principle, and that which changes can only be known in relation to that which does not change, such that "the nature of the necessary and the good really differ" (*Republic*, 436b).

It is this basic distinction between what may be necessary, including the compulsions imposed by power in its various permutations, and what is good, that is dissolved by historicism in its various instantiations, from secular faith in progress, to open-ended conceptions of values and the revaluation of values as historically specific goods created by the fiat of human will. For if the many changing conceptions of the good as values are the animus of historical change, being both the ends and means of liberating the human will, then the good cannot stand independently of supposed historical necessity, but is a self-fulfilling ideal to the extent that the human historical will is empowered to realize it. In Grant's view, this formulation of the revaluation of values as measure of human, historical accomplishment is incoherent, for to what end and purpose (and within what limits) is the will so conceived liberated?

> In the conceptions of history now prevalent among those 'creative' men who plan the mastery of the planet, changing the world becomes ever more an end in itself. It is undertaken less simply to overcome the natural accidents that frustrate our humanity and more and more for the sheer sake of the 'creation' of novelty. This movement inevitably grows among the resolute as the remnants of any belief in a loveable actuality disappear. We will, not so much for some end beyond will, but for the sake of willing itself (Grant 1995, p. 27).

What goes missing in such conceptions of what is worth doing are any measures by which to discern when the will is misguided, beyond technological measures of efficiency of means and efficacy of design. It is at this historical juncture that it is worth asking what could ground, moderate and guide shared aspirations beyond the relentless pursuit of freedom, so as to begin answering Grant's question, "how do we know what is worth doing with our freedom?" (Grant 1969, p. 138)

THE PLACE OF THE GOOD

Even when Grant seeks to root the shared good in some apprehension of autochthony, of belonging to place, the very soil beneath our feet, he does so in a way that cannot be reduced to some mere stuff of which we're made. His friend Dennis Lee recounts:

> George Grant once gave me a particular gift. We were sitting in the living room of his house in Dundas. I'd been telling him about the patch of ground where I most belong—a couple of acres by a lake north of Toronto, where we spent summers when I was a boy.
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> "How *marvellous*, Dennis!" he boomed, with that outsize gusto which always took me off guard. A tumble of ashes came snaking down his cardigan. "How *marvellous*! It's what Plato meant, isn't it?..." Abruptly I felt myself paddling along about twenty steps behind him. How had Plato come into this?
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> But he went on—more gingerly, I thought. "…That we're made to love the Good." *What*? I tried to interpret the shift in his tone, since the sense was eluding me. He seemed concerned that he might be offending me; evidently the connection between my cottage and the Good was so obvious that I might feel patronized if he spelled it out. I tried not to let my bewilderment show. "And the way we come to love the Good is by first loving our own. … How marvellous for you, having that place in Muskoka to love!" More ashes tumbled onto the cardigan.[1] (Emberley 1990, p. 11)

It may help political philosophy to have poetry on its side. It can take a poet's eye to find the fullness of a character in a detail like cigarette ashes tumbling down a professor's cardigan. Or likewise, for a philosopher to uplift a friend's memory of a childhood cottage (a very Southern Ontario term: as one approaches Northern Ontario it would be called a "camp" instead) into an apprehension of Plato's idea of the Good.

There is that basic wonder in the experience of some especially beautiful aspect of one's community, whether it is the ritual of summers at camp on the lake, or an enlightening talk with a dear friend. As the experiences of shared goods scale up, from family, to friendship, to community, those attachments do get thinner.[2] This is where poetry can once again help political philosophy, by providing myths, those likely stories that recount impossible to know, cosmogonic origin stories, and that can guide virtuous action without dictating as doctrine, since myths need interpretation.

Though Plato is the first to begin the transformation of *muthos* from the true word that it is for the poet Homer, in the direction of mere story, to be replaced by *logos*, the philosopher Plato is also quite ready to lean on myths where reason cannot go. For myth can help philosophy in accounting for how the *polis* is a larger ordered whole, and indeed how we may each be ordered wholes within ourselves, with the parts of our souls harmonized within- being friends to ourselves, with that unity within pointing to a cosmological order that transcends any one of us.

For as both Plato and Aristotle seem to agree, myth and philosophy bear a certain likeness, in that both begin in wonder.[3] It is a good sign for a philosopher to be capable of this, much as Grant exclaims with marvel at his poet friend's recollection of summer cottage life. This is both because this kind of experience, quite like Platonic love, attaches meaning to the world, while at the same time causing one to question what those meanings are.

