



Michael Ignatieff, *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*

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At the heart of Michael Ignatieff's excellent new book is the proposal that consolation comes through reconciliation with our failures and limitations. This apparently simple idea, which in essence means accepting that our lives are imperfect and finite, turns out to be highly compelling. Ignatieff, whose readable style is the craft of an experienced broadcaster and writer, is himself a remarkably versatile figure who has had much success across a wide range of fields. His impressive bibliography includes novels, screenplays, dramatic works, and many works of non-fiction, which include European history, international politics, and a biography of his mentor Isaiah Berlin. He has been professor of history at Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard and the University of Toronto, where he also taught law and political science. Yet, as a senior politician in Canada, Ignatieff experienced humiliation as leader of the Liberal Party, which he guided to that party's electoral ruin in 2011. This public chastening is only implicitly referenced in the book but, as he admits, one of the great gifts of getting older is that the illusion that you are somehow special falls away as time presses relentlessly onwards and death becomes somehow more familiar.

Indeed, death — the final event that we can only ever experience alone — casts its ever-present shadow over the entire book. *On Consolation* begins and ends with two deaths — the first, a brief sketch of how Ignatieff struggled to find the words to console a friend whose wife had died; the second, his own personal challenge when his parents died within three years of each other. This structure is hardly accidental: of all the reasons for seeking consolation that Ignatieff explores, death is the most pervasive. Ignatieff writes especially touchingly on the grief that followed the deaths of his own parents, and one senses that it is with this personal loss rather and his

own sense of mortality than reckoning with his failure as a politician that led him to search for his own form of individual consolation. Yet while this personal element is significant in the book — and Ignatieff moves as gracefully between personal and impersonal registers as one of its subjects, Michel de Montaigne — *On Consolation* is a sage and tender exploration of the enduring need that all human beings feel to make sense of their lives as they approach the final hour.

Over the course of seventeen lucid and frequently poignant chapters, or “portraits” as the author terms them, Ignatieff provides us with both a history of consolation and a meditation on the theme. Each of the influential thinkers, writers, artists, musicians and politicians explored here has at one time or other sought to find, and themselves understand, consolation. From each of these people we can learn, not from their greatness or their success, but from their failures, their griefs, their torments, their humble, essential human-ness. In this respect, the book fits unashamedly within the liberal humanist continuum and is all the better for it. The portraits Ignatieff has chosen all come from western culture, though he accepts an alternative book might have included selections from the Muslim world or the Far East. Nonetheless, a felicitous dimension to this approach is that Ignatieff is also enabled to chart the evolving secularisation of the forms of consolation in the western tradition, from the sacred and supernatural to the modest and intimate; from the immense authority of the Bible to the quiet transformative power of a few lines of contemporary poetry.

While the need for consolation is not in doubt, a key question for Ignatieff is where humans have continued to find consolation as the reach of religion into daily life has gradually receded over the centuries. This is an important question since Ignatieff wishes to demonstrate that what endures for humanity is the need for their lives to be meaningful and what does not endure is the manner in which meaningfulness is understood and articulated. Once, Ignatieff argues, consolation was situated within the framework of religious texts, practices and institutions. It was found in the collective spaces of

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churches, synagogues and mosques where people came to console each other, in the rituals that bound humans together for centuries, and in the great religious texts. Where, then, can consolation be found in a world that has been winnowed out of religion? The answer, it would appear, is that each historical society provides its own version or versions of consolation.

To begin with, however, Ignatieff explores how people found consolation in the great Christian and Hebrew tracts that project their salvation by an all-powerful God. For pre-modern societies, the absence of discernible meaning in our lives could only be tolerable by faith in a divine power. Ultimately, Ignatieff will argue against this idea by stating that religious doctrines cannot provide consolation at all. Nonetheless, he states that at its core consolation “is an unavoidably religious idea, even if, as we shall see, the meaning that gives us hope can take non-religious and even anti-religious forms” (p. 8). Ignatieff, it should be noted, is not at all interested in disparaging religious forms of consolation; instead, he sees types of consolation as expressed in the Bible as part of the chain of meanings that have come down to us through the ages. In this sense, they still have extraordinary capacity to console. Indeed, in the preface to the book, Ignatieff explains that the origin of *On Consolation* lay in a choral event that accompanied a talk that he was invited to give about justice and politics in the Book of Psalms. As Ignatieff listened to the musical performance of the Psalms, he found himself suddenly moved; he was being consoled, he realised, by the words of this ancient religious text. Both the Old Testament texts, the Book of Psalms and the Book of Job, the subjects of the opening chapter, give powerful voice to the fear and doubt humans have about their existence and their relationship to God. In particular, the Book of Job is a terrifying dramatisation of existential questioning. For the authors of these texts, the inscrutability of God’s design — the sheer unfairness of life — was the biggest test of their faith, not only in salvation, but in the essential justice of God. For Job, apparently arbitrarily stripped of his land and family, taunted by Satan, and then effectively physically and mentally tortured by God, the lesson is this:

