

Introduction to Ethical Studies

An Open Source Reader

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Introduction to Ethical Studies: An Open Source Reader

by Lee Archie

by John G. Archie

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GDFL

The current version, Version 0.11, of this open source textbook in philosophy is a work-in-progress and is being released in draft form. The collaborators would be grateful for corrections or other suggestions to this preliminary draft. Please address comments to

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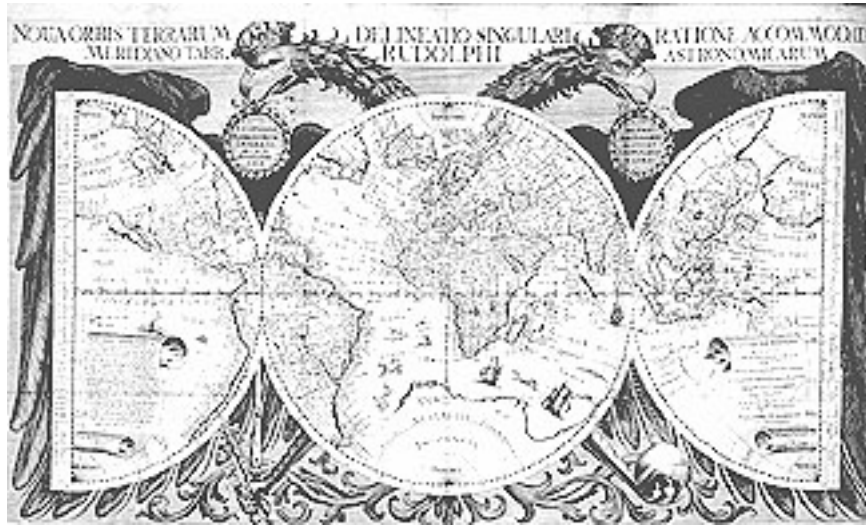
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“Preface”



Tabulae Rudolphinae : quibus astronomicae... by Johannes Kepler, 1571-1630, NOAA

Why Open Source?

Almost all major works in philosophy are accessible *via* online sources on the Internet. Fortunately, most of the best work in philosophy is available as public domain; these readings provide convenient sources for almost anyone seeking to learn about ethics and ethical theory. Our present collection is composed almost entirely of public domain sources, edited and emended, and subject to the legal notice following the title page which references *Appendix A*.

By placing these reading selections under the GDFL, this product is being open-sourced, in part to minimize costs to interested students of philosophy. More important, however, is that students, themselves, can improve the product, if they wish to do so.

This particular edition (version 0.11) represents a first step in the develop-

“Preface”

ment of an open-source text in ethical theory. The development model of *Introduction to Ethical Studies* is loosely patterned on the “release early, release often” model championed by Eric S. Raymond.¹ Various formats of this work are being made available for distribution. If the core readings and commentary prove useful, the successive revisions will be released as incrementally numbered “stable” versions beginning with version 1.0.

A Note about Selections

Reading selections in this collection of papers often have deletions of text *in passim*; consequently, the ideas of the writers are examined out of their literary and historical context. Nevertheless, the main focus for our approach to ethics, is not so much for historical understanding as it is for sparking interest in thinking about our well being and significance.

In general, as the difficulty of the reading increases, the length of the selection decreases. The primary consideration of selection and inclusion for this volume is to introduce primary sources accessible for a wide variety of readers, including high school and homeschooling students. In addition to this core set of readings, supplementary readings are in process. These readings are longer, more complete, and sparsely edited.

Please send your questions and inquiries of interest to the “Editors” at

<philbook@philosophy.lander.edu>

1. Eric Raymond, *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*. Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly & Associates, 1999. Online at *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* (<http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/>)

Part I. The Nature of Ethical Inquiry



Dartford, Messrs. Burroughs, Wellcome & Co.'s Factory, London and suburbs, England, Library of Congress

In this, the first part of our study, we take up the central questions of ethics. What is the nature of the life of excellence? What is the ultimate worth of the goals you seek? What specific courses of conduct will help you to lead an excellent life in keeping with the goals you seek?

The question of how a moral issue differs from other kinds of issues and the evaluation of the criteria for determining its outcome are important parts of our study. What is the importance of authority, law, conscience, revelation, feeling, reason, or science in the determination of rightness human action?

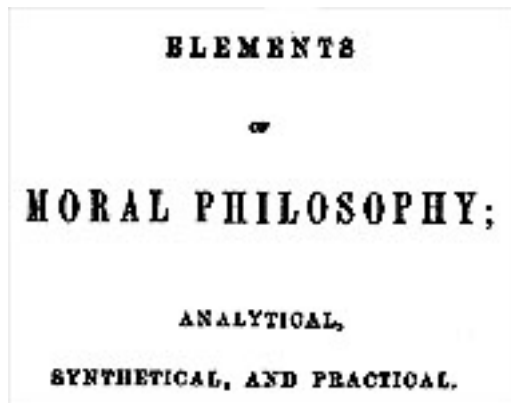
Perhaps of greatest interest is this part of our readings is the question of psychological and ethical relativity. Are moral values objective even though they seem to be culturally relative?

Where to go for help

Notes, quizzes, and tests for some of the selections from this part of the readings, “The Nature of Ethical Inquiry,” can be found at Problems of Ethics (http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/problems_topics.html).

Chapter 1

“Conscience Determines What’s Right” by Hubbard Winslow



Moral Philosophy, title page

About the author...

Hubbard Winslow (1799-1864) is also the author of a popular 19th century textbook entitled *Intellectual Philosophy*, 1853, wherein he surveys the history of philosophy and, as well, relates influential thinkers to Christian philosophy in an accessible manner.

About the work...

In his *Moral Philosophy; Analytical, Synthetical, and Practical*,¹ Hubbard Winslow argues that basing ethics on theoretical philosophy is a “prevailing error.” Metaphysics and logic, he argues, are not subservient to everyday consciousness of freedom and responsibility. In this passage from Part II, Chapter I, Winslow argues that philosophy should be used in the service of faith. Faith is a direct “manifestation of the truth” presented to each person’s conscience. Winslow points out that just as “[w]e must not wait until we can philosophize upon food before we eat...” so also “[n]either should we wait to learn all the grounds and reasons of duty, before doing what we already know to be right.”

From the reading...

“... the retributions of conscience are by no means always immediately consequent upon wrong doing. They are sometimes delayed, especially in the case of hardened transgressors, for months and for years.”

Ideas of Interest from *Moral Philosophy*

1. According to Winslow, what is “the exclusive dominion of conscience”?
2. How does Winslow characterize the two elements of conscience? How are these psychological elements related?
3. What is the distinguishing faculty of conscience according to Winslow?
4. Discuss Winslow’s three main functions of conscience.

1. Hubbard Winslow. *Moral Philosophy; Analytical, Synthetical, and Practical*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856.

The Reading Selection from *Moral Philosophy*

Conscience

Man alone of all creatures upon earth is capable of *moral* action. He alone realizes what is indicated by the word *ought*...

The relation of the susceptibility of *conscience* to the perception of *moral* truth, is like that of the susceptibility of *taste* to the perception of *aesthetical* truth. Conscience quickens the rational spirit to discern between right and wrong, as the sensibility of taste quickens it to discern between beauty and deformity.

Our only intuitive perceptions with which the susceptibility of conscience is associated, are those which relate to *moral* truths. Other feeling attend other perceptions; here is the exclusive dominion of conscience...

[C]onscience includes both the power of *perception*, and a susceptibility to a peculiar *feeling*. But the power of perception is always the same, to whatever truths it may be directed... Thus conscience involves two psychological elements, the cognitive and the motive, affirmed in one and the same deliverance of the personal consciousness.

But while all the susceptibilities of the soul are dependent upon the intellect, there is one only, which, as united and coöperating with it, constitutes the distinguishing and sublime faculty of conscience. It is this which we are now to examine.

The Latin word *conscientia* and the Greek *συνειδησις*, used in the Bible, denote an inward susceptibility to or realization of the mind's perceptions. Thus a man's intellect *perceives* the beauty of an object, and his susceptibility to the beautiful make him *realize* it. He thus not only *knows* it, but he *feels* it. The former is *speculative* knowledge; the latter is *experimental*. As both of these mental acts respect the same objective fact, the former is the *scientia* of it, the latter the *conscientia* of it. The one confirms the other.

Precisely thus a man's intellect *perceives*, and his conscience makes him *feel*, that is, it makes him *experimentally* know, the distinction between right and wrong...

Conscience, then, including the power of perception, is man's *susceptibil-*

ity to moral distinctions. It is a faculty implanted in our mental constitution expressly to make us *feel* the distinction between moral truth and falsehood, and between right and wrong action, and thus to incite us to duty. It was not designed to go *before* reason, nor to act independently of it, to teach us which *is* true and right, but to be always strictly in its service. . . .

That which *distinguishes* the susceptibility of conscience from all other susceptibilities, is its exclusive interest in what pertains to the person’s *own* conduct as *morally right or wrong*. It has nothing to do with the actions of others, nor yet those of one’s self, except as they are related to his *personal duty*. In addition to this, the feeling of obligation, and the feeling of pleasure and of pain, which it imparts, are *unlike any other*. No other feeling is like that of moral obligation; no other *pain* is like that which arises from a consciousness of having *done wrong*; no other *pleasure* is like that which arises from a consciousness of having *done right*. It is not a difference in mere *degree*, but in *kind*. Our appeal here is to every man’s experience.

Conscience Has Three Functions

Considered as a motive power, conscience is both passive and active; a susceptibility and an impulse. Besides prompting the rational spirit to *discern* between right and wrong, it has *three functions*, or, in other words, there are three ways in which it incites us to *do* right. It makes us feel that we *ought* to do so; it affords us a feeling of self-approval, when we *have* done so; it inflicts upon us a painful feeling of self-reproach, when we have *not* done so.

The first feeling is *prospective*. It is one that we have in view of something *to be* done. The last two are *retrospective*. They are feelings which we realize in view of something which we *have* done. The present moment is but a point; hence, all actions upon which we deliberate, must precede or follow the deliberation. . . .

First Function of Conscience

Conscience makes us feel that *we ought to do what we believe to be right*. In the same connection we may say, that it makes us feel that we ought *not*

to do what we believe to be wrong. Both amount to the same thing; for, failing to do right, is doing wrong.

A boy sees tempting fruit in a neighbor's garden. He knows that it would be wrong to steal it. Now, whether we say, his conscience admonishes him that it is right to let it alone, or that it is wrong to steal it, our meaning is of course the same.

On returning from the bank, a man finds that the teller has accidentally counted to him a ten dollar note too much. We mean the same, whether we say, his conscience reminds him that he ought to return it, or, that it would be wrong not to do so...

Second Function of Conscience

The second function of conscience is, to afford us a *delightful* feeling of self-approval when we have done what we believe to be right. This feeling is especially vivid, after a successful encounter with a strong and dangerous temptation to do wrong. When a severe struggle has been had, and a triumph has been won on the side of virtue, the feeling of satisfaction is peculiarly rich and delightful.

It is needless to attempt to analyze or to define this feeling. To know it, we must experience it. It was evidently designed to be a token of approbation from the Being who made us; a present reward of virtue, or rather, a fore-taste of the richer reward awaiting it hereafter. It is a kind of first fruit of goodness. It was meant to encourage us to *persevere* in the conflict with temptation, and thus to strengthen and establish every right principle...

Third Function of Conscience

The third function of conscience is, *to inflict upon us a peculiar painful feeling, when we have done what we believe to be wrong*. When the conscience is not seared, reflecting upon wrong conduct of which we have been guilty, is invariably attended with this feeling. It is termed *remorse*. It is designed, in part, as a present punishment for misdoing, or rather as an admonition of its guilt, and of the fearful ultimate consequences to which it tends. It is thus evidently meant to warn us against *repeating* the act.

Chapter 1. "Conscience Determines What's Right" by Hubbard Winslow

It is useless to attempt a definition of remorse. Dictionaries define it, the keen pain or anguish excited by a sense of guilt. But as we have keen pain and anguish from other sources, this definition only refers us to its cause; thus leaving every person to learn, from his own experience, what the pain and anguish actually are... As it cannot be defined, like every other primitive feeling, it can be known only as it is experienced.

Even the little child who disobeys his mother, or does other things which he knows to be wrong, has the painful feeling of a disturbed conscience. The young man rightly taught at home, who, when removed from parental watchfulness, begins to venture upon vicious indulgences, sometimes passes many a sleepless night in painful reflections upon his conduct.

It is important to observe, that the retributions of conscience are by no means always immediately consequent upon wrong doing. They are sometimes delayed, especially in the case of hardened transgressors, for months and for years.

The law of the operation of conscience seems to be this. In the early stages of transgression, its rebukes are prompt and earnest; but if these are disregarded, its sensibility gradually becomes less active, and, like the deep fires of a volcano when crusted over at the top, prepare for a tremendous outburst at a future time.

Thus the libertine, the thief, the defrauder, the murderer, has sometimes gone on for a series of years, realizing, especially during the latter part of his career, but feeble, if any, compunctions of conscience.

He is thus greatly emboldened in crime. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed *speedily, therefore* the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil."²

Retribution at length overtakes the guilty man. Perhaps the civil arm arrests him, and places him in circumstances to reflect upon his ways. His feelings are at first mostly those of regret and chagrin. But conscience is at length aroused. His guilt now stares him in the face, and darts its fiery stings into his inmost spirit. Remorse, relentless and agonizing, makes him its prey, and drags him to the gates of despair.

Let no one, then, who offends his conscience, hope to escape its retributions. They may be slow, but they are sure; and when they come, they will be all the more severe for the delay; for they will find greatly enhanced

2. Eccl.8: 11.

Chapter 1. “Conscience Determines What’s Right” by Hubbard Winslow

guilt. Sooner or later, they will certainly overtake him, and they will be in proportion to his crimes. But there will not have been made an even barter of pleasure for pain. Far, very far from it. All the pleasures of vice will prove at last to have been as nothing, compared with those merciless and bitter pangs, which an avenging and relentless conscience will justly inflict.

Such are the threefold functions of conscience, in accomplishing the great moral end for which it was given us. It is to our moral and religious interests what the desire of life is to our existence. The former would induce us to prize and protect character, as the latter would to prize and protect life. It is an original faculty. This susceptibility, as truly as the discerning intellect, with all its fearful power to bless and to torment us, is a part of our mental constitution, and, like the soul itself, imperishable.

From the reading...

“Retribution at length overtakes the guilty man.”



Fort Defiance, Arizona, Library of Congress

Related Ideas

Conscience (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Baldwin/Dictionary/defs/C4defs.htm>). *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. An entry on “Conscience” in James Mark Baldwin’s 1901 dictionary online.

Medieval Theories of Conscience (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience-medieval/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The use and philosophy of “conscience” and *synderesis* by Bonaventura, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and others. Links to other sources, as well, provided.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Does Winslow make a “category mistake”³ by supposing that the two psychological elements of conscience, feeling and perceiving, are presented as one to consciousness? Can a perception be a feeling or *vice versa*?
2. Do moral feelings differ in kind and not just degree from other kinds of feelings? Discuss how this difference in kind might be characterized from Winslow’s point of view.
3. Why do you think Hubbard Winslow believes the conscience is eternal? How is it different from soul? If a person had no conscience, would that person have no soul?
4. The judgment, “If I can do it, anyone can do it” is sometimes used to rationalize a criticism of another person’s actions. Is Winslow’s evidence for the existence of the unique associated feelings of pleasure and pain attending to conscience of the same sort of rationalization? In what ways are both arguments flawed?
5. Explain how Winslow’s argument and characterization of “conscience” relies on a fallacy of equivocation involving the term “feeling.” Use an unabridged dictionary or a dictionary of psychology to support your explanation.

3. A category mistake is a confusion of logical types in definition or classification such as “I heard green and saw loud.”

Chapter 2

“Conscience Is Learned” by Alexander Bain



Alexander Bain, Thoemmes

About the author...

Alexander Bain (1818-1903) was self-educated until he entered Marischal College in Aberdeen Scotland. He became drawn into utilitarianism and empiricism. As one of the founders of British psychology, he sought to explain all mental processes in terms of physical sensations. His books *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) and *The Emotions and the Will* (1859) were standard textbooks in psychology well into the next century. Bain founded the psychological journal *Mind* in 1876—today it’s a well-known philosophy journal.

About the work...

In his *Moral Science*,¹ Bain uses his insight into the nature of the will for an explication of ethical theory. In many ways, Bain anticipated pragmatism. In the brief selection below, he explains the origin of conscience and how conscience is shaped. If Bain is correct, conscience is not a reliable guide to a consistent ethics across different cultures and different times.

From the reading...

“Still more striking is the growth of a moral sentiment in connexion with such usages as the Hindoo suttee. It is known that the Hindoo widow, if prevented from burning herself with her husband’s corpse, often feels all the pangs of remorse, and leads a life of misery and self-humiliation.”

Ideas of Interest from *Moral Science*

1. How does Bain define “conscience”? Is his definition congruent with the contemporary use of the word?
2. According to Bain, how are the emotions and self-interest related to conscience?
3. How is conscience shaped by education, law, and authority? Explain what Bain means by the “effect of contiguous association”?

The Reading Selection from *Moral Science*

[Nature of Conscience]

It may be proved, by such evidence as the case admits of, that the peculiar-

1. Alexander Bain. *Moral Science: A Compendium of Ethics*. New York: D. Appleton, 1869.

Chapter 2. "Conscience Is Learned" by Alexander Bain

ity of the Moral Sentiment, or Conscience, is identified with our education under government, or Authority.

Conscience is described by such terms as moral approbation and disapprobation; and involves, when highly developed, a peculiar and unmistakable revulsion of mind at what is wrong, and a strong resentment towards the wrong-doer, which become Remorse, in the case of self.

It is capable of being proved, that there is nothing natural or primitive in these feelings, except in so far as the case happens to concur with the dictates of Self-interest, or Sympathy, aided by the Emotions formerly specified. Any action that is hostile to our interest, excites a form of disapprobation, such as belongs to wounded self-interest; and any action that puts another to pain may so affect our natural sympathy as to be disapproved, and resented on that ground. These natural or inborn feelings are always liable to coincide with moral right and wrong, although they are not its criterion or measure in the mind of each individual. But in those cases where an unusually strong feeling of moral disapprobation is awakened, there is apt to be a concurrence of the primitive motives of self, and of fellow-feeling; and it is the ideal of good law, and good morality, to coincide with a certain well-proportioned adjustment of the Prudential and the Sympathetic regards of the individual.

The requisite allowance being made for the natural impulses, we must now adduce the facts, showing that the characteristic of the Moral Sense is an education under Law, or Authority, through the instrumentality of Punishment.

[Conscience Formed by Association]

(1) It is a fact that human beings living in society are placed under discipline, accompanied by punishment. Certain actions are forbidden, and the doers of them are subjected to some painful infliction; which is increased in severity, if they are persisted in. Now, what would be, the natural consequence of such a system, under the known laws of feeling, will, and intellect? Would not an action that always brings down punishment be associated with the pain and the dread of punishment? Such an association is inevitably formed, and becomes at least a part, and a very important part, of the sense of duty; nay, it would of itself, after a certain amount of repetition, be adequate to restrain for ever the performance of the action,

thus attaining the end of morality.

There may be various ways of evoking and forming the moral sentiment, but the one way most commonly trusted to, and never altogether dispensed with, is the associating of pain, that is, punishment, with the actions that are disallowed. Punishment is held out as the consequence of performing certain actions; every individual is made to taste of it; its infliction is one of the most familiar occurrences of every-day life. Consequently, whatever else may be present in the moral sentiment, this fact of the connexion of pain with forbidden actions must enter into it with an overpowering prominence. Any natural or primitive impulse in the direction of duty must be very marked and apparent, in order to divide with this communicated bias the direction of our conduct. It is for the supporters of innate distinctions to point out any concurring impetus (apart from the Prudential and Sympathetic regards) sufficiently important to cast these powerful associations into a secondary or subordinate position.

By a familiar effect of Contiguous Association, the dread of punishment clothes the forbidden act with a feeling of aversion, which in the end persists of its own accord, and without reference to the punishment. Actions that have long been connected in the mind with pains and penalties, come to be contemplated with a *disinterested* repugnance; they seem to give pain on their own account. This is a parallel, from the side of pain, of the acquired attachment to money. Now, when, by such transference, a self-subsisting sentiment of aversion has been created, the conscience seems to be detached from all external sanctions, and to possess an isolated footing in the mind. It has passed through the stage of reference to authority, and has become a law to itself. But no conscience ever arrives at the independent standing, without first existing in the reflected and dependent stage.

We must never omit from the composition of the Conscience the primary impulses of Self-Interest and Sympathy, which in minds strongly alive to one or other, always count for a powerful element in human conduct, although for reasons already stated, not the strictly moral element, so far as the individual is concerned. They are adopted, more or less, by the authority imposing the moral code; and when the two sources coincide, the stream is all the stronger.

(2) Where moral training is omitted or greatly neglected, there is an absence of security for virtuous conduct.

Chapter 2. "Conscience Is Learned" by Alexander Bain

In no civilized community is moral discipline entirely wanting. Although children may be neglected by their parents, they come at last under the discipline of the law and the public. They cannot be exempted from the associations of punishment with wrong. But when these associations have not been early and sedulously formed, in the family, in the school, and in the workshop, the moral sentiment is left in a feeble condition. There still remain the force of the law and of public opinion, the examples of public punishment, and the reprobation of guilt. Every member of the community must witness daily the degraded condition of the viciously disposed, and the prosperity following on respect for the law. No human being escapes from thus contracting moral impressions to a very large amount.



Union Terrace, Aberdeen, Scotland, Library of Congress

(3) Whenever an action is associated with Disapprobation and Punishment, there grows up, in reference to it, a state of mind undistinguishable from Moral Sentiment.

There are many instances where individuals are enjoined to a course of conduct wholly indifferent with regard to universal morality, as in the regulations of societies formed for special purposes. Each member of the society has to conform to these regulations, under pain of forfeiting all the benefits of the society, and of perhaps incurring positive evils. The code of honour among gentlemen is an example of these artificial impositions. It is not to be supposed that there should be an innate sentiment to perform actions having nothing to do with moral right and wrong; yet the disap-

Chapter 2. “Conscience Is Learned” by Alexander Bain

probation and the remorse following on a breach of the code of honour, will often be greater than what follows a breach of the moral law. The constant habit of regarding with dread the consequences of violating any of the rules, simulates a moral sentiment, on a subject unconnected with morality properly so called.

From the reading...

“The constant habit of regarding with dread the consequences of violating any of the rules, simulates a moral sentiment, on a subject unconnected with morality properly so called.”

The arbitrary ceremonial customs of nations, with reference to such points as ablutions, clothing, eating and abstinence from meats,—when rendered obligatory by the force of penalties, occupy exactly the same place in the mind as the principles of moral right and wrong. The same form of dread attaches to the consequences of neglect; the same remorse is felt by the individual offender. The exposure of the naked person is as much abhorred as telling a lie. The Turkish woman exposing her face, is no less conscience-smitten than if she murdered her child. There is no act, however trivial, that cannot be raised to the position of a moral act, by the imperative of society.

Still more striking is the growth of a moral sentiment in connexion with such usages as the Hindoo suttee. It is known that the Hindoo widow, if prevented from burning herself with her husband’s corpse, often feels all the pangs of remorse, and leads a life of misery and self-humiliation. The habitual inculcation of this duty by society, the penalty of disgrace attached to its omission, operate to implant a sentiment in every respect analogous to the strongest moral sentiment.

Chapter 2. “Conscience Is Learned” by Alexander Bain



Marischal College, Library of Congress

Related Ideas

Alexander Bain (<http://www.thoemmes.com/encyclo.htm>). *The Thoemmes Encyclopedia of the History of Ideas*. An excellent summary of Bain’s contribution to psychology.

Mind, Brain and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century by Robert M. Young (<http://www.human-nature.com/mba/chap3.html>). *Chapter 3: “Alexander Bain: Transition from Introspective Psychology to Experimental Psychophysiology”*. An online chapter on Bain’s psychology from a well-received book on the mind-body problem.

From the reading...

“The Turkish woman exposing her face, is no less conscience-smitten than if she murdered her child. There is no act, however trivial, that cannot be raised to the position of a moral act, by the imperative of society.”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. In Bain’s goal to unite psychology and physiology, he distanced himself from John Stuart Mill and the utilitarians. He sought to explain mental association in terms of neural connections. Given this background, speculate as to how Bain might conclude that belief is merely “a preparation to act.”
2. In the last part of his *The Emotions and the Will*, Bain argues for a behavioral determinism. Yet, in his *Moral Science: A Compendium of Ethics* published the same year, he explains the psychological basis of ethics. If determinism is true, how is a science of ethics possible?

Chapter 3

“It Doesn’t Pay to Be Religious” by G. W. Foote



George William Foote, The Freethinker

About the author...

Over a century ago, G. W. Foote (1850-1950) joined the British secular movement in London under the leadership of Charles Bradlaugh. He attacked religious thought and founded *The Freethinker*, a journal still in existence today. As the editor of *The Freethinker*, he published a series of cartoons attacking the church and was charged and convicted of blasphemy in the 1882 by a Roman Catholic judge. Sentenced to one year of hard-labor, reportedly Foote replied to the judge, “Thank you, my lord, the sentence is worthy of your creed.” His defense and subsequent refusal to be silenced eventually effected a change in which the crimes of religious

Chapter 3. “It Doesn’t Pay to Be Religious” by G. W. Foote

criticism in Victorian England changed from Biblical blasphemy to civil offense. The movement in societal values from religious standards to more secular literary standards was a major cultural shift in 19th England—a change presaging similar cultural concerns in other countries.

About the work...

In his *Infidel Death-Beds*¹ G. W. Foote, responds to the then popular view that a repentant conscience and overwhelming guilt would accompany anyone who strayed from the path of religious morality. His response is designed to defuse the claim that we ought do what’s right because, from a religious point of view, “It pays.” Implicit in the argument Foote is attacking is the *ad baculum* appeal.²

From the reading...

“...expiring skeptics have been portrayed in agonies of terror, gnashing their teeth, wringing their hands, rolling their eyes, and exhibiting every sign of despair.”

Ideas of Interest from *Infidel Death-Beds*

1. What is the argument behind the appeal to “infidel death-beds”?
2. How would a representative of a specific belief evaluate the claim that “the religion of mankind is determined by the geographical accident of their birth”?

1. G. W. Foote and A. D. McLaren, *Infidel Death-Beds*, G.W. Foot and Co. Ltd., 1886.

2. An *ad baculum* argument is fallacious when the truth of the conclusion is based, not on relevant reasons, but on a threat or appeal to force not logically related to the subject at hand. *Ad baculum* fallacies are often practically persuasive even though they are logically irrelevant.

3. Are the beliefs of most persons limited to ideas they were taught as children?
4. Is Foote's argument concerning the reversion to early beliefs when a person is near death, an *ad hominem* appeal?
5. How is the issue of death-bed confession of faith logically related to the ethical issue of how we should live?

The Reading Selection from *Infidel Death-Beds*

[Religious Use of Dying Repentance]

INFIDEL death-beds have been a fertile theme of pulpit eloquence. The priests of Christianity often inform their congregations that Faith is an excellent soft pillow, and Reason a horrible hard bolster, for the dying head. Freethought, they say, is all very well in the days of our health and strength, when we are buoyed up by the pride of carnal intellect; but ah! how poor a thing it is when health and strength fail us, when, deserted by our self-sufficiency, we need the support of a stronger power. . .

Pictorial art has been pressed into the service of this plea for religion, and in such orthodox periodicals as the *British Workman*, to say nothing of the hordes of pious inventions which are circulated as tracts, expiring skeptics have been portrayed in agonies of terror, gnashing their teeth, wringing their hands, rolling their eyes, and exhibiting every sign of despair.

One minister of the gospel, the Rev. Erskine Neale, has not thought it beneath his dignity to compose an extensive series of these holy frauds, under the title of *Closing Scenes*. This work was, at one time, very popular and influential; but its specious character having been exposed, it has fallen into disrepute, or at least into neglect. . .

[Psychological Aspect of Dying]

Throughout the world the religion of mankind is determined by the geographical accident of their birth. In England men grow up Protestants; in

Chapter 3. “It Doesn’t Pay to Be Religious” by G. W. Foote

Italy, Catholics; in Russia, Greek Christians; in Turkey, Mohammedans; in India, Brahmans; in China, Buddhists or Confucians. What they are taught in their childhood they believe in their manhood; and they die in the faith in which they have lived.

Here and there a few men think for themselves. If they discard the faith in which they have been educated, they are never free from its influence. It meets them at every turn, and is constantly, by a thousand ties, drawing them back to the orthodox fold. The stronger resist this attraction, the weaker succumb to it. Between them is the average man, whose tendency will depend on several things. If he is isolated, or finds but few sympathizers, he may revert to the ranks of faith; if he finds many of the same opinion with himself, he will probably display more fortitude. Even Free-thinkers are gregarious, and in the worst as well as the best sense of the words, the saying of Novalis is true—“My thought gains infinitely when it is shared by another.”

From the reading...

“ Throughout the world the religion of mankind is determined by the geographical accident of their birth.”

But in all cases of reversion, the skeptic invariably turns to the creed of his own country. What does this prove? Simply the power of our environment, and the force of early training. When “infidels” are few, and their relatives are orthodox, what could be more natural than what is called “a death-bed recantation?” Their minds are enfeebled by disease, or the near approach of death; they are surrounded by persons who continually urge them to be reconciled to the popular faith; and is it astonishing if they sometimes yield to these solicitations? Is it wonderful if, when all grows dim, and the priestly carrion-crow of the death-chamber mouths the perfunctory shibboleths, the weak brain should become dazed, and the poor tongue mutter a faint response?

Should the dying man be old, there is still less reason for surprise. Old age yearns back to the cradle, and as Dante Rossetti says: —

“Life all past Is like the sky when the sun sets in it, Clearest where furthest off.”

Chapter 3. "It Doesn't Pay to Be Religious" by G. W. Foote

The "recantation" of old men, if it occurs, is easily understood. Having been brought up in a particular religion, their earliest and tenderest memories may be connected with it; and when they lie down to die they may mechanically recur to it, just as they may forget whole years of their maturity, and vividly remember the scenes of their childhood. Those who have read Thackeray's exquisitely faithful and pathetic narrative of the death of old Col. Newcome, will remember that as the evening chapel bell tolled its last note, he smiled, lifted his head a little, and cried Adsum! ("I am present"), the boy's answer when the names were called at school. . .

Supposing, however, that every Freethinker turned Christian on his death-bed. It is a tremendous stretch of fancy, but I make it for the sake of argument. What does it prove? Nothing, as I said before, but the force of our surroundings and early training. It is a common saying among Jews, when they hear of a Christian proselyte, "Ah, wait till he comes to die!" As a matter of fact, converted Jews generally die in the faith of their race; and the same is alleged as to the native converts that are made by our missionaries in India.

Heine has a pregnant passage on this point. Referring to Joseph Schelling, who was "an apostate to his own thought," "who deserted the altar he had himself consecrated," and "returned to the crypts of the past," Heine rebukes the "old believers," who cried *Kyrie eleison* ("Lord, have mercy in honor of such a conversion." "That," he says proves nothing for their doctrine. "It only proves that man turns to religion when he is old and fatigued, when his physical and mental force has left him, when he can no longer enjoy nor reason. So many Freethinkers are converted on their death-beds! . . . But at least do not boast of them. These legendary conversions belong at best to pathology, and are a poor evidence for your cause. After all, they only prove this, that it was impossible for you to convert those Freethinkers while they were healthy in body and mind."³

Renan has some excellent words on the same subject in his delightful volume of autobiography. After expressing a rooted preference for a sudden death, he continues: "I should be grieved to go through one of those periods of feebleness, in which the man who has possessed strength and virtue is only the shadow and ruins of himself, and often, to the great joy of fools, occupies himself in demolishing the life he had laboriously built up. Such an old age is the worst gift the gods can bestow on man. If such a fate is

3. De l'Allemagne, Vol. I, p. 174.

Chapter 3. “It Doesn’t Pay to Be Religious” by G. W. Foote

reserved for me, I protest in advance against the fatuities that a softened brain may make me say or sign. It is Renan sound in heart and head, such as I am now, and not Renan half destroyed by death, and no longer himself, as I shall be if I decompose gradually, that I wish people to listen to and believe.”⁴

From the reading...

“These legendary conversions belong at best to pathology, and are a poor evidence for your cause. After all, they only prove this, that it was impossible for you to convert those Freethinkers while they were healthy in body and mind.”

To find the best passage on this topic in our own literature we must go back to the seventeenth century, and to Selden’s *Table Talk*, a volume in which Coleridge found “more weighty bullion sense” than he “ever found in the same number of pages of any uninspired writer.” Selden lived in a less mealy-mouthed age than ours, and what I am going to quote smacks of the blunt old times; but it is too good to miss, and all readers who are not prudish will thank me for citing it. “For a priest,” says Selden, “to turn a man when he lies a dying, is just like one that has a long time solicited a woman, and cannot obtain his end; at length he makes her drunk, and so lies with her.” It is a curious thing that the writer of these words helped to draw up the Westminster Confession of faith...

Professor Tyndall, while repudiating Atheism himself, has borne testimony to the earnestness of others who embrace it. “I have known some of the most pronounced among them,” he says, “not only in life but in death—seen them approaching with open eyes the inexorable goal, with no dread of a hangman’s whip, with no hope of a heavenly crown, and still as mindful of their duties, and as faithful in the discharge of them, as if their eternal future depended on their latest deeds.”⁵

Lord Bacon said, “I do not believe that any man fears to be dead, but only the stroke of death.” True, and the physical suffering, and the pang of separation, are the same for all. Yet the end of life is as natural as its begin-

4. *Souvenirs d’Enfance et de Jeunesse*, p. 377.