What then might be those particular sources of wonder that could ground and overarch a distinctively Canadian identity, as familiar as the path from one's front door and as universally shared as the sun in the sky? Grant calls out the Canadian Rockies as a national landmark, as awesome as chunks of rock can be. Anyone who has stood before them, whether native or tourist, cannot help but to feel a twinge of awe. And yet, Grant observes that,

> When we go into the Rockies we may have a sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what we did (Grant 1969, p. 17).

This is the kind of primal autochthony that Grant means—gods gone absent from a landscape reduced to matter in motion subject to forces, mere stuff, where meaning is produced through the overcoming of the environment, subjugated through the overcoming of technological horizons. This casts back to the settler experience in North America, except for the *Autochthones* whom Grant rather tragically, and perhaps unfairly, assesses as having been just barely allowed to survive in this new world (Grant 1969, p. 16). And yet this is the still animating primal for the new North Americans, their encounter with a new land in a way that allowed for the old world, and its myths and histories pre-dating the age of progress, to be left behind, if not altogether forgotten.

What distinguishes the Canadian experience of North America for Grant is that there lingers an apprehension that something has gone missing in the devotion to progress through the technological transformation of nature into resources. For unlike the revolutionary origins of the United States, which meant that it had no history pre-dating the era of progress, Canada was borne out of the constitutive relations between three founding nations: British, French and First Nations. This has meant that the freedom of the individual is not sacrosanct in either Canadian political culture or constitution, since our identity is constituted by those relations amongst others.

Older virtues, dating back to Plato, or the Anishinaabeg Grandfather teachings, like love and wisdom can perhaps still have some play in public discourse here, without being de-valued into mere values conceived as self-made horizons of the human will. A sense of self-worth can still be linked to respect for others and for the natural world, as if human beings have a given, purposive nature in themselves that makes those presences of nature into something more than mere externalities. For as Socrates implies when he refuses to flee an unjust punishment to save his own life, it is never justified to repay injustice with injustice, in his case because he owed his being to Athens (*Crito*, 50e). Just so, to be Canadian is to be obliged to one's community, and to the lands and waters that sustain a sharing in common goods.

And yet, the Canadian experience makes one aware of the powerful drive to transform nature into a hostile field of happenstance, and to view others as an incidental collection of pleasure-seeking automatons who may be either useful or harmful to oneself, depending on the circumstances. There is a persistent truth in Grant's indictment that there are no real options within the ideological wash of liberalism, other than between an older version of classical liberalism conceived as conservatism, though ultimately owed to thinkers like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke, and versions of late modernity traceable to Rousseau, Hegel and Kant, who conceived human freedom through the lens of historicism. Between the early and late moderns there is a fundamental consensus though that the ultimate measure of human relations with each other and with the non-human natural world is human freedom, however variously conceived.

If there is to be such an awareness of this ideological straight-jacket, then some perspective from outside of the asylum is needed. And this is where some recourse to older traditions and myths upholds the critical perspective of being Canadian. For while Canadians may understand American political and popular culture, to the extent that the country is awash in both, they can still know that this is not all.

It may indeed be true that history brings certain necessities to bear on the human experience, and that human nature consists at least in part of violent compulsions, drives and aversions. But if necessity is not all, if there remains some light between what is perceived as being necessary and what is thought to be

good, then it is not enough to shrug off the forces that come to bear on a diminutive neighbour from the most powerful nation the world has known, militarily and economically; but rather, as Grant indicts, "… it would be immoderate and uncourageous and perhaps unwise to live in the midst of our present drive, merely working in it and celebrating it, and not also listening and watching or simply waiting for intimations of deprival which might lead us to see the beautiful as the image, in the world, of the good" (Grant 1969, p. 143).

It is telling that in the face of some apparent necessity, Grant invokes ancient, classical virtues: moderation, courage, and wisdom. Even in the times when those virtues and others were first and most fully articulated by Plato and Aristotle, the vicissitudes of regimes threatened the sort of standing back and looking on that would allow a person to see power for what it was, without functioning as a lackey to the current political order. With Athenian regimes then violently lurching from democracy, to oligarchy and back again, and given the manifest threats to the practice of philosophy- in the execution of Socrates by the Athenian *demos*, the imprisonment of Plato by the tyrant Dionysius, and Aristotle's flight from Athens so that it could not sin against philosophy a second time—the possibility of philosophy is always precarious. Regimes are all, every one of them, even more precarious, to the extent that none of them always was, or always will be. So, to find something of enduring importance in any one ephemeral collection of human beings remains the shared providence of philosophy and poetry, which can beautifully transcend their time.

