
The Hocking Primer

Chapter One: Three Types of Diplomacy

Hocking addresses a liability of power in the first paragraph:

National power may so handle itself as to develop national weakness. Not that "power always corrupts": if that were true there could be no states and no statesmen at once strong and honest. There are such statesmen. But it is true that national power, taken as external evidence of an inner perfection, has an extraordinary capacity to mislead its holders, and in time corrupt them. Through failure to identify and understand the conditions of its own power, a truly great nation may find itself mysteriously enfeebled.

We do not have a problem with the idea that power corrupts. One just has to look at government to see that this is true. But how it corrupts is more difficult to understand. Hocking says people make the wrong connection, attributing too much of the success to themselves and not enough to fate and perhaps effort. But that error reflects character not cognition. People attribute more credit for success than they deserve to avoid facing how little they actually control. Along that line we hesitate to undertake the hard work success requires, preferring to hold out for the easier work of good fortune. The biggest of these errors by intent is due to the inability of most people to face their ultimate demise. People reach for eternity while experiencing finality, distorting everything in a desperate grasp at immortality. The common denominator here is physicalism. We are conceptual creatures in physical bodies. It appears that as goes the body, so goes the soul. Any serious attempt to negotiate this world has to address that issue. The big mistakes made in life are not because people don't get it. It is because they don't like it.

Things fade and alternatives exclude. That is the full text of existentialism. These statements are correct, but people ignore turn away. So they exchange truth for futility. Futility, unfortunately, always has its say. Truth, on the other hand, while not necessarily attractive, is more polite. And it supports hope.

I have strayed here from Hocking, but our purpose in this primer is not to turn his words into gospel but to use them to increase our own effectiveness. We need to speak from considered concepts wrapped in personal experience rather than read from borrowed text. That is the point of equality, and also democracy.

Hocking felt that the United States was losing its way back in 1958 at the time he wrote this book. He gets no argument from me. Alan Greenspan said recently that Americans will think while others can sweat. That sounds like internal perfection to me. We are that good at thinking? The head of the Dallas Federal reserve said after 9/11 that everyone should go out and buy a new SUV. Allegedly we provide a service to the rest of the world by shopping—good work if you can get it. But borrowing, spending, and consumption sound like a path to bankruptcy rather than success. What happens if others sweat and think? I guess we will find out.

Policy, while from above it directs national action, has its springs in the convictions and purposes of a people, and especially in their judgment as to the meaning of their own ideals, and of the issues that constitute the public conflict.

Here are the sources of our weakness. They lie in the basic temper of our democracy—our orientation in world affairs, our conceptions of the good life, and withal in what we consider the meaning of our professed public principles—say of liberty, of free enterprise, of democracy itself. If in this region of our unformulated but daily-lived ideology there are maladjustments to the changing realities we have to meet, we can understand a loss of fitness for the leadership our position implies and requires.

The nature of a society is reflected in the quality of its leaders. (Should we be worried?) And while we may not be conscious of our philosophy we will live it, for better or for worse. Most likely if that philosophy is not understood and periodically reviewed it will be for worse. Having no philosophy is in itself a philosophy. Something has to give meaning to one's behavior. Having no philosophy simply defaults to the idea of might makes right. Brilliant!

Hocking does not introduce the first two forms of diplomacy and perhaps they do not have names. One emphasizes principles, the other favors appeasement. A third approach, which he tentatively labels “creative”, involves finding common ground. The first two approaches seek to settle mutually exclusive interests, while the third proposes to find common ones. This cooperative approach (as opposed to combative or compliant) places its bet on the principle of the universality of human experience—i.e., that we all bleed red, have hopes for our children, and do not desire to be blasted into atoms, etc. We can start there.



There is a personal application to this type of interaction as well. That should be no surprise, since both involve people. In working with post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, if the patient and I are working on a common problem (i.e. we both have experiences that are hard to integrate) then each of us benefits from the process. We share a project. The gain is intrinsic.

The alternative is that the patient and I share little or nothing of his problem. I act upon him but not with him. Influence is important; honesty less so. As a person I am irrelevant and in fact get in the way. I just need to quote the latest studies and prescribe the latest drug. Objectivity is preserved and therefore

my suggestions will be superior. But if Yalom is right and the big issues in therapy (life) are addressed by the verb “to be”, then we are in trouble.

In my opinion therapy comes from being on the same field with the patient, not sitting in the stands shouting instructions. Sometimes nothing needs to be said at all. Both of us just know. Many professionals fault this approach, claiming it leads to a lack of boundaries and encourages the patient to stay conflicted. They prefer to direct rather than empathize. But if the difficult issues of our lives (i.e. loss, lack of agency, linear time) are similar, and I think they are, then the synergy of working together makes our experience less tedious, more alive, and perhaps more effective. Therapy should be experienced, not thought. I prefer the risk/reward ratio of the empathic model.

The common ground concept applies to all relationships. If you are going to take your children to a dinosaur museum that you have no interest in seeing just because they want to go, find something that both of you wish to visit. Self-sacrifice is overrated, pompous and boring. Painting it over with a smile does not hide it. It just makes it insidious.

Hocking believes that the quality of a culture is represented in its education and art. What we choose to pass on to our children reveals what we consider valuable. And since art speaks a universal language it reveals our soul. Everyone on the planet understood the Vietnam picture of the girl burnt by napalm. No text was required.

Totalitarian regimes produce spectacle but little art. Few are inspired by works from the Third Reich or the Soviet Union. Art reveals what we are, for better or worse. Hocking felt that the cold war was a battle for the hearts of people based on different forms of economy, experiments upon which other people passed their judgment. Fair enough. But winning the hearts and minds of people is never done at the point of a gun. It requires inspiration. A culture that is worthwhile inspires. Art provides the medium.

We might wonder what rap music and movie violence says about our culture. Perhaps we are moving toward spectacle and away from art. I personally find nothing inspiring about shock and awe.