5. *Fortnightly Review*, November 1877.

ning, and the true philosophy of existence is nobly expressed in the lofty sentence of Spinoza, "A free man thinks less of nothing than of death."

"So live, that when thy summons comes to join The innumerable caravan, which moves To that mysterious realm, where each shall take His chamber in the silent halls of death, Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night, Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave, Like one who wraps the drapery of his conch About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."⁶



Religious sign on highway between Columbus and Augusta, Georgia, Library of Congress

Related Ideas

The Freethinker (<http://www.freethinker.co.uk/index13.php>). *Secular Humanist Monthly*. Access to current articles from the English magazine as well as archival material, news, and links.

Joss Marsh. *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998.

6. Bryan, *Thanatopsies*.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. If most human beings are not of a “thinking personality” type, why isn’t it appropriate to appeal to nonrational means of persuasion concerning issues of ultimate concern? When a person is in immediate danger, aren’t commands more effective than treatises?
2. What should be the relation between religion and ethics? Are religious beliefs and ethics ever in conflict for a religious person? (*C.f.*, the notion of the “teleological suspension” of the ethical in the reading from Søren Kierkegaard.)
3. Compare the notions of “right and wrong” from a psychological, a philosophical, and a religious point of view. Are there common features?

Chapter 4

“Ethics Are Culturally Relative” by Charles A. Ellwood



Charles A. Ellwood, American Sociological Association

About the author...

Charles A. Ellwood (1873-1946) was the 14th President of the American Sociological Society, now known as the American Sociological Association. As a Professor of Sociology at the University of Missouri, he studied the conditions of the county almshouses and jails in Missouri. In the short reading selection below, Ellwood explains why “Morality... is not anything arbitrarily designed by the group, but is a standard of conduct which necessities of social survival require.”

About the work...

In his *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*,¹ Ellwood outlines the origin of moral codes and ethics in terms of the competition and conflict inherent in the evolution and development of sociological groups. He maintains that morality is a consequence of survival, and, in light of these studies, the study of morality can now be considered an essential part of sociology. The consequences of this reading would seem to imply that ethics is culturally relative to the specific times and conditions of disparate societies—a sociological view expounded also by Edward Westermarck, William Graham Sumner, and Ruth Benedict.

From the reading...

“This text therefore, will not attempt to exclude ethical implications and judgments from sociological discussions, because that would be futile and childish...”

Ideas of Interest from “The Study of Society”

1. According to Ellwood, what is the major factor occasioning war? Why is this so?
2. What have been the major effects of war on social development?
3. How does Ellwood account for the origin of a group code of ethics?
4. What are some of the ways struggle and competition among human beings is manifested?
5. What are the reasons provided in this reading for the view that social progress depends upon conflict and competition? Explain whether you agree with this view.

1. Charles A. Ellwood. *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*. 1910.

6. How does Ellwood describe the origin of moral codes?

The Reading Selection from “The Study of Society”

The Study of Society

Ethics is the science which deals with the right or wrong of human conduct. Its problems are the nature of morality and of moral obligation, the validity of moral ideals, the norms by which conduct is to be judged, and the like. While ethics was once considered to be a science of individual conduct it is now generally conceived as being essentially a social science. The moral and the social are indeed not clearly separable, but we may consider the moral to be the ideal aspect of the social.

From the reading...

“It needs to be emphasized, however, that the most primitive groups are not warlike”

This view of morality, which, for the most part, is indorsed by modern thought, makes ethics dependent upon sociology for its criteria of rightness or wrongness. Indeed, we cannot argue any moral question nowadays unless we argue it in social terms. If we discuss the rightness or wrongness of the drink habit we try to show its social consequences. So, too, if we discuss the rightness or wrongness of such an institution as polygamy we find ourselves forced to do so mainly in social terms. This is not denying, of course, that there are religious and metaphysical aspects to morality,—these are not necessarily in conflict with the social aspects,—but it is saying that modern ethical theory is coming more and more to base itself upon the study of the remote social consequences of conduct, and that we cannot judge what is right or wrong in our complex society unless we know something of the social consequences.

Ethics must be regarded, therefore, as a normative science to which sociology and the other social sciences lead up. It is, indeed, very difficult to

separate ethics from sociology. It is the business of sociology to furnish norms and standards to ethics, and it is the business of ethics as a science to take the norms and standards furnished by the social sciences, to develop them, and to criticize them. This text therefore, will not attempt to exclude ethical implications and judgments from sociological discussions, because that would be futile and childish...

The Bearing of the Theory of Evolution

From the very beginning there has been no such thing as unmitigated individual struggle among animals. Nowhere in nature does pure individualism exist in the sense that the individual animal struggles alone, except perhaps in a few solitary species which are apparently on the way to extinction. The assumption of such a primitive individual struggle has been at the bottom of many erroneous views of human society. The primary conflict is between species. A secondary conflict, however, is always found between the members of the same species. Usually this conflict within the species is a competition between groups. The human species exactly illustrates these statements. Primitively its great conflict was with other species of animals. The supremacy of man over the rest of the animal world was won only after an age-long conflict between man and his animal rivals. While this conflict went on there was apparently but little struggle within the species itself. The lowest groups of which we have knowledge, while continually struggling against nature, are rarely at war with one another. But after man had won his supremacy and the population of groups came to increase so as to encroach seriously upon food supply, and even on territorial limits of space, then a conflict between human groups, which we call war, broke out and became almost second nature to man. It needs to be emphasized, however, that the most primitive groups are not warlike, but only those that have achieved their supremacy over nature and attained considerable size. In other words, the struggle between groups which we call war was occasioned very largely by numbers and food supply. To this extent at least war primitively arose from economic conditions, and it is remarkable how economic conditions have been instrumental in bringing about all the great wars of recorded human history.

The conflict among human groups, which we call war, has had an immense effect upon human social evolution. Five chief effects must be noted.

- (1) Intergroup struggle gave rise to higher forms of social organization,

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because only those groups could succeed in competition with other groups that were well organized, and especially only those that had competent leadership.



Frightful Outrages Perpetrated by the Huguenots in France, (Persecution of Catholics by Huguenots), detail from Richard Verstegen, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D. C.

(2) Government, as we understand the word, was very largely an outcome of the necessities of this intergroup struggle, or war. As we have already seen, the groups that were best organized, that had the most competent leadership, would stand the best chance of surviving. Consequently the war leader or chief soon came, through habit, to be looked upon as the head of the group in all matters. Moreover, the exigencies and stresses of war frequently necessitated giving the war chief supreme authority in times of danger, and from this, without doubt, arose despotism in all of its forms. The most primitive tribes are republican or democratic in their form of government, but it has been found that despotic forms of government rapidly take the place of the primitive democratic type, where a people are

continually at war with other peoples.

(3) A third result of war in primitive times was the creation of social classes. After a certain stage was reached groups tried not so much to exterminate one another as to conquer and absorb one another. This was, of course, after agriculture had been developed and slave labor had reached a considerable value. Under such circumstances a conquered group would be incorporated by the conquerors as a slave or subject class. Later, this enslaved class may have become partially free as compared with some more recently subjugated or enslaved classes, and several classes in this way could emerge in a group through war or conquest. Moreover, the presence of these alien and subject elements in a group necessitated a stronger and more centralized government to keep them in control, and this was again one way in which war favored a development of despotic governments. Later, of course, economic conditions gave rise to classes, and to certain struggles between the classes composing a people.

From the reading...

"The number of peoples that have perished in the past is impossible to estimate. But we can get some inkling of the number by the fact that philologists estimate that for every living language there are twenty dead languages."

(4) Not only was social and political organization and the evolution of classes favored by intergroup struggle, but also the evolution of morality. The group that could be most efficiently organized would be, other things being equal, the group which had the most loyal and most self-sacrificing membership. The group that lacked a group spirit, that is, strong sentiments of solidarity and harmonious relations between its members, would be the group that would be apt to lose in conflict with other groups, and so its type would tend to be eliminated. Consequently in all human groups we find recognition of certain standards of conduct which are binding as between members of the same group. For example, while a savage might incur no odium through killing a member of another group, he was almost always certain to incur either death or exile through killing a member of his own group. Hence arose a group code of ethics founded very largely upon the conceptions of kinship or blood relationship, which bound all

members of a primitive group to one another.

(5) A final consequence of war among human groups has been the absorption of weaker groups and the growth of larger and larger political groups, until in modern times a few great nations dominate the population of the whole world. That this was not the primitive condition, we know from human history and from other facts which indicate the disappearance of a vast number of human groups in the past. The earth is a burial ground of tribes and nations as well as of individuals. In the competition between human groups, only a few that have had efficient organization and government, loyal membership and high standards of conduct within the group, have survived. The number of peoples that have perished in the past is impossible to estimate. But we can get some inkling of the number by the fact that philologists estimate that for every living language there are twenty dead languages. When we remember that a language not infrequently stands for several groups with related cultures, we can guess the immense number of human societies that have perished in the past in this intergroup competition.

Even though war passes away entirely, nations can never escape this competition with one another. While the competition may not be upon the low and brutal plane of war, it will certainly go on upon the higher plane of commerce and industry, and will probably be on this higher plane quite as decisive in the life of peoples in future as war was in the past.

While the primary struggle within the human species has been in the historic period between nations and races, this is not saying, of course, that struggle and competition have not gone on within these larger groups. On the contrary, as has already been implied, a continual struggle has gone on between classes, first perhaps of racial origin, and later of economic origin. Also there is within the nation a struggle between parties and sects, and sometimes between "sections" and communities. Usually, however, the struggle within the nation is a peaceful one and does not come to bloodshed.

Again, within each of these minor groups that we have mentioned struggle and competition in some modified form goes on between its members. Thus within a party or class there is apt to be a struggle or competition between factions. There is, indeed, no human group that is free from struggle or competition between its members, unless it be the family. The family seems to be so constituted that normally there is no competition between its members,—at least, there is good ground for believing that competition

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between the members of a family is to be considered exceptional, or even abnormal.

From what has been said it is evident that competition and coöperation are twin principles in the evolution of social groups. While competition characterizes in the main the relation between groups, especially independent political groups, and while coöperation characterizes in the main the relation of the members of a given group to one another, still competition and coöperation are correlatives in practically every phase of the social life. Some degree of competition, for example, has to be maintained by every group between its members if it is going to maintain high standards of efficiency or of loyalty. If there were no competition with respect to the matters that concern the inner life of groups, it is evident that the groups would soon lose efficiency in leadership and in membership and would sooner or later be eliminated. Consequently society, from certain points of view, presents itself to the student at the present time as a vast competition, while from other standpoints it presents itself as a vast coöperation.

From the reading...

“If a social group were to check all competition between its members, it... would soon cease to progress.”

It follows from this that competition and coöperation are both equally important in the life of society. It has been a favorite idea that competition among human beings should be done away with, and that coöperation should be substituted to take its place entirely. It is evident, however, that this idea is impossible of realization. If a social group were to check all competition between its members, it would stop thereby the process of natural selection or of the elimination of the unfit, and, as a consequence, would soon cease to progress. If some scheme of artificial selection were substituted to take the place of natural selection, it is evident that competition would still have to be retained to determine who were the fittest. A society that would give positions of trust and responsibility to individuals without imposing some competitive test upon them would be like a ship built partially of good and partially of rotten wood,—it would soon go to pieces.

This leads us to emphasize the continued necessity of selection in society.

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No doubt natural selection is often a brutal and wasteful means of eliminating the weak in human societies, and no doubt human reason might devise superior means of bringing about the selection of individuals which society must maintain. To some extent it has done this through systems of education and the like, which are, in the main, selective processes for picking out the most competent individuals to perform certain social functions. But the natural competition, or struggle between individuals, has not been done away with, especially in economic matters, and it is evidently impossible to do away with it until some vast scheme of artificial selection can take its place. Such a scheme is so far in the future that it is hardly worth talking about. The best that society can apparently do at the present time is to regulate the natural competition between individuals, and this it is doing increasingly.

What people rightfully object to is, not competition, but unregulated or unfair competition. In the interest of solidarity, that is, in the interest of the life of the group as a whole, all forms of competition in human society should be so regulated that the rules governing the competition may be known and the competition itself public. It is evident that in politics and in business we are very far from this ideal as yet, although society is unquestionably moving toward it.

From the reading...

"A society that would give positions of trust and responsibility to individuals without imposing some competitive test upon them would be like a ship built partially of good and partially of rotten wood. . ."

A word in conclusion about the nature of moral codes and standards from the social point of view. It is evident that moral codes from the social point of view are simply formulations of standards of conduct which groups find it convenient or necessary to impose upon their members. Even morality, in an idealistic sense, seems from a sociological standpoint to be those forms of conduct which conduce to social harmony, to social efficiency, and so to the survival of the group. Groups, however, as we have already pointed out, cannot do as they please. They are always hard-pressed in competition by other groups and have to meet the standards of efficiency which nature imposes. Morality, therefore, is not anything arbitrarily de-

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signed by the group, but is a standard of conduct which necessities of social survival require. In other words, the right, from the point of view of natural science, is that which ultimately conduces to survival, not of the individual, but of the group or of the species. This is looking at morality, of course, from the sociological point of view, and in no way denies the religious and metaphysical view of morality, which may be equally valid from a different standpoint.

Finally, we need to note that natural selection does not necessitate in any mechanical sense certain conduct on the part of individuals or groups. Rather, natural selection marks the limits of variation which nature permits, and within those limits of variation there is a large amount of freedom of choice, both to individuals and to groups. Human societies, therefore, may be conceivably free to take one of several paths of development at any particular point. But in the long run they must conform to the ultimate conditions of survival; and this probably means that the goal of their evolution is largely fixed for them. Human groups are free only in the sense that they may go either backward or forward on the path which the conditions of survival mark out for them. They are free to progress or to perish. But social evolution in any case, in the sense of social change either toward higher or toward lower social adaptation, is a necessity that cannot be escaped. Sociology and all social science is, therefore, a study not of what human groups would like to do, but of what they must do in order to survive, that is, how they can control their environment by utilizing the laws which govern universal evolution.

From the reading...

“Morality, therefore, is not anything arbitrarily designed by the group, but is a standard of conduct which necessities of social survival require.”

From this brief and most elementary consideration of the bearings of evolutionary theory upon social problems it is evident that evolution, in the sense of what we know about the development of life and society in the past, must be the guidepost of the sociologist. Human social evolution, we repeat, rests upon and is conditioned by biological evolution at every point. There is, therefore, scarcely any sanity in sociology without the biological

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point of view.



Massacre Fait a Sens en Bourgagne par la Populace, (Persecution of Huguenots by Catholics at Burgundy, 1562), A. Challe, Library of Congress

Related Ideas

Brock University's Mead Project's "Prolegomena to Social Psychology" (http://spartan.ac.brocku.ca/~lward/Ellwood/Ellwood_1.html). *Mead Project*. Ellwood's four-part introduction first presented in the *American Journal of Sociology*

The Association's Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthrology (<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/toc.htm>). *American Anthropological Association*. Readings compiled by Edited by Joan Cassell and Sue-Ellen Jacobby. See especially Murray L. Wax's "Some Issues and Sources on Ethics in Anthropology" for current approaches and sources.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. If competition and conflict between individuals is now regulated by modern societies, does it follow on Ellwood’s premisses that societies cannot progress morally? Or would it follow that ethical ideals for society are now being behaviorally shaped?
2. Does the existence of cultural relativity, as defined in the context of the evolution of societies, provide the basis for proving the legitimacy of ethical relativity? (It may be of interest to note that anthropologists have rethought this question in light of the rise of Nazism.)
3. Does the explanation of the progress of society preclude the possibility of establishing a stable society based on noncompetitive Utopian ideals?

Chapter 5

“Ethics Are Relative” by Edward Westermarck



Edward Westermarck, adapted from The Edward Westermarck Memorial Lectures

About the author...

Edward Westermarck (1862-1939) taught sociology and moral philosophy at the University of Helsinki; later, he taught sociology at the University of London. He is perhaps best known for his anthropological works on marriage. In moral philosophy, he attempted to provide a basis for the sociological study of moral behavior. Louis L'Amour wrote in his *Education of a Wandering Man*, “Long ago I sat one day in a library where I had come upon the three volumes of E. A. Westermarck’s *The History of Human Marriage*. Browsing through its pages, I kept chuckling and I know some

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other denizens of the library must have thought me off my rocker to be finding something at which to laugh in what was a dusty tome. Yet there is nothing more amusing than man and his customs, and in that case it was some studies of marriage by capture.”

About the work...

In his *Ethical Relativity*,¹ Edward Westermarck argues for both psychological and ethical relativism² and attempts to base ethics on the biological basis for emotions. In the book from which our reading selection is taken, Westermarck argues forcefully for ethical relativism by emphasizing that there is no empirical basis for objective standards in ethical theory.

From the reading...

“I am not aware of any moral principle that could be said to be truly self-evident.”

Ideas of Interest from *Ethical Relativity*

1. Explain how a normative science should be defined? Why does Westermarck believe ethics is not normative?

1. Edward Westermarck. *Ethical Relativity*. New York: Littlefield, Adams & Company, 1932. (Copyright status not resolved: selections are cited under the “fair use” provision of U.S. Copyright law.)

2. In brief, psychological (or sociological) relativism is the empirical observation that moral behavior and the consequent ethics differ among cultures, societies, and groups—both in the present and in the past. Ethical relativism is the denial there is one objective moral standard for all groups at all times; more precisely, ethical relativism is the doctrine that differences in moral standards *ought* to exist. On this view, moral standards are descriptive—not prescriptive.

2. Why does Westermarck object to the notion of a conscience as the basis of the objectivity of moral judgments?
3. Explain Westermarck's view on the judgment that an action is not right because a Supreme Being decrees it; on the contrary, the reason a Supreme Being would decree it is because the action is right.
4. Clarify how on Westermarck's view moral judgments are not objective.
5. Explain why, in Westermarck's view, "...to say that something is good because it is in accordance with the will of an all-good God is to reason in a circle."
6. How does Westermarck answer the charge of "ethical subjectivism" against his view of ethical relativity?
7. Explain Westermarck's argument that moral judgments cannot be objective even though they are not arbitrary.

The Reading Selection from *Ethical Relativity*

[Ethics Is Not Normative]

Ethics is generally looked upon as a "normative" science, the object of which is to find and formulate moral principles and rules possessing objective validity. The supposed objectivity of moral values, as understood in this treatise, implies that they have a real existence apart from any reference to a human mind, that what is said to be good or bad, right or wrong, cannot be reduced merely to what people think to be good or bad, right or wrong. It makes morality a matter of truth and falsity, and to say that a judgment is true obviously means something different from the statement that it is thought to be true. The objectivity of moral judgments does not presuppose the infallibility of the individual who pronounces such a judgment, nor even the accuracy of a general consensus of opinion; but if a certain course of conduct is objectively right, it must be thought to be right by all rational beings who judge truly of the matter and cannot, without error, be judged to be wrong.

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In spite of the fervour with which the objectivity of moral judgments has been advocated by the exponents of normative ethics there is much diversity of opinion with regard to the principles underlying the various systems. This discord is as old as ethics itself. But while the evolution of other sciences has shown a tendency to increasing agreements on points of fundamental importance, the same can hardly be said to have been the case in the history of ethics, where the spirit of controversy has been much more conspicuous than the endeavour to add new truths to results already reached. Of course, if moral values are objective, only one of the conflicting theories can possibly be true. Each founder of a new theory hopes that it is he who has discovered the unique jewel of moral truth, and is naturally anxious to show that other theories are only false stones. But he must also by positive reasons make good his claim to the precious find.

These reasons are of great importance in a discussion of the question whether moral judgments really are objective or merely are supposed to be so; for if any one of the theories of normative ethics has been actually proved to be true, the objectivity of those judgments has *eo ipso* been established as an indisputable fact. . . .

From the reading . . .

“No [moral theory] has proved . . . that moral principles express anything more than the opinions of those who believe in them.”

[Moral Principles Are Not Self-Evident]

There are no doubt moral propositions which really are certain and self-evident, for the simple reason that they are tautological, that the predicate is but a repetition of the subject; and moral philosophy contains a great number of such tautologies, from the days of Plato and Aristotle to the present times. But apart from such cases, which of course tell us nothing, I am not aware of any moral principle that could be said to be truly self-evident. The presumed self-evidence is only a matter of opinion; and in some cases one might even be inclined to quote Mr. Bertrand Russell’s statement that “if self-evidence is alleged as a ground of belief, that implies that doubt has crept in, and that our self-evident proposition has not

wholly resisted the assaults of scepticism." None of the various theories of normative science can be said to have proved its case; none of them has proved that moral judgments possess objective validity, that there is anything good or bad, right or wrong, that moral principles express anything more than the opinions of those who believe in them. But what, then, has made moralists believe that moral judgments possess an objective validity which none of them has been able to prove? What has allured them to invent a science the subject-matter of which—the objectively good or right—is not even known to exist? The answer is not difficult to find. It has often been remarked that there is much greater agreement among moralists on the question of moral practice than on the question of theory. When they are trying to define the ultimate end of right conduct or to find the essence of right and wrong, they give us the most contradictory definitions or explanations—as Leslie Stephen said, we find ourselves in a "region of perpetual antinomies, where controversy is everlasting, and opposite theories seem to be equally self-evident to different minds." But when they pass to a discussion of what is right and wrong in concrete cases, in the various circumstances of life, the disagreement is reduced to a surprising extent. They all tell us that we should be kind to our neighbour, that we should respect his life and property, that we should speak the truth, that we should live in monogamy and be faithful husbands or wives, that we should be sober and temperate, and so forth. This is what makes books on ethics, when they come to the particular rules of life, so exceedingly monotonous and dull; for even the most controversial and pugnacious theories becomes then quite tame and commonplace. And the reason for this is that all ethical theories are as a matter of fact based on the morality of common sense . . . So also normative ethics has adopted the common sense idea that there is something right and wrong independently of what is thought to be right or wrong. People are not willing to admit that their moral convictions are a mere matter of opinion, and took upon convictions differing from their own as errors. If asked why there is so much diversity of opinion on moral questions, and consequently so many errors, they would probably argue that there would be unanimity as regards the rightness or wrongness of a given course of conduct if everybody possessed a sufficient knowledge of the case and all the attendant circumstances and if, at the same time, everybody had a sufficiently developed moral consciousness—which practically would mean a moral consciousness as enlightened and developed as their own. This characteristic of the moral judgments of common sense is shared by the judgments of philosophers, and is at the bottom of their

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reasoned arguments in favour of the objectivity of moral values.

The common sense idea that moral judgments possess objective validity is itself regarded as a proof of their really possessing such validity. It is argued that the moral judgment “claims objectivity,” that it asserts a value which is found in that on which it is pronounced. “This is the meaning of the judgment,” says Professor Sorley. “It is not about a feeling or attitude of, or any relation to the subject who makes the judgment.” . . . The whole argument is really reduced to the assumption that an idea—in this case the idea of the validity of moral judgments—which is generally held, or held by more or less advanced minds, must be true; people claim objective validity for the moral judgments, therefore it must possess such validity. The only thing that may be said in favour of such an argument is, that if the definition of a moral proposition implies the claim to objectivity, a judgment that does not express this quality cannot be a moral judgment; but this by no means proves that moral propositions so defined are true—the predicated objectivity may be a sheer illusion. . . .



Views of Morocco, Westermarck field-work location, Library of Congress

The authority assigned to conscience is really only an echo of the social or religious sanctions of conduct: it belongs to the “public” or the religious conscience, *vox populi* or *vox dei*. In theory it may be admitted that every man ought to act in accordance with his conscience. But this phrase is easily forgotten when, in any matter of importance, the individual’s conscience comes into conflict with the common sense of his community; or doubt may be thrown upon the sincerity of his professed convictions, or he may be blamed for having such a conscience as he has. There are philosophers, like Hobbes and Hegel, who have denied the citizen the right of having a private conscience. The other external source from which author-

ity has been instilled into the moral law is the alliance between morality and religion . . . It has been pointed out by Schopenhauer and others that Kant's categorical imperative, with its mysteriousness and awfulness, is really an echo of the old religious formula "Thou shalt," though it is heard, not as the command of an external legislator, but as a voice coming from within. Schiller wrote to Goethe, "There still remains something in Kant, as in Luther, that makes one think of a monk who has left his monastery, but been unable to efface all traces of it."

[Whether God Is the Source of Right]

The theological argument in favour of the objective validity of moral judgments, which is based on belief in an all-good God who has revealed his will to mankind, contains, of course, an assumption that cannot be scientifically proved. But even if it could be proved, would that justify the conclusion drawn from it? Those who maintain that they in such a revelation possess an absolute moral standard and that, consequently, any mode of conduct which is in accordance with it must be objectively right, may be asked what they mean by an all-good God. If God were not supposed to be all-good, we might certainly be induced by prudence to obey his decrees, but they could not lay claim to moral validity; suppose the devil were to take over the government of the world, what influence would that have on the moral values—would it make the right wrong and the wrong right? It is only the all-goodness of God that can give his commandments absolute moral validity. But to say that something is good because it is in accordance with the will of an all-good God is to reason in a circle; if goodness means anything, it must have a meaning which is independent of his will. God is called good or righteous because he is supposed to possess certain qualities that we are used to call so: he is benevolent, he rewards virtue and punishes vice, and so forth. For such reasons we add the attributes goodness and righteousness to his other attributes, which express qualities of an objective character, and by calling him all-good we attribute to him perfect goodness. As a matter of fact, there are also many theologians who consider moral distinctions to be antecedent to the divine commands. Thomas Aquinas and his school maintain that the right is not right because God wills it, but that God wills it because it is right. . . .

[Moral Subjectivism Is Not Arbitrary]

... Another question is whether the ethical subjectivism I am here advocating really is a danger to morality. It cannot be depreciated by the same inference as was drawn from the teaching of the ancient Sophists, namely, that if that which appears to each man as right or good stands for that which is right or good, then everybody has the natural right to follow his caprice and inclinations and to hinder him doing so is an infringement on his rights. My moral judgments spring from my own moral consciousness; they judge of the conduct of other men not from their point of view but from mine, not in accordance with their feelings and opinions about right and wrong but according to my own. And these are not arbitrary. We approve and disapprove because we cannot do otherwise; our moral consciousness belongs to our mental constitution, which we cannot change as we please. Can we help feeling pain when the fire burns us? Can we help sympathizing with our friends? Are these facts less necessary or less powerful in their consequences, because they fall within the subjective sphere of our experience? So also, why should the moral law command less obedience because it forms a part of ourselves?

I think that ethical writers are often inclined to overrate the influence or moral theory upon moral practice, but if there is any such influence at all, it seems to me that ethical subjectivism, instead of being a danger, is more likely to be an advantage to morality. Could it be brought home to people that there is no absolute standard in morality, they would perhaps be on the one hand more tolerant and on the other hand more critical in their judgments. Emotions depend on cognitions and are apt to vary according as the cognitions vary; hence a theory which leads to an examination of the psychological and historical origin of people's moral opinions should be more useful than a theory which postulates moral truths enunciated by self-evident intuitions that are unchangeable. In every society the traditional notions as to what is good or bad, obligatory or indifferent, are commonly accepted by the majority of people without further reflection. By tracing them to their source it will be found that not a few of these notions have their origin in ignorance and superstition or in sentimental likes or dislikes, to which a scrutinizing judge can attach little importance; and, on the other hand, he must condemn many an act or omission which public opinion, out of thoughtlessness, treats with indifference. It will, moreover, appear that moral estimates often survive the causes from which they sprang. And what unprejudiced person can help changing his views if he

be persuaded that they have no foundation in existing facts?

From the reading...

"If there are no moral truths it cannot be the object of a science of ethics to lay down rules for human conduct, since the aim of all science is the discovery of some truth."

[Moral Judgments Are Not Objective]

I have thus arrived at the conclusion that neither the attempts of moral philosophers or theologians to prove the objective validity of moral judgments, nor the common sense assumption to the same effect, give us any right at all to accept such a validity as a fact. So far, however, I have only tried to show that it has not been proved; now I am prepared to take a step further and assert that it cannot exist. The reason for this is that in my opinion the predicates of all moral judgments, all moral concepts, are ultimately based on emotions, and that, as is very commonly admitted, no objectivity can come from an emotion. It is of course true or not that we in a given moment have a certain emotion; but in no other sense can the antithesis of true and false be applied to it. The belief that gives rise to an emotion, the cognitive basis of it, is either true or false; in the latter case the emotion may be said to be felt "by mistake"—as when a person is frightened by some object in the dark which he takes for a ghost, or is indignant with a person to whom he imputes a wrong that has been committed by somebody else; but this does not alter the nature of the emotion itself. We may call the emotion of another individual "unjustified," if we feel that we ourselves should not have experienced the same emotion had we been in his place, or, as in the case of moral approval or disapproval, if we cannot share his emotion. But to speak, as Brentano does, of "right" and "wrong" emotions, springing from self-evident intuitions and having the same validity as truth and error, is only another futile attempt to objectivize our moral judgments. . . .

Chapter 5. “Ethics Are Relative” by Edward Westermarck

From the reading...

“None ... that moral principles express anything more than the opinions of those who believe in them.”

If there are no moral truths it cannot be the object of a science of ethics to lay down rules for human conduct, since the aim of all science is the discovery of some truth. Professor Höffdung argues that the subjectivity of our moral valuations does not prevent ethics from being a science any more than the subjectivity of our sensations renders a science of physics impossible, because both are concerned with finding the external facts that correspond to the subjective processes. It may, of course, be a subject for scientific inquiry to investigate the means which are conducive to human happiness or welfare, and the results of such a study may also be usefully applied by moralists, but it forms no more a part of ethics than physics is a part of psychology. If the word “ethics” is to be used as the name for a science, the object of that science can only be to study the moral consciousness as a fact.



The Quay, Helsinki, Finland, Library of Congress

Related Ideas

Ethical Relativism (<http://pong.telarama.com/~jdehullu/ethics/erhist.htm>). *Ariadne's Thread*. The history and variety of the arguments dealing with ethical relativity designed to help form your own view.

The Definition of Morality (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Descriptive and normative definitions with links by Bernard Gert.

From the reading...

"[I]n my opinion the predicates of all moral judgments, all moral concepts, are ultimately based on emotions, and that, as is very commonly admitted, no objectivity can come from an emotion."

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare and contrast Westermarck's views on conscience in this reading selection with Alexander Bain's view as expressed in his "Conscience Is Learned."
2. Westermarck writes, "... a theory which leads to an examination of the psychological and historical origin of people's moral opinions should be more useful than a theory which postulates moral truths enunciated by self-evident intuitions that are unchangeable" in defense of his view that an intuitionistic ethical theory is not reliable. Discuss whether his observation commits the genetic fallacy.
3. In his plea for a fair hearing, Westermarck writes, "And what unprejudiced person can help changing his views if he be persuaded that they have no foundation in existing facts?" Explain whether this remark is a tautology and whether it helps his case.

Chapter 6

“The Objectivity of Moral Judgements” by G. E. Moore



G. E. Moore, Università di Pavia

About the author...

G. E. Moore was a Fellow of the British Academy, Professor of Mental Philosophy and Logic at Trinity College, Cambridge, and editor of the philosophy and psychology journal *Mind*. Bertrand Russell, a colleague, wrote about Moore's reputation for honesty, "I have never but once succeeded in making him tell a lie, and that was by a subterfuge. 'Moore,' I said, 'do you *always* speak the truth?' 'No,' he replied. I believe this to be the only lie he ever told."

About the work...

In his *Ethics*,¹ G. E. Moore clarifies in conversational style whether “good” and “right” have any common characteristics. His arguments are easy to understand, if the reader is willing to follow the natural flow of the rather long sentences. Moore is such a clear and careful writer that he is almost always better understood when he is read slowly and patiently. The central purpose of his *Ethics* was to draw attention to some confusions in utilitarianism. In this short selection from Chapter II, Moore argues against ethical relativism based on an emotive theory or *consensus gentium*.

From the reading...

“...it seems also to be often supposed that, if our moral judgements were developed out of feeling—if this was their origin—they must *still* at this moment be somehow concerned with feelings... and this is an assumption of which there is, surely, no shadow of ground.”

Ideas of Interest from *Ethics*

1. The emotive theory of ethics bases rightness and wrongness on emotions. Explain Moore’s characterization of the theory.
2. Explain how the two steps Moore describes indicate that the emotive theory of ethics is inconsistent: (1) his argument from emotivism and (2) his argument from moral progress.
3. Explain how personal feelings as to moral approval and disapproval in different persons might not be contradictory.

1. G. E. Moore. “The Objectivity of Moral Judgments” in *Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912.

4. Explain Moore’s argument against relativism based on the meanings of the words “right” and “wrong.”
5. Why is ethics not sociologically based according to Moore? *I.e.*, why is not ethics based on measures of social approval?
6. What is Moore’s argument that ethics is not based upon what most people think?

The Reading Selection from *Ethics*

[Emotivism: Is Ethics Based on Feelings?]

Now this question as to whether one and the same action can ever be both right and wrong at the same time, or can ever be right at one time and wrong at another, is, I think, obviously, an extremely fundamental one. If we decide it in the affirmative, then a great many of the questions which have been most discussed by ethical writers are at once put out of court. It must, for instance, be idle to discuss what characteristic there is, which universally distinguishes right actions from wrong ones, if this view be true. If one and the same action can be both right and wrong then obviously there can be *no* such characteristic—there can be no characteristic which *always* belongs to right actions, and *never* to wrong ones. . .

I propose, therefore, first of all, to raise the simple issue: Can one and the same action be both right and wrong, either at the time or at different times? . . .