This is part of what Grant accomplished in his lament at the passing of Canada as an independent nation, given the forces brought to bear on that particular state as it sought to articulate a truly independent foreign policy. The point of the lament was not to force an articulation of a distinctively Canadian foreign policy, or a means of unravelling the continent's branch-plant economy, however well-intentioned the efforts of practical people who did so as critiques of his *Lament for a Nation*.[4] The point was rather to step back from the underlying premise of liberalism, that freedom is the highest good for human beings, and that historical forces march humanity in that direction. The specific means by which he suggested doing so require articulating what goes missing in that drive, and this is partly why particulars matter. His response to the universalizing and homogenizing effects of what we might now call globalization was to decry them as false universals, set apart from the beautiful particulars that are the way to an idea of the good that transcends any one of those particulars.

If there is something obvious to the point of oblivion about the apparent goodness of the universal and homogenous state- for why would one possibly not want to eliminate wars between states, or class conflict within them?- then there is an ephemeral, searching character to the connections between the particular instantiations of beauty that hold us together as families and communities and the notions of the good that such connections intimate. The "intimations of deprival" that Grant articulates in the face of an American imperium functioning as the spearhead of modernity depend on these intimations of beauty, from Dennis Lee's attachment to his cottage in Muskoka to the awe experienced as the Rockies rise into sight over the western prairies. As human beings, with our own dear perspectives, unique territorial situations, and mortal limits, we cannot leap over our own shadows in some kind of direct link between particular and universal. The good must touch ground for us, and yet precisely because it must, that apprehension of the good is limited by our specific experience of it.

As a rejoinder to Grant in part, I cannot see how his intimation of Canada's mortal limits was an affirmation that the drive towards continental integration in North America had "made Canada redundant" (Grant 1998, p. 78). For even if all that remains are these antiquated languages of moderation, courage and wisdom, then that can hardly be called redundant, even if those languages have little currency in popular discourse, shameless as it may be. It is never redundant to be able to think; indeed in the classical tradition it is precisely the divine uselessness of philosophy that is sign of what it is good for, being unlike technical knowledge suited to solving the problems of the world. In the original meaning of thought as *theoria*, it is to be beset by what is. The theorist as such would have in its most archaic, basic sense meant a delegation to the Olympic games or religious festival, whose role was to bring back an account of what they saw, with this requiring that they were not active contestants or believers themselves[5] (Gadamer 1981, p. 17). This seems

to be very much what Grant is doing in bearing witness to Canada's precarious relation with the United States, that is being beset by what is, so as to know things for what they are.

Grant's quite correct apprehension as to the imperial dimension of America's existence, at a time when talk of American imperialism was the limited province of the Marxist-Leninist school of political economy, has been borne out quite clearly, from a full-throated endorsement of empire as being good for the United States and the world in its neo-conservative moment, to a less ideologically ambitious pivot to regional hegemony presently. After the end of history, in the absence of a cumulative negation that would bring freedom and equality to the whole of the planet, one is apparently left with a multi-polar collection of great powers content to cut deals amongst themselves to coerce their weaker neighbours into submission as vassal states. There is in the latter less ideological coherence, though the imperial drive remains, with Canadian sovereignty vulnerable in either case, whether steam-rolled for some progressive historical purpose, or simply taken up in the desire for power after power. And it is this precariousness of Canada's situation that calls upon some principled sense of the good as retort, if only to know what goes missing if those imperial designs succeed.

NOTES

1 It is worth noting that Grant's preface to *English-Speaking Justice* recognizes Dennis Lee and Alex Colville as "two artists who taught me about justice".

2 Aristotle seems right in his critique of Plato's *Republic* in this regard, (*Politics*, II.A.1.) though this may be a matter of the audience of the *Politics* if we pair it as natural accompaniment to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, addressed more to the *agathai ge kai kalai*, the good and fine, (I.8.13.) practical gentlemen, rather than to pure students of philosophy, and thus treating that "city in speech" (*Rep*ublic, 369a) as an impractical blueprint rather than as an archetypal test-piece for actual regimes.

3 "For this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, and he who said that Iris was the child of Thaumas made a good genealogy" (*Theaetetus*, 155d).

"It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too… Now he who wonders and is perplexed feels that he is ignorant (thus the myth-lover [*philomuthos*] is in a sense a philosopher, since myths are composed of wonders)…" (*Metaphysics*, 982b11).

4 For a contemporary example, see Michael Byers' *Intent for a Nation*. However pragmatic his intentions or idealistic his tone, his advice that Canada adopt a multi-lateral approach to security through pooled sovereignties is not a detraction from Grant's argument in principle, while his advocacy of a post-national form of identity as being uniquely suited to cosmopolitanism and global governance seems to align with Grant's point that the corrosive effects of liberalism as ideology undermine any distinctive claims to national identity based in autochthonous belonging.

5 Liddell and Scott (1968) account for *to theoreion* simply as "a place for seeing".

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