Nobility and Ignobility

John Herrmann – 8 Nov 2026

In a world crying out for strong leadership among growing tensions, are there any human beings qualified to solve all the world's problems? President Trump has described China's leader Xi Jinping and Russia's leader Vladimir Putin as strong leaders whilst calling Western leaders weak.

In my primary school days a teacher told a story that there are different types of courage. He said he knew two boys that when exposed to a cliff edge saw one stand on the edge without hesitation whilst the other boy cowered away, terrified of heights. Later he witnessed the same two boys exposed to a vicious dog fight that had erupted near them. The boy unafraid of heights cowered from the fight whilst the boy terrified of heights ran into the dog fight trying to separate them. This got me to thinking that humans are more complex than I'd imagined. All human beings can act nobly in one set of circumstances and yet ignobly in another set of circumstances.

A motion picture titled 'Crash' won the Academy Award in 2006 for best picture. It was full of bad language but still carried a powerful message. It highlighted a number of characters throughout the movie that behaved with shining nobility in one set of circumstances and degrading ignobility in another. Human beings can act nobly in one situation and ignobly in another because human morality is not a fixed, unchangeable trait, but a dynamic interaction between individual psychology and external pressures - and atheists would add biological evolution. When the context changes, the internal and external forces driving a person's choices change as well, leading to radically different behaviours. Ultimately, human morality is a shifting landscape. Rather than being entirely "good" or entirely "bad", individuals possess a sliding scale of disposition. Nobility and ignobility are not permanent identities but descriptions of choices made when human fallibility collides with the pressures of the world. This doesn't augur well for any human being able to solve the world's problems.

Let's look at just some of humanity's cream of the crop. This is not to humiliate them but to simply show that the very best that humanity has to offer isn't the answer to the world's problems. If we are honest, we know we all have noble and ignoble makeups.

Thomas Jefferson [1743-1826] The nobility: He was a primary architect of modern human rights philosophy. He penned the immortal words of the United States Declaration of Independence, asserting that *"all men are created equal"* with unalienable rights to *"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."* He also championed religious freedom and public education. The ignobility: Despite writing that slavery was a "moral depravity," Jefferson enslaved over 600 human beings throughout his lifetime. He profited from their forced labour, actively pursued runaways and fathered multiple children with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman whom he held in bondage until his death.

King David of Israel [1040-940 BCE] The nobility: David is considered by most Jews as Israel's greatest king. He is celebrated as a deeply spiritual, courageous leader who united Israel. As a youth, he famously risked his life to fight Goliath. He was known for his profound mercy, famously sparing the life of king Saul - the man actively hunting him - because he respected the sanctity of Saul's position. The ignoble: Later in life, consumed by lust for Bathsheba, David committed a monstrous abuse of power. After getting her pregnant, he attempted a cover-up.
When that failed, he intentionally engineered the battlefield murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite - one of his most loyal and elite soldiers.

Oskar Schindler: The nobility: During the Holocaust, Schindler risked his life, his fortune and his safety to save roughly 1,200 Jewish people from extermination. He spent millions of marks bribing Nazi officials, buying black-market food and creating a fake munitions factory specifically to protect his workers from the death camps. The ignobility: Before his heroic pivot, Schindler was a profiteer, a spy and a womaniser. He joined the Nazi Party strictly for financial gain. He arrived in Poland to exploit the war, actively taking over a bankrupt Jewish-owned enamelware factory using slave labour to line his own pockets with wartime profits.

Arthur Conan Doyle [1859-1930]: The nobility: Doyle used his immense fame and sharp intellect to act as a real-life detective, fighting devastating miscarriages of justice. He personally investigated and overturned the wrongful convictions of George Edalji [a lawyer targeted by racism] and Oscar Slater [a man falsely accused of murder], funding their legal defences and proving their innocence. The ignobility: In his later years, Doyle became obsessed with Spiritualism. In a bizarre lapse in judgement, he aggressively championed the Cottingley Fairies hoax - a series of clearly fabricated photographs taken by two young girls using cardboard cutouts. He spent vast sums of money and ruined his own intellectual credibility defending a obvious lie, unable to admit he had been deceived.

Fritz Haber [1868-1934] The nobility: He co-developed the Haber-Bosch process, a method of synthesizing ammonia fertiliser directly from the nitrogen in the air. This single breakthrough revolutionised global agriculture. Today, it generates the fertiliser needed to feed nearly half of the world's population, earning him the 1918 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. The ignobility: During World War 1, Haber eagerly weaponised his intellect for the German military. He pioneered the creation and deployment of weaponised chlorine gas and other chemical weapons. He personally supervised the first successful large-scale gas attack at Ypres, which agonisingly choked thousands of soldiers to death.