It may be held, namely, that whenever we assert that an action or class of actions is right or wrong, we must be merely making an assertion about somebody’s *feelings* towards the action or class of actions in question. This is a view which seems to be very commonly held in some form or other; and one chief reason why it is held is, I think, that many people seem to find an extreme difficulty in seeing what else we possibly *can* mean by the words “right” and “wrong,” except that some mind or set of minds have some feeling, or some other mental attitude, towards the actions to which we apply these predicates. . . .

To begin with, it may be held that whenever any man asserts an action to be right or wrong, what he is asserting is merely that he *himself* has some

Chapter 6. "The Objectivity of Moral Judgements" by G. E. Moore

particular feeling towards the action in question. Each of us, according to this view, is merely making an assertion about *his own* feelings: when *I* assert that an action is right, the *whole* of what I mean is merely that *I* have some particular feeling towards the action; and when *you* make the same assertion, the *whole* of what you mean is merely that *you* have the feeling in question towards the action. . . .

But whatever view be taken as to the precise nature of the feelings about which we are supposed to be making a judgment, *any* view which holds that, when we call an action right or wrong, each of us is always merely asserting that he *himself* has or has not some particular feeling toward it, does, I think inevitably lead to the same conclusion—namely, that quite often one and the same action is *both* right and wrong; and *any* such view is also exposed to one and the same fatal objection.

The argument which shows that such views inevitably lead to the conclusion that one and the same action is quite often both right and wrong, consists of two steps, each of which deserves to be separately emphasized.

The first is this. If, whenever I judge an action to be right, I am merely judging that I myself have a particular feeling towards it, then it plainly follows that, provided I really have the feeling in question, my judgment is true, and therefore the action in question really is right. And what is true of me, in this respect, will also be true of any other man. No matter what we suppose the feeling to be, it must be true that, whenever and so long as *any* man really has towards any action the feeling in question, then, and for just so long, the action in question really is right. For what our theory supposes is that, when a man judges an action to be right, he is merely judging *that* he has this feeling toward it; and hence, whenever he really has it, his judgment must be true, and the action really must be right. It strictly follows, therefore, from this theory that whenever *any man whatever* really has a particular feeling towards an action, the action really is right; and whenever *any man whatever* really has another particular feeling towards an action, the action really is wrong. . . .

And now, if we take into account a second fact, it seems plainly to follow that, if this be so, one and the same action must quite often be both right and wrong.

This second fact is merely the observed fact, which it seems difficult to deny, that, whatever pair of feelings or single feeling we take, cases do occur in which two different men have opposite feelings towards the same

Chapter 6. “The Objectivity of Moral Judgements” by G. E. Moore

action, and in which, while one has a given feeling towards an action, the other has not got it. . . .

But still, if we look at the extraordinary differences that there have been and are between different races of mankind, and in different stages of society, in respect of the classes of actions which have been regarded as right and wrong, it is, I think, scarcely possible to doubt that in some societies, actions have been regarded with actual *feelings* of positive moral approval, towards which many of us would feel the strongest disapproval. And if this is so with regard to *classes* of actions, it can hardly fail to be sometimes the case with regard to *particular* actions. We may, for instance, read of a particular action, which excites in us a strong feeling of moral disapproval; and yet it can hardly be doubted that sometimes this very action will have been regarded by some of the men among whom it was done, without any feeling of disapproval whatever, and even with a feeling of positive approval. But, if this be so, then, on the view we are considering, it will absolutely follow that whereas it was true *then*, when it was done, that that action was right, it is true *now* that the very same action was wrong.

And once we admit that there have been such real differences of feeling between men in different stages of society, we must also, I think, admit that such differences do quite often exist even among contemporaries, when they are members of very different societies; so that one and the same action may be quite often be *at the same time* both right and wrong. And, having admitted this, we ought, I think, to go still further. Once we are convinced that real differences of *feeling* towards certain classes of actions, and not merely differences of opinion, do exist between men in different states of society, the probability is that when two men in the same state of society differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong, this difference of opinion, though it by no means always indicates a corresponding difference of feeling, yet sometimes really is accompanied by such a difference: so that two members of the *same* society may really sometimes have opposite feelings towards one and the same action, *whatever feeling we take*. And finally, we must admit, I think, that even one and the same individual may experience such a change of feeling towards one and the same action. A man certainly does often come to change his *opinion* as to whether a particular action was right or wrong; and we must, I think, admit that, sometimes at least, his feelings towards it completely change as well; so that, for instance, an action, which he formerly regarded with moral disapproval, he may now regard with positive moral approval, and

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vice versa. So that, for this reason alone, and quite apart from differences of feeling between different men, we shall have to admit, according to our theory, that it is often *now* true of an action that it *was* right, although it was formerly true of the same action that it *was* wrong. . . .

Can it possibly be the case then, that, when we judge an action to be right or wrong, each of us is only asserting that *he himself* has some particular feeling toward it? . . .

If, when one man says, "This action is right," and another answers, "No, it is not right," each of them is always merely making an assertion about *his own* feelings, it plainly follows that there is never really any difference of opinion between them: the one of them is never really contradicting what the other is asserting. They are no more contradicting one another than if, when one had said, "I like sugar," the other had answered, "*I don't* like sugar." In such a case, there is of course, no conflict of opinion, no contradiction of one by the other for it may perfectly well be the case that what each asserts is equally true; it may quite well be the case that the one man really does like sugar, and the other really does *not* like it. The one, therefore is *never* denying what the other is asserting. And what the view we are considering involves is that when one man holds an action to be right, and another holds it to be wrong or not right, here also the one is *never* denying what the other is asserting. It involves, therefore, the very curious consequence that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong. And surely the fact that it involves this consequence is sufficient to condemn it. It is surely plain matter of fact that when I assert an action to be wrong, and another man asserts it to be right, there sometimes is a real difference of opinion between us: he sometimes is denying the very thing which I am asserting. But, if this is so, then it cannot possibly be the case that each of us is merely making a judgment about his own feelings; since two such judgments never can contradict one another. . . .

[I]t is sometimes the case that both men may use the word "right" to denote *exactly the same* predicate, and that the one may really be thinking that the action in question really has this predicate, while the other is thinking that it has *not* got it. But if this is so, then the theory we are considering certainly is not true. It cannot be true that every man always denotes by the word "right" merely a relation to *his own feelings*, since, if that were so, no two men would ever denote by this word *the same* predicate; and hence a man who said that an action was *not* right could never be denying that it has

the very predicate, which another, who said that it *was* right, was asserting that it had. . . .

If we once clearly see that to say that an action is right is not the same thing as to say that we have any feeling towards it, what reason is there left for holding that the presence of a certain feeling is, in fact, always a sign that it is right? No one, I think, would be very much tempted to assert that the mere presence (or absence) of a certain feeling is invariably a sign of rightness, but for the supposition that, in some way or other, the only possible meaning of the word "right," as applied to actions, is that somebody has a certain feeling towards them. And it is this supposition, in one of its forms, that our argument does disprove. . . .

[Is Ethics Based on What Society Thinks?]

Many people have such a strong disposition to believe that when we judge an action to be right or wrong we *must* be merely making an assertion about the feelings of *some* man or set of men. . . that each man, when he asserts an action to be right or wrong, is merely asserting that a certain feeling is *generally* felt towards actions of that class by most of the members of the society to which he belongs. . .

From either of these two views, it will, of course, follow that one and the same action is often both right and wrong, for the same reasons as were given in the last case. Thus, if, when *I*, assert an action to be right, I am merely asserting that it is generally approved in the society to which *I* belong, it follows, of course, that if it *is* generally approved by my society, my assertion is true, and the action really *is* right. But as we say, it seems undeniable, that some actions which are generally approved in *my* society, will have been disapproved or will still be disapproved in other societies. And, since any member of one of those societies will, on this view, when he judges an action to be wrong, be merely judging that it is disapproved in *his* society, though approved in mine, to be *wrong*, this judgement of his will be just as true as *my* judgment that the same action was right: and hence the same action really will be both right and wrong. And similarly, if we adopt the other alternative, and say that when a man judges an action to be right he is merely judging that *some man or other* has a particular feeling toward it, it will, of course, follow that whenever any man at all really has this feeling towards it, the action really is right, while, whenever any man at all has *not* got it or has an opposite feeling, the action really is

wrong; and, since cases will certainly occur in which one man has the required feeling, while another has an opposite one towards the same action, in all such cases the same action will be both right and wrong. . . .

For, whatever feeling or feelings we take as the ones about which he is supposed to be judging, it is quite certain that a man may think an action to be right, even when he does *not* think that the members of his society have in general the required feeling (or absence of feeling) towards it; and that similarly he may doubt whether an action is right, even when he does not doubt that *some man or other* has the required feeling towards it. Cases of this kind certainly constantly occur, and what they prove is that, whatever a man is thinking when he thinks an action to be right, he is certainly *not* merely thinking that his society has in general a particular feeling toward it; and similarly that, when he is in doubt as to whether an action is right, the question about which he is in doubt is not merely as to whether any man at all has the required feeling towards it. Facts of this kind are, therefore, absolutely fatal to both of these two theories; whereas in the case of the theory that he is merely making a judgement about *his own feelings*, it is not so obvious that there are any facts of the same kind inconsistent with it. For here it might be urged with some plausibility (though, I think, untrue) that when a man judges an action to be right he always does think that he himself has some particular feeling towards it; and similarly that when he is in doubt as to whether an action is right he always is in doubt as to his own feelings. but it cannot possibly be urged, with any plausibility at all, that when a man judges an action to be right he always thinks, for instance, that it is generally approved in his society; or that when he is in doubt, he is always in doubt as to whether *any* man approves it. He may know quite well that *somebody* does approve it, and yet be in doubt whether it is right; and he may be quite certain that his society does *not* approve it, and yet still think that it *is* right. And the same will hold, *whatever* feeling we take instead of moral approval.

These facts, then, seem to me to prove conclusively that, when a man judges an action to be right or wrong, he is *not* always merely judging that his society has some particular feeling towards actions of that class, nor yet that *some* man does. . . .

From the reading...

“No argument from the origin of a thing can be a safe guide as to exactly what the nature of the thing is now.”

[Is Ethics Sociologically Based?]

It has been widely held that, in the history of the human race, judgments of right and wrong *originated* in the fact that primitive men or their non-human ancestors had certain feelings towards certain classes of actions. That is to say, it is supposed that there was a time, if we go far enough back, when our ancestors *did* have different feelings towards different actions, being, for instance, pleased with some and displeased with others, but when they did *not*, as yet, judge any actions to be right or wrong; and that it was only because they transmitted these feelings, more or less modified, to their descendants, that those descendants at some later stage, began to make judgements of right and wrong; so that, in a sense, our moral judgments were *developed out of* mere feelings. And I can see no objection to the supposition that this was so. But, then, it seems also to be often supposed that, if our moral judgements were developed out of feeling—if this was their origin—they must *still* at this moment be somehow concerned with feelings: that the developed product must resemble the germ out of which it was developed in this particular respect. And this is an assumption for which there is, surely, no shadow of ground. . . .

And hence the theory that moral judgments originated in feelings does not, in fact, lend any support at all to the theory that now, as developed, they can only be judgments *about* feelings. No argument from the origin of a thing can be a safe guide as to exactly what the nature of the thing is now.² That is a question which must be settled by actual analysis of the thing in its present state. And such analysis seems plainly to show that moral judgements are *not* merely judgments about feelings.

2. From a logical point of view, Moore is pointing out the “genetic fallacy”—the mistake of arguing that the acceptance or the rejection of a statement should be based on that statement’s historical origin or genesis. *Ed.*

I conclude, then that the theory that our judgments of right and wrong are merely judgments about somebody's feeling is quite untenable in any of the forms in which it will lead to the conclusion that one and the same action is often both right and wrong. . . .

From the reading...

"And since it is even more obvious that different men's opinions as to whether a given action is right or wrong differ both at the same time and at different times, than that their feelings towards the same action differ, it will follow that one and the same action very often *is* both right and wrong."

[Relativism: Is Ethics Based on What People Think?]

[A] second theory is one which is often confused with the one just considered. It consists in asserting that when we judge an action to be right or wrong what we are asserting is merely that somebody or other *thinks* it to be right or wrong. That is to say, just as the last theory asserted that our moral judgements are merely judgements about somebody's *feelings*, this one asserts that they are merely judgments about somebody's *thoughts* or opinions. . . .

If, for instance, when I say that an action is right, all that I mean is that I *think* it to be right, it will follow, that, if I do really think it to be right, my judgement *that* I think so will be true; and since this judgment is supposed to be identical with the judgement that it *is* right, it will follow that the judgement that it is right is true and hence that the action really is right. And since it is even more obvious that different men's opinions as to whether a given action is right or wrong differ both at the same time and at different times, than that their feelings towards the same action differ, it will follow that one and the same action very often *is* both right and wrong. . . . Thus, in its first form, it will involve the absurdity that no two men ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong, and will thus contradict a plain fact. While in the other two forms, it will involve the conclusions that no man ever thinks a action to be right, unless

Chapter 6. “The Objectivity of Moral Judgements” by G. E. Moore

he thinks that his society thinks it to be right, and that no man ever doubts whether an action is right, unless he doubts whether any man at all thinks it right—two conclusions which are both of them certainly untrue.

These objections are, I think, sufficient by themselves to dispose of this theory as of the last. . .



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Related Ideas

G. E. Moore (http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/G._E._Moore). *Wikipedia*. Overview description of Moore’s life and philosophy with links.

“*The Nature of Moral Philosophy*” by G. E. Moore (<http://www.ditext.com/moore/nmp.html>). *Center for the Study of Great Philosophical Problems*. Moore’s well-known paper originally published in his *Philosophical Studies*.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Moore’s arguments in this short reading selection are directed against two kinds of moral relativity. Do these arguments also show ethical relativism to be a confusion? Be sure to explain the difference

Chapter 6. "The Objectivity of Moral Judgements" by G. E. Moore

between sociological (or psychological) relativism and ethical relativism.

2. Suppose someone agrees with Moore's arguments that ethics is inconsistent in the ways that he argues. Ultimately what is wrong about believing and acting in accordance with a doctrine that is contradictory?

Part II. Free Will and Determinism



Cathedral at Marseilles, France, Library of Congress

In this, the second part of our study, we examine the crucial question of how free, if at all, human choice and action can be. In the philosophical literature, persuasive doctrines range from scientific or hard determinism to complete and radical free will.

In this section, we face some of the main philosophic positions on the free will—determinism issue. The crux of the problem is sometimes related as the dilemma known as *Hume's Fork*: On the one hand, if my actions are entirely subject to causal laws, then I am not responsible for them anymore than an apple is responsible for falling from a tree.¹⁷ On the other hand, if my actions are not determined then they must be random events, but then in that case also I would not be responsible for my actions because specific outcome to a random process cannot be willed or decided upon.

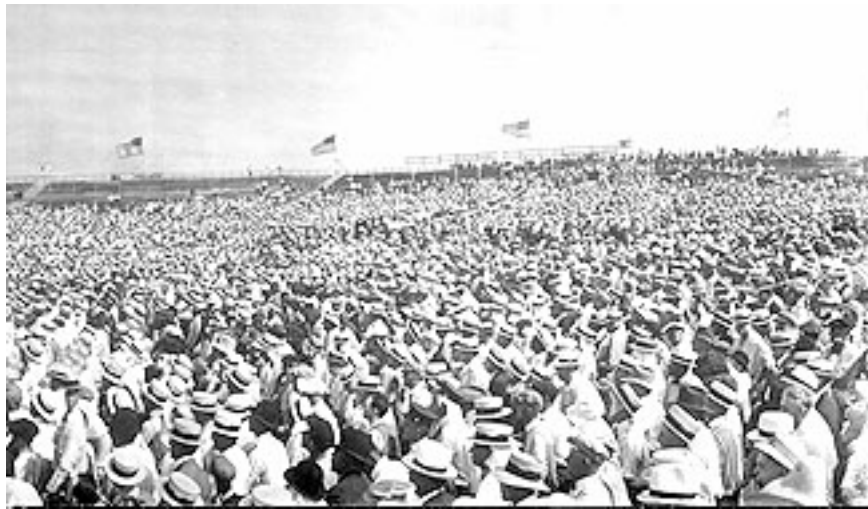
17. On this view, an caused event would be the same thing as what is called “a miracle”—*i.e.*, an event without cause or explanation.

Where to go for help...

Notes, quizzes, and tests for some of the selections from this part of the readings, "Free Will and Determinism," can be found at Problems of Ethics (http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/problems_topics.html).

Chapter 7

Some Varieties of Determinism



Crowds at Squires, Library of Congress

Philosophical Ethics

Historically, the ethics of peoples has been based on religion. Not surprisingly, morals differ from person to person and place to place because different cultures have different religions.

If there is to be a philosophical basis for how we ought to lead our lives and seek the good life, then this basis probably cannot be founded on religious

tenets of God's existence. As we have seen, both *á priori* and *á posteriori* proofs for God's existence are not philosophically well developed enough to be reliable for further inferences.

Thus, our task in this part of our study is to see to what extent we can base ethical principles on reason alone. Toward this end, it is important to mention that if scientific determinism were true and psychology is a science with the potential of accurate prediction, it's quite possible the whole enterprise of ethics would be moot, since with no free will, we cannot recommend or freely decide upon alternative courses of decision or action.

Varieties of Determinism

Determinism (hard or scientific): the philosophical view that all events (including mental events) have a cause. In other words, all states of affairs, both physical and mental, are conditioned by their causes and are describable by scientific law.

Implications: In a deterministic universe, there is no free will, no miracles, and no chance events. Sometimes mental events or "choices" are considered epiphenomena. The classic view of determinism was expressed by Laplace. Given sufficient knowledge of every particle in the universe, any future event or past event could be calculated with exactitude.

Pierre-Simon Laplace, *Philosophical Essays on Probability*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1995.

If we imagine an intellect which at any given moment knew all the forces that animate Nature and the mutual positions of the beings that comprise it—if this intellect were vast enough to submit its data to analysis -- could condense into a single formula the movement of the greatest bodies of the universe and that of the lightest atom. For such an intellect nothing could be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.

Determinism (soft): the philosophical view that all physical events are caused but mental processes are uncaused. Choices have only to do with mental processes and have no actual effect in the external world—a view often held by Stoics.

Chapter 7. Some Varieties of Determinism

Implications: Consider why one sees a movie twice or watches an instant replay on TV. We do not do so in order to see a different outcome, but we do so as a result of interest and active perception. Consider also the Stoic doctrine that we should distinguish those things in our control from those outside of our control and be concerned only with those things in our control. On this view, what we can control is not what happens in the external world but how we think about what happens in the external world. Our choices are often restricted to "willing the next moment in spite of its inevitability" or simply to be willing to "let it be."

Predeterminism: the philosophical and theological view that combines God with determinism. On this doctrine events throughout eternity have been foreordained by some supernatural power in a causal sequence.

Implications: If world-events are predetermined, there is no free will, no miracles, and no chance events. The metaphor of God constructing and winding up a clock (the universe) and letting it run until the end of time is often used. Presumably, on some accounts, God could step in and adjust the clock and so a miracle (a violation of natural law) would occur. However, strictly speaking, the admission of the occurrence of miracles in a predeterministic universe would be inconsistent belief.

Fatalism: the philosophical and sometimes theological doctrine that specific events are fixed in advance (either by God or by some unknown means) although there might be some free play in minor events.

Implications: Fatalism does not presuppose causality, but it is compatible with choice with respect to some events and is compatible with the existence of miracles. The idea is that major events such as birth, death, major discovery, and so forth will happen regardless of causes or chance. "What will be, will be, and there is nothing we can do about it."

Suppose, for example, by means of some kind of revelation I learn that I will die from burns at 10:02 AM in the local Mercy Hospital on Saturday morning. On the one hand, suppose as soon as I learn this, I get in my car to get to the airport to get as far away as possible, but on the way to the airport, my car is hit by a tanker and I suffer severe injuries. After being transported to the hospital, I linger on and then die at the appointed time. On the other hand, suppose I did not take the risk of traveling to the airport and go home and intend to stay under the bed until Sunday. Unknown to me, however, there was a wiring fault in the house, and the house catches fire and so on. I would have choices in such a situation, but the fated event

would occur anyway.

Predestination: the theological doctrine that all events are made to happen by God and not by causality in nature. In a sense, the world is being continuously created, and each moment is a miracle (*i.e.*, not explainable by the laws of nature).

Implications: Many persons who hold this doctrine believe that predestination is compatible with free will in the sense that God knows in advance what will happen, but we freely choose and, by coincidence, choose according to God's plan. Consider, for example, the fact that our best friend often knows how we will decide a difficult issue before we ourselves do. Although it is sometimes said that under predestination all events are "caused" to happen by God, this is not the normal sense of efficient cause. God foreordains or preordains their occurrence.

Søren Kierkegaard, Journals, 1837

"It is so impossible for the world to exist without God that if God could forget it it would instantly cease to be."

Indeterminism: The philosophical doctrine that denies determinism is true. More specifically, not all events (either mental or physical) are determined by past events. There is a certain amount of free play between events, possibly due to chance, free choice, or chaos. Some events are caused, and some events are not caused.

Implications: Hence, indeterminism allows for free will, miracles, laws of nature, causality, chance, and chaos.

Chance (á priori): the philosophical view that the probability of a future occurrence can be calculated from the principles of mathematics. For example a coin toss results in an equal chance of resulting in a heads or tails. Obviously, such an ideal coin could have no width (so that it could not land on its side) and no head or tails to alter its center of gravity.

Chance (á posteriori): the philosophical view that the probability of a future occurrence can be calculated from past observations of previous similar occurrences. The á posteriori view of chance is wrapped up the intractable problem of induction. For example, we would base the prediction

Chapter 7. Some Varieties of Determinism

of a coin toss on data derived from past coin tosses of the same coin and tossing mechanism.

Implications: The notion of chance is not necessarily incompatible with determinism since it might be that the lack of exact initial conditions results in unpredictable behavior. In this sense, the outcome can not be known because of our ignorance of the exact causes of a phenomenon. For example, if one knew the exact shape, mass, geometry, center of gravity of a coin, and the exact amount and direction of force applied, and the relative humidity, wind velocity, and so forth, according to the determinist, an exact predication of heads or tails could be made.

Free will: the philosophical and theological doctrine that some of our choices are uncaused and effective. Free will results from the absence of causes, conditions, or other necessary determinations of choice or behavior. The usual definition of this term in philosophy is not affirmative but negative.

Implications: Note that so-called spontaneous people are persons who do not necessarily exercise free will. Their behavior is often prompted by proximate causes.

Chapter 8

“Positive Philosophy” by August Comte



August Comte, Thoemmes

About the author...

August Comte (1798-1857), a founder of sociology, believes societies as well as all other aspects of our world can be known solely through observation and reason. Although he rejects the existence of theoretical entities, he believes all explanation and prediction are based on lawful succession—not causality, for he thought causality was not reducible to observation. In his view, each of the individual sciences has unique features and, just like social processes, passes through three stages: the theological based on supernatural powers, the metaphysical based on abstract ideas, and the positive (or scientific) based on relationships among empirical

Chapter 8. “Positive Philosophy” by August Comte

facts. His development of positivism not only interested J. S. Mill but also influenced the development of twentieth century logical positivism.

About the work...

In his *Cours de Philosophie Positive*,¹ Comte explains how societies evolve in accordance with natural law. The three stages discussed here, the theological-military, the metaphysical-transitional, and the scientific-industrial, he argues, progress according to a law of social development. Furthermore, he advocates a historical method of study for social science based on empirical methods.

From the reading...

“... each branch of our knowledge, passes in succession through three different theoretical states”

Ideas of Interest from *Cours de Philosophie Positive*

1. Explain Comte’s three laws of development.
2. According to the law of the three stages, how does the metaphysical state differ from the religious state of understanding? Is it possible for a person to understand the world two different ways?
3. Clarify as precisely as possible Comte’s description of the third stage of knowledge. Do you think Comte would endorse “the quest for certainty”?

1. August Comte. *Cours de Philosophie Positive*. Translated by Paul Descours and H. G. Jones. 1905.

The Reading Selection from *Cours de Philosophie Positive*

In order to explain properly the true nature and peculiar character of the Positive Philosophy, it is indispensable that we should first take a brief survey of the progressive growth of the human mind, viewed as a whole; for no idea can be properly understood apart from its history.

From the reading...

“[T]he human mind... makes use... of three methods of philosophizing, whose characters are essentially different, and even radically opposed to each other...”

[Fundamental Law of Development]

In thus studying the total development of human intelligence in its different spheres of activity, from its first and simplest beginning up to our own time, I believe that I have discovered a great fundamental Law, to which the mind is subjected by an invariable necessity. The truth of this Law can, I think be demonstrated both by reasoned proofs furnished by a knowledge of our mental organization, and by historical verification due to an attentive study of the past. This Law consists in the fact that each of our principal conceptions, each branch of our knowledge, passes in succession through three different theoretical states: the Theological or fictitious state, the Metaphysical or abstract state, and the Scientific or positive state. In other words, the human mind—by its very nature—makes use successively in each of its researches of three methods of philosophizing, whose characters are essentially different, and even radically opposed to each other. We have first the Theological method, then the Metaphysical method, and finally the Positive method. Hence there are three kinds of philosophy or general systems of conceptions on the aggregate of phenomena, which are mutually exclusive of each other. The first is the necessary starting point of human intelligence: the third represents its fixed and definite state; the second is only destined to serve as a transitional method.

[The Theological State]

In the Theological state, the human mind directs its researches mainly toward the inner nature of beings, and toward the first and final causes of all the phenomena which it observes—in a word, toward Absolute knowledge. It therefore represents these phenomena as being produced by the direct and continuous action of more or less numerous supernatural agents, whose arbitrary intervention explains all the apparent anomalies of the universe.

[The Metaphysical State]

In the Metaphysical state, which is in reality only a simple general modification of the first state, the supernatural agents are replaced by abstract forces, real entities or personified abstractions, inherent in the different beings of the world. These entities are looked upon as capable of giving rise by themselves to all the phenomena observed, each phenomenon being explained by assigning it to its corresponding entity.

From the reading...

“... the human mind, recognizing the impossibility of obtaining absolute truth, gives up the search after the origin and destination of the universe and a knowledge of the final causes of phenomena.”

[The Positive State]

Finally, in the Positive state, the human mind, recognizing the impossibility of obtaining absolute truth, gives up the search after the origin and destination of the universe and a knowledge of the final causes of phenomena. It only endeavors now to discover, by a well-combined use of reasoning and observation, the actual *laws* of phenomena—that is to say, their invariable relations of succession and likeness. the explanation of facts, thus reduced to its real terms, consists henceforth only in the connection established between different particular phenomena and some general facts, the number of which the progress of science tends more and more to diminish.

Related Ideas

Comte, August (<http://48.1911encyclopedia.org/C/CO/COMTE.htm>). *The 1911 Encyclopædia*. Discussion of Comte’s life and work from the classic edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.



The Madeline and Rue Royale, Paris, France, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Comte notes that “[n]o idea can be properly understood apart from its history.” Evaluate whether or not Comte’s description of the laws of development commits the genetic fallacy.²
2. Consider some of the concepts used in some of our reading selections: the “Great Mystery” of the Sioux, the “Idea of the Good” of Plato, the “Allah” of Islam, and the “science” of Comte. Relate each of these ideas to a stage of development and state your reasoning. What does the claim mean that “science has become God in the contemporary world”?

2. In brief, the genetic fallacy is an error in reasoning committed by basing or supporting the truth of a conclusion on an account of its history or origin.

Chapter 8. “Positive Philosophy” by August Comte

3. Recognizing that there is no absolute truth, Comte notes that in the third stage of *knowledge*, reason and observation discover “invariable relations of succession and likeness.” Are scientific laws, according to Comte, the same thing as necessary connections in nature? Explain Comte’s view on the possibility of scientific knowledge.
4. Briefly discuss how the discipline of ethics is viewed under each of the three states of knowledge Comte explains.
5. If all three stages of understanding, the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific, are all systems of conceiving phenomena, even though as Comte remarks they are mutually inconsistent, might not the terms used in each system be functionally structured much like terms in the other systems? For example, are the notions of “God,” “the Absolute Idea,” and “Nature” functionally equivalent. Do other ideas serve similar purposes in the different states of knowledge? (Interestingly enough, Comte, in this regard, sought a religion of humanity for his own time.)

Chapter 9

“Science of Natural Processes” by Frederick Engels



Frederick Engels

About the author...

Frederick Engels (1820-1895), as the son of a German textile manufacturer who owned factories in England, became so concerned about fate of textile workers he published *The Condition of the Working Classes in England*. He saw the textile worker as a new societal force leading to a rational ordering of social life, superceding capitalism. In collaboration with Karl Marx, Engels produced a number of works in social philoso-

Chapter 9. “Science of Natural Processes” by Frederick Engels

phy, including the *Communist Manifesto* which recounts the history of the working class in a dialectical fashion based on materialistic conflict. At the heart of Marxism is this thesis: The modes of production in any society uniquely determine the so-called higher ideologies of politics, ethics, religion, and philosophy. Engels financially supported Marx and edited most of his work. The contribution of the philosophy of historical materialism, the perspective expressed in *Ludwig Feuerbach*, is generally credited to Engels.

About the work...

In this reading from the second publication of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*,¹ Frederick Engels argues that three recent discoveries in the sciences provide the basis by which *all* aspects of the universe can be understood in terms of the philosophy of materialism. Wöhler’s synthesis of urea proves that organic processes are explainable in terms of inorganic processes. The theory of the cell discovered by Schwann and Schleiden proves that the physiological basis of all living things is the same, and Darwin’s theory of evolution indicates no difference in kind between human and all other forms of life. Finally, the discovery of the mechanical equivalent of heat (that heat is just matter in motion), proved that subjective properties (heretofore considered mental qualities) are equivalent to material processes. On Engels’s proposal, soul, spirit, and ideas are part of the material processes of nature. One arguable consequence of the unification of science provided by the theory of mechanistic materialism is impossibility of the discipline of an ethics based on choice. How could free will be possible in a deterministic and materialistic world?

From the reading...

“Three great discoveries, however, were of decisive importance.”

1. Frederick Engels. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. 1888.

Ideas of Interest from *Ludwig Feuerbach*

1. Explain the significance of the discovery of the transformation of energy in terms of the classical "mind-body" problem.² In Engels's terms, what are the two kinds of "motions" that are now understandable as mechanistic materialism? How, then, are mental qualities to be explained?
2. Why was the discovery by Schwann and Schleiden that the biological cell is the basis of all living things such revolutionary theory?
3. What is the unifying role of Darwin's theory of evolution in the philosophy of mechanistic materialism?
4. Prior to Wöhler's discovery, scientists thought that organic molecules could only be synthesized by living organisms. Explain Engels's argument that when Friedrich Wöhler accidentally created the organic compound urea by heating the inorganic compound ammonium cyanate, vitalism³ was disproved.
5. Engels is claiming that scientific law applies with equal measure to nature and society. Explain whether or not the free choice of human beings would be possible if all life processes are subject to deterministic scientific laws.

The Reading Selection from *Ludwig Feuerbach*

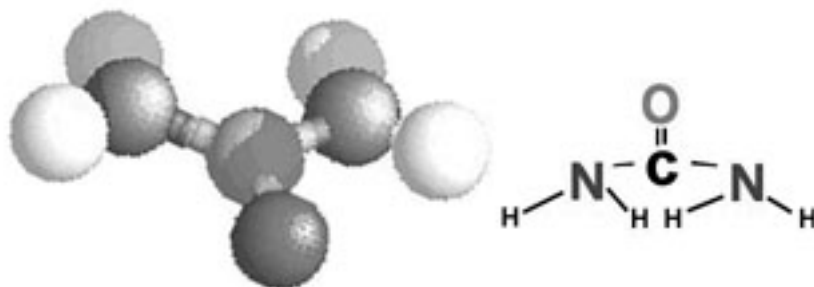
[Unification of Science of Natural Processes]

... empirical natural science made such an advance and achieved such bril-

2. The mind-body problem arises from the doctrine that physical and mental things are essentially two distinct kinds of substances with uniquely different properties. Mental objects, unlike physical objects, have no size, shape, and weight. How, then, do these two entirely different substances interact?

3. Vitalism is the doctrine that all living organisms have a non-physical aspect or unique life-force which animates them such that living processes are not reducible to mechanistic materialism and therefore cannot be completely explained by scientific laws.

liant results that not only did it become possible to overcome completely the mechanical one-sidedness of the eighteenth century, but natural science itself was, through the proof of the inter-relation existing in nature itself between the various spheres of investigation (mechanics, physics, chemistry, biology, *etc.*), transformed from an empirical into a theoretical science and, by the integration of the results achieved, into a system of materialistic knowledge of nature. The mechanics of gasses; newly created organic chemistry, which stripped the last remnants of incomprehensibility from the so-called organic compounds, one after the other, by preparing them from inorganic materials; the science of embryology which dates back to 1818; geology, palaeontology and the comparative anatomy of plants and animals—all of them provided new material to an unprecedented extent. Three great discoveries, however, were of decisive importance.



Structure of Urea

[Transformation of Energy and Motion]

The first was the proof of the transformation of energy obtained from the discovery of the mechanical equivalent of heat (by Robert Mayer, Joule and Colding). All the innumerable operative causes in nature, which until then had led a mysterious inexplicable existence as so-called "forces"—mechanical, force, heat, radiation (light and radiant heat), electricity, magnetism, the force of chemical combination and dissociation—are now proved to be special forms, modes of existence of one and the same energy, *i.e.*, motion. We are not only able to demonstrate their perpetual transformation in nature from one form into

another, but we can carry out this transformation itself in the laboratory and in industry and this in such a way that a given quantity of energy in one form always corresponds to a given quantity of energy in this or that other form. Thus we can express the unity of heat in kilogram-meters, and again the units of any quantity of electrical or chemical energy in unity of heat and vice versa. Similarly we can measure the consumption and supply of energy to a living organism, and express these in any unity desired, *e.g.*, in units of heat. The unity of all motion in nature is no longer a philosophical assertion but a fact of natural science.