Job’s story tells us we are fated to endure sorrow and suffering that have no apparent meaning, moments when existence is a torment, when we know what it is to be truly inconsolable. But like Job, we must learn to endure, we must hold on to the truth of what we have lived and refuse false consolations, like believing that we deserve to suffer. We should refuse the burden of guilt and struggle as best we can to understand the meaning of our lives. (p.16)

The reward for living in truth and shunning false consolation is eternal life, and it is specifically in the letters of St. Paul that Ignatieff believes where this is most powerfully articulated.

Following Paul’s conversion to Christianity, he became convinced that suffering had a twofold purpose: to put one’s faith to the test and thereby to demonstrate the resilience of that faith. Paul, we learn, was unshakeable in his belief that the Messiah would come and through his fervent missionary work helped spread this idea to communities throughout the Mediterranean world. Paul’s message was that “instead of aging and decay, instead of fear and loss, a climactic moment would come when time would be abolished and believers would live beyond loss and pain in an eternal present”; for Ignatieff, “no more influential idea of consolation was ever devised” (p.33). But in the end, in a manoeuvre that will become familiar as the book progresses, Ignatieff does not let us linger on the righteousness of Paul’s message but instead our eye rests on Paul himself as an old man. Although he did not live to see the coming of the Messiah, Paul had nonetheless genuinely experienced the love of those who he left behind. That love, it is implied with subtlety, must have been Paul’s real consolation and the authentic consolation we can take from his example.

Paul’s work was done in the first decades after the death of Christ; for the Romans who put Christ to death, consolation lay in the strict, social code of stoic manliness that was the bedrock of the Roman Republic. This is mechanism through which Cicero, the leading politician of his generation, was enabled to deal with the death of his beloved daughter and, later, his grandson, events that plunged him into tremendous, unbreakable sorrow. Unable to publicly grieve, Cicero won admiration for the forbearance with which he carried his sadness. For Ignatieff, the respect that Cicero earned must have proven some form of consolation, and yet

It is from Cicero and Roman Stoicism that men learned, for a thousand years and more, that they must refuse the comfort of tears, that they deserve the consolation that comes from the approval of their male peers only if they remain dry-eyed and composed though all their trials (p. 55).

There are not too many notes of rebuke in *On Consolation*, but Ignatieff is clearly unimpressed with Cicero’s manly “self-command”, which left a poisonous legacy we might now recognise as hyper-masculinity (p. 55). Like his fellow Roman, the emperor Marcus Aurelius also practised a form of public stoicism that was at odds with the turmoil of his inner life, which he privately set down in his *Meditations*. Ignatieff observes that for all Marcus Aurelius’ achievements as emperor of Rome, what has not endured are monuments to his greatness, or the memory of his remote and awesome powers, but those scrolls that contained his most intimate feelings about loneliness, fear, and even disdain for life itself. Separately, Ignatieff notes that for a figure such as *Boethius*, whose sixth century text *Consolatio Philosophiae* dramatises the inner

dialogue between terrible doubt and stoic acceptance, it is doubtful if even his own book provided consolation to the author, even as it offered consolation to many others. How can we identify with such people, who were bound by ancient social codes in societies quite alien to those we live in today? What we share with Cicero, Marcus Aurelius and Boethius, as with Paul and Job, Ignatieff argues, is not an affinity with their religious conviction or agreement with their philosophical outlook, but the underlying doubt and fear that gave rise to their searching articulations of consolation; each in their own way is our fellow traveller. From them we can learn something of the need for consolation that affects us all.