Mahatma Gandhi [1869-1948] The Nobility: He pioneered Satyagraha [non-violent resistance], leading India to independence from British colonial rule. His strategies of peaceful protest inspired global civil rights movements, including those led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. The ignobility: During his early years working in South Africa, Gandhi held deeply racist views against black Africans, repeatedly writing that white and Indian people were superior to them. Later in life, he subjected young women - including his own grandnieces - to a controversial "purity test," forcing them to sleep naked in his bed to test his own spiritual self-control, a severe abuse of his massive power dynamic.

You could examine any human being and without exception we could be characterised into the noble and ignoble parts. It seems humanity doesn't have anyone qualified to solve the world's problems.

In **N.T. Wright's** new book **'Into the Heart of Isaiah,** he goes over the meaning and message of Isaiah chapters 40 to 55. God is full of surprises and is often hidden. *As often in great music, just when things seem to be reaching a peak, there's a new chord, or a sudden modulation, which disrupts what we expect. Or perhaps instruments we haven't heard up to this point suddenly blare out a shocking new variation on the earlier themes. What's the composer up to? How's it going to work out? That's the effect created by Isaiah 45.* We've already been told that's how God works - through humans he calls to fulfill his purposes. But this time, the God of surprises, the God who says that he is doing new things we haven't imagined before, declares that he is going to do all this - overcoming Babylon and sending the Judaean captives home again - through a **pagan king.** Through **Cyrus the Persian**. Well now, we can hear Isaiah's audience saying, We didn't see that coming. Cyrus the cheerful polytheist - but the prophet reassures the shocked Judeans that their God is indeed the one and only. It is he who is responsible both for the things we humans like and for the things we don't. This is as strong a statement of divine sovereignty as anywhere in scripture; both good times and bad times, in other words, are in the hand of God. One of the functions of this statement is to head off any suggestion that Cyrus and other pagan kings get their effective energy - whatever they are doing! - from their own gods. But then we come down with a bump. As we see in Isaiah 45:9-13, the Judaean exiles don't like this message. Perhaps they've become too comfortable in Babylon? Or perhaps, like the wilderness generation, they prefer the equivalent of slavery in Egypt to manna and quails on the long march home? Perhaps they object to the idea of a pagan king doing YHWH's will. The idols they see every day have so compromised their faith that they can't believe their own true God. [That, by the way, is a problem the church faces in every generation.]

So the prophet rebukes them. In verse 9, God is the potter and they are the clay; God is the parent and they are the child. Using the full grand title *"the Holy One of Israel"* in verse 11, God challenges them: *Are you really going to question me about this? Look here [v12] - I am the Creator!* YHWH Himself made the earth and placed people on it, as well as making the heavens and filling with stars, so if he now chooses Cyrus and gets him to free the captives and rebuild Jerusalem [v13], that's his business. YHWH has put it into his heart, and Cyrus will do it for free.

We are reminded in Proverbs 21:1: The king's heart is like *"a stream of water"* in YHWH's hand, and he turns it this way and that. That's why the early Christians, living under hostile Roman rule, were instructed to pray for those in authority. Now, the prophet is telling the exiles to trust that YHWH knows what he's doing. We all need that message now and then, not in order to justify or excuse wickedness but in order to inculcate humility.

This is unwelcome to some today. Some are so eager to stress the wickedness of modern empires that they want an overly bright either/or, where the only thing to say about rulers and empires that they're all wicked. Equally, some are all too eager to hail new political rulers in messianic terms. The first Christians point us back to Isaiah 45 and talk about the potter and the clay.

God remains sovereign but he is the God who hides himself. The fact he can and does use pagan imperial authorities doesn't mean that he approves of their motivations or policies. God's world is more complicated than we like to think. We who live at a dangerous and confused moment in history need to read and re-read Isaiah 40 to 55, not just for our own comfort and direction - though that too, of course - but to be humbled again before the sovereignty of the God who, having made heaven and earth, has promised to bring them together in covenant faithfulness and new creational fruitfulness.

Humanity is unqualified to solve the world's problems. Scripture indicates the world will in the final days produce a dynamic leader or leaders who will be great orators and whip up the masses to follow them. People will think they have the answers to the world's problems. Don't be fooled. We have the greatest commander in chief in Jesus Christ why would we want to go anywhere else. Jesus the first and only human to qualify to solve the world's problems.