[Life Explained by Scientific Law]

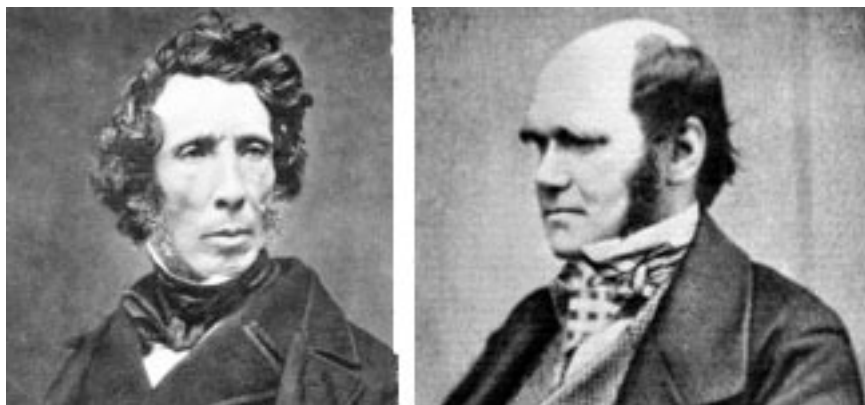
The second—chronologically earlier—discovery was that of the organic cell by Schwann and Schleiden—of the cell as the unity, out of the multiplication and differentiation of which all organisms, except the very lowest, arise and develop. With this discovery, the investigation of the organic, living products of nature—comparative anatomy and physiology, as well as embryology—was for the first time put upon a firm foundation. The mystery was removed from the origin, growth and structure of organisms. The hitherto incomprehensible miracle resolved itself into a process taking place according to a law essentially identical for all multicellular organisms.

[Origins of the Varieties of Organisms]

But an essential gap still remained. If all multi-cellular organisms—plants as well as animals, including man—grow from a single cell according to the law of cell-division, whence, then comes the infinite variety of these organisms? This question was answered by the three great discovery, the theory of evolution, which was first presented in connected form and substantiated by Darwin. However numerous the modifications in details this theory will yet undergo, it nevertheless, on the whole, already solves the problem in a more than satisfactory manner. The evolutionary series of organisms from few and simple to increasingly manifold and complex forms, as we see them today before our eyes, right up to and including man himself, has been proved in all its main basic features. Thereby not only has an explanation been made possible for the existing stock of the organic products of nature, but the basis has been given for the announced-history of

Chapter 9. "Science of Natural Processes" by Frederick Engels

the human mind, for following all its various stages of evolution from the protoplasm, simple and structureless yet responsive to stimuli, of the lower organisms right up to the thinking human brain. Without this prehistory, however, the existence of the thinking human brain remains a miracle.



Friedrich Wöhler and Charles Darwin, adapted from Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library

[Origin of Life]

With these three great discoveries, the main processes of nature are explained and traced back to natural causes. Only one thing remains to be done here: to explain the origin of life from inorganic nature. At the present stage of science, that means nothing else than the preparation of albuminous bodies from inorganic materials. Chemistry is approaching ever closer to this task. It is still a long way from it. But when we reflect that it was only in 1828 that the first organic body, urea, was prepared by Wöhler from inorganic materials and that innumerable so-called organic compounds are now artificially prepared without any organic substances, we shall not be inclined to bid chemistry halt before the production of albumen. Up to now, chemistry has been able to prepare any organic substance the composition of which is accurately known. As soon as the composition of albuminous bodies shall have become known, it will be possible to proceed to the production of live albumen. But that chemistry should achieve

over night what nature herself even under very favorable circumstances could succeed in doing on a few planets after millions of years—would be to demand a miracle.

[Scientific Materialism]

The materialist conception of nature, therefore, stands today on very different and firmer foundations than in the last century. Then it was only the motion of the heavenly bodies and of rigid terrestrial bodies under the influence of gravity that was thoroughly understood to some extent. Almost the whole sphere of chemistry and the whole of organic nature remained an incomprehensible secret. Today, the whole of nature is laid open before us as a system of interconnections and processes which have been, at least in their main features, explained and comprehended. Indeed, the materialistic outlook on nature means no more than simply conceiving nature just as it exists without any foreign admixture, and as such it was understood originally among the Greek philosophers as a matter of course. But between those old Greeks and us lie more than two thousand years of an essentially idealistic world outlook and hence the return to the self-evident is more difficult than it seems at first glance. For the question is not at all one of simply repudiating the whole thought-content of those two thousand years but of criticizing it in order to extricate from within the false, but for its time and the process of evolution even inevitable, idealistic form, the results gained from this transitory form. And how difficult that is, is demonstrated for us by those numerous scientists who are inexorable materialists within their science but who, outside it, are not only idealists but even pious, nay orthodox, Christians.

From Frederick Engels’s *Anti-Dühring*...

“All religion, however, is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.”

Related Ideas

Marxists Internet Archive (<http://www.marxists.org/>) . *Marxist Writers and History*. Comprehensive reference and sources for the philosophy of Marxism—useful for many online sources not available elsewhere.

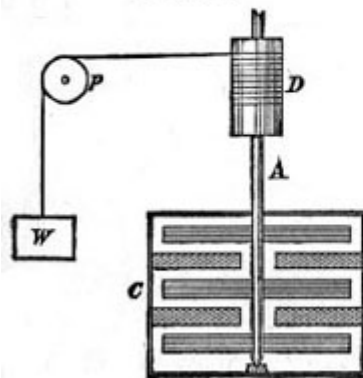
Cosmology Today (<http://www.flash.net/~csmith0/index.htm>). A series of accessible articles by scientists on the present and future state of science including present concerns of "a theory of everything"

From the reading...

"Today, the whole of nature is laid open before us as a system of interconnections and processes which have been, at least in their main features, explained and comprehended."

Joule's mode of determining this value of the mechanical equivalent is the following :

A weight W (Fig. 311), by means of a cord passing over a pulley p and around a drum D , gives to the vertical axis A a rapid rotation. Attached to this axis are a number of radial arms, or paddles, as shown in the figure; projecting from the sides of the cylinder C , in which these arms rotate, are fixed arms, as shown, to arrest any tendency to a rotary motion of the water in the cylinder.



the falling weight W to raise its temperature by agitation to 61° F.

Mechanical Equivalent of Heat, from Denison Olmsted, *An Introduction to Natural Philosophy*, 1844, 341.

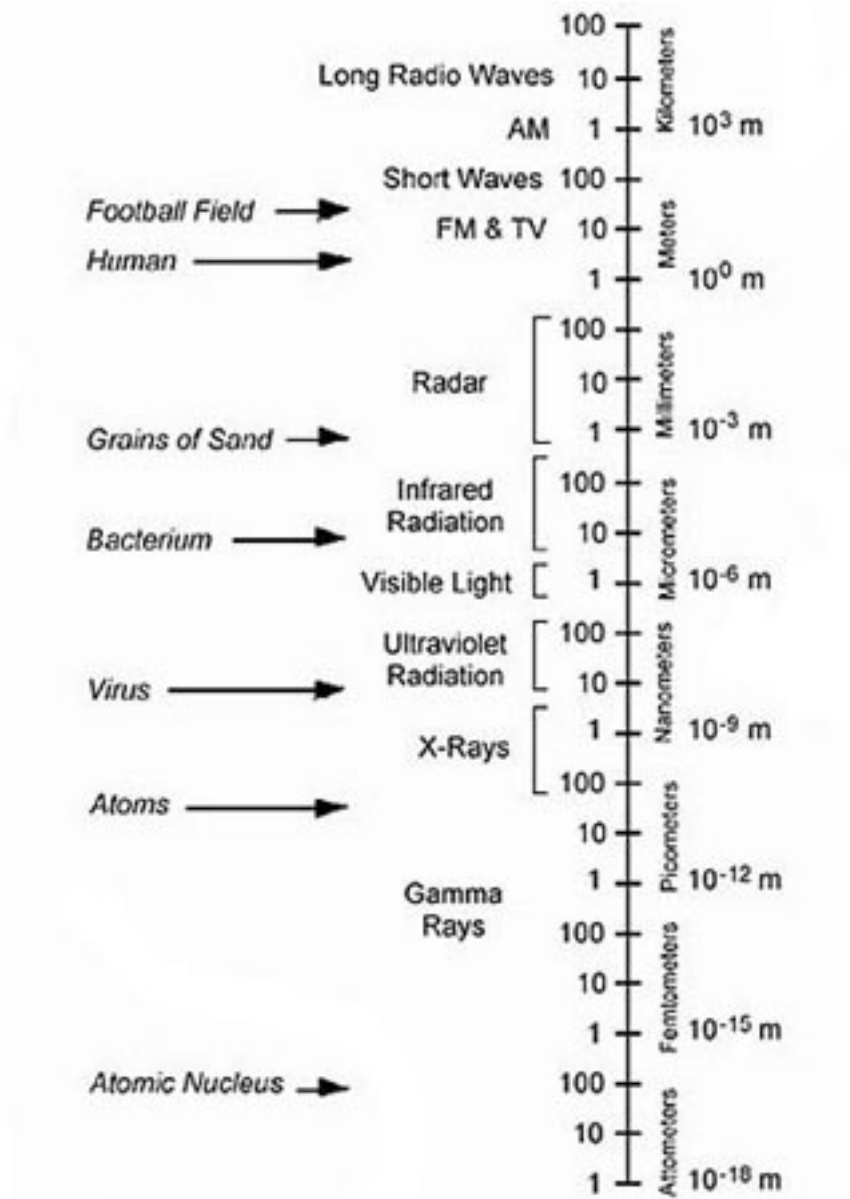
Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals, 1850*

"It is clear enough that 'this generation' tends to put natural science in the place of religion."

Topics Worth Investigating

1. What are some of the advantages of a philosophy of mechanistic materialism?⁴. What are some disadvantages?
2. What are the implications of the unification of the sciences for the possibility of a theory of ethics? Is political science reducible to psychology, psychology reducible to biology, biology reducible to biochemistry, and chemistry reducible to physics? Are all human achievements, then, ultimately just patterns of matter and motion?
3. Has life been chemically created from "non-living" molecules in the laboratory? How precise can the distinction between living things and non-living things be made? How is it made by contemporary science?
4. If science were to develop "a theory of everything," would religion still be an essential part of the human experience? First explain and then justify your position.

4. The term "dialectical materialism" was not originally used by either Marx or Engels. "Historical materialism" is essentially an economic thesis. *Ed.*



Electromagnetic Spectrum, NASA, Jet Propulsion Laboratory

Chapter 10

“A Science of Human Nature” by John Stuart Mill



John Stuart Mill, Thoemmes

About the author...

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was entirely home-schooled by his father and was subjected to a remarkable education. His autobiography is recommended reading in large part because it shows the dangers of an intensely intellectual education which neglects the emotional aspects of life. His father secured for him a position in the East India Company which provided him the opportunity for continuing the utilitarian tradition begun by Jeremy Bentham. He spent his life advancing a logical and scientific approach to social and political problems. His *Utilitarianism* is

Chapter 10. “A Science of Human Nature” by John Stuart Mill

generally considered the foundational statement on the nature of happiness for the individual and society. Partly as a result of reading Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and partly from his discussions with Harriet Taylor, Mill feared the conformist attitude of the middle working class threatened individual freedoms and authored *On Liberty* which remains a classic statement today. In his *The Subjection of Women*, Mill argues for equality of freedom of the sexes in spite of the 19th century’s widespread bias that women were of a different nature than men.

About the work...

In our selection from *A System of Logic*,¹ his first significant book, Mill argues that a science of human nature is no different from any other kind of exact science. In astronomy, the movement of the planets can be predicted with certainty because the laws of motions and the antecedent circumstances can be, he thinks, known with certainty. The rise and fall of the tides, on the other hand, can only be imprecisely known because local antecedent conditions cannot be known or measured exactly. The study of human nature is similar to tidology because of the complexity of the factors in human action. Nevertheless, Mill argues that, in principle, both tidology and human nature can become exact sciences.

From the reading...

“Any facts are fitted, in themselves, to be a subject of science, which follow one another according to constant laws; although those laws may not have been discovered, nor even be discoverable by our existing resources...”

1. John Stuart Mill. *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893. Bk. VI, Ch. IV.

Ideas of Interest from *A System of Logic*

1. According to Mill, what is the difference between astronomy and tidology? Does Mill think tidology will ever be an exact science?
2. Do you think Mill believes *any* inexact science is *only* inexact because of the complexity of causes as applied in specific instances?
3. When Mill writes, "Now if these minor causes are not so constantly accessible, or not accessible at all to accurate observation, the principal mass of the effect may still, as before, be accounted for, and even predicted. . .," is he arguing for the validity of a science based on probability theory?
4. According to Mill, what is the ideal goal of a science (*i.e.*, its perfection)?
5. Does Mill think that the study of the ideas, feelings, and acts of human beings can, in principle, achieve the exactitude of a perfect science? If so, would such a science preclude the possibility of the freedom of the will?
6. If human actions cannot be accurately predicted in specific instances because of the inexhaustible number of prior conditions, then would deterministic conditions still obviate the possibility of free choice? Explain your answer.

The Reading Selection from *A System of Logic*

[Human Nature as a Subject of Science]

It is a common notion, or at least it is implied in many common modes of speech, that the thoughts, feelings, and actions of sentient beings are not a subject of science, in the same strict sense in which this is true of the objects of outward nature. This notion seems to involve some confusion of ideas, which it is necessary to begin by clearing up.

Any facts are fitted, in themselves, to be a subject of science, which follow one another according to constant laws; although those laws may not have

been discovered, nor even be discoverable by our existing resources...

It may happen that the greater causes, those on which the principal part of the phenomena depends, are within the reach of observation and measurement; so that if no other causes intervened, a complete explanation could be given not only of the phenomenon in general, but of all the variations and modifications which it admits of. But inasmuch as other, perhaps many other causes, separately insignificant in their effects, co-operate or conflict in many or in all cases with those greater causes, the effect, accordingly, presents more or less of aberration from what would be produced by the greater causes alone. Now if these minor causes are not so constantly accessible, or not accessible at all to accurate observation, the principal mass of the effect may still, as before, be accounted for, and even predicted; but there will be variations and modifications which we shall not be competent to explain thoroughly, and our predictions will not be fulfilled accurately, but only approximately.

[The Theory of the Tides]

It is thus with the theory of the tides...

[The] circumstances of a local or causal nature, such as the configuration of the bottom of the ocean, the degree of confinement from shores, the direction of the wind, &c., influence in many or in all places the height and time of the tide; and a portion of these circumstances being either not accurately knowable, not precisely measurable, or not capable of being certainly foreseen, the tide in known places commonly varies from the calculated result of general principles by some difference that we cannot explain, and in unknown ones may vary from it by a difference that we are not able to foresee or conjecture...

Astronomy was once a science, without being an exact science. It could not become exact until not only the general course of the planetary motions, but the perturbations also, were accounted for, and referred to their causes. It has become an exact science, because its phenomena have been brought under laws comprehending the whole of the causes by which the phenomena are influenced...



The Asteroid Ida, NASA

Tidology, therefore, is not yet an exact science; not from any inherent incapacity of being so, but from the difficulty of ascertaining with complete precision the real derivative uniformities...

[Aspects of a Science of Human Nature]

The science of human nature is of this description. It falls far short of the standard of exactness now realized in Astronomy; but there is no reason that it should not be as much a science of Tidology is, or as Astronomy was when its calculations had only mastered the main phenomena, but not the perturbations.

The phenomena with which this science is conversant being the thoughts, feelings, and actions of human beings, it would have attained the ideal perfection of a science if it enabled us to foretell how an individual would think, feel, or act through life, with the same certainty with which astronomy enables us to predict the places and the occultations of the heavenly bodies. It needs scarcely be stated that nothing approaching to this can be done. The actions of individuals could not be predicted with scientific accuracy, were it only because we cannot foresee the whole of the circum-

stances in which those individuals will be placed. But further, even in any given combination of (preset) circumstances, no assertion, which is both precise and universally true, can be made respecting the manner in which human beings will think, feel, or act. This is not, however, because every person’s modes of thinking, feeling, and acting do not depend on causes; nor can we doubt that if, in the case of any individual, our data could be complete, we even now know enough of the ultimate laws by which mental phenomena are determined to enable us in many cases to predict, with tolerable certainty, what, in the greater number of supposable combinations of circumstances his conduct or sentiments would be. But the impressions and actions of human beings are not solely the result of their present circumstances, but the joint result of those circumstances and of the characters of the individuals; and the agencies which determine human character are so numerous and diversified, (nothing which has happened to the person throughout life being without its portion of influence,) that in the aggregate they are never in any two cases exactly similar. Hence, even if our science of human nature were theoretically perfect, that is if we could calculate any character as we can calculate the orbit of any planet, *from given data*; still, as the data are never all given, nor ever precisely alike in different cases, we could neither make positive predictions, nor lay down universal propositions.

From the reading...

“... we even now know enough of the ultimate laws by which mental phenomena are determined to enable us in many cases to predict, with tolerable certainty...”

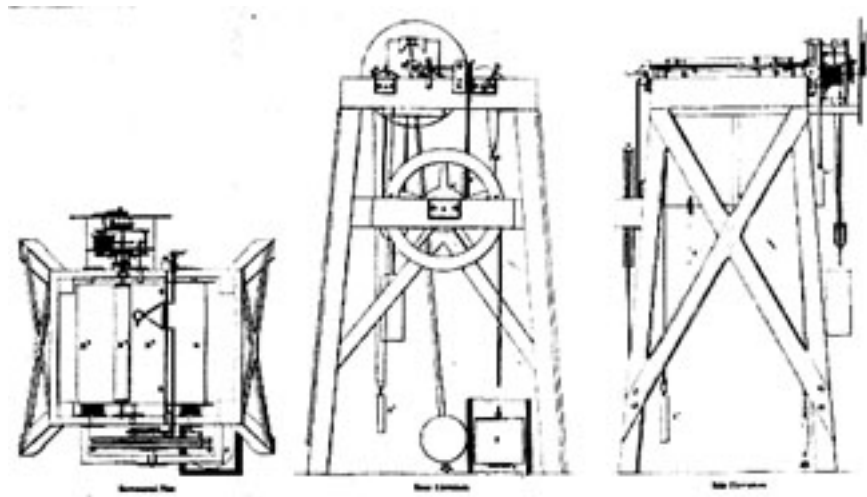
Inasmuch, however, as many of those effects which it is of most importance to render amenable to human foresight and control are determined like the tides, in an incomparably greater degree by general causes... it is evidently possible, with regard to all such effects, to make predictions which will *almost* always be verified, and general proposition which are almost always true. And whenever it is sufficient to know how the great majority of the human race, or of some nation or class of persons, will think, act, feel, and act, these propositions are equivalent to universal ones. For the purposes of political and social science this *is* sufficient. [A]n approximate generalisation is, in social inquiries, for most practical purposes

Chapter 10. "A Science of Human Nature" by John Stuart Mill

equivalent to an exact one; that which is only probable when asserted of individual human beings indiscriminately selected, being certain when affirmed of the character and collective conduct of masses. . . .

[The Science of Human Nature]

The science of Human Nature may be said to exist in proportion as the approximate truths which compose a practical knowledge of mankind can be exhibited as corollaries from the universal laws of human nature on which they rest, whereby the proper limits of those approximate truths would be shown, and we should be enabled to deduce others for any new state of circumstances, in anticipation of specific experience.



Saxon Self-Registering Tide Gauge (horizontal, rear, and side elevation views), NOAA, Historic C&GS Collection

Related Ideas

John Stuart Mill Links (<http://www.jsmill.com/>). *J. S. Mill*. Extensive links to online versions of Mill's writings, articles, and letters.

Chapter 10. “A Science of Human Nature” by John Stuart Mill

Mill, John Stuart (<http://1911encyclopedia.org/M/index.htm>). *The 1911 Edition Encyclopædia*. The “John Stuart Mill” entry in the classic 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

John Stuart Mill (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mill/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A thoroughly reliable guide to Mill’s works by Fred Wilson.

From the reading...

“Even if our science of human nature were theoretically perfect, . . . we could neither make positive predictions, nor lay down universal propositions.”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. If psychology were to be an exact, or to use Mill’s phrase, “ a perfect” science, then specific human acts could be accurately predicted. Would a prediction be accurate if the person about to act becomes aware of the prediction prior to the act itself? Does the fact that a prediction can be known in advance disprove the possibility of predicting accurately or is that fact just one more antecedent condition? Thoroughly explain your view.
2. Is it merely a coincidence that Mill’s phrase, repeated several times in this chapter, concerning the aspects of the science of human nature as applying to “the thoughts, feelings, and actions” correspond to three of the four psychological types analyzed by C. G. Jung: the thinking, feeling, and sensation types (the fourth, the intuitive type, is omitted)? See his Theory of Types (<http://www.psychclassics.yorku.ca/>).
3. Do you think that a probabilistic science such as meteorology would qualify on Mill’s outlook as an exact science? See his thoughts on this question in his *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Book. VI, Chapter IV.

Chapter 11

“Statistics as Applied to Human Action” by John Venn



John Venn, adapted from H. D. Francis

About the author...

John Venn (1834-1923) studied mathematics at Cambridge. He became a lecturer in moral sciences— teaching logic and probability theory and published three influential texts improving and extending the logic of George Boole. Venn is best known for his development of “Venn diagrams” designed to analyze the validity of logical arguments. John Maynard Keynes, the Nobel Prize winning economist, described *The Logic of Chance*, the work from which our reading is taken, as a study that is “strikingly orig-

Chapter 11. “Statistics as Applied to Human Action” by John Venn

inal and [has] considerably influenced the development of the theory of statistics.”

About the work...

In the chapter entitled, “Statistics as Applied to Human Actions,” from his *The Logic of Chance*,¹ Venn argues (against John Stuart Mill’s purported determinism of the previous reading) that the logic of human conduct differs in kind from the logic of inanimate sciences. The foreknowledge of a prediction concerning a voluntary action affects the possibility of that action occurring. By distinguishing between the speculative and practical views of statistical laws, Venn explains the “fatalistic fallacy”—the belief that the reliability and certainty of natural law is inconsistent with the existence of free will.

From the reading...

“The publication of the *Nautical Almanack* is not supposed to have the slightest effect upon the path of the planets, whereas the publication of any prediction about the conduct of human beings... almost certainly would have some effect.”

Ideas of Interest from *The Logic of Chance*

1. What are the two conditions Venn describes that prevent logic from being applied objectively to the study of human conduct?
2. Why does Venn believe that logic cannot accurately predict the individual actions of human beings?
3. Explain Venn’s theoretical objection to Mill’s supposition that the study of human conduct can be an exact science?

1. John Venn. *The Logic of Chance*. New York: MacMillan, 1876.

4. On what grounds does Venn believe the accuracy of prediction in the sciences is irrelevant to the free will-determinism problem?
5. According to Venn, how is the study of the voluntary actions affected by an observer?
6. Explain clearly the difference between the speculative and the practical view of the nature of human conduct.
7. How does the "fatalistic fallacy" turn on the ambiguity of the word "necessary"? What are the two kinds of necessity which are confused?

The Reading Selection from *The Logic of Chance*

[The Application of Logic to Human Conduct]

It is now time to enter into a short enquiry as to how far it is right thus to put these various human actions, especially those of the more exclusively voluntary description, upon the same footing as the results of the seasons or the turning up of the faces of a die, and to subject them all alike to the same rules... whether the general principles of what we have termed Phenomenalist or Material Logic are as applicable to the facts of society as they are generally admitted to be to those of inanimate nature...

It has been already repeatedly stated that the standing-point occupied by the observer who is supposed to make the inferences we have been considering, is that in which he looks out on to things which are happening about him. He is supposed to observe coexistences and sequences of things around him, which he then proceeds to analyse and classify, and from which he draws what inferences he can. To retain such a standing-point consistently two conditions, amongst others, seem to be presupposed. These are (1) That the observer should leave the things which he is engaged in observing to work out their courses undisturbed by any interference on his own part. (2) That he should adhere consistently to the position of an observer, and not in imagination step down and take a place amongst the things which he observes. In the attempt to construct the Logic of Society, or Sociology as it is often termed, both of the above conditions seem to be often neglected. The neglect of the former is, I think, an

Chapter 11. "Statistics as Applied to Human Action" by John Venn

inherent imperfection in any such science of human conduct; that of the latter is rather a fallacy into which loose thinkers are apt to fall. We will examine these conditions in turn.



Maria Mitchell, Astronomer and Computer for National Almanac, adapted from H. Dassel, 1851, NOAA

To say that the objects of any kind whose behaviour we are considering are to be left free from any interference on our own part, is to make a claim which is so obviously demanded, that the caution may seem unnecessary. An it certainly is not needed in the case of most inferences about inanimate objects. Any person can see that to draw inferences about a thing, and then to introduce a disturbance into its conduct which was not contemplated when the inference was drawn, is to invalidate the results we have obtained. But when the inference is about the conduct of human beings it is often forgotten that in the inference itself, if published, we may have produced an unsuspected source of disturbance. In other words, if the

results of our investigations be given in the form of statements as to what people are doing and what they will do, the moment these statements come before their notice the agents will be subject to a new motive which will produce a disturbance in the conduct which had been inferred. We may make what statements and criticisms we please about the *past* conduct of men, but directly we commit ourselves to any statements about the future, or, in other words, begin to make predictions, we lay ourselves open to the difficulty just mentioned. That predictions can be made seems to be held by most of those who have adopted the application of logic now under consideration. They do not, of course, claim to be able to foretell the particular actions of individuals, but they constantly assert that it is quite possible that we may some day be able to foretell general tendencies, and the results of the conduct of large masses of men.

From the reading...

“With every wish to be nothing more than simple observers, we cannot always secure our isolation when we are describing the conduct of intelligent human beings, for we cannot always prevent them from being influenced by what we say...”

[Critique of Mill’s Science of Human Nature]

The following extracts from Mill’s *Logic*, Bk. VI. ch. iii §2, will contain the best compendious description of these claims of Sociology. After referring to the condition in which astronomy once was, and in which the science of the tides now is, he describes in the following words the practical aims of sociology, and the ideal perfection of the science from which we are precluded only by the imperfection of our faculties:—“The science of human nature is of this description. It falls far short of the standard of exactness now realized in Astronomy; but there is no reason that it should not be as much a science as Tidology is, or as Astronomy was when its calculations had only mastered the main phenomena, but not the perturbations.”

“The phenomena with which this science is conversant being the thoughts, feelings, and actions of human beings, it would have attained the ideal

perfection of a science if it enabled us to foretell how an individual would think, feel, or act, throughout life, with the same certainty with which astronomy enables us to predict the places and the occultations of the heavenly bodies."

It will hardly be denied that there is the following distinct theoretical objection to the above illustration. The publication of the Nautical Almanack is not supposed to have the slightest effect upon the path of the planets, whereas the publication of any prediction about the conduct of human beings (unless it were kept out of their sight, or expressed in unintelligible language) almost certainly would have some effect. The existence of this distinction renders all such physical illustrations entirely inapplicable when we thus attempt to explain the way in which it is supposed that human conduct can be studied and foretold...

[Exact Prediction Is Compatible with Free Will]

It should be clearly understood that we need not be under any apprehension of getting involved in any Fate and Free-will controversy here; the difficulty before us does not arise out of the *foreknowledge*, but out of the *foretelling*, of what the agents are going to do. Assuming that the abstract possibility of foreseeing human conduct, alluded to in the extract above quoted, is quite compatible with our practical consciousness of freedom, it must be maintained that a difficulty of an entirely distinct character introduced the moment we suppose that this conduct is foretold, or rather, if one may use the term, *forepublished*. After all the causes have been estimated which can affect the agent, with the single exception of the sociological publication which describes his conduct, we shall very possibly find that the result is subsequently falsified by the disturbing agency of this publication itself.

This disturbance, observe, is not of the nature of a mere complication of the result; it takes the form of introducing a distinct contradiction. Some particular action was going to be done, and was therefore announced; in consequence of the announcement that the action is not done, but something else is done instead. but had this further consequence been foreseen (as we must, on our present assumption, suppose might have been the case) and allowed for, we still shall not find any escape from the difficulty. Were this all we had to take into account we should have nothing further to apprehend than a complication; but beyond all this there is the conflict

between the final announcement and the conduct announced, which cannot be avoided. It must be repeated again, that it is not foreknowledge, but foretelling, that creates the difficulty; the observer, after he has made his announcement, or whilst he is making it, may be perfectly aware of the effect it will produce, and may even privately communicate the result to others, but once let him make it so public that it reaches the ears of those to whom it refers, and his work is undone. His position, in fact is somewhat like that attributed to Jonah at Nineveh. Giving the prophet the fullest recognition of his power of foreseeing things as they would actually happen, we must yet admit that he labours under an inherent incapacity of publicly announcing them in that form. The city was going to be destroyed; Jonah announces this; in consequence the people repent and are spared. But had he foretold their repentance and escape, the repentance might never have taken place. He might, of course, make a hypothetical statement, so as to provide for either alternative, but a categorical statement is always in danger of causing its own falsification...



Jonah Preaching at Nineveh, George A. Peltz, Grandpa Stories, 1885.

[An Independent Observer Can Be Practically Impossible]

The remarks in the last few sections are intended to point out that that purely speculative and isolated position of the observer, which alone is tenable when we are laying down rules for a science of inference, is one

which it is in certain cases practically impossible to maintain. With every wish to be nothing more than simple observers, we cannot always secure our isolation when we are describing the conduct of intelligent human beings, for we cannot always prevent them from being influenced by what we say...

The statistics with which we are concerned in Probability are composed, as already stated, in great part of the voluntary actions of men...

We are the observers, or any one else whom we suppose to occupy the position of observer, are ourselves beings like those whose conduct we tabulate and reason about, and the actions in question are such as we are or may be in the habit or performing ourselves. hence it results that we are conceivably, if one may so say, a portion of our own statistics; we may suppose our own case to be included in the statistics under discussion...²

To retain the correct view with rigid consistency it would indeed be necessary to exclude ourselves entirely from the statistics, in other words, to confine ourselves consistently to the observer’s point of view, as we unavoidably do in the case of games of chance. We might help to compose the statistics of others, just as others compose the statistics for us, but we must not attempt to occupy both positions, those of observer and observed, simultaneously.

[General Laws Are Not Deterministic]

A quotation from Buckle’s³ *History of Civilization* (Vol. I. p. 25) will form a convenient introduction to the discussion now to be entered upon. After pointing out that among public and registered crimes there is none which seems so completely dependent on the individual, and so little liable to interruption as suicide, he proceeds as follows:—“These being the peculiarities of this singular crime, it is surely an astonishing fact, that all the

2. Note the infinite regress resulting from including our own actions as observer as part of the data-set. Our own reaction to the inclusion must itself be included and so on *ad infinitum*. *Ed.*

3. Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* (1857-61) was an attempt to found history as a science based on general laws presumably inferred from statistical determination in accordance with by Auguste Comte’s *philosophie positive*. In spite of some questionable assumptions, his attempt to place history on a historical basis is undervalued. *Ed.*

evidence we possess respecting it points to one great conclusion, and can leave no doubt on our minds that suicide is merely the product of the general condition of society, and that the individual felon only carries into effect what is a necessary consequence of preceding circumstances. In a given state of society a certain number of persons must put an end to their own life.⁴ This is the general law, and the special question as to who shall commit the crime depends of course upon special laws; which however, in their total action, must obey the large social law to which they are all subordinate. And the power of the larger law is so irresistible, that neither the love of life nor the fear of another world can avail anything towards even checking its operation."

From the reading...

"[The] purely speculative and isolated position of the observer, which alone is tenable when we are laying down rules for a science of inference, is one which it is in certain cases practically impossible to maintain."

The above passage as it stands seems very absurd, and would I think, taken by itself, convey an extremely unfair opinion of its author's ability. But the views which it expresses are very prevalent, and are probably increasing with the spread of statistical information and study. They have moreover a still wider extension in the form of a vague sentiment than in that of a distinct doctrine...

One portion of the quotation is plain enough. It simply asserts a statistical fact of the kind already familiar to us, namely, that about 250 persons annually commit suicide in London. This is all that the statistics themselves establish. But, secondly this datum of experience is extended by Induction. The inference is drawn that about the same number of persons will continue for the future to commit suicide. Now this, though not lying within the strict ground of the science of Probability, is nevertheless a perfectly legitimate employment of Induction. The conclusion may or may not be correct as a matter of fact, but there can be no question that we are at liberty to extend our inferences beyond the strict ground of experience, and that the rules of inductive philosophy will furnish us with many directions

4. About 250 annually in London.

for that purpose. We had admit therefore that, for some time to come, the annual number of suicides will in all likelihood continue to be about 250.

From the reading...

"To say this is to fall into a fatalistic fallacy, for it generally involves a confusion between certainty of inference on our own part and compulsion of the part of the agents."

[The Fatalistic Fallacy]

But it will not take much trouble to show that there is a serious fallacy involved in most cases in the expression of such sentiments as those quoted. I am anxious that it should be clearly understood that this fallacy finds no countenance in either of the two assumptions which are necessary for the establishment respectively of the rules of Probability and Induction, in those, namely, of statistical uniformity, and invariability of antecedence and sequence. In other words, the inference in the quotation would remain either unmeaning or false, in spite of our admitting that the number of persons who perform any assigned kind of action remains year by year about the same, and that the actions of each person are links in an invariable sequence.⁵...

When the efforts of a few persons are contemplated, the hypothesis of their acting otherwise is admitted, but the consequent effect is pronounced to be insignificant, as might very like be the case. When however the efforts of many are contemplated, the hypothesis of their acting otherwise and the consequent effect, which would then be great, are not admitted, on the plea that they are inconsistent with fact.