On the face of it, it may seem that the central message of *On Consolation* is simply that what we can learn from the example of ‘great’ people is that they are just like us. To those of us used to living in democracies that at least ostensibly promote and attempt to legislatively guarantee the notion of equality, this message may seem a little trite at this point in history. But from another perspective, Ignatieff wants to remind us that there is something useful and instructive in examining the repetition of the human struggle for meaning: bad things happen to us and sometimes we do bad things to others and to ourselves, but ultimately, we may come to realise that we are never truly alone in our exertions. Contained within this idea is also a proposition, for as Ignatieff says: “consolation is an argument about why life is the way it is and why we must keep going” (p. 6). That this instinct persists is proof of his own theory: even when the religious framework for consolation has been dismantled, or the Roman code of Stoicism dies away, or political utopianisms collapse, the need for consolation remains. This is why Ignatieff feels compelled to say that religious doctrines or social codes are incapable of providing consolation. Consolation, in fact, is not a gift from God nor does it come through the achievement of a perfect society; it derives solely from recognising that the human capacity to endure, to hope, to continue, belongs to us all. The long story of art, philosophy and literature essentially tells us that story of endurance. One might even call this fact — whisper it — an example of the human condition.

The title of the book — *On Consolation* — is surely a nod to Michel de Montaigne’s wonderful essays, and it is not hard to hear the literary echo of Montaigne in the way Ignatieff seamlessly intertwines commentary on philosophy, politics, history, art and literature with moments of personal reflection and opinion. Montaigne’s essays represent a decisive break with the authority of religion and philosophy to provide consolation. From this moment on, in Ignatieff’s schema, people who absorb Montaigne’s lessons only need to find consolation in the perpetual wonder of being alive, as long as every dimension of being alive is fully embraced. This will become one of the most influential avenues to consolation in the modern world. Of all the thinkers covered in the book, Montaigne is probably the most joyous, most surprising and the most

wise, extracting out of even the most mundane aspect of being alive something worth reflecting on. Montaigne, Ignatieff reminds us, directs our attention back towards the body itself, to the “second-by-second cascade of sensations, feelings, needs, pleasures, [and] pains” that make us conscious — and that is all the consolation we need.

Montaigne’s glorious humanism is a precursor to the radical scepticism that came with the Enlightenment, which brought new forms of secular belief systems and modern philosophy expressed as political ideology and social and economic theory. Other thinkers explored in the middle sections of the book — David Hume, Condorcet, Marx, and Abraham Lincoln — attempted each in their own way to find consolation in the social, political and economic transformations of their period. For Hume, the epistemological pillars that the entirety of European culture had rested upon for centuries had been little more than vain inventions of the human mind, metaphysical scandals that provided false answers to various unanswerable questions. For Ignatieff

Hume is the single thinker most responsible for philosophy’s abandonment of metaphysics and theodicy, all its grand attempts to make sense of the world as a divinely created order, or even as any kind of order at all (p. 114).

This is disorienting stuff, and will only accelerate the crisis of truth that will bedevil philosophy since Descartes first conjured up his evil demon. And yet, Ignatieff portrays Hume as a fundamentally genial person who, after years of severe mental ill-health, eventually found consolation in the society of his friends; he is depicted in his last days as a man happily free from the false consolations of religion, a champion of human freedom, a man who will face death with equanimity. Hume was, for Ignatieff, a powerful example of the modern concept of self-realisation. Hume was also interested in the social and economic life of modern human beings, and recognised that philosophy needed to reconcile itself with these increasingly important dimensions of human existence. In this vein, both the French revolutionary Condorcet and Karl Marx offered consolations through the idea of *progress*; in Marx’s case, his political utopia appears as a sustained effort to replace religious consolation with a more perfect worldly society. As with the chapter on Marcus Aurelius, Ignatieff reserves for himself a certain amount of scepticism: the question is not if a utopian society as envisaged by Marx — a world beyond consolation — is attainable. The question, he says, is whether or not such a world is desirable. This provocative remark not only lays a large query at the door of political Marxism, but reprises a key argument the book makes, that the search for consolation in some form is what binds us together throughout history, and this is what makes Marx interesting to us.

If religion and philosophy are bound by their own limitations, and society cannot be perfected, are then humans doomed forever to experience distress, sadness, fear and anxiety? The answer, it would appear, is yes. The political history of much of the twentieth century is miserable; no other century in human history has hitherto achieved the scale and methods of death, hatred and destruction. *On Consolation* is subtitled ‘finding consolation in dark times’. Of course, one gets the impression that the dark times that Ignatieff is referring to is not just the dark times that shaped the lives of thinkers and artists he writes about, but also our own times. He cites the outbreak of Covid-19 as a moment where modern media platforms became spaces of mutual consolation during the initial stages of the global pandemic. One thinks, for instance, of orchestral collaborations over the internet, or the camera phone recordings of opera singers on their balconies in lockdown Italy replayed on social media; these rallies of consolation were in their own right moments akin to others found in religion, art, literature and philosophy. One may also think of the impending planetary disasters that will be wrought by the worst effects of climate change, or the semi-permanent threat of nuclear annihilation. Few would argue that consolation is needed more than ever. But ‘dark times’ also refers to the catastrophic madneses of twentieth-century extremist political ideologies — Nazism and Communism — that denuded human beings of the commonality Ignatieff argues for and which made consolation in that century at times both unimaginably necessary and for many entirely unattainable.

