



**J.H. Prynne**

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## No Universal Plan for a Good Life

I believe that there is no universal plan for a good life. Each person makes individual choices within the condition of what is possible during a span of life, and each person can also reach out beyond the currently possible, in the direction of hope and in continuing effort to bring hopes closer to reality. I myself believe that hope is not just for the future, and is not some general desire for happiness or utopia. For me it is concerned with true understanding and small advantage, step by step, in relation to what is real in the world of human life, so as to think and act in accord with one's principles and to keep these principles directed towards a coherent aspiration. Some instruments in my own practice are: a firm belief in the non-importance of self advancement; a strong theoretical and practical commitment to justice in the conduct of entire social life; a regular and instinctive habit of sharing opportunities with those around you, not in a spirit of benevolence but from a rooted sense of inherent equity. Equity at this defining point is fundamentally opposed to capitalistic habits of defensive class advantage and to the distortion of value as an instrument of oppressive power. This

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outlook extends, without selective favour, to persons and communities in all parts of the wide world, not abstractly but according as encounter and enlarged experience open links and friendship which give meaning to common humanity. Within friendship the extreme fullness of love and its loyalty to truth of deepest feeling can find their expression as the root and base of reality in self-being, as found in and given to relations with dearest ones, and spread out from the inmost domain of family and offspring into the social and material expanse of nature and human kind. To love deeply and largely is to be transfigured, into the human fullness of trust and hope.

These idealised ambitions for truthful living come into perpetual contradiction with the negative and opposed features in how the world is constructed, not by divine intervention but as a planetary reality occupied in fundamental argument with itself. The movement of contrary forces and strife in divided performance are the principle of dialectic in the process of nature and history: this too is not an abstract diagram, but is the testing-ground for struggle towards a justice that is man-made and only incompletely natural. The struggle corresponds intimately with human ethical instincts, towards the right and the fair; but these terms are relatively weak without dialectical underpinning, and for this the activity of social life must essentially be realised through directed political consciousness and commitment. Thus the hope for justice is a struggle for just practice, or else it is nothing but empty virtue. And yet such a concept of struggle is itself dialectical, to know what it is that you believe, and to bring this into working argument with what it is that you do. At the same time the silence of inward thought, and feeling not directed towards an object, make breathing-spaces in daily life and pose always the question, whether the self can be sufficient in its own truth.

The life of plants and landforms, almost silent and local to their own accident of position, echoes this question in their solitary and companionable forms of being.

In my own span of life thus far the course of effort and opportunity has led into teaching young people how to think for themselves, without intrusion into their task to discover how each of them can become responsible for what knowledge they will value and what path of action they will choose. To have scruple in regard to this individual freedom to be confused and undecided is a strong challenge. To act as a teacher across radical boundaries of cultural and linguistic difference is even more a challenge, because the alert teacher learns always by teaching and can offer the consideration of influence by having no influence to promote. This too is the habit and duty of a scholar, to search for knowledge with accurate judgement and human use: fact and imagination. Thus, life and occupying work are the frame of time for giving back some of what the opportunity of being in the world confers as reckonable human occasion.

In final place I set down the enduring justification, or effort towards this, of my singular life-work. To be in and across all things a poet, in daily involvement with the dialectic of imagination and real things, has been a task giving the profoundest joy and fulfilment. The task in this work has been to maintain the fundamental argument of contradiction, even while opening one's powers of feeling and knowledge to the largest extent, so that language occupies the entire space of the poet's self-being and then overflows it, pressing its structures of composition against the exertion of writerly creation and encounter. There has also to be the purpose of critical irony in resistance to habits of self-regard; some ardently playful turns keep this project alive and frisky. Throughout all my poetical work, in writing and reading and staying open to the world of historical presence, the dialectical purpose has

enhanced the fire of latent ethical seriousness, and at the same time has tested this seriousness against the disorder of unpurposed material reality and the contradictions of human will. If such a diverse schedule of beliefs and actions in the shifting course of human life has any coherence, the present brief sketch may indicate both somewhat how it is (and has been); and also how far hope will make test of what is actual, and will extend the dialectic which itself struggles to hold these two contrary positions in active work: that to be active, this work should be true to principle and experience as well as grasping the contradiction which gives life to each aspect in terms conversely of the other.

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