Such a confusion as that discussed above may seem absurd, but I cannot help thinking that in this way considerable support is often given to that

5. It may prevent confusion if I remark here that my own opinion is in favour of Necessity, provided that nothing more is assumed in the meaning of that term than that where the antecedents are the same so will be the consequents... such a doctrine is necessary for the establishment of strict rules of Induction, though not for securing those of Probability.

practical fatalism which expresses itself in the common complaints about the utter impotence of the individual, and the irresistible power of great social laws, and which shows itself in our conduct by a somewhat indolent and selfish disposition to let everything good or evil take its own course without troubling ourselves about it...

Such fatalistic views are often expressed in the form of disparaging comments upon the insignificance of individual efforts. In the sense in which this complaint is often made, I cannot but think that it is nothing more than an expression of our own indolence or selfishness, and really means, not that the results we could effect are small, but that we care little about them...

We will assume that there is a long-continued uniformity in the frequency of the performance of some action, against which, it may be, large classes of persons are struggling with their whole strength. What we are now concerned with is the vital importance of the distinction between what may be called the speculative and the practical views which we may take in reference to any such uniformity.

What we have to adhere to, in making inferences, is the speculative view. On this view we have no right, when talking about the future to use any other expressions than those which denote simple futurity. To say that the agents "must" perform certain actions, or "cannot" perform others, is inadmissible. To say this is to fall into a fatalistic⁶ fallacy, for it generally involves a confusion between certainty of inference on our own part and compulsion on the part of the agents...

I cannot help thinking that much support is thus given to the doctrine which one hears uttered in so many different forms, and in every shade of dogmatism, by a certain school of writers, that the sorrows and the crimes of our fellow-men are only the necessary product of the existing state of society, and that the efforts of the individual are insignificant. There are many perhaps who would indolently tell some hard-working philanthropist that he could do nothing, who would yet be very much astonished if asked whether the trouble of their own doctor in coming to

6. By Fatalism I understand the doctrine that events really dependent in part upon human agency, will yet be equally brought to pass whether men try to oppose or to forward them. It is essentially distinct from Necessity, and is indeed rather entertained as a vague sentiment than as a definite doctrine. It is indeed difficult to state it with brevity without making it obviously involve a contradiction.

Chapter 11. "Statistics as Applied to Human Action" by John Venn

see them when they are suffering from any ailment produced insignificant results.

But the confusion between the speculative and the practical points of view produces, I think, still further consequences, quite as deplorable as those already described...

[T]he complaint is often made, and I think not altogether unjustly, that the advocates of Sociology are too much in the habit of regarding crimes as being not only certain to happen, but as being morally indifferent. In so far as this complaint is true, I should think that such an apparent moral obtuseness of judgment (I shall not be misunderstood as hinting that this is accompanied by moral laxity in practice) is connected with that confusion between two distinct views which has occupied our attention during this chapter. The connection would be as follows. The speculative view is in one sense wider than the practical, for the former includes not only voluntary actions (the province of the practical view), but also actions which are not voluntary, as well as results which are not strictly speaking actions at all, such as the facts turned up by dice. In the great majority of subjects to which this view introduces us, moral praise and blame have no applicability. When therefore the two views are confused together, we are sometimes apt, not merely to hamper our practice by fatalism, but even to run the risk of debasing our moral judgment by regarding the actions of men with the indifference with which we regard the happening of things. It might thus result, for example, that we should not merely believe that the number of murders or suicides are so fixed that efforts are unavailing to counteract them, but even that we should feel little more affected at the commission of crimes than at the successions of the throws of a die.

Against every such confusion between the two views there is no safeguard comparable with that afforded by the habit of familiarizing ourselves with each of them. In other words, it might be advisable to temper one's speculations with a reasonable infusion of practice. Fatalism cannot easily exit in the fresh air of practical life. The hardest workers are generally the most hopeful men, and in unselfish efforts will be found the best corrective to that depression which is apt to be produced by a too exclusive devotion to the speculative view. We should thus avoid the danger of always discussing the joys and the sorrows of our fellow-men in way which, though legitimate when we are avowedly taking a partial view of the subject, too easily lapses in to indifference or cynicism if we suffer ourselves to forget how partial that view is.

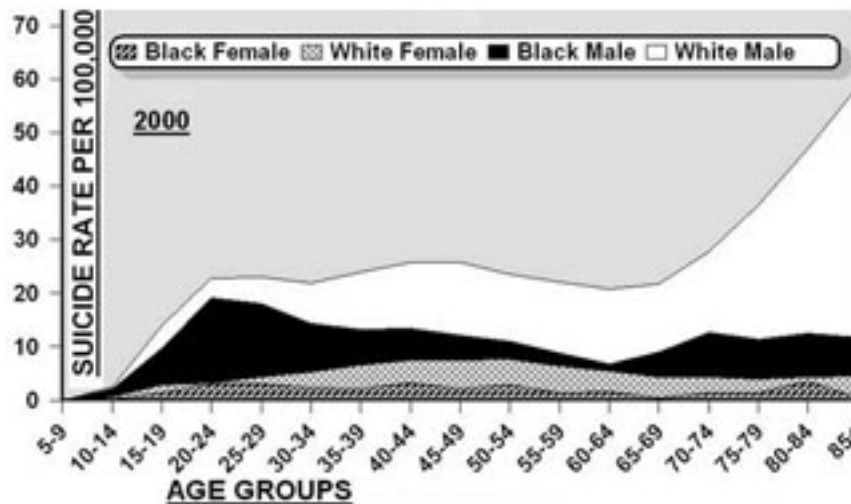
Related Ideas

Logic of Chance (<http://gdz.sub.uni-goettingen.de/search-entry.shtml>).
Göttinger Digitalisierungs Zentrum. John Venn's classic 1876 text online.

A Survey of Venn Diagrams (<http://www.combinatorics.org/>). *The Electronic Journal of Combinatorics*. Comprehensive selection of uses and types of Venn diagrams from Frank Ruskey, Department of Computer Science, University of Victoria.

The Ecological Fallacy (<http://www.stat.berkeley.edu/~census/ecofall.txt>).
Pre-print for Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods. A re-statement of Venn's "fatalistic fallacy." Many recent publications in sociology and statistical inference, unfortunately, have overlooked Venn for the first clearest statement of this fallacy although it is an essential contemporary problem in working with aggregate, or group-level, data.

The Ecological Fallacy (<http://jratcliffe.net/research/ecolfallacy.htm>).
Short definitional entry and illustration of the fallacy.



U. S. Suicide Rates by Age, Gender, and Racial Group, NIMH, 2003

From the reading...

"Fatalism cannot easily exit in the fresh air of practical life."

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Does the adoption of a thinking, speculative view of human conduct affect one's outlook on life as Venn suggests. Would Venn agree, in this regard, with the aphorism, "Ignorance is bliss"?
2. Explain how Venn argues against sociology's value-neutrality. Is his argument successful?
3. When Venn objects to the dogmatism expressed in the belief "that the sorrows and the crimes of our fellow-men are only the necessary product of the existing state of society, and that the efforts of the individual are insignificant," what are the philosophical presuppositions of the doctrine he is refuting?
4. Carefully clarify the differences between the doctrine of fatalism, the doctrine of necessity, and the doctrine of determinism. Show which view admits of the most ambiguity.
5. The "ecological fallacy" and its more specific relatives, the "modifiable area unit problem" and the economist's "aggregation bias" are more recent variants of Venn's "fatalistic fallacy." Can these fallacies be classified as types of the more general fallacy of composition? Can the distinction between ethics and social science be based on the presuppositions of this fallacy? Are these "fallacies" related to the problems of emergent levels and reductionism?

Chapter 12

“Human Beings are Determined” by Baruch Spinoza



Spinoza, Thoemmes

About the author...

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was born in Amsterdam to parents who had fled from the Spanish Inquisition and sought refuge in the Netherlands. His study of Descartes and Hobbes led his philosophical views away from orthodox Jewish philosophy; subsequently, he was excommunicated from the Jewish community. In the years thereafter, he skillfully crafted optical lenses for a living while dedicating his life to render clearly his philosophy by the geometrical method of proof. Unfortunately, his strict deductive

Chapter 12. “Human Beings are Determined” by Baruch Spinoza

writing style, although perhaps the clearest method of logical exposition at the time, remains to us somewhat stiff and formal. When Spinoza was offered a teaching position at Heidelberg, he wrote, “I do not know how to teach philosophy without becoming a disturber of the peace.” Spinoza is best read only one sentence at a time; otherwise, the depth of this thought can easily be overlooked. Somewhat dismissively, Novalis once characterized Spinoza as “a God-intoxicated man.”

About the work...

Sometime after his sentence of excommunication Spinoza began working of the ideas which would eventually be published as *The Ethics*,¹ a book published posthumously from the fear of persecution from the charge of the blasphemy of pantheism.² Pantheism should be distinguished from “pantheism” which is the view that gods are *in* all things. Spinoza believed, much as Socrates believed, the excellent life is the life of reason in the service of one’s own being. The soul seeks knowledge as a good; indeed, the soul’s highest good is knowledge of God. Spinoza argues that the mind and the body are, in reality, only one thing but can be thought of in two different ways. The person who understands how the soul is part of the system of nature also understands, at the same time, how the soul is part of God. In sum, Spinoza’s monism³ is the deductive exposition of existence as the complete unity of God and nature. According to this view, human beings have no free will, and the world cannot be evil.

1. Baruch Spinoza. *The Ethics: Demonstrated in Geometric Order*. Translated by R.H.M. Elwes. 1883. Part III: On the Origin and the Nature of the Emotions—Note to Proposition 2.

2. Pantheism is the doctrine that God is identical with all existing things. Often the view derives from spiritual motives, but a monist could be a strict materialist or a strict idealist.

3. Monism is the doctrine that reality can only be the modifications deriving from one kind of subsistent entity. For Spinoza, everything that exists is both God and the system of nature, and the implicit pantheism (and the consequent threat of blasphemy) of this view provide one reason why his works were published posthumously.

From the reading...

“Thus, when men say that this or that physical action has its origin in the mind... they are using words without meaning...”

Ideas of Interest from *The Ethics*

1. Explain as clearly as possible Spinoza’s two objections to the belief that human behavior is the result of the free will of the mind.
2. What counter-objection does Spinoza raise against his view that mental and physical states are merely coincidental, and the mind does not in fact control the body or control the physical world?
3. How does Spinoza define “decision” from the standpoint of thought, and how does he define it from the standpoint of extension?⁴
4. According to Spinoza, why do many persons believe human beings have free will? How can we become conscious or discover the causes of our decisions and the unconscious “appetites” upon which they depend?

The Reading Selection from *The Ethics*

[The Unknown Causes of Human Action]

I can scarcely believe, until the fact is proved by experience, that men can be induced to consider the question calmly and fairly, so firmly are they convinced that it is merely at the bidding of the mind, that the body is set in motion or at rest, or performs a variety of actions depending solely on the mind’s will or the exercise of thought. However, no one has hitherto laid

4. “Extension” can be thought of as the essence of matter. The most important quality of bodies or physical or material substances are that they are extended, *i.e.*, materially or physically existent things take up space. Height, width, and depth are essential to physical existence.

down the limits to the powers of the body, that is, no one has as yet been taught by experience what the body can accomplish solely by the laws of nature, in so far as she is regarded as extension. No one hitherto has gained such an accurate knowledge of the bodily mechanism, that he can explain all its functions; nor need I call attention to the fact that many actions are observed in the lower animals, which far transcend human sagacity, and that somnambulists do many things in their sleep, which they would not venture to do when awake: these instances are enough to show, that the body can by the sole laws of its nature do many things which the mind wonders at.

[Meaninglessness of the Mind's Control of Body]

Again, no one knows how or by what means the mind moves the body, nor how many various degrees of motion it can impart to the body, nor how quickly it can move it. Thus, when men say that this or that physical action has its origin in the mind, which latter has dominion over the body, they are using words without meaning, or are confessing in specious phraseology that they are ignorant of the cause of the said action, and do not wonder at it.

[Similar States of Mind and Body]

But, they will say, whether we know or do not know the means whereby the mind acts on the body, we have, at any rate, experience of the fact that unless the human mind is in a fit state to think, the body remains inert. Moreover, we have experience, that the mind alone can determine whether we speak or are silent, and a variety of similar states which, accordingly, we say depend on the mind's decree. But, as to the first point, I ask such objectors, whether experience does not also teach, that if the body be inactive the mind is simultaneously unfitted for thinking? For when the body is at rest in sleep, the mind simultaneously is in a state of torpor also, and has no power of thinking, such as it possesses when the body is awake. Again, I think everyone's experience will confirm the statement, that the mind is not at all times equally fit for thinking on a given subject, but according as the body is more or less fitted for being stimulated by the image of this or that object, so also is the mind more or less fitted for contemplating the said object.

[Infinite Complexity of Nature]

But, it will be urged, it is impossible that solely from the laws of nature considered as extended substance, we should be able to deduce the causes of buildings, pictures, and things of that kind, which are produced only by human art; nor would the human body, unless it were determined and led by the mind, be capable of building a single temple. However, I have just pointed out that the objectors cannot fix the limits of the body's power, or say what can be concluded from a consideration of its sole nature, whereas they have experience of many things being accomplished solely by the laws of nature, which they would never have believed possible except under the direction of mind: such are the actions performed by somnambulists while asleep, and wondered at by their performers when awake. I would further call attention to the mechanism of the human body, which far surpasses in complexity all that has been put together by human art, not to repeat what I have already shown, namely, that from nature, under whatever attribute she be considered, infinite results follow.

[The Illusory Nature of Free Decisions]

As for the second objection, I submit that the world would be much happier, if men were as fully able to keep silence as they are to speak. Experience abundantly shows that men can govern anything more easily than their tongues, and restrain anything more easily than their appetites; when it comes about that many believe, that we are only free in respect to objects which we moderately desire, because our desire for such can easily be controlled by the thought of something else frequently remembered, but that we are by no means free in respect to what we seek with violent emotion, for our desire cannot then be allayed with the remembrance of anything else. However, unless such persons had proved by experience that we do many things which we afterwards repent of, and again that we often, when assailed by contrary emotions, see the better and follow the worse, there would be nothing to prevent their believing that we are free in all things. Thus an infant believes that of its own free will it desires milk, an angry child believes that it freely desires to run away; further, a drunken man believes that he utters from the free decision of his mind words which, when he is sober, he would willingly have withheld: thus, too, a delirious man, a garrulous woman, a child, and others of like complexion, believe that they speak from the free decision of their mind, when they are in reality unable

to restrain their impulse to talk.

From the reading...

“... these decisions of the mind arise in the mind by the same necessity, as the ideas of things actually existing.”

[Decision Defined]

Experience teaches us no less clearly than reason, that men believe themselves to be free, simply because they are conscious of their actions, and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined; and, further, it is plain that the dictates of the mind are but another name for the appetites, and therefore vary according to the varying state of the body. Everyone shapes his actions according to his emotion, those who are assailed by conflicting emotions know not what they wish; those who are not attacked by any emotion are readily swayed this way or that. All these considerations clearly show that a mental decision and a bodily appetite, or determined state, are simultaneous, or rather are one and the same thing, which we call decision, when it is regarded under and explained through the attribute of thought, and a conditioned state, when it is regarded under the attribute of extension, and deduced from the laws of motion and rest. . .

[Nature of Human Action]

For the present I wish to call attention to another point, namely, that we cannot act by the decision of the mind, unless we have a remembrance of having done so. For instance, we cannot say a word without remembering that we have done so. Again, it is not within the free power of the mind to remember or forget a thing at will. Therefore the freedom of the mind must in any case be limited to the power of uttering or not uttering something which it remembers. But when we that we speak, we believe that we speak from a free decision of the mind, yet we do not speak, or, if we do, it is by a spontaneous motion of the body. Again, we dream that we are concealing something, and we seem to act from the same decision of the mind as that, whereby we keep silence when awake concerning something

we know. Lastly, we dream that from the free decision of our mind we do something, which we should not dare to do when awake.

[The Idea of Free Will]

Now I should like to know whether there be in the mind two sorts of decisions, one sort illusive, and the other sort free? If our folly does not carry us so far as this, we must necessarily admit, that the decision of the mind, which is believed to be free, is not distinguishable from the imagination or memory, and is nothing more than the affirmation, which an idea, by virtue of being an idea, necessarily involves... Wherefore these decisions of the mind arise in the mind by the same necessity, as the ideas of things actually existing. Therefore those who believe, that they speak or keep silence or act in any way from the free decision of their mind, do but dream with their eyes open.

From the *The Ethics*, IV, 50...

"The man who has properly understood that everything follows from the necessity of the divine nature, and comes to a pass accordingly to the eternal laws and rules of nature, will in truth, discover nothing which is worthy of hatred, laughter, or contempt, nor will he pity any one, but, so far as human virtue is able, he will endeavor to *do well*, as we say, and to *rejoice*."

Related Ideas

Interview with Antonio Damasio
(<http://www.harcourtbooks.com/authorinterviews/>)

Harcourt Trade Publishers A brief discussion of Spinoza's anticipation of the possibility of a neurobiological foundations to ethics.

Spinoza Net (<http://www.spinoza.net>) *New World Sciences Corp.* Events, articles, works, bibliographies, and newsletters of interest to student and scholar alike.

Chapter 12. “Human Beings are Determined” by Baruch Spinoza

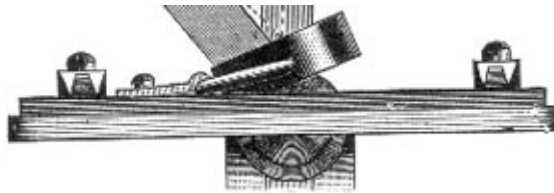
Antonio Damasio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. Harcourt, 2003. A fascinating investigation, based on neurobiology of the differences between bodily emotion and mental feeling and, more important, how this relation elucidates the connection between unconscious and conscious thought.

Roger Scruton. *Spinoza: The Great Philosophers*. Routledge, 1999. A short, but engaging, introduction to Spinoza’s thought.

Everlasting Joy of Happiness or the Live and Adventures of Spinoza. Directed by Igal Barsztan. Israel, 1996. An award-winning imaginative and intellectual 90 minute comedy based on Spinoza searching for happiness in present-day Tel Aviv.

From the reading...

“All these considerations clearly show that a mental decision and a bodily appetite, or determined state, are simultaneous, or rather are one and the same thing. . .”



Detail of Mount of Newton’s Rings for the Microscope, from George M. Hopkins, *Experimental Science*, 1903.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare Spinoza’s discussion of dreaming with Sigmund Freud’s statement, “A dream frequently has the profoundest meaning in the very places where it seems most absurd. . .” Spinoza mentions that

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we are unconscious of the causes of our actions, and the causes are, in point of fact, our desires. Do you think that Spinoza's account of human behavior differs significantly from the account Freud advanced over two-and-a-half centuries later?

2. If the mind can influence the body and the body can influence the mind (*cf.*, the James-Lange theory), how do mind and body interact? Minds, unlike bodies, have no size, shape, or weight. How can something without any physical properties move a material thing? How does a thought of drinking a cup of coffee cause the coffee to be drunk? How does a thought fire a neural network?
3. If all things, viewed as bodies in motion, or viewed as minds in thought, are necessarily determined, as Spinoza argues, then how could anything have moral qualities, since no one could have done otherwise? Yet, Spinoza writes, "There is no rational life, therefore without intelligence, and things are good only in so far as they assist men to enjoy that life of the mind which is determined by intelligence. Those things alone, on the other hand, we call evil which hinder man from perfecting his reason and enjoying a rational life."⁵ Isn't Spinoza caught in the same paradox as the radical behaviorist, such as B.F. Skinner, who believes human behavior (as a dependent variable) is shaped by operant conditioning (stimuli or independent variables)? How, then, can one tend one's own soul, or, as the behaviorist would phrase it, how can one achieve self-directed behavior or a self-managed life-style?
4. Evaluate Immanuel Kant's criticism in his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* of Spinoza's metaphysics: "Fundamentally Spinozism could just as well be called a great fanaticism as a form of atheism. For of God, the one substance, Spinoza affirms two predicates: extension and thought. Every soul, he says, is only a modification of God's thought, and every body is a modification of his extension. Thus Spinoza assumed that everything existing could be found in God. But by making this assumption he fell into crude contradictions. For if only a single substance exists, then either I must be this substance, and consequently I must be God (but this contradicts my dependency); or else I am an accident (but this contradicts the concept of my ego, in which I think myself as an ultimate subject which is not the predicate

5. *The Ethics*, Appendix.

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of any other being).”

Chapter 13

“The Will to Believe” by William James



William James, Thoemmes

About the author...

William James (1842-1909), both a philosopher and a psychologist, was an early advocate of pragmatism: a belief is true insofar as it “works,” is useful, or satisfies a function. On this theory, truth is thought to be found in experience, not in judgments about the world. James had a most profound “arrest of life”— one quite similar to Tolstoy’s. While Tolstoy’s solution to his personal crisis was spiritual, James advocated the development of the power of the individual self. In this effort, James exerted a greater influence on twentieth century existential European thought than he did on twentieth century American philosophy.

About the work...

In his *Will to Believe and Other Essays*,¹ James argues that it is not unreasonable to believe hypotheses that cannot be known or established to be true by scientific investigation. However, when some hypotheses of ultimate concern arise, he argues by not choosing we lose any possibility for meaningful encounters because our faith pragmatically shapes future outcomes.

From the reading...

“He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as certainly as surely as if he tried and failed.”

Ideas of Interest from *The Will to Believe*

1. Carefully explain James’s genuine option theory. In his characterization of three types of options, does James commit the fallacy of false dichotomy?
2. How can one be sure an option is momentous? Is it possible some momentous options are not evident to us at the time they occur in our lives? Is it possible for us to obtain a second chance to decide a momentous option? Can you construct necessary and sufficient conditions² for an option to be a momentous one?

1. William James. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897.

2. A necessary condition is a factor in the absence of which a specific event cannot take place. A necessary condition is *indispensable* or is *essential* for some other event to occur. For example, the presence of oxygen is a necessary condition for a fire to occur. A condition *x* is necessary for condition *y*, if whenever *x* does not occur, then *y* does not occur. A sufficient condition is that factor in the presence of which an event always occurs. A sufficient condition is always *enough* for some other event to occur. For example, in the U.S., having ten dimes is sufficient for having a dollar, but having ten dimes is not necessary to have a dollar because one could also have a dollar

3. James applies his theory to morals, social relations, and religion. Are there any other dimensions of living which should be included. Why cannot the genuine option theory be applied to the scientific method? How is option theory applied to the problem of free will?
4. Is acceptance of the genuine option theory and James's thesis, itself, a momentous option in a person's life? Discuss. Would such a decision be related in any manner to the philosophy of existentialism?
5. Can you construct an example where James's thesis is false? *I.e.*, is it possible for our passional nature to decide an option which cannot be decided on intellectual grounds and have a disastrous result?
6. Can you think of two or three different kinds of examples where "faith in a fact can help create the fact"? How would this kind of faith differ from Nietzsche's notion of truth as "irrefutable error"?³

The Reading Selection from *The Will to Believe*

[Hypotheses and Options]

... Let us give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either live or dead. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: It is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means

by having four quarters. Subjunctively, a sufficient condition can be expressed in the formula, "If factor *p* should occur, then factor *q* would also occur." This subjunctive conditional statement also expresses *q* as a dispositional property of *p*.

3. See Friedrich Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil" in this section of readings.

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belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an option. Options may be of several kinds. They may be (1) living or dead, (2) forced or avoidable, (3) momentous or trivial; and for our purposes we may call an option a genuine option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.

1. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones. If I say to you, “Be a theosophist, or be a Mohammedan,” it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say, “Be an agnostic or be a Christian,” it is otherwise: Trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.

2. Next, if I say to you, “Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it,” I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, “Either love me or hate me,” “Either call my theory true or call it false,” your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, “Either accept this truth or go without it,” I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.



Fridtjof Nansen and the Fram in the North Atlantic, from Fridtjof Nansen, Farthest North, Harper & Bros., 1897—Nansen’s account of the polar expedition of 1893-1896.

3. Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only similar opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands. He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. *Per contra* the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise. Such trivial options abound in the scientific life. A chemist finds a hypothesis live enough to spend a year in its verification: He believes in it to that extent. But if his experiments prove inconclusive either way, he is quit for his loss of time, no vital harm being done.

It will facilitate our discussion if we keep all these distinctions well in mind. . .

[James’s Thesis]

The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passionate decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. . .

[Options in Science]

Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of gaining truth away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all. Law courts, indeed, have to decide on the best evidence attainable for the moment, because a judge’s duty is to make law as well as to ascertain it, and (as a learned judge once said to me) few cases are worth spending much time over: The great thing is to have them decided on any acceptable principle and gotten out of the way. But in our dealings

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with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and seldom is there any such hurry about them that the risks of being duped by believing a premature theory need be faced. The questions here are always trivial options; the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators); the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced. The attitude of skeptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes. What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Roentgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons *pro et contra* with an indifferent hand.

From the reading...

“Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual ground...”

[Discovery in Science]

I speak, of course, here of the purely judging mind. For purposes of discovery such indifference is to be less highly recommended, and science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept out of the game. . . On the other hand, if you want an absolute duffer in an investigation, you must, after all, take the man who has no interest whatever in its results: He is the warranted incapable, the positive fool. The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organized this nervousness into a regular technique, her so-called method of verification; and she has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to

care for truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form, and she would decline to touch it. Such truth as that, she might repeat with Clifford, would be stolen in defiance of her duty to mankind. Human passions, however, are stronger than technical rules. "*Le coeur a ses raisons,*" as Pascal says, "*que la raison ne connait pas:*"⁴ and however indifferent to all but the bare rules of the game the umpire, the abstract intellect, may be, the concrete players who furnish him the materials to judge of are usually, each one of them, in love with some pet "live hypothesis" of his own. Let us agree, however, that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal.

The question next arises, Are there not somewhere forced options in our speculative questions, and can we (as men who may be interested at least as much in positively gaining truth as in merely escaping dupery) always wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived? It seems *a priori* improbable that the truth should be so nicely adjusted to our needs and powers as that. In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean. Indeed, we should view them with scientific suspicion if they did.

[Moral Beliefs]

Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult, not science, but what Pascal calls our heart. Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man. Challenge the statement, and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such ascertainment and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which man's heart in turn declares. The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If

4. "The heart has its reasons that reason does not know." *Ed.*

your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. . .

[Social Relations]

Turn now from these wide questions of good to a certain class of questions of fact, questions concerning social relations, states of mind between one man and another. Do you like me or not?—for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum*, ten to one your liking never comes. How many women's hearts are vanquished by the mere sanguine insistence of some man that they must love him! He will not consent to the hypothesis that they cannot. The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.

A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come

at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. And where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the "lowest kind of immorality" into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!

In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing.

[Religious Questions]

But now, it will be said, these are all childish human cases, and have nothing to do with great cosmic matters, like the question of religious faith. Let us then pass on to that. Religions differ so much in their accidents that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad. What then do we now mean by the religious hypothesis? Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things.

First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. . .

The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.

Now, let us consider what the logical elements of this situation are in case the religious hypothesis in both its branches be really true. . . So proceeding, we see, first, that religion offers itself as a momentous option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our nonbelief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a forced option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way if religion be untrue, we lose the good, if it be true, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. . . Skepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. Better risk loss of truth than chance of error—that is your faith-vetoer's exact position. He is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field. To preach skepticism to us as a duty until "sufficient evidence" for religion be found is tantamount therefore to telling

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us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof; and I simply refuse obedience to the scientist's command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. If religion be true and the evidence for it be still insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your extinguisher upon my nature (which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter), to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side that chance depending, of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right.

All this is on the supposition that it really may be prophetic and right, and that, even to us who are discussing the matter, religion is a live hypothesis which may be true. Now, to most of us religion comes in a still further way that makes a veto on our active faith even more illogical. The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here. For instance, although in one sense we are passive portions of the universe, in another we show a curious autonomy, as if we were small, active centers on our own account. We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way. To take a trivial illustration: Just as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed in no one's word without proof would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn, so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance. This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts, including this one,

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then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity; and some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required. I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. That for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be. . .

From the reading...

“Whenever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous. . . The attitude of skeptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes.”

Related Ideas

William James (<http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/james.htm>) Information, texts, and links to a wide assortment of information about James by Frank Pajares.

William James (<http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/>) *The Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Russell Goodman’s entry summarizing James’s life and writings.

Ralph Barton Perry, *et. al.*. *The Thought and Character of William James*. Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1996. A reprint of the 1936 Pulitzer Prize winning biography.



Hollis Hall, Harvard College, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare James’s momentous option theory as applied to eternal matters with Pascal’s Wager concerning the existence of God. Notice also James quotes Pascal’s phrase, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.” How do these two accounts differ? Is James’s genuine option theory just a restatement of Pascal’s Wager? Is Pascal’s Wager just one instantiation of James’s momentous option theory?
2. How would Bertrand Russell respond to James’s conclusion: “I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.” James, unlike Russell, seems unwilling to conclude we should have a disinterested view on topics of ultimate concern. Would Russell concede that, in some matters at least, faith does not prevent the “liberating” effects of doubt? Russell writes about the values of keep-

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ing an open mind and avoiding a pragmatic dogmatism:

Bertrand Russell. *Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912. 156-7.

The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected.

3. Discuss whether James’s genuine option theory can or should be applied to the question of how I find a meaning in life. Discuss in some detail whether he agrees with Camus that I must impose a meaning on my life or whether he agrees with Tolstoy that I seek faith in order to find a meaning to my life?
4. Carefully compare the use of the *reductio ad absurdum* proofs in philosophy and science with the application of James’ genuine option theory to matters of morals, personal relations, and religion. Is his theory just that we must assume something is true in order to ascertain whether it really is so? Is the theory a “leap of faith” without any rational restrictions? On James’s view, how could one rule out any of the beliefs of religious extremists?
5. In accordance with his option theory, James wrote, “The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes.” Even so, a theory of the origin of attitudes independently discovered by William James and Carl Georg Lange, known as the James-Lange theory, is the view that attitudes result from physiological changes. In other words, it is our reaction to a stimulus, not the stimulus itself that is the cause of our emotions. Fear does not result in our running from the bear; running from the bear results in our fear. James also held that sensations, emotions, and ideas are all part of the “stream of consciousness,” whereas, formerly, ideas were presumed to be independent of emotions. Try to reconcile James’s option theory with the James-Lange theory.

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From the reading...

“... faith in a fact can help create that fact...”

Part III. Religious and Duty Ethics



Auction's End, Douglas Georgia, Library of Congress

Many persons have never looked at ethics from a philosophical point of view. Instead, they see ethical laws, commandments, and duties as a result of God's will for man. From a logical point of view, reason is placed prior to revelation. The philosopher argues that an action is not right simply because God commands it, instead God commands it because it is right.

In the readings concerning religion and duty ethics, we examine a spectrum of positions. Pascal believes the reasoning ability of human beings is too feeble to be of use for such issues of ultimate concern. We must take a "leap of faith." Ohiyesa presents a duty ethics which is of interest to us in a number of different ways. Does religion presuppose ethical absolutism? Are all cultures essentially somehow the same in fundamental values?

Kant argues for the good will as the basis of acting for the sake of duty. His categorical imperative is meant to provide a philosophic basis for a monotheistic absolutism. We conclude this part with Kierkegaard who believes religious truth as "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness" supercedes a duty

ethics. In a sense, we end this section where we began—with a “leap of faith” beyond the reasonable and experiential.

Where to go for help...

Notes, quizzes, and tests for some of the selections from this part of the readings, “Religious Ethics,” can be found at Duty Ethics (http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/duty_topics.html).

Chapter 14

“The Wager” by Blaise Pascal



Blaise Pascal Thoemmes

About the author...

Early in life Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) pursued interests in physics and mathematics. His theory of conic sections and probability theory are well known; nevertheless, his experimental methodology in physics proved just as influential, especially his research in hydrostatics. His correspondence with Fermat helped establish the foundations of probability theory; his correspondence with Leibniz helped establish the foundations of the calculus. As a result of a harrowing accident, Pascal turned his attention to religion and religious philosophy in the latter part of his life. It seems he was driving a four-in-hand when the two leader horses leaped over the parapet of Neuilly bridge. Pascal's life was saved when the traces broke;

Chapter 14. “The Wager” by Blaise Pascal

he took the accident as a sign to abandon his experimental life and turn to God. The remainder of his life, he carried a piece of parchment describing this incident next to his heart. Fortunately, for mathematics, however, he sinned from time to time, especially, when a few years later, he completed his essay on the cycloid.

About the work...

Pascal’s *Pensées* reveals a skepticism with respect to natural theology. Pascal pointed out that the most important things in life cannot be known with certainty; even so we must make choices. His deep mysticism and religious commitment is reflective of Christian existentialism, and Pascal’s devotional writing is often compared to Kierkegaard’s. The *Pensées*¹ remained fragmented devotional pieces until definitively edited and organized fifty years ago.

From the reading...

“Yes but you must wager. It is not optional.”

Ideas of Interest from the *Pensées*

1. According to Pascal, how much can be known about God?
2. Reconstruct Pascal’s wager as carefully as possible.
3. Explain whether you consider Pascal’s wager a proof of God’s existence or not.
4. What major objections can you construct to the wager? Can these objections be countered?

1. Blaise Pascal. *Pensées*. (1660) Trans. W. F. Trotter. New York: Collier & Son, 1910.

5. Clarify the meaning of Pascal's sentence, "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know."

The Reading Selection from *Pensées*

We know that there is an infinite, and are ignorant of its nature. As we know it to be false that numbers are finite, it therefore true that there is an infinity in number. But we do not know what it is. It is false that it is even, it is false that it is odd; for the addition of a unit can make no change in its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is odd or even (this is certainly true of every finite number. So we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is. Is there not one substantial truth, seeing that there are so many things which are not the truth itself?