As a historian, Ignatieff is especially alert to the dangers of believing that history is marching towards some future utopia: “History has no consolations to offer because it never ends and its meaning is never settled” (p. 209). This warning is at the heart of Ignatieff’s criticism of Condorcet and Marx’s faith in the inevitability of progress, which, as it manifested in the USSR, was a disaster. Perhaps the most emotionally forceful chapter in the book is the one entitled ‘The Consolations of Witness’, in which Ignatieff considers in brief the cases of writers Anna Akhmatova, Primo Levi, and Miklós Radnóti, each victims of brutal regimes. For Ignatieff — and here he uses the word consolation in the specific sense of political hope — witness for these people was a form of consolation:

They wanted to win the vital political battle of the future, over what meaning their nations and peoples would give to the horror they endured. They wanted victims to be remembered and to ensure that their once all-powerful tormentors would be consigned to infamy (p. 207).

For them, the mere but unimpeachable act of remembrance would be consolation in itself — to never forget their compatriots and co-religionists who were sent mercilessly to their deaths by Nazis and by Stalinists. As Ignatieff remarks, these writers had kept faith even in the darkest hour, wringing from

the most extreme times moments of vivifying poetry. But here one senses in the author a deeper despair as new genocides and horrors continue to be visited by humans upon one another. There is not simply a forgetting, but an ongoing revision of history, even, a disputation of the facts. It turns out that not even the power of witness can bring consolation, because as time passes the authority of that witness becomes subject to distortion and myth. All that can remain, Ignatieff states, is the responsibility to defend the truth.

Remarkably, for a man who has spent a lifetime as an academic and as a former high-profile politician, he ultimately suggests that what binds humans are not “liberal protestations of abstract solidarity” but the common fate of grief, loss and death (p. 258). In fact, Ignatieff goes further: all doctrines that aim to console are false. There is nothing that politics, or history, or religious faith in salvation can do to provide consolation. These conclusions are startling because they suggest that the whole course of human history, which from a liberal perspective places so much faith in political systems to achieve progress, offers no genuine consolation. What then, is left? In two sentences, Ignatieff reorients our attention away from political, social and religious systems of consolation towards the consoling grace of the human struggle:

Though I have described three ancient doctrines of consolation — the Hebrew, Christian, the Stoic — together with a fourth one, the idea of progress that led Marx to put his faith in revolution, this has been a book about people. It is not doctrines that console us in the end, but people: their example, their singularity, their courage and steadfastness, their being with us when we need them most (p. 259).

There is a Beckettian echo in the idea that consolation can only be found through the example of what it means to *keep going*. Hope is a tricky enough concept to apply to the works of Beckett, who said his favourite word was the more qualified “perhaps”. But for Ignatieff, hope is the “essential element” of consolation (p. 7). Indeed, the essential element is not just hope itself but the realisation that hope will always recover. So, to accept one’s defeats and limitations is not the same as succumbing to fatalism. Consolation, we are told, is “a conscious process by which we seek meaning for our losses and at the same time a deeply unconscious undertaking, in the reckoning of our souls, in which we recover hope” (p. 257). Consolation is in this sense both necessary and voluntary; it is a journey we must decide to embark on and one on which we embark nonetheless. The self-pity that first accompanies failure and the subsequent ownership of those failures are part of the consoling process. In this scheme, while consolation is something humans have always sought, it is also something we have never been able to escape either, “because we cannot live in hope without reckoning with death, or with loss and

failure” (p. 257). To this, Ignatieff adds an idea that he provides at the beginning of the book: that consolation, deriving from the Latin *consolor*, means to find solace together. It is a plainly persuasive idea that is delineated throughout this fascinating, complex, illuminating book: if consolation means anything at all, it means recognising that we belong, that we are not alone in our fates, while there is time there is still hope, that we must live in truth, and that we go on.

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