We know the existence and nature of the finite, because we also are finite and have extension. We know the existence of the infinite, and are ignorant of its nature, because it has extension like us, but not limits like us. But we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because He has neither extension nor limits.

But by faith we know His existence; in glory we shall know His nature. Now, I have already shown that we may well know the existence of a thing, without knowing its nature.

Let us now speak according to natural lights.² If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is. This being so, who will dare to undertake the decision of the question? Not we, who have no affinity to Him.

Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their belief since they profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in expounding it to the world, that it is a foolishness; and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not keep their words; it is in lacking proofs, that they are not lacking in sense. "Yes, but although this excuses those who offer it as such, and take away from them the blame of putting it forward without reason, it does not excuse those who receive it." Let us then examine this point, and say, "God is, or He is not" But to which side shall we incline? Reason can

2. *I.e.*, reason. *Ed.*

Chapter 14. "The Wager" by Blaise Pascal

decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separates us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.

Do not then reprove for error those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it. "No, but I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice; for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all."

—Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then; Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager them without hesitation that He is. "That is very fine. Yes, I must wager; but I may perhaps wager too much."—Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss, if you had only to gain two lives, instead of one, you might still wager. But if there were three lives to gain, you would have to play (since you are under the necessity of playing), and you would be imprudent, when you are forced to play, not to chance your life to gain three at a game where there is an equal risk of loss and gain. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly, being obliged to play, by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in which out of an infinity of chances there is one for you, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. And thus, when one is forced to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain, as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness.

Chapter 14. "The Wager" by Blaise Pascal

For it is no use to say it is uncertain if we will gain, and it is certain that we risk, and that the infinite distance between the certainty of what is staked and the uncertainty of what will be gained, equals the finite good which is certainly staked against the uncertain infinite. It is not so, as every player stakes a certainty to gain an uncertainty, and yet he stakes a finite certainty to gain a finite uncertainty, without transgressing against reason. There is not an infinite distance between the certainty staked and the uncertainty of the gain; that is untrue. In truth, there is an infinity between the certainty of gain and the certainty of loss. But the uncertainty of the gain is proportioned to the certainty of the stake according to the proportion of the chances of gain and loss.

Hence it comes that, if there are as many risks on one side as on the other, the course is to play even; and then the certainty of the stake is equal to the uncertainty of the gain, so far is it from the fact that there is an infinite distance between them. And so our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain. This is demonstrable; and if men are capable of any truths, this is one. "I confess it, I admit it. But still is there no means of seeing the faces of the cards?"—Yes, Scripture and the rest, &c.—"Yes, but I have my hands tied and my mouth closed; I am forced to wager, and am not free. I am not released, and am so made that I cannot believe. What then would you have me do?"

True. But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and you cannot believe. Endeavor then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believe, taking the holy water, having masses said, &c. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness.—"But this is what I am afraid of"—And why? What have you to lose?

But to show you that this leads you there, it is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling—blocks.

The heart has its reasons which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. I say that the heart naturally loves the Universal Being,

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and also itself naturally, according as it gives itself to them; and it hardens itself against one or the other at its will. You have rejected the one, and kept the other. Is it by reason that you love yourself?

It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith; God felt by the heart, not by reason.

From the reading...

“The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”

Related Ideas

Pascal’s Wager (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager>) A thorough examination of the Wager and objections to it from the point of view of probability and decision theory.

J. D. Williams. *The Compleat Strategyst: being a primer on the theory of games of strategy*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954.



Pascal’s Experimental Apparatus, ©IIHR, University of Iowa

Chapter 15

“The Soul of the Indian” by Ohiyesa



Dr. Charles A. Eastman (Ohiyesa), Library of Congress

About the author...

Ohiyesa's mother died soon after birth and his father, Many Lightnings, was captured after the 1862 Dakota uprising and presumed hanged with over 300 other Sioux. Ohiyesa (1858-1939) was traditionally reared in Sioux language and culture by his grandmother for the first fifteen years of his life. When his father, who had in fact been pardoned by President Lincoln and had spent 12 years in an Iowa prison, suddenly appeared, Ohiyesa was required to move to a Christian Dakota community. Ohiyesa took the name of Charles Alexander Eastman, won scholarships, graduated from Dartmouth College in 1887, and studied medicine at Boston University.

Chapter 15. “*The Soul of the Indian*” by Ohiyesa

Under horrific conditions, he was the sole physician at the Wounded Knee massacre. Encouraged by Zitkala Sha (Red Bird), who studied music at the Boston Conservatory of Music (see image below), he began to write of his culture and experience.

About the work . . .

In his *Soul of an Indian*,¹ Ohiyesa portrays the nomadic life and culture of the American Indian prior to interaction with the white man. This selection from Chapter 10 of that book, “Barbarism and the Moral Code,” defends Indian ethical practices from the stereotypic view of many non-native Americans.

From the reading . . .

“As a child. . . [a]ny pretty pebble was valuable to me then. . . [n]ow I worship with the white man. . . as the natural rocks are ground to powder, and made into artificial blocks which may be built into the walls of modern society.”

Ideas of Interest from *The Soul of an Indian*

1. Why is silence such an essential part of character for the Sioux?
2. What sociological reasons can be provided for the relatively conservative sexual ethics of the Sioux?
3. What are the exceptions, pointed out by Ohiyesa, to the dishonor of stealing—why are these exceptions allowed?
4. What is the rationalization Ohiyesa relates for the killing of noncombatants (women and children) in war?

1. Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa). *The Soul of an Indian: An Interpretation*. London, 1911.

5. Why was prosecution and proof unnecessary among the Sioux for "conviction" in cases of murder?
6. Ohiyesa asserts that the coming of the white man was the cause of much barbarism in Indian affairs. What are the reasons he offers for these changes in Indian culture? Is his reasoning convincing or is he merely asserting a series of historical facts?
7. Why, according to Ohiyesa, was lying, at one time, a capital offense?

The Reading Selection from *The Soul of an Indian*

Silence the Corner-Stone of Character

Long before I ever heard of Christ, or saw a white man, I had learned from an untutored woman the essence of morality. With the help of dear Nature herself, she taught me things simple but of mighty import. I knew God. I perceived what goodness is. I saw and loved what is really beautiful. Civilization has not taught me anything better!

As a child, I understood how to give; I have forgotten that grace since I became civilized. I lived the natural life, whereas I now live the artificial. Any pretty pebble was valuable to me then; every growing tree an object of reverence. Now I worship with the white man before a painted landscape whose value is estimated in dollars! Thus the Indian is reconstructed, as the natural rocks are ground to powder, and made into artificial blocks which may be built into the walls of modern society.

The first American mingled with his pride a singular humility. Spiritual arrogance was foreign to his nature and teaching. He never claimed that the power of articulate speech was proof of superiority over the dumb creation; on the other hand, it is to him a perilous gift. He believes profoundly in silence—the sign of a perfect equilibrium. Silence is the absolute poise or balance of body, mind, and spirit. The man who preserves his selfhood ever calm and unshaken by the storms of existence—not a leaf, as it were, astir on the tree; not a ripple upon the surface of shining pool—his, in the mind of the unlettered sage, is the ideal attitude and conduct of life.

Chapter 15. "The Soul of the Indian" by Ohiyesa

If you ask him: "What is silence?" he will answer: "It is the Great Mystery!" "The holy silence is His voice!" If you ask: "What are the fruits of silence?" he will say: "They are self-control, true courage or endurance, patience, dignity, and reverence. Silence is the cornerstone of character."

"Guard your tongue in youth," said the old chief, Wabashaw, "and in age you may mature a thought that will be of service to your people!"

Basic Ideas of Morality

The moment that man conceived of a perfect body, supple, symmetrical, graceful, and enduring—in that moment he had laid the foundation of a moral life! No man can hope to maintain such a temple of the spirit beyond the period of adolescence, unless he is able to curb his indulgence in the pleasures of the senses. Upon this truth the Indian built a rigid system of physical training, a social and moral code that was the law of his life.

There was aroused in him as a child a high ideal of manly strength and beauty, the attainment of which must depend upon strict temperance in eating and in the sexual relation, together with severe and persistent exercise. He desired to be a worthy link in the generations, and that he might not destroy by his weakness that vigor and purity of blood which had been achieved at the cost of much self-denial by a long line of ancestors.

He was required to fast from time to time for short periods, and to work off his superfluous energy by means of hard running, swimming, and the vapor-bath. The bodily fatigue thus induced, especially when coupled with a reduced diet, is a reliable cure for undue sexual desires.

Personal modesty was early cultivated as a safeguard, together with a strong self-respect and pride of family and race. This was accomplished in part by keeping the child ever before the public eye, from his birth onward. His entrance into the world, especially in the case of the first-born, was often publicly announced by the herald, accompanied by a distribution of presents to the old and needy. The same thing occurred when he took his first step, when his ears were pierced, and when he shot his first game, so that his childish exploits and progress were known to the whole clan as to a larger family, and he grew into manhood with the saving sense of a reputation to sustain.

Chapter 15. "The Soul of the Indian" by Ohiyesa

The youth was encouraged to enlist early in the public service, and to develop a wholesome ambition for the honors of a leader and feastmaker, which can never be his unless he is truthful and generous, as well as brave, and ever mindful of his personal chastity and honor. There were many ceremonial customs which had a distinct moral influence; the woman was rigidly secluded at certain periods, and the young husband was forbidden to approach his own wife when preparing for war or for any religious event. The public or tribal position of the Indian is entirely dependent his private virtue, and he is never permitted to forget that he does not live to himself alone, but to his tribe and his clan. Thus habits of perfect self-control were early established, and there were no unnatural conditions or complex temptations to beset him until he was met and overthrown by a stronger race.

From the reading...

"Silence is the cornerstone of character."

To keep the young men and young women strictly to their honor, there were observed among us, within my own recollection, certain annual ceremonies of a semi-religious nature. One of the most impressive of these was the sacred "Feast of Virgins," which, when given for the first time, was equivalent to the public announcement of a young girl's arrival at a marriageable age. The herald, making the rounds of the tepee village, would publish the feast something after this fashion:

Pretty Weasel-woman, the daughter Brave Bear, will kindle her first maidens' fire to-morrow! All ye who have never yielded to the pleading man, who have not destroyed your innocency, you alone are invited to proclaim anew before the Sun and the Earth, before your companions and in the sight of the Great Mystery, the chastity and purity of your maidenhood. Come ye, all who have not known man!

The whole village was at once aroused to the interest of the coming event, which was considered next to the Sun Dance and the Grand Medicine Dance in public importance. It always took place in midsummer, when a number of different clans were gathered together for the summer festivities, and was held in the centre of the great circular encampment.

Chapter 15. "The Soul of the Indian" by Ohiyesa



Eagle Feather and Baby; Zitkala (Gertrude Bonnin) Dakota Sioux, Library of Congress

Here two circles were described, one within the other, about a rudely heart-shaped rock which was touched with red paint, and upon either side of the rock there were thrust into the ground a knife and two arrows. The inner circle was for the maidens, and the outer one for their grandmothers or chaperones, who were supposed to have passed the climacteric. Upon the outskirts of the feast there was a great public gathering, in which order was kept by certain warriors of highest reputation. Any man among the spectators might approach and challenge any young woman whom he knew to be unworthy; if the accuser failed to prove his charge, the warriors were accustomed to punish him severely.

Each girl in turn approached the sacred rock and laid her hand upon it with all solemnity. This was her religious declaration of her virginity, her vow to remain pure until her marriage. If she should ever violate the maidens' oath, then welcome that keen knife and those sharp arrows!

Our maidens were ambitious to attend a number of these feasts before marriage, and it sometimes happened that a girl was compelled to give one, on account of gossip about her conduct. Then it was in the nature of a challenge to the scandal-mongers to prove their words! A similar feast was sometimes made by the young men, for whom the rules were even more strict, since no young man might attend this feast who had so much as spoken of love to a maiden. It was considered a high honor among us to have won some distinction in war and the chase, and above all to have been invited to a seat in the council, before one had spoken to any girl save his own sister.

"Give All or Nothing!"

It was our belief that the love of possessions is a weakness to be overcome. Its appeal is to the material part, and if allowed its way it will in time disturb the spiritual balance of the man. Therefore the child must early learn the beauty of generosity. He is taught to give what he prizes most, and that he may taste the happiness of giving, he is made at an early age the family almoner. If a child is inclined to be grasping, or to cling to any of his little possessions, legends are related to him, telling of the contempt and disgrace falling upon the ungenerous and mean man.

From the reading...

"If she should ever violate the maidens' oath, then welcome that keen knife and those sharp arrows!"

Public giving is a part of every important ceremony. It properly belongs to the celebration of birth, marriage, and death, and is observed whenever it is desired to do special honor to any person or event. Upon such occasions it is common to give to the point of utter impoverishment. The Indian in his simplicity literally gives away all that he has, to relatives, to guests of another tribe or clan, but above all to the poor and the aged, from whom he can hope for no return. Finally, the gift to the "Great Mystery" the religious offering, may be of little value in itself, but to the giver's own thought it should carry the meaning and reward of true sacrifice.

Orphans and the aged are invariably cared for, not only by their next of kin, but by the whole clan. It is the loving parent's pride to have his daughters visit the unfortunate and the helpless, carry them food, comb their hair, and mend their garments. The name "Wenonah," bestowed upon the eldest daughter, distinctly implies all this, and a girl who failed in her charitable duties was held to be unworthy of the name.

The man who is a skillful hunter, and whose wife is alive to her opportunities makes many feasts, to which he is careful to invite the older men of his clan, recognizing that they have outlived their period of greatest activity, and now love nothing so well as to eat in good company, and to live over the past. The old men, for their part, do their best to requite his liberality with a little speech, in which they are apt to relate the brave and

Chapter 15. "The Soul of the Indian" by Ohiyesa

generous deeds of their host's ancestors, finally congratulating him upon being a worthy successor of an honorable line. Thus his reputation is won as a hunter and a feast-maker, and almost as famous in his way as the great warrior is he who has a recognized name and standing as a "man of peace."



Fasting—Teton Sioux Indian performing Vision Cry Ceremony through fasting and chanting to the Great Mystery, Edward S. Curtis

The true Indian sets no price upon either his property or his labor. His generosity is only limited by his strength and ability. He regards it as an honor to be selected for a difficult or dangerous service, and would think it shame to ask for any reward, saying rather: "Let him whom I serve express his thanks according to his own bringing up and his sense of honor!"

Nevertheless, he recognizes rights in property. To steal from one of his own tribe would be indeed disgrace if discovered, the name of "Wamanon," or Thief, is fixed upon him forever as an unalterable. The only exception to the rule is in the case of food, which is always free to the hungry if there is none by to offer it. Other protection than the moral law there could not

be in an Indian community, where there were neither locks nor doors, and everything was open and easy of access to all comers.

The property of the enemy is spoil of war, and it is always allowable to confiscate it if possible. However, in the old days there was not much plunder. Before the coming of the white man, there was in fact little temptation or opportunity to despoil the enemy; but in modern times the practice of "stealing horses" from hostile tribes has become common, and is thought far from dishonorable.

Rules for an Honorable Warfare

Warfare we regarded as an institution the "Great Mystery"—an organized tournament or trial of courage and skill, with elaborate rules and "counts" for the coveted honor of the eagle feather. It was held to develop the quality of manliness and its motive was chivalric or patriotic, but never the desire for territorial aggrandizement or the overthrow of a brother nation. It was common, in early times, for a battle or skirmish to last all day, with great display of daring and horsemanship with scarcely more killed and wounded than may be carried from the field during a university game of football.²

The slayer of a man in battle was expected to mourn for thirty days, blackening his face and loosening his hair according to the custom. He of course considered it no sin to take the life of an enemy, and this ceremonial mourning was a sign of reverence for the departed spirit. The killing in war of non-combatants, such as women and children, is partly explained by the fact that in savage life the woman without husband or protector is in pitiable case, and it was supposed that the spirit of the warrior would be better content if no widow and orphans were left to suffer want, as well as to weep.

A scalp might originally be taken by the leader of the war party only, and at that period no other mutilation was practiced. It was a small lock not more than three inches square, which was carried only during the thirty days' celebration of a victory, and afterward given religious burial. Wanton cruelties and the more barbarous customs of war were greatly intensified with the coming of the white man, who brought with him fiery liquor and

2. While studying at Dartmouth, he was captain of the football team and participated in track and field, tennis, boxing, and baseball. *Ed.*

Chapter 15. "The Soul of the Indian" by Ohiyesa

deadly weapons, aroused the Indian's worst passions, provoking in him revenge and cupidity, and even offered bounties for the scalps of innocent men, women, and children.

From the reading...

"It was common, in early times, for a battle or skirmish to last all day, with great display of daring and horsemanship with scarcely more killed and wounded than may be carried from the field during a university game of football."

Murder within the tribe was a grave offense, to be atoned for as the council might decree, and it often happened that the slayer was called upon to pay the penalty with his own life. He made no attempt to escape or to evade justice. That the crime was committed in the depths of the forest or at dead of night, witnessed by no human eye, made no difference to his mind. He was thoroughly convinced that all is known to the "Great Mystery," and hence did not hesitate to give himself up, to stand his trial by the old and wise men of the victim's clan. His own family and clan might by no means attempt to excuse or to defend him, but his judges took all the known circumstances into consideration, and if it appeared that he slew in self-defense, or that the provocation was severe, he might be set free after a thirty days' period of mourning in solitude. Otherwise the murdered man's next of kin were authorized to take his life; and if they refrained from doing so, as often happened, he remained an outcast from the clan. A willful murder was a rare occurrence before the days of whiskey and drunken rows, for we were not a violent or a quarrelsome people.

It is well remembered that Crow Dog, who killed the Sioux chief, Spotted Tail, in 1881, calmly surrendered himself and was tried and convicted by the courts in South Dakota. After his conviction, he was permitted remarkable liberty in prison, such as perhaps no white man has ever enjoyed when under sentence of death.

The cause of his act was a solemn commission received from his people, nearly thirty years earlier, at the time that Spotted Tail usurped the chieftainship by the aid of the military, whom he had aided. Crow Dog was under a vow to slay the chief, in case he ever betrayed or disgraced the

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name of the Brule Sioux. There is no doubt that he had committed crimes both public and private, having been guilty of misuse of office as well as of gross offenses against morality; therefore his death was not a matter of personal vengeance but of just retribution.



Winter Camp, Sioux Tepee, Library of Congress

A few days before Crow Dog was to be executed, he asked permission to visit his home and say farewell to his wife and twin boys, then nine or ten years old. Strange to say, the request was granted, and the condemned man sent home under escort of the deputy sheriff, who remained at the Indian agency, merely telling his prisoner to report there on the following day. When he did not appear the time set, the sheriff dispatched Indian police after him. They did not find him, and his wife simply said that Crow Dog had desired to ride alone to the prison, and would reach there on the day appointed. All doubt was removed next day by a telegram from Rapid City, two hundred miles distant, saying Crow Dog has just reported here.

The incident drew public attention to the Indian murderer, with the unexpected result that the case was reopened, and Crow Dog acquitted. He still lives, a well-preserved man of about seventy-five years, and is much respected among his own people.

Chapter 15. "The Soul of the Indian" by Ohiyesa



Crow Dog, Sioux Indian, Library of Congress

It is said that, in the very early days, lying was a capital offense among us. Believing that the deliberate liar is capable of committing any crime behind the screen of cowardly untruth and double-dealing, the destroyer of mutual confidence was summarily put to death, that the evil might go no further.

An Indian Conception of Courage

Even the worst enemies of the Indian, those who accuse him of treachery, blood-thirstiness, cruelty, and lust, have not denied his courage but in their minds it is a courage is ignorant, brutal, and fantastic. His own conception of bravery makes of it a high moral virtue, for to him it consists not so much in aggressive self-assertion as in absolute self-control. The truly brave man, we contend, yields neither to fear nor anger, desire nor agony; he is at all times master of himself; his courage rises to the heights of chivalry, patriotism, and real heroism.

“Let neither cold, hunger, nor pain, nor the fear of them, neither the bristling teeth of danger nor the very jaws of death itself, prevent you from doing a good deed,” said an old chief to a scout who was about to seek the buffalo in midwinter for the relief of a starving people. This was his childlike conception of courage.

From the reading...

"The truly brave man, we contend, yields neither to fear nor anger, desire nor agony; he is at all times master of himself; his courage rises to the heights of chivalry, patriotism, and real heroism."

Related Ideas

Eastman, Charles (Ohiyesa) (<http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp>). *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*. A summary of Dr. Eastman's life and works by David Reed Miller.

The Soul of the Indian (<http://www.mountainman.com.au/eastman7.html>). *Mountain Man Graphics*. Commentary and list of online works by Ohiyesa.

Dee Brown. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: A History of the American West*. New York: Holt, 1970. The controversial classic and well researched account of the American frontier under "Manifest Destiny" from a native American perspective.

From the reading...

"Let neither cold, hunger, nor pain, nor the fear of them, neither the bristling teeth of danger nor the very jaws of death itself, prevent you from doing a good deed"

Chapter 15. “The Soul of the Indian” by Ohiyesa



Prayer to the Mystery and Invocation—Sioux, Edward S. Curtis, Library of Congress, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare Ohiyesa’s characterization of strict self-denial in the development of youth with Bentham’s critique of asceticism as discussed in Part IV of this text.
2. Explain how the customs of the Sioux relate to a duty ethics. In the reading, what aspects of the Sioux culture are not reducible to a duty ethics?
3. Compare Ohiyesa’s description of bravery and courage to the account argued by Socrates in the *Protagoras*.
4. Discuss whether a clear distinction between folkways, mores, and ethics can be made in the case of this reading.

Chapter 16

“Act in Accordance with Universal Law” by Immanuel Kant



Immanuel Kant, Antiquities Project

About the author...

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) studied in Königsberg, East Prussia. Before he fully developed an interest in philosophy, he was fascinated with physics and astronomy—in fact, he anticipated William Herschel’s discovery of Uranus by a few years. Kant’s critical philosophy, one of the truly profound philosophies in all of Western Civilization, was constructed to forge empiricism and rationalism into a “critical” philosophy which sought to overcome the many pressing shortcomings of

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each. What we call objective reality, Kant argues, is subject to whatever conforms to the structures of our perception and thinking. Virtually every epistemological theory since Kant, directly or indirectly, refers to some aspect of *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kant was such an individual of regular habits that, reportedly, his neighbors in Königsberg set their watches by the regularity of his afternoon walks.

About the work...

Immanuel Kant writes in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*¹ that “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” This principle, termed the categorical imperative, is the foundation of the Kantian ethics. Kant believes that actions do not have moral worth because of their consequences. Actions proceeding from a good will, if done, for the sake of duty are unqualifiedly good.

Important Ideas from *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*

1. According to Kant, what is the only good-in-itself? Why is this so? Is it a necessary condition for happiness?
2. Does Kant believe that you judge an action by its consequences? Might I have good will but do evil things through ignorance?
3. Does Kant believe reason is inimical to good choices? Explain his view of the relation between the good will and reason.

1. Immanuel Kant. “First Section Transition from the Common Rational Knowledge of Morality to the Philosophical” in *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Trans. by Thomas Kingsmill Abbot, 1785.

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4. Why is it selfish for a prudent merchant not to overcharge a child? How does he distinguish between an action done *for the sake of* duty and an action done *in accordance with* duty?
5. Why according to Kant is there no moral worth in taking delight in helping others? Would it really be of higher moral worth to do one’s duty grudgingly?
6. Explain how not keeping a promise cannot be done in accordance with the categorical imperative. How do you think Kant distinguishes between a maxim and a universal law?
7. Explain what it means to make a maxim a universal law? Can you think of an action which is morally correct that cannot be universalized?

From the reading...

“...the coolness of a villain not only makes him far more dangerous, but also directly makes him more abominable in our eyes than he would have been without [calm deliberation].”

Reading Selection from the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*

[The Good Will]

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgement, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called character, is not good. It is the same with the gifts of fortune. Power, riches, honour, even health, and the general well-being and contentment with one’s condition which is called happiness, inspire pride, and often

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presumption, if there is not a good will to correct the influence of these on the mind, and with this also to rectify the whole principle of acting and adapt it to its end. The sight of a being who is not adorned with a single feature of a pure and good will, enjoying unbroken prosperity, can never give pleasure to an impartial rational spectator. Thus a good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness.

There are even some qualities which are of service to this good will itself and may facilitate its action, yet which have no intrinsic unconditional value, but always presuppose a good will, and this qualifies the esteem that we justly have for them and does not permit us to regard them as absolutely good. Moderation in the affections and passions, self-control, and calm deliberation are not only good in many respects, but even seem to constitute part of the intrinsic worth of the person; but they are far from deserving to be called good without qualification, although they have been so unconditionally praised by the ancients. For without the principles of a good will, they may become extremely bad, and the coolness of a villain not only makes him far more dangerous, but also directly makes him more abominable in our eyes than he would have been without it.

A good will is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition; that is, it is good in itself, and considered by itself is to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it in favour of any inclination, nay even of the sum total of all inclinations. Even if it should happen that, owing to special disfavour of fortune, or the niggardly provision of a step-motherly nature, this will should wholly lack power to accomplish its purpose, if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the good will (not, to be sure, a mere wish, but the summoning of all means in our power), then, like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light, as a thing which has its whole value in itself. Its usefulness or fruitfulness can neither add nor take away anything from this value. It would be, as it were, only the setting to enable us to handle it the more conveniently in common commerce, or to attract to it the attention of those who are not yet connoisseurs, but not to recommend it to true connoisseurs, or to determine its value.

From the reading...

"...reason is not competent to guide the will with certainty in regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our wants..."

There is, however, something so strange in this idea of the absolute value of the mere will, in which no account is taken of its utility, that notwithstanding the thorough assent of even common reason to the idea, yet a suspicion must arise that it may perhaps really be the product of mere high-flown fancy, and that we may have misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason as the governor of our will. Therefore we will examine this idea from this point of view.

In the physical constitution of an organized being, that is, a being adapted suitably to the purposes of life, we assume it as a fundamental principle that no organ for any purpose will be found but what is also the fittest and best adapted for that purpose. Now in a being which has reason and a will, if the proper object of nature were its conservation, its welfare, in a word, its happiness, then nature would have hit upon a very bad arrangement in selecting the reason of the creature to carry out this purpose. For all the actions which the creature has to perform with a view to this purpose, and the whole rule of its conduct, would be far more surely prescribed to it by instinct, and that end would have been attained thereby much more certainly than it ever can be by reason. Should reason have been communicated to this favoured creature over and above, it must only have served it to contemplate the happy constitution of its nature, to admire it, to congratulate itself thereon, and to feel thankful for it to the beneficent cause, but not that it should subject its desires to that weak and delusive guidance and meddle bunglingly with the purpose of nature. In a word, nature would have taken care that reason should not break forth into practical exercise, nor have the presumption, with its weak insight, to think out for itself the plan of happiness, and of the means of attaining it. Nature would not only have taken on herself the choice of the ends, but also of the means, and with wise foresight would have entrusted both to instinct.

And, in fact, we find that the more a cultivated reason applies itself with deliberate purpose to the enjoyment of life and happiness, so much the more does the man fail of true satisfaction. And from this circumstance there arises in many, if they are candid enough to confess it, a certain

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degree of misology, that is, hatred of reason, especially in the case of those who are most experienced in the use of it, because after calculating all the advantages they derive, I do not say from the invention of all the arts of common luxury, but even from the sciences (which seem to them to be after all only a luxury of the understanding), they find that they have, in fact, only brought more trouble on their shoulders. rather than gained in happiness; and they end by envying, rather than despising, the more common stamp of men who keep closer to the guidance of mere instinct and do not allow their reason much influence on their conduct. And this we must admit, that the judgement of those who would very much lower the lofty eulogies of the advantages which reason gives us in regard to the happiness and satisfaction of life, or who would even reduce them below zero, is by no means morose or ungrateful to the goodness with which the world is governed, but that there lies at the root of these judgements the idea that our existence has a different and far nobler end, for which, and not for happiness, reason is properly intended, and which must, therefore, be regarded as the supreme condition to which the private ends of man must, for the most part, be postponed.

For as reason is not competent to guide the will with certainty in regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our wants (which it to some extent even multiplies), this being an end to which an implanted instinct would have led with much greater certainty; and since, nevertheless, reason is imparted to us as a practical faculty, *i.e.*, as one which is to have influence on the will, therefore, admitting that nature generally in the distribution of her capacities has adapted the means to the end, its true destination must be to produce a will, not merely good as a means to something else, but good in itself, for which reason was absolutely necessary. This will then, though not indeed the sole and complete good, must be the supreme good and the condition of every other, even of the desire of happiness. Under these circumstances, there is nothing inconsistent with the wisdom of nature in the fact that the cultivation of the reason, which is requisite for the first and unconditional purpose, does in many ways interfere, at least in this life, with the attainment of the second, which is always conditional, namely, happiness. Nay, it may even reduce it to nothing, without nature thereby failing of her purpose. For reason recognizes the establishment of a good will as its highest practical destination, and in attaining this purpose is capable only of a satisfaction of its own proper kind, namely that from the attainment of an end, which end again is determined by reason only, notwithstanding that this may involve many a disappointment to the ends

of inclination.

We have then to develop the notion of a will which deserves to be highly esteemed for itself and is good without a view to anything further, a notion which exists already in the sound natural understanding, requiring rather to be cleared up than to be taught, and which in estimating the value of our actions always takes the first place and constitutes the condition of all the rest. In order to do this, we will take the notion of duty, which includes that of a good will, although implying certain subjective restrictions and hindrances. These, however, far from concealing it, or rendering it unrecognizable, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth so much the brighter.

[Actions for the Sake of Duty]

I omit here all actions which are already recognized as inconsistent with duty, although they may be useful for this or that purpose, for with these the question whether they are done from duty cannot arise at all, since they even conflict with it. I also set aside those actions which really conform to duty, but to which men have no direct inclination, performing them because they are impelled thereto by some other inclination. For in this case we can readily distinguish whether the action which agrees with duty is done from duty, or from a selfish view. It is much harder to make this distinction when the action accords with duty and the subject has besides a direct inclination to it. For example, it is always a matter of duty that a dealer should not over charge an inexperienced purchaser; and wherever there is much commerce the prudent tradesman does not overcharge, but keeps a fixed price for everyone, so that a child buys of him as well as any other. Men are thus honestly served; but this is not enough to make us believe that the tradesman has so acted from duty and from principles of honesty: his own advantage required it; it is out of the question in this case to suppose that he might besides have a direct inclination in favour of the buyers, so that, as it were, from love he should give no advantage to one over another. Accordingly the action was done neither from duty nor from direct inclination, but merely with a selfish view.

On the other hand, it is a duty to maintain one's life; and, in addition, everyone has also a direct inclination to do so. But on this account the of anxious care which most men take for it has no intrinsic worth, and their maxim has no moral import. They preserve their life as duty requires, no

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doubt, but not because duty requires. On the other hand, if adversity and hopeless sorrow have completely taken away the relish for life; if the unfortunate one, strong in mind, indignant at his fate rather than desponding or dejected, wishes for death, and yet preserves his life without loving it—not from inclination or fear, but from duty—then his maxim has a moral worth.



Fish and Vegetable Market, Königsberg, East Prussia, Library of Congress

To be beneficent when we can is a duty; and besides this, there are many minds so sympathetically constituted that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest, they find a pleasure in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however proper, however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth, but is on a level with other inclinations, *e.g.*, the inclination to honour, which, if it is happily directed to that which is in fact of public utility and accordant with duty and consequently honourable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem. For the maxim lacks the moral import, namely, that such actions be done from duty, not from inclination. Put the case that the mind of that philanthropist were clouded by sorrow of his own, extinguishing all sympathy with the lot of others, and that, while he still has the power to benefit others in distress, he is not touched by their trouble because he is absorbed with his own; and now suppose that he tears

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himself out of this dead insensibility, and performs the action without any inclination to it, but simply from duty, then first has his action its genuine moral worth. Further still; if nature has put little sympathy in the heart of this or that man; if he, supposed to be an upright man, is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because in respect of his own he is provided with the special gift of patience and fortitude and supposes, or even requires, that others should have the same—and such a man would certainly not be the meanest product of nature—but if nature had not specially framed him for a philanthropist, would he not still find in himself a source from whence to give himself a far higher worth than that of a good-natured temperament could be? Unquestionably. It is just in this that the moral worth of the character is brought out which is incomparably the highest of all, namely, that he is beneficent, not from inclination, but from duty.

To secure one's own happiness is a duty, at least indirectly; for discontent with one's condition, under a pressure of many anxieties and amidst unsatisfied wants, might easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty. But here again, without looking to duty, all men have already the strongest and most intimate inclination to happiness, because it is just in this idea that all inclinations are combined in one total. But the precept of happiness is often of such a sort that it greatly interferes with some inclinations, and yet a man cannot form any definite and certain conception of the sum of satisfaction of all of them which is called happiness. It is not then to be wondered at that a single inclination, definite both as to what it promises and as to the time within which it can be gratified, is often able to overcome such a fluctuating idea, and that a gouty patient, for instance, can choose to enjoy what he likes, and to suffer what he may, since, according to his calculation, on this occasion at least, he has not sacrificed the enjoyment of the present moment to a possibly mistaken expectation of a happiness which is supposed to be found in health. But even in this case, if the general desire for happiness did not influence his will, and supposing that in his particular case health was not a necessary element in this calculation, there yet remains in this, as in all other cases, this law, namely, that he should promote his happiness not from inclination but from duty, and by this would his conduct first acquire true moral worth.

It is in this manner, undoubtedly, that we are to understand those passages of Scripture also in which we are commanded to love our neighbour, even our enemy. For love, as an affection, cannot be commanded, but benefi-

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cence for duty’s sake may; even though we are not impelled to it by any inclination—nay, are even repelled by a natural and unconquerable aversion. This is practical love and not pathological—a love which is seated in the will, and not in the propensions of sense—in principles of action and not of tender sympathy; and it is this love alone which can be commanded.

The second proposition is: That an action done from duty derives its moral worth, not from the purpose which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined, and therefore does not depend on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the principle of volition by which the action has taken place, without regard to any object of desire. It is clear from what precedes that the purposes which we may have in view in our actions, or their effects regarded as ends and springs of the will, cannot give to actions any unconditional or moral worth. In what, then, can their worth lie, if it is not to consist in the will and in reference to its expected effect? It cannot lie anywhere but in the principle of the will without regard to the ends which can be attained by the action. For the will stands between its a priori principle, which is formal, and its *á posteriori* spring, which is material, as between two roads, and as it must be determined by something, it that it must be determined by the formal principle of volition when an action is done from duty, in which case every material principle has been withdrawn from it.

From the reading...

“And, in fact, we find that the more a cultivated reason applies itself with deliberate purpose to the enjoyment of life and happiness, so much the more does the man fail of true satisfaction.”

[Duty as Respect for Law]

The third proposition, which is a consequence of the two preceding, I would express thus Duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the law. I may have inclination for an object as the effect of my proposed action, but I cannot have respect for it, just for this reason, that it is an effect and not an energy of will. Similarly I cannot have respect for inclination, whether my own or another’s; I can at most, if my own, approve

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it; if another’s, sometimes even love it; *i.e.*, look on it as favourable to my own interest. It is only what is connected with my will as a principle, by no means as an effect- what does not subserve my inclination, but overpowers it, or at least in case of choice excludes it from its calculation- in other words, simply the law of itself, which can be an object of respect, and hence a command. Now an action done from duty must wholly exclude the influence of inclination and with it every object of the will, so that nothing remains which can determine the will except objectively the law, and subjectively pure respect for this practical law, and consequently the maxim² that I should follow this law even to the thwarting of all my inclinations.

Thus the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it, nor in any principle of action which requires to borrow its motive from this expected effect. For all these effects—agreeableness of one’s condition and even the promotion of the happiness of others—could have been also brought about by other causes, so that for this there would have been no need of the will of a rational being; whereas it is in this alone that the supreme and unconditional good can be found. The pre-eminent good which we call moral can therefore consist in nothing else than the conception of law in itself, which certainly is only possible in a rational being, in so far as this conception, and not the expected effect, determines the will. This is a good which is already present in the person who acts accordingly, and we have not to wait for it to appear first in the result.³

2. A maxim is the subjective principle of volition. The objective principle (*i.e.*, that which would also serve subjectively as a practical principle to all rational beings if reason had full power over the faculty of desire) is the practical law.

3. It might be here objected to me that I take refuge behind the word respect in an obscure feeling, instead of giving a distinct solution of the question by a concept of the reason. But although respect is a feeling, it is not a feeling received through influence, but is self-wrought by a rational concept, and, therefore, is specifically distinct from all feelings of the former kind, which may be referred either to inclination or fear. What I recognise immediately as a law for me, I recognise with respect. This merely signifies the consciousness that my will is subordinate to a law, without the intervention of other influences on my sense. The immediate determination of the will by the law, and the consciousness of this, is called respect, so that this is regarded as an effect of the law on the subject, and not as the cause of it. Respect is properly the conception of a worth which thwarts my self-love. Accordingly it is something which is considered neither as an object of inclination nor of fear, although it has something analogous to both. The object of respect is the law only, and that the law which we impose on ourselves and yet recognise as necessary in itself. As a law, we are sub-

[Categorical Imperative]

But what sort of law can that be, the conception of which must determine the will, even without paying any regard to the effect expected from it, in order that this will may be called good absolutely and without qualification? As I have deprived the will of every impulse which could arise to it from obedience to any law, there remains nothing but the universal conformity of its actions to law in general, which alone is to serve the will as a principle, *i.e.*, I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law. Here, now, it is the simple conformity to law in general, without assuming any particular law applicable to certain actions, that serves the will as its principle and must so serve it, if duty is not to be a vain delusion and a chimerical notion. The common reason of men in its practical judgements perfectly coincides with this and always has in view the principle here suggested. Let the question be, for example: May I when in distress make a promise with the intention not to keep it? I readily distinguish here between the two significations which the question may have: Whether it is prudent, or whether it is right, to make a false promise? The former may undoubtedly of be the case. I see clearly indeed that it is not enough to extricate myself from a present difficulty by means of this subterfuge, but it must be well considered whether there may not hereafter spring from this lie much greater inconvenience than that from which I now free myself, and as, with all my supposed cunning, the consequences cannot be so easily foreseen but that credit once lost may be much more injurious to me than any mischief which I seek to avoid at present, it should be considered whether it would not be more prudent to act herein according to a universal maxim and to make it a habit to promise nothing except with the intention of keeping it. But it is soon clear to me that such a maxim will still only be based on the fear of consequences. Now it is a wholly different thing to be truthful from duty and to be so from apprehension of injurious consequences. In the first case, the very notion of the action already implies a law for me; in the second case, I must first look about elsewhere to see what results may be combined with

jected too it without consulting self-love; as imposed by us on ourselves, it is a result of our will. In the former aspect it has an analogy to fear, in the latter to inclination. Respect for a person is properly only respect for the law (of honesty, *etc.*) of which he gives us an example. Since we also look on the improvement of our talents as a duty, we consider that we see in a person of talents, as it were, the example of a law (*viz.*, to become like him in this by exercise), and this constitutes our respect. All so-called moral interest consists simply in respect for the law.

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it which would affect myself. For to deviate from the principle of duty is beyond all doubt wicked; but to be unfaithful to my maxim of prudence may often be very advantageous to me, although to abide by it is certainly safer. The shortest way, however, and an unerring one, to discover the answer to this question whether a lying promise is consistent with duty, is to ask myself, “Should I be content that my maxim (to extricate myself from difficulty by a false promise) should hold good as a universal law, for myself as well as for others?” and should I be able to say to myself, “Every one may make a deceitful promise when he finds himself in a difficulty from which he cannot otherwise extricate himself?” Then I presently become aware that while I can will the lie, I can by no means will that lying should be a universal law. For with such a law there would be no promises at all, since it would be in vain to allege my intention in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this allegation, or if they over hastily did so would pay me back in my own coin. Hence my maxim, as soon as it should be made a universal law, would necessarily destroy itself.



University and Royal Gardens, Königsberg, East Prussia, Library of Congress

I do not, therefore, need any far-reaching penetration to discern what I have to do in order that my will may be morally good. Inexperienced in the course of the world, incapable of being prepared for all its contingencies, I only ask myself: Canst thou also will that thy maxim should be a universal law? If not, then it must be rejected, and that not because of a disadvantage accruing from it to myself or even to others, but because it cannot enter as

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a principle into a possible universal legislation, and reason extorts from me immediate respect for such legislation. I do not indeed as yet discern on what this respect is based (this the philosopher may inquire), but at least I understand this, that it is an estimation of the worth which far outweighs all worth of what is recommended by inclination, and that the necessity of acting from pure respect for the practical law is what constitutes duty, to which every other motive must give place, because it is the condition of a will being good in itself, and the worth of such a will is above everything.

Thus, then, without quitting the moral knowledge of common human reason, we have arrived at its principle. And although, no doubt, common men do not conceive it in such an abstract and universal form, yet they always have it really before their eyes and use it as the standard of their decision. Here it would be easy to show how, with this compass in hand, men are well able to distinguish, in every case that occurs, what is good, what bad, conformably to duty or inconsistent with it, if, without in the least teaching them anything new, we only, like Socrates, direct their attention to the principle they themselves employ; and that, therefore, we do not need science and philosophy to know what we should do to be honest and good, yea, even wise and virtuous. Indeed we might well have conjectured beforehand that the knowledge of what every man is bound to do, and therefore also to know, would be within the reach of every man, even the commonest. Here we cannot forbear admiration when we see how great an advantage the practical judgement has over the theoretical in the common understanding of men. In the latter, if common reason ventures to depart from the laws of experience and from the perceptions of the senses, it falls into mere inconceivabilities and self-contradictions, at least into a chaos of uncertainty, obscurity, and instability. But in the practical sphere it is just when the common understanding excludes all sensible springs from practical laws that its power of judgement begins to show itself to advantage. It then becomes even subtle, whether it be that it chicanes with its own conscience or with other claims respecting what is to be called right, or whether it desires for its own instruction to determine honestly the worth of actions; and, in the latter case, it may even have as good a hope of hitting the mark as any philosopher whatever can promise himself. Nay, it is almost more sure of doing so, because the philosopher cannot have any other principle, while he may easily perplex his judgement by a multitude of considerations foreign to the matter, and so turn aside from the right way. Would it not therefore be wiser in moral concerns to acquiesce in the judgement of common reason, or at most only to call in philosophy for the

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purpose of rendering the system of morals more complete and intelligible, and its rules more convenient for use (especially for disputation), but not so as to draw off the common understanding from its happy simplicity, or to bring it by means of philosophy into a new path of inquiry and instruction?

Innocence is indeed a glorious thing; only, on the other hand, it is very sad that it cannot well maintain itself and is easily seduced. On this account even wisdom—which otherwise consists more in conduct than in knowledge—yet has need of science, not in order to learn from it, but to secure for its precepts admission and permanence. Against all the commands of duty which reason represents to man as so deserving of respect, he feels in himself a powerful counterpoise in his wants and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name of happiness. Now reason issues its commands unyieldingly, without promising anything to the inclinations, and, as it were, with disregard and contempt for these claims, which are so impetuous, and at the same time so plausible, and which will not allow themselves to be suppressed by any command. Hence there arises a natural dialectic, *i.e.*, a disposition, to argue against these strict laws of duty and to question their validity, or at least their purity and strictness; and, if possible, to make them more accordant with our wishes and inclinations, that is to say, to corrupt them at their very source, and entirely to destroy their worth—a thing which even common practical reason cannot ultimately call good.

From the reading...

“... there yet remains in this, as in all other cases, this law, namely, that he should promote his happiness not from inclination but from duty, and by this would his conduct first acquire true moral worth.”

Thus is the common reason of man compelled to go out of its sphere, and to take a step into the field of a practical philosophy, not to satisfy any speculative want (which never occurs to it as long as it is content to be mere sound reason), but even on practical grounds, in order to attain in it information and clear instruction respecting the source of its principle, and the correct determination of it in opposition to the maxims which are based on wants and inclinations, so that it may escape from the perplexity of

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opposite claims and not run the risk of losing all genuine moral principles through the equivocation into which it easily falls. Thus, when practical reason cultivates itself, there insensibly arises in it a dialectic which forces it to seek aid in philosophy, just as happens to it in its theoretic use; and in this case, therefore, as well as in the other, it will find rest nowhere but in a thorough critical examination of our reason.



Rauschen, Königsberg, East Prussia, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare and contrast Kant's view of the good will with the Socratic Paradox expressed in Plato's *Protagoras*. Kant writes, "...reason is not competent to guide the will with certainty in regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our wants..." How would Socrates react to this assessment?
2. Kant writes:

And, in fact, we find that the more a cultivated reason applies itself with deliberate purpose to the enjoyment of life and happiness, so much the more does the man fail of true satisfaction. And from this circumstance there arises in many, if they are candid enough to confess it, a certain

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degree of misology, that is, hatred of reason, especially in the case of those who are most experienced in the use of it, because after calculating all the advantages they derive, I do not say from the invention of all the arts of common luxury, but even from the sciences (which seem to them to be after all only a luxury of the understanding), they find that they have, in fact, only brought more trouble on their shoulders. rather than gained in happiness; and they end by envying, rather than despising, the more common stamp of men who keep closer to the guidance of mere instinct and do not allow their reason much influence on their conduct.

Compare Kant's reasoning with Jeremy Bentham's hedonistic calculus. How would Bentham respond to Kant's point that the pain of calculation out factors the actions itself. Would the validity of this argument depend on the personality type of the person who is evaluating the action?

3. Can you construct counterexamples to Kant's view that actions done for the sake of duty have more moral worth in every case than actions done in accordance with duty? Would this doctrine imply that the development of good character is morally neutral? Does a good person who acts rightly have less moral worth than a deceiver who is honest only upon occasion?
4. In the reading, Kant argues that an act of self-preservation, if done from inclination has no moral worth, but an act of self-preservation if done for the sake of duty has moral worth. At the same time he states, "calm deliberation" makes a villain far more dangerous. Would the foregoing statements, if taken as premises, imply that for Kant, the action of a soldier who, against his natural inclination, leaves his post in order to preserve his life is an action of moral worth, whereas the action of a soldier who is inclined to stay at his post in accordance with his duty, in spite of great personal hazard, has no moral worth?
5. Kant contrasts practical and pathological love. Distinguish between these two, apparently essentially different, kinds of love. Is the crucial point of difference the distinction between affection and will?

Chapter 17

“Truth is Faith” by Søren Kierkegaard



Søren Kierkegaard, Theommes

About the author...

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish existential writer, dedicated his life to explaining what it means to exist through authentic choice. For Kierkegaard, the typical individual moves through three stages: (1) the *aesthetic stage* characterized by immediate pleasure, whether sensual or intellectual, (*e.g.*, egoism or hedonism), (2) the *ethical stage* marked by the individual's commitment to duty (*e.g.*, Stoicism, religious law), and (3) the religious stage characterized by faith (*e.g.*, the “leap” characterized by subjectivity and paradox). For Kierkegaard, this third context of existence is truth defined as “an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-

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process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.”¹

About the work...

In his *Fear and Trembling*,² Kierkegaard examines the faith of Abraham and finds it incomprehensible. The tragic hero in the ethical sphere of existence through infinite resignation can find truth through a leap of faith embracing the absurd. This leap cannot be understood in ordinary terms, for a higher spiritual end overturns ethics—the teleological suspension of the ethical. God, alone, is the basis of a truth beyond ethics.

From the reading...

“The fact is, the ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he wanted to murder Isaac...”

Ideas of Interest from *Fear and Trembling*

1. How does Kierkegaard characterize faith?
2. Explain Kierkegaard’s distinction between the sacrifice of money and the sacrifice of ethical responsibility. How can this distinction be made in terms of the “most precious possession”?
3. What could possibly be the test of faith for an Abraham of today? Why does Kierkegaard suggest that the minister of today does not fathom the story: “If a certain preacher learned of this he would, perhaps, go to him, he would gather up all his spiritual dignity and ex-

1. Søren Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, 182.

2. Søren Kierkegaard. Translated by L. M. Hollander *Fear and Trembling*. 1843. Published in the *University of Texas Bulletin* N. 2326 (July 8, 1923).

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claim: “Thou abominable creature, thou scum of humanity, what devil possessed thee to wish to murder son?” When is “truth,” the unethical?

4. What is the difference between “faith for this life” and “faith for the afterlife”? Can’t one have both?
5. Explain the implicit distinction Kierkegaard makes between the ethical or ethics and the religious or faith.
6. How does Kierkegaard answer his own question, “Now how shall we explain the contradiction contained in that sermon?”
7. In the story of the knight and the princess, what it meant by “infinite resignation”?

The Reading Selection from *Fear and Trembling*

Introduction

Not only in the world of commerce but also in the world of ideas our age has arranged a regular clearance-sale. Everything may be had at such absurdly low prices that very soon the question will arise whether any one cares to bid. Every waiter with a speculative turn who carefully marks the significant progress of modern philosophy, every lecturer in philosophy, every tutor, student, every sticker-and-quitter of philosophy—hey are not content with doubting everything, but “go right on.” It might, possibly, be ill-timed and inopportune to ask them whither they are bound; but it is no doubt polite and modest to take it for granted that they have doubted everything—else it were a curious statement for them to make, that they were proceeding onward. So they have, all of them, completed that preliminary operation and, it would seem, with such ease that they do not think it necessary to waste a word about how they did it. The fact is, not even he who looked anxiously and with a troubled spirit for some little point of information, ever found one, nor any instruction, nor even any little dietetic prescription, as to how one is to accomplish this enormous task. “But did not Descartes proceed in this fashion?” Descartes, indeed! that venerable, humble, honest thinker whose writings surely no one can

read without deep emotion—Descartes did what he said, and said what he did. Alas, alas! that is a mighty rare thing in our times! But Descartes, as he says frequently enough, never uttered doubts concerning his faith...

In our times, as was remarked, no one is content with faith, but “goes right on.” The question as to whither they are proceeding may be a silly question; whereas it is, a sign of urbanity and culture to assume that every one has faith, to begin with, for else it were a curious statement for them to make, that they are proceeding further. In the olden days it was different. Then, faith was a task for a whole life-time because it was held that proficiency in faith was not to be won within a few days or weeks.—

A Panegyric on Abraham

If Abraham had not had faith, then Sarah would probably have died of sorrow, and Abraham, dulled by his grief, would not have understood the fulfillment, but would have smiled about it as a dream of his youth. But Abraham had faith, and therefore he remained young; for he who always hopes for the best, his life will deceive, and he will grow old; and he who is always prepared for the worst, he will soon age; but he who has faith, he will preserve eternal youth. Praise, therefore, be to this story! For Sarah, though advanced in age, was young enough to wish for the pleasures of a mother, and Abraham, though grey of hair, was young enough to wish to become a father. In a superficial sense it may be considered miraculous that what they wished for came to pass, but in a deeper sense the miracle of faith is to be seen in Abraham’s and Sarah’s being young enough to wish, and their faith having preserved their wish and therewith their youth. The promise he had received was fulfilled, and he accepted it in faith, and it came to pass according to the promise and his faith; whereas Moses smote the rock with his staff but believed not.

From the reading...

“That which people generally forget in the story of Abraham is his fear and anxiety...”

There was joy in Abraham’s house when Sarah celebrated the day of her Golden Wedding. But it was not to remain thus; for once more was Abra-

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ham to be tempted. He had struggled with that cunning power to which nothing is impossible, with that ever watchful enemy who never sleeps, with that old man who outlives all. . . he had struggled with Time and had preserved his faith. And now all the terror of that fight was concentrated in one moment. And God tempted Abraham, saying to him: take now thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.³

All was lost, then, and more terribly than if a son had never been given him! The Lord had only mocked Abraham, then! Miraculously he had realized the unreasonable hopes of Abraham; and now he wished to take away what he had given. A foolish hope it had been, but Abraham had not laughed when the promise had been made him. Now all was lost—the trusting hope of seventy years, the brief joy at the fulfillment of his hopes. Who, then, is he that snatches away the old man’s staff, who that demands that he himself shall break it in two? Who is he that renders disconsolate the grey hair of old age, who is he that demands that he himself shall do it? Is there no pity for the venerable old man, and none for the innocent child? And yet was Abraham God’s chosen one, and yet was it the Lord that tempted him. And now all was to be lost! The glorious remembrance of him by a whole race, the promise of Abraham’s seed—all that was but a whim, a passing fancy of the Lord, which Abraham was now to destroy forever! That glorious treasure, as old as the faith in Abraham’s heart, and many, many years older than Isaac, the fruit of Abraham’s life, sanctified by prayers, matured in struggles—the blessing on the lips of Abraham: this fruit was now to be plucked before the appointed time, and to remain without significance; for of what significance were it if Isaac was to be sacrificed?—

But Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life. Indeed, had his faith been but concerning the life to come, then might he more easily have cast away all, in order to hasten out of this world which was not his. . . .

But Abraham had faith and doubted not, but trusted that the improbable would come to pass. If Abraham had doubted, then would he have undertaken something else, something great and noble; for what could Abraham have undertaken but was great and noble! He would have proceeded to Mount Moriah, he would have cloven the wood, and fired it, and un-

3. Genesis 20, 11f.

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sheathed his knife—he would have cried out to God: “Despise not this sacrifice; it is not, indeed, the best I have; for what is an old man against a child foretold of God; but it is the best I can give thee. Let Isaac never know that he must find consolation in his youth.” He would have plunged the steel in his own breast. And he would have been admired throughout the world, and his name would not have been forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired and another, to be a lode-star which guides one troubled in mind—



Abraham and Isaac, Ferdinand Bol, etching, 17th Century, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

And Abraham rose up early in the morning.⁴ He made haste as though for some joyous occasion, and early in the morning he was in the appointed place, on Mount Moriah. He said nothing to Sarah, nothing to Eliezer, his steward; for who would have understood him? Did not his temptation by its very nature demand of him the vow of silence? “He laid the wood in

4. Luke 23, 30.

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order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." My listener! Many a father there has been who thought that with his child he lost the dearest of all there was in the world for him; yet assuredly no child ever was in that sense a pledge of God as was Isaac to Abraham. Many a father there has been who lost his child; but then it was God, the unchangeable and inscrutable will of the Almighty and His hand which took it. Not thus with Abraham. For him was reserved a more severe trial, and Isaac's fate was put into Abraham's hand together with the knife. And there he stood, the old man, with his only hope! Yet did he not doubt, nor look anxiously to the left or right, nor challenge Heaven with his prayers. He knew it was God the Almighty who now put him to the test; he knew it was the greatest sacrifice which could be demanded of him; but he knew also that no sacrifice was too great which God demanded—and he drew forth his knife.

Who strengthened Abraham's arm, who supported his right arm that it drooped not powerless? For he who contemplates this scene is unnerved. Who strengthened Abraham's soul so that his eyes grew not too dim to see either Isaac or the ram? For he who contemplates this scene will be struck with blindness. And yet, it is rare enough that one is unnerved or is struck with blindness, and still more rare that one narrates worthily what there did take place between father and son. To be sure, we know well enough—it was but a trial!

If Abraham had doubted, when standing on Mount Moriah; if he had looked about him in perplexity; if he had accidentally discovered the ram before drawing his knife; if God had permitted him to sacrifice it instead of Isaac—then would he have returned home, and all would have been as before, he would have had Sarah and would have kept Isaac; and yet how different all would have been! For then had his return been a flight, his salvation an accident, his reward disgrace, his future, perchance, perdition. Then would he have borne witness neither to his faith nor to God's mercy, but would have witnessed only to the terror of going to Mount Moriah. Then Abraham would not have been forgotten, nor either Mount Moriah. It would be mentioned, then, not as is Mount Ararat on which the Ark landed, but as a sign of terror, because it was there Abraham doubted. . .

Preliminary Expectoration

Now the story of Abraham has the remarkable property of always being glorious, in however limited a sense it is understood; still, here also the point is whether one means to labor and exert one's self. Now people do not care to labor and exert themselves, but wish nevertheless to understand the story. They extol Abraham, but how? By expressing the matter in the most general terms and saying: "the great thing about him was that he loved God so ardently that he was willing to sacrifice to Him his most precious possession." That is very true; but "the most precious possession" is an indefinite expression. As one's thoughts, and one's mouth, run on one assumes, in a very easy fashion, the identity of Isaac and "the most precious possession"—and meanwhile he who is meditating may smoke his pipe, and his audience comfortably stretch out their legs. If the rich youth whom Christ met on his way⁵ had sold all his possessions and given all to the poor, we would extol him as we extol all which is great—aye, would not understand even him without labor; and yet would he never have become an Abraham, notwithstanding his sacrificing the most precious possessions he had. That which people generally forget in the story of Abraham is his fear and anxiety; for as regards money, one is not ethically responsible for it, whereas for his son a father has the highest and most sacred responsibility. However, fear is a dreadful thing for timorous spirits, so they omit it. And yet they wish to speak of Abraham.

So they keep on speaking, and in the course of their speech the two terms Isaac and "the most precious thing" are used alternately, and everything is in the best order. But now suppose that among the audience there was a man who suffered with sleeplessness—and then the most terrible and profound, the most tragic, and at the same time the, most comic, misunderstanding is within the range of possibility. That is, suppose this man goes home and wishes to do as did Abraham; for his son is his most precious possession. If a certain preacher learned of this he would, perhaps, go to him, he would gather up all his spiritual dignity and exclaim: "Thou abominable creature, thou scum of humanity, what devil possessed thee to wish to murder son?" And this preacher, who had not felt any particular warmth, nor perspired while speaking about Abraham, this preacher would be astonished himself at the earnest wrath with which he poured forth his thunders against that poor wretch; indeed, he would rejoice over himself, for never had he spoken with such power and unction, and he would have

5. Matthew 19, 16f.

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said to his wife: "I am an orator, the only thing I have lacked so far was the occasion. Last Sunday, when speaking about Abraham, I did not feel thrilled in the least."

Now, if this same orator had just a bit of sense to spare, I believe he would lose it if the sinner would reply, in a quiet and dignified manner: "Why, it was on this very same matter you preached, last Sunday!" But however could the preacher have entertained such thoughts? Still, such was the case, and the preacher's mistake was merely not knowing what he was talking about. Ah, would that some poet might see his way clear to prefer such a situation to the stuff and nonsense of which novels and comedies are full! For the comic and the tragic here run parallel to infinity. The sermon probably was ridiculous enough in itself, but it became infinitely ridiculous through the very natural consequence it had. Or, suppose now the sinner was converted by this lecture without daring to raise any objection, and this zealous divine now went home elated, glad in the consciousness of being effective, not only in the pulpit, but chiefly, and with irresistible power, as a spiritual guide, inspiring his congregation on Sunday, whilst on Monday he would place himself like a cherub with flaming sword before the man who by his actions tried to give the lie to the old saying that "the course of the world follows not the priest's word."

From the reading...

"He knew it was God the Almighty who now put him to the test; he knew it was the greatest sacrifice which could be demanded of him; but he knew also that no sacrifice was too great which God demanded—and he drew forth his knife."

If, on the other hand, the sinner were not convinced of his error his position would become tragic. He would probably be executed, or else sent to the lunatic asylum—at any rate, he would become a sufferer in this world; but in another sense I should think that Abraham rendered him happy; for he who labors, he shall not perish.

Now how shall we explain the contradiction contained in that sermon? Is it due to Abraham's having the reputation of being a great man—so that whatever he does is great, but if another should undertake to do the same it is a sin, a heinous sin? If this be the case I prefer not to participate in such

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thoughtless laudations. If faith cannot make it a sacred thing to wish to sacrifice one's son, then let the same judgment be visited on Abraham as on any other man. And if we perchance lack the courage to drive our thoughts to the logical conclusion and to say that Abraham was a murderer, then it were better to acquire that courage, rather than to waste one's time on undeserved encomiums. The fact is, the ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he wanted to murder Isaac; the religious, that he wanted to sacrifice him. But precisely in this contradiction is contained the fear which may well rob one of one's sleep. And yet Abraham were not Abraham without this fear. Or, again, supposing Abraham did not do what is attributed to him, if his action was an entirely different one, based on conditions of those times, then let us forget him; for what is the use of calling to mind that past which can no longer become a present reality?—Or, the speaker had perhaps forgotten the essential fact that Isaac was the son. For if faith is eliminated, having been reduced to a mere nothing, then only the brutal fact remains that Abraham wanted to murder Isaac—which is easy for everybody to imitate who has not the faith—the faith, that is, which renders it most difficult for him. . .

Love has its priests in the poets, and one bears at times a poet's voice which worthily extols it. But not a word does one hear of faith. Who is there to speak in honor of that passion? Philosophy "goes right on." Theology sits at the window with a painted visage and sues for philosophy's favor, offering it her charms. It is said to be difficult to understand the philosophy of Hegel; but to understand Abraham, why, that is an easy matter! To proceed further than Hegel is a wonderful feat, but to proceed further than Abraham, why, nothing is easier! Personally, I have devoted a considerable amount of time to a study of Hegelian philosophy and believe I understand it fairly well; in fact, I am rash enough to say that when, notwithstanding an effort, I am not able to understand him in some passages, is because he is not entirely clear about the matter himself. All this intellectual effort I perform easily and naturally, and it does not cause my head to ache. On the other hand, whenever I attempt to think about Abraham I am, as it were, overwhelmed. At every moment I am aware of the enormous paradox which forms the content of Abraham's life, at every moment I am repulsed, and my thought, notwithstanding its passionate attempts, cannot penetrate into it, cannot forge on the breadth of a hair. I strain every muscle in order to envisage the problem—and become a paralytic in the same moment. . .

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As far as I am concerned, I am able to describe most excellently the movements of faith; but I cannot make them myself. When a person wishes to learn how to swim he has himself suspended in a swimming-belt and then goes through the motions; but that does not mean that he can swim. In the same fashion I too can go through the motions of faith; but when I am thrown into the water I swim, to be sure (for I am not a wader in the shallows), but I go through a different set of movements, to-wit, those of infinity; whereas faith does the opposite, to-wit, makes the movements to regain the finite after having made those of infinite resignation. Blessed is he who can make these movements, for he performs a marvelous feat, and I shall never weary of admiring him, whether now it be Abraham himself or the slave in Abraham's house, whether it be a professor of philosophy or a poor servant-girl: it is all the same to me, for I have regard only to the movements. But these movements I watch closely, and I will not be deceived, whether by myself or by any one else. The knights of infinite resignation are easily recognized, for their gait is dancing and bold. But they who possess the jewel of faith frequently deceive one because their bearing is curiously like that of a class of people heartily despised by infinite resignation as well as by faith—the philistines.



The Tivoli Park, Copenhagen, Denmark, Library of Congress

Let me admit frankly that I have not in my experience encountered any certain specimen of this type; but I do not refuse to admit that as far as I know, every other person may be such a specimen. At the same time I will say that I have searched vainly for years. It is the custom of scientists to

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travel around the globe to see rivers and mountains, new stars, gay-colored birds, misshapen fish, ridiculous races of men. They abandon themselves to a bovine stupor which gapes at existence and believe they have seen something worth while. All this does not interest me; but if I knew where there lived such a knight of faith I would journey to him on foot, for that marvel occupies my thoughts exclusively. Not a moment would I leave him out of sight, but would watch how he makes the movements, and I would consider myself provided for life, and would divide my time between watching him and myself practicing the movements, and would thus use all my time in admiring him. . .

But this miracle may so easily deceive one that it will be best if I describe the movements in a given case which may illustrate their aspect in contact with reality; and that is the important point. Suppose, then, a young swain falls in love with a princess, and all his life is bound up in this love. But circumstances are such that it is out of the question to think of marrying her, an impossibility to translate his dreams into reality. The slaves of paltriness, the frogs in the sloughs of life, they will shout, of course: "Such a love is folly, the rich brewer's widow is quite as good and solid a match." Let them but croak. The knight of infinite resignation does not follow their advice, he does not surrender his love, not for all the riches in the world. He is no fool, he first makes sure that this love really is the contents of his life, for his soul is too sound and too proud to waste itself on a mere intoxication. He is no coward, he is not afraid to let his love insinuate itself into his most secret and most remote thoughts, to let it wind itself in innumerable coils about every fiber of his consciousness—if he is disappointed in his love he will never be able to extricate himself again. He feels a delicious pleasure in letting love thrill his every nerve, and yet his soul is solemn as is that of him who has drained a cup of poison and who now feels the virus mingle with every drop of his blood, poised in that moment between life and death.

Having thus imbibed love, and being wholly absorbed in it, he does not lack the courage to try and dare all. He surveys the whole situation, he calls together his swift thoughts which like tame pigeons obey his every beck, he gives the signal, and they dart in all directions. But when they return, every one bearing a message of sorrow, and explain to him that it is impossible, then he becomes silent, he dismisses them, he remains alone; and then he makes the movement. Now if what I say here is to have any significance, it is of prime importance that the movement be made in a

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normal fashion. The knight of resignation is supposed to have sufficient energy to concentrate the entire contents of his life and the realization of existing conditions into one single wish. But if one lacks this concentration, this devotion to a single thought; if his soul from the very beginning is scattered on a number of objects, he will never be able to make the movement—he will be as worldly-wise in the conduct of his life as the financier who invests his capital in a number of securities to win on the one if he should lose on the other; that is, he is no knight. Furthermore, the knight is supposed to possess sufficient energy to concentrate all his thought into a single act of consciousness. If he lacks this concentration he will only run errands in life and will never be able to assume the attitude of infinite resignation; for the very minute he approaches it he will suddenly discover that he forgot something so that he must remain behind. The next minute, thinks he, it will be attainable again, and so it is; but such inhibitions will never allow him to make the movement but will, rather, tend to him sink ever deeper into the mire.

From the reading...

"For the comic and the tragic here run parallel to infinity."

Our knight, then, performs the movement—which movement? Is he intent on forgetting the whole affair, which, too, would presuppose much concentration? No, for the knight does not contradict himself, and it is a contradiction to forget the main contents of one's life and still remain the same person. And he has no desire to become another person; neither does he consider such a desire to smack of greatness. Only lower natures forget themselves and become something different. Thus the butterfly has forgotten that it once was a caterpillar—who knows but it may forget her that it once was a butterfly, and turn into a fish! Deeper natures never forget themselves and never change their essential qualities. So the knight remembers all; but precisely this remembrance is painful. Nevertheless, in his infinite resignation he has become reconciled with existence. His love for the princess has become for him the expression of an eternal love, has assumed a religious character, has been transfigured into a love for the eternal being which, to be sure, denied him the fulfillment of his love, yet reconciled him again by presenting him with the abiding consciousness of his love's being preserved in an everlasting form of which no reality can

rob him. . .

Now, he is no longer interested in what the princess may do, and precisely this proves that he has made the movement of infinite resignation correctly. In fact, this is a good criterion for detecting whether a person's movement is sincere or just make-believe. Take a person who believes that he too has resigned, but lo! time passed, the princess did something on her part, for example, married a prince, and then his soul lost the elasticity of its resignation. This ought to show him that he did not make the movement correctly, for he who has resigned absolutely is sufficient unto himself. The knight does not cancel his resignation, but preserves his love as fresh and young as it was at the first moment, he never lets go of it just because his resignation is absolute. Whatever the princess does, cannot disturb him, for it is only the lower natures who have the law for their actions in some other person, *i.e.* have the premises of their actions outside of themselves. . .

Infinite resignation is the last stage which goes before faith, so that every one who has not made the movement of infinite resignation cannot have faith; for only through absolute resignation do I become conscious of my eternal worth, and only then can there arise the problem of again grasping hold of this world by virtue of faith.

We will now suppose the knight of faith in the same case. He does precisely as the other knight, he absolutely resigns the love which is the contents of his life, he is reconciled to the pain; but then the miraculous happens, he makes one more movement, strange beyond comparison, saying: "And still I believe that I shall marry her—marry her by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the act that to God nothing is impossible." Now the absurd is not one of the categories which belong to the understanding proper. It is not identical with the improbable, the unforeseen, the unexpected. The very moment our knight resigned himself he made sure of the absolute impossibility, in any human sense, of his love. This was the result reached by his reflections, and he had sufficient energy to make them. In a transcendent sense, however, by his very resignation, the attainment of his end is not impossible; but this very act of again taking possession of his love is at the same time a relinquishment of it. Nevertheless this kind of possession is by no means an absurdity to the intellect; for the intellect all the while continues to be right, as it is aware that in the world of finalities, in which reason rules, his love was and is, an impossibility. The knight of faith realizes this fully as well. Hence the only thing which can save him is recourse to the absurd, and this recourse he has through

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his faith. That is, he clearly recognizes the impossibility, and in the same moment he believes the absurd; for if he imagined he had faith, without at the same time recognizing, with all the passion his soul is capable of, that his love is impossible, he would be merely deceiving himself, and his testimony would be of no value, since he had not arrived even at the stage of absolute resignation. . .

This last movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, I cannot make, whether or no it be my duty, although I desire nothing more ardently than to be able to make it. It must be left to a person's discretion whether he cares to make this confession; and at any rate, it is a matter between him and the Eternal Being, who is the object of his faith, whether an amicable adjustment can be affected. But what every person can do is to make the movement of absolute resignation, and I for my part would not hesitate to declare him a coward who imagines he cannot perform it. It is a different matter with faith. But what no person has a right to, is to delude others into the belief that faith is something of no great significance, or that it is an easy matter, whereas it is the greatest and most difficult of all things.



Royal Theater, Copenhagen, Denmark, Library of Congress

Let us then either waive the whole story of Abraham, or else learn to stand in awe of the enormous paradox which constitutes his significance for us, so that we may learn to understand that our age, like every age, may rejoice if it has faith. If the story of Abraham is not a mere nothing, an illusion,

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or if it is just used for show and as a pastime, the mistake cannot by any means be in the sinner’s wishing to do likewise; but it is necessary to find out how great was the deed which Abraham performed, in order that the man may judge for himself whether he has the courage and the mission to do likewise.

From the reading...

“Infinite resignation is the last stage which goes before faith, so that every one who has not made the movement of infinite resignation cannot have faith. . . .”

Related Ideas

Commentary of Kierkegaard (<http://www.sorenkierkegaard.org/>). D. Anthony Storm. Commentary on Kierkegaard’s works, gallery, biography, and links.

Kierkegaard on the Internet (<http://www.webcom.com/kierke/>). Information, resources, and links.

From the reading...

“Hence the only thing which can save him is recourse to the absurd, and this recourse he has through his faith.”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Using the story of Abraham and Isaac, show the difference between the ethical and the religious approach to Abraham’s dilemma (or “objective uncertainty”).

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2. Explain the Kierkegaard's use of these key concepts: the absurd, paradox, the leap, faith, subjectivity, and truth. Is there a kind of relativity of truth in the implicit distinction between Socratic truth (the ethical) and subjective truth (the religious).
3. How can we distinguish between someone "in the truth" and a lunatic?
4. Explain why you think Kierkegaard believes we have an absolute duty to God? What is the role of rational thought in our everyday lives?

Part IV. Search for Happiness



Chemistry Laboratory at Howard University, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress

In this part of our reading about ethics, we look at the quest for personal happiness. Almost all variations in this quest stem from the philosophy and example of Socrates, and so we begin with the “Socratic Paradox.”

The quest for intrinsic goods—whether pleasure, power, knowledge, or beauty—has led many persons to believe that people are ultimately selfish. If they are not selfish, at least, then, it is thought, people are always self-interested. We evaluate the persuasiveness of these claims.

The questions of psychological and ethical egoism lead us ultimately to the ethics of Aristotle: the question of the good life for man. How do we obtain an life of excellence—a life of living well and doing well in the affairs of the world?

Where to go for help...

Notes, quizzes, and tests for some of the selections from this part of the readings, "Search for Happiness," can be found at The Ethics of Self-Interest (http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/egoism_topics.html).

Chapter 18

“The Socratic Paradox” by Plato



Socrates, Thoemmes

About the author...

Socrates's best known student was Plato (427-347 BCE), a young aristocrat. In point of fact, Plato's given name was Aristocles, but he came to be known by the nickname "Plato" which designated his broad shoulders. Upon Socrates's execution, Plato continued the Socratic quest. After years of travel and study to Egypt and Italy, during which time purportedly he was kidnapped and held for ransom, Plato founded the Academy in 385 BC—the best-known school in the classical world. In his early writings, Plato narrates the Socratic examination of prominent persons who were presumably knowledgeable about the specific subject under question. In

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these early dialogues insights are gleaned about the nature of friendship, piety, virtue, knowledge, and so forth, but generally these ideas are discovered and evaluated provisionally and dialectically.

The later dialogues constitute Plato’s own extensive development of metaphysical and political ideals. In *Process and Reality*, A. N. Whitehead noted, “The safest general characterization of the Western philosophical tradition is that it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato.” It should be pointed out to those who might be unaware that the most famous pupil of the Academy was Aristotle, an author whose works will figure prominently in this text.

About the Author...

Plato in the second half of his dialogue *Protagoras*¹ investigates Socrates’s explanation of that aspect of his philosophy often termed “the Socratic Paradox.” Socrates believed that we all seek what we think is most genuinely in our own interest. (Obviously, short-term pleasure or success is often not in our best interest. The long-term effect on the soul is, however.) On the one hand, if we act with knowledge, then we will obtain what is good for our soul because “knowledge” implies certainty in results.

On the other hand, if the consequences of our action turn out not to be what is good for our soul (and hence what is genuinely not in our self-interest), then we had to have acted from ignorance because we were unable to achieve what we desired. In a sense, then, for Socrates, there is no ethical good or evil in things in the world—things are what they are. Instead, “knowledge” is considered to be materially equivalent to what is “good,” “excellence,” or “*areté*,” and “ignorance” is considered to be materially equivalent to “evil” or what is “harmful to our soul.”

Since we never *intentionally* harm ourselves, if harm happens to us, then, at some point, we had to have acted with a lack of knowledge. In this manner, Socrates concludes, what to many persons seems paradoxical, that we are “morally responsible” for obtaining all the knowledge we can. In this sense, ignorance is no excuse. In the reading selection below, Socrates and Protagoras disagree as to the heart of the Socratic Paradox: whether virtue is indeed knowledge and, conversely, whether virtue can be taught.

1. Plato. *Protagoras*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. 348d-362.

Ideas of Interest from *Protagoras*

1. What is Socrates’ argument that the virtue called “courage” implies knowledge?
2. According to Socrates, what is the relation between pleasure and good? Does Protagoras agree with Socrates’s arguments? Do you agree with Socrates on this point?
3. Explain Socrates’s substitution *reductio ad absurdum* to the conclusion that even if hedonism were true, that which is an evil or a bad action is not done as a result of “being overcome by pleasure.”
4. According to Socrates, why do most persons believe we do not act knowledgeably? Why do most persons believe we often act in opposition to what we know to be good for us? Could something be good for a person and not be in that person’s self-interest?
5. What do you think is Prodicus’ “distinction of names”? Why do you think Socrates wants to disallow the use of his technique?
6. How does Socrates know that the way things appear is not the way they really are?

From the reading...

“Are wisdom and temperance and courage and justice and holiness five names of the same thing?”

Reading from *The Protagoras*

[Do All Virtues Imply Knowledge?]

So I said: Do not imagine, Protagoras, that I have any other interest in asking questions of you but that of clearing up my own difficulties. For I

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think that Homer was very right in saying that "When two go together, one sees before the other (II.)," for all men who have a companion are readier in deed, word, or thought; but if a man "Sees a thing when he is alone," he goes about straightway seeking until he finds some one to whom he may show his discoveries, and who may confirm him in them. And I would rather hold discourse with you than with any one, because I think that no man has a better understanding of most things which a good man may be expected to understand, and in particular of virtue. For who is there, but you?—who not only claim to be a good man and a gentleman, for many are this, and yet have not the power of making others good—whereas you are not only good yourself, but also the cause of goodness in others. Moreover such confidence have you in yourself, that although other Sophists conceal their profession, you proclaim in the face of Hellas that you are a Sophist or teacher of virtue and education, and are the first who demanded pay in return. How then can I do otherwise than invite you to the examination of these subjects, and ask questions and consult with you? I must, indeed. And I should like once more to have my memory refreshed by you about the questions which I was asking you at first, and also to have your help in considering them. If I am not mistaken the question was this: Are wisdom and temperance and courage and justice and holiness five names of the same thing? or has each of the names a separate underlying essence and corresponding thing having a peculiar function, no one of them being like any other of them? And you replied that the five names were not the names of the same thing, but that each of them had a separate object, and that all these objects were parts of virtue, not in the same way that the parts of gold are like each other and the whole of which they are parts, but as the parts of the face are unlike the whole of which they are parts and one another, and have each of them a distinct function. I should like to know whether this is still your opinion; or if not, I will ask you to define your meaning, and I shall not take you to task if you now make a different statement. For I dare say that you may have said what you did only in order to make trial of me.

I answer, Socrates, he said, that all these qualities are parts of virtue, and that four out of the five are to some extent similar, and that the fifth of them, which is courage, is very different from the other four, as I prove in this way: You may observe that many men are utterly unrighteous, unholy, intemperate, ignorant, who are nevertheless remarkable for their courage.

Stop, I said; I should like to think about that. When you speak of brave

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men, do you mean the confident, or another sort of nature?

Yes, he said; I mean the impetuous, ready to go at that which others are afraid to approach.

In the next place, you would affirm virtue to be a good thing, of which good thing you assert yourself to be a teacher.

Yes, he said; I should say the best of all things, if I am in my right mind.



Parthenon, Library of Congress

And is it partly good and partly bad, I said, or wholly good?

Wholly good, and in the highest degree.

Tell me then; who are they who have confidence when diving into a well?

I should say, the divers.

And the reason of this is that they have knowledge?

Yes, that is the reason. And who have confidence when fighting on horseback—the skilled horseman or the unskilled? The skilled.

And who when fighting with light shields—the peltasts or the nonpeltasts?

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The peltasts. And that is true of all other things, he said, if that is your point: those who have knowledge are more confident than those who have no knowledge, and they are more confident after they have learned than before.

And have you not seen persons utterly ignorant, I said, of these things, and yet confident about them?

From the reading...

“And those, I said, who are thus confident without knowledge are really not courageous, but mad. . .”

Yes, he said, I have seen such persons far too confident. And are not these confident persons also courageous?

In that case, he replied, courage would be a base thing, for the men of whom we are speaking are surely madmen.

Then who are the courageous? Are they not the confident?

Yes, he said; to that statement I adhere.

And those, I said, who are thus confident without knowledge are really not courageous, but mad; and in that case the wisest are also the most confident, and being the most confident are also the bravest, and upon that view again wisdom will be courage.

Nay, Socrates, he replied, you are mistaken in your remembrance of what was said by me. When you asked me, I certainly did say that the courageous are the confident; but I was never asked whether the confident are the courageous; if you had asked me, I should have answered “Not all of them”: and what I did answer you have not proved to be false, although you proceeded to show that those who have knowledge are more courageous than they were before they had knowledge, and more courageous than others who have no knowledge, and were then led on to think that courage is the same as wisdom. But in this way of arguing you might come to imagine that strength is wisdom. You might begin by asking whether the strong are able, and I should say “Yes;” and then whether those who know how to wrestle are not more able to wrestle than those who do not know how to wrestle, and more able after than before they had learned, and I should

assent. And when I had admitted this, you might use my admissions in such a way as to prove that upon my view wisdom is strength; whereas in that case I should not have admitted, any more than in the other, that the able are strong, although I have admitted that the strong are able. For there is a difference between ability and strength; the former is given by knowledge as well as by madness or rage, but strength comes from nature and a healthy state of the body. And in like manner I say of confidence and courage, that they are not the same; and I argue that the courageous are confident, but not all the confident courageous. For confidence may be given to men by art, and also, like ability, by madness and rage; but courage comes to them from nature and the healthy state of the soul.

[Pleasure and Good]

I said: You would admit, Protagoras, that some men live well and others ill?

He assented.

And do you think that a man lives well who lives in pain and grief?

He does not. But if he lives pleasantly to the end of his life, will he not in that case have lived well?

He will.

Then to live pleasantly is a good, and to live unpleasantly an evil?

Yes, he said, if the pleasure be good and honourable. And do you, Protagoras, like the rest of the world, call some pleasant things evil and some painful things good?—for I am rather disposed to say that things are good in as far as they are pleasant, if they have no consequences of another sort, and in as far as they are painful they are bad.

I do not know, Socrates, he said, whether I can venture to assert in that unqualified manner that the pleasant is the good and the painful the evil. Having regard not only to my present answer, but also to the whole of my life, I shall be safer, if I am not mistaken, in saying that there are some pleasant things which are not good, and that there are some painful things which are good, and some which are not good, and that there are some which are neither good nor evil.

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From the reading...

“...do you think that knowledge is a noble and commanding thing, which cannot be overcome, and will not allow a man, if he only knows the difference of good and evil, to do anything which is contrary to knowledge...?”

And you would call pleasant, I said, the things which participate in pleasure or create pleasure?

Certainly, he said.

Then my meaning is, that in as far as they are pleasant they are good; and my question would imply that pleasure is a good in itself.

According to your favourite mode of speech, Socrates, “Let us reflect about this,” he said; and if the reflection is to the point, and the result proves that pleasure and good are really the same, then we will agree; but if not, then we will argue.

You ought to take the lead, he said; for you are the author of the discussion.



The Acropolis, (Mt. Lycabettus in background), Library of Congress

[Knowledge and Pleasure]

May I employ an illustration? I said. Suppose some one who is enquiring into the health or some other bodily quality of another:—he looks at his face and at the tips of his fingers, and then he says, Uncover your chest and back to me that I may have a better view:—that is the sort of thing which I desire in this speculation. Having seen what your opinion is about good and pleasure, I am minded to say to you: Uncover your mind to me, Protagoras, and reveal your opinion about knowledge, that I may know whether you agree with the rest of the world. Now the rest of the world are of opinion that knowledge is a principle not of strength, or of rule, or of command: their notion is that a man may have knowledge, and yet that the knowledge which is in him may be overmastered by anger, or pleasure, or pain, or love, or perhaps by fear,—just as if knowledge were a slave, and might be dragged about anyhow. Now is that your view? or do you think that knowledge is a noble and commanding thing, which cannot be overcome, and will not allow a man, if he only knows the difference of good and evil, to do anything which is contrary to knowledge, but that wisdom will have strength to help him?

I agree with you, Socrates, said Protagoras; and not only so, but I, above all other men, am bound to say that wisdom and knowledge are the highest of human things.

Good, I said, and true. But are you aware that the majority of the world are of another mind; and that men are commonly supposed to know the things which are best, and not to do them when they might? And most persons whom I have asked the reason of this have said that when men act contrary to knowledge they are overcome by pain, or pleasure, or some of those affections which I was just now mentioning.

Yes, Socrates, he replied; and that is not the only point about which mankind are in error.

Suppose, then, that you and I endeavour to instruct and inform them what is the nature of this affection which they call "being overcome by pleasure," and which they affirm to be the reason why they do not always do what is best. When we say to them: Friends, you are mistaken, and are saying what is not true, they would probably reply: Socrates and Protagoras, if this affection of the soul is not to be called "being overcome by pleasure," pray, what is it, and by what name would you describe it?

But why, Socrates, should we trouble ourselves about the opinion of the

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many, who just say anything that happens to occur to them? I believe, I said, that they may be of use in helping us to discover how courage is related to the other parts of virtue. If you are disposed to abide by our agreement, that I should show the way in which, as I think, our recent difficulty is most likely to be cleared up, do you follow; but if not, never mind.

You are quite right, he said; and I would have you proceed as you have begun.

Well then, I said, let me suppose that they repeat their question, What account do you give of that which, in our way of speaking, is termed being overcome by pleasure? I should answer thus: Listen, and Protagoras and I will endeavour to show you. When men are overcome by eating and drinking and other sensual desires which are pleasant, and they, knowing them to be evil, nevertheless indulge in them, would you not say that they were overcome by pleasure? They will not deny this. And suppose that you and I were to go on and ask them again: “In what way do you say that they are evil,—in that they are pleasant and give pleasure at the moment, or because they cause disease and poverty and other like evils in the future? Would they still be evil, if they had no attendant evil consequences, simply because they give the consciousness of pleasure of whatever nature?”—Would they not answer that they are not evil on account of the pleasure which is immediately given by them, but on account of the after consequences—diseases and the like?

I believe, said Protagoras, that the world in general would answer as you do.

And in causing diseases do they not cause pain? and in causing poverty do they not cause pain;—they would agree to that also, if I am not mistaken?

Protagoras assented.

Then I should say to them, in my name and yours: Do you think them evil for any other reason, except because they end in pain and rob us of other pleasures:—there again they would agree?

We both of us thought that they would.

And then I should take the question from the opposite point of view, and say: “Friends, when you speak of goods being painful, do you not mean remedial goods, such as gymnastic exercises, and military service, and the

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physician’s use of burning, cutting, drugging, and starving? Are these the things which are good but painful?”—they would assent to me?

He agreed.

“And do you call them good because they occasion the greatest immediate suffering and pain; or because, afterwards, they bring health and improvement of the bodily condition and the salvation of states and power over others and wealth?”—they would agree to the latter alternative, if I am not mistaken?

He assented.



The Prison of Socrates and Statue of Pan, Theatre Bacchus, Socrates’ hymn to Pan in the Phædrus is a prayer for inner beauty and that he be given only what he can bear. Library of Congress

“Are these things good for any other reason except that they end in pleasure, and get rid of and avert pain? Are you looking to any other standard but pleasure and pain when you call them good?”—they would acknowledge that they were not?

I think so, said Protagoras.

“And do you not pursue after pleasure as a good, and avoid pain as an evil?” He assented.

“Then you think that pain is an evil and pleasure is a good: and even pleasure you deem an evil, when it robs you of greater pleasures than it gives, or causes pains greater than the pleasure. If, however, you call pleasure an

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evil in relation to some other end or standard, you will be able to show us that standard. But you have none to show."

I do not think that they have, said Protagoras.

"And have you not a similar way of speaking about pain? You call pain a good when it takes away greater pains than those which it has, or gives pleasures greater than the pains: then if you have some standard other than pleasure and pain to which you refer when you call actual pain a good, you can show what that is. But you cannot."



Side View of Theseum, Smith, *A History of Greece*, 1855. A Doric Temple of 5th century BC

True, said Protagoras. Suppose again, I said, that the world says to me: "Why do you spend many words and speak in many ways on this subject?" Excuse me, friends, I should reply; but in the first place there is a difficulty in explaining the meaning of the expression "overcome by pleasure;" and the whole argument turns upon this. And even now, if you see any possible way in which evil can be explained as other than pain, or good as other than pleasure, you may still retract. Are you satisfied, then, at having a life of pleasure which is without pain? If you are, and if you are unable

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to show any good or evil which does not end in pleasure and pain, hear the consequences:—If what you say is true, then the argument is absurd which affirms that a man often does evil knowingly, when he might abstain, because he is seduced and overpowered by pleasure; or again, when you say that a man knowingly refuses to do what is good because he is overcome at the moment by pleasure. And that this is ridiculous will be evident if only we give up the use of various names, such as pleasant and painful, and good and evil. As there are two things, let us call them by two names—first, good and evil, and then pleasant and painful. Assuming this, let us go on to say that a man does evil knowing that he does evil. But some one will ask, Why? Because he is overcome, is the first answer. And by what is he overcome? the enquirer will proceed to ask. And we shall not be able to reply "By pleasure," for the name of pleasure has been exchanged for that of good. In our answer, then, we shall only say that he is overcome. "By what?" he will reiterate. By the good, we shall have to reply; indeed we shall. Nay, but our questioner will rejoin with a laugh, if he be one of the swaggering sort, "That is too ridiculous, that a man should do what he knows to be evil when he ought not, because he is overcome by good. Is that, he will ask, because the good was worthy or not worthy of conquering the evil?" And in answer to that we shall clearly reply, Because it was not worthy; for if it had been worthy, then he who, as we say, was overcome by pleasure, would not have been wrong. "But how," he will reply, "can the good be unworthy of the evil, or the evil of the good?" Is not the real explanation that they are out of proportion to one another, either as greater and smaller, or more and fewer? This we cannot deny. And when you speak of being overcome—"what do you mean," he will say, "but that you choose the greater evil in exchange for the lesser good?" Admitted. And now substitute the names of pleasure and pain for good and evil, and say, not as before, that a man does what is evil knowingly, but that he does what is painful knowingly, and because he is overcome by pleasure, which is unworthy to overcome. What measure is there of the relations of pleasure to pain other than excess and defect, which means that they become greater and smaller, and more and fewer, and differ in degree? For if any one says: "Yes, Socrates, but immediate pleasure differs widely from future pleasure and pain"—To that I should reply: And do they differ in anything but in pleasure and pain? There can be no other measure of them. And do you, like a skilful weigher, put into the balance the pleasures and the pains, and their nearness and distance, and weigh them, and then say which outweighs the other. If you weigh

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pleasures against pleasures, you of course take the more and greater; or if you weigh pains against pains, you take the fewer and the less; or if pleasures against pains, then you choose that course of action in which the painful is exceeded by the pleasant, whether the distant by the near or the near by the distant; and you avoid that course of action in which the pleasant is exceeded by the painful. Would you not admit, my friends, that this is true? I am confident that they cannot deny this.

He agreed with me.

[Ethical Error as Ignorance]

Well then, I shall say, if you agree so far, be so good as to answer me a question: Do not the same magnitudes appear larger to your sight when near, and smaller when at a distance? They will acknowledge that. And the same holds of thickness and number; also sounds, which are in themselves equal, are greater when near, and lesser when at a distance. They will grant that also. Now suppose happiness to consist in doing or choosing the greater, and in not doing or in avoiding the less, what would be the saving principle of human life? Would not the art of measuring be the saving principle; or would the power of appearance? Is not the latter that deceiving art which makes us wander up and down and take the things at one time of which we repent at another, both in our actions and in our choice of things great and small? But the art of measurement would do away with the effect of appearances, and, showing the truth, would fain teach the soul at last to find rest in the truth, and would thus save our life. Would not mankind generally acknowledge that the art which accomplishes this result is the art of measurement?

Yes, he said, the art of measurement.

From the reading...

“Are these things good for any other reason except that they end in pleasure, and get rid of and avert pain?”

Suppose, again, the salvation of human life to depend on the choice of odd and even, and on the knowledge of when a man ought to choose the greater

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or less, either in reference to themselves or to each other, and whether near or at a distance; what would be the saving principle of our lives? Would not knowledge?—a knowledge of measuring, when the question is one of excess and defect, and a knowledge of number, when the question is of odd and even? The world will assent, will they not?

Protagoras himself thought that they would.

Well then, my friends, I say to them; seeing that the salvation of human life has been found to consist in the right choice of pleasures and pains, —in the choice of the more and the fewer, and the greater and the less, and the nearer and remoter, must not this measuring be a consideration of their excess and defect and equality in relation to each other?

This is undeniably true.

And this, as possessing measure, must undeniably also be an art and science?

They will agree, he said.



The Parthenon, view from southeast, Library of Congress

The nature of that art or science will be a matter of future consideration; but the existence of such a science furnishes a demonstrative answer to the question which you asked of me and Protagoras. At the time when you asked the question, if you remember, both of us were agreeing that there was nothing mightier than knowledge, and that knowledge, in whatever existing, must have the advantage over pleasure and all other things; and then you said that pleasure often got the advantage even over a man who

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has knowledge; and we refused to allow this, and you rejoined: O Protagoras and Socrates, what is the meaning of being overcome by pleasure if not this?—tell us what you call such a state:—if we had immediately and at the time answered “Ignorance,” you would have laughed at us. But now, in laughing at us, you will be laughing at yourselves: for you also admitted that men err in their choice of pleasures and pains; that is, in their choice of good and evil, from defect of knowledge; and you admitted further, that they err, not only from defect of knowledge in general, but of that particular knowledge which is called measuring. And you are also aware that the erring act which is done without knowledge is done in ignorance. This, therefore, is the meaning of being overcome by pleasure;—ignorance, and that the greatest. And our friends Protagoras and Prodicus and Hippias declare that they are the physicians of ignorance; but you, who are under the mistaken impression that ignorance is not the cause, and that the art of which I am speaking cannot be taught, neither go yourselves, nor send your children, to the Sophists, who are the teachers of these things—you take care of your money and give them none; and the result is, that you are the worse off both in public and private life:—Let us suppose this to be our answer to the world in general: And now I should like to ask you, Hippias, and you, Prodicus, as well as Protagoras (for the argument is to be yours as well as ours), whether you think that I am speaking the truth or not?

They all thought that what I said was entirely true.

Then you agree, I said, that the pleasant is the good, and the painful evil. And here I would beg my friend Prodicus not to introduce his distinction of names, whether he is disposed to say pleasurable, delightful, joyful. However, by whatever name he prefers to call them, I will ask you, most excellent Prodicus, to answer in my sense of the words.

Prodicus laughed and assented, as did the others.

[Can Virtue Be Taught?]

Then, my friends, what do you say to this? Are not all actions honourable and useful, of which the tendency is to make life painless and pleasant? The honourable work is also useful and good? This was admitted.

Then, I said, if the pleasant is the good, nobody does anything under the idea or conviction that some other thing would be better and is also attain-

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able, when he might do the better. And this inferiority of a man to himself is merely ignorance, as the superiority of a man to himself is wisdom.

They all assented.

And is not ignorance the having a false opinion and being deceived about important matters?

To this also they unanimously assented.

Then, I said, no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature; and when a man is compelled to choose one of two evils, no one will choose the greater when he may have the less.

All of us agreed to every word of this.

Well, I said, there is a certain thing called fear or terror; and here, Prodicus, I should particularly like to know whether you would agree with me in defining this fear or terror as expectation of evil.

Protagoras and Hippias agreed, but Prodicus said that this was fear and not terror.

Never mind, Prodicus, I said; but let me ask whether, if our former assertions are true, a man will pursue that which he fears when he is not compelled? Would not this be in flat contradiction to the admission which has been already made, that he thinks the things which he fears to be evil; and no one will pursue or voluntarily accept that which he thinks to be evil?

That also was universally admitted.

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Erechtheion and Parthenon, Bruno Balestrini

Then, I said, these, Hippias and Prodicus, are our premisses; and I would beg Protagoras to explain to us how he can be right in what he said at first. I do not mean in what he said quite at first, for his first statement, as you may remember, was that whereas there were five parts of virtue none of them was like any other of them; each of them had a separate function. To this, however, I am not referring, but to the assertion which he afterwards made that of the five virtues four were nearly akin to each other, but that the fifth, which was courage, differed greatly from the others. And of this he gave me the following proof. He said: You will find, Socrates, that some of the most impious, and unrighteous, and intemperate, and ignorant of men are among the most courageous; which proves that courage is very different from the other parts of virtue. I was surprised at his saying this at the time, and I am still more surprised now that I have discussed the matter with you. So I asked him whether by the brave he meant the confident. Yes, he replied, and the impetuous or goers. (You may remember, Protagoras, that this was your answer.)

He assented.

Well then, I said, tell us against what are the courageous ready to go—against the same dangers as the cowards?

No, he answered.

Then against something different?

Yes, he said.

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Then do cowards go where there is safety, and the courageous where there is danger?

Yes, Socrates, so men say.

Very true, I said. But I want to know against what do you say that the courageous are ready to go—against dangers, believing them to be dangers, or not against dangers?

No, said he; the former case has been proved by you in the previous argument to be impossible.

That, again, I replied, is quite true. And if this has been rightly proven, then no one goes to meet what he thinks to be dangers, since the want of self-control, which makes men rush into dangers, has been shown to be ignorance.

He assented.

And yet the courageous man and the coward alike go to meet that about which they are confident; so that, in this point of view, the cowardly and the courageous go to meet the same things.

And yet, Socrates, said Protagoras, that to which the coward goes is the opposite of that to which the courageous goes; the one, for example, is ready to go to battle, and the other is not ready.

And is going to battle honourable or disgraceful? I said.



El Socrates, A. Bijur, 1859 and *The Prison of Socrates*, Athens, Greece, Library of Congress

Honourable, he replied.

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And if honourable, then already admitted by us to be good; for all honourable actions we have admitted to be good.

That is true; and to that opinion I shall always adhere.

True, I said. But which of the two are they who, as you say, are unwilling to go to war, which is a good and honourable thing?

The cowards, he replied.

And what is good and honourable, I said, is also pleasant?

It has certainly been acknowledged to be so, he replied.

And do the cowards knowingly refuse to go to the nobler, and pleasanter, and better?

The admission of that, he replied, would belie our former admissions.

From the reading...

“You will find, Socrates, that some of the most impious, and unrighteous, and intemperate, and ignorant of men are among the most courageous...”

But does not the courageous man also go to meet the better, and pleasanter, and nobler?

That must be admitted.

And the courageous man has no base fear or base confidence?

True, he replied.

And if not base, then honourable?

He admitted this.

And if honourable, then good?

Yes.

But the fear and confidence of the coward or foolhardy or madman, on the contrary, are base?

He assented.

Chapter 18. "The Socratic Paradox" by Plato

And these base fears and confidences originate in ignorance and uninstructedness?

True, he said.

Then as to the motive from which the cowards act, do you call it cowardice or courage?

I should say cowardice, he replied.

And have they not been shown to be cowards through their ignorance of dangers?

Assuredly, he said.

And because of that ignorance they are cowards?

He assented.

And the reason why they are cowards is admitted by you to be cowardice?

He again assented.

Then the ignorance of what is and is not dangerous is cowardice?

He nodded assent.

But surely courage, I said, is opposed to cowardice?

Yes.

Then the wisdom which knows what are and are not dangers is opposed to the ignorance of them?

To that again he nodded assent.

And the ignorance of them is cowardice?

To that he very reluctantly nodded assent.

And the knowledge of that which is and is not dangerous is courage, and is opposed to the ignorance of these things?

At this point he would no longer nod assent, but was silent.

From the reading...

"I want to know whether you still think that there are men who are most ignorant and yet most courageous?"

And why, I said, do you neither assent nor dissent, Protagoras?

Finish the argument by yourself, he said.

I only want to ask one more question, I said. I want to know whether you still think that there are men who are most ignorant and yet most courageous?

You seem to have a great ambition to make me answer, Socrates, and therefore I will gratify you, and say, that this appears to me to be impossible consistently with the argument.

My only object, I said, in continuing the discussion, has been the desire to ascertain the nature and relations of virtue; for if this were clear, I am very sure that the other controversy which has been carried on at great length by both of us—you affirming and I denying that virtue can be taught—would also become clear. The result of our discussion appears to me to be singular. For if the argument had a human voice, that voice would be heard laughing at us and saying: "Protagoras and Socrates, you are strange beings; there are you, Socrates, who were saying that virtue cannot be taught, contradicting yourself now by your attempt to prove that all things are knowledge, including justice, and temperance, and courage,—which tends to show that virtue can certainly be taught; for if virtue were other than knowledge, as Protagoras attempted to prove, then clearly virtue cannot be taught; but if virtue is entirely knowledge, as you are seeking to show, then I cannot but suppose that virtue is capable of being taught. Protagoras, on the other hand, who started by saying that it might be taught, is now eager to prove it to be anything rather than knowledge; and if this is true, it must be quite incapable of being taught." Now I, Protagoras, perceiving this terrible confusion of our ideas, have a great desire that they should be cleared up. And I should like to carry on the discussion until we ascertain what virtue is, whether capable of being taught or not, lest haply Epimetheus should trip us up and deceive us in the argument, as he forgot us in the story; I prefer your Prometheus to your Epimetheus, for of him I make use, whenever I am busy about these questions, in Promethean care

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of my own life. And if you have no objection, as I said at first, I should like to have your help in the enquiry.

Protagoras replied: Socrates, I am not of a base nature, and I am the last man in the world to be envious. I cannot but applaud your energy and your conduct of an argument. As I have often said, I admire you above all men whom I know, and far above all men of your age; and I believe that you will become very eminent in philosophy. Let us come back to the subject at some future time; at present we had better turn to something else.

By all means, I said, if that is your wish; for I too ought long since to have kept the engagement of which I spoke before, and only tarried because I could not refuse the request of the noble Callias. So the conversation ended, and we went our way.



The Death of Socrates (1787), Jacques-Louis David, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Related Ideas

Exploring Plato’s Dialogues (<http://plato.evansville.edu/life.htm>). *Plato’s Life*. Part of Anthony F. Beavers and Christopher Planeaux’s “virtual learning environment” on the Web.

Moral Character (<http://plato.stanford.edu/topics/moral-character>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A reliable guide discussing Socrates’s influence in the history of Western ethics.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (<http://ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext96/notun11.txt>). *Notes from Underground*, *Project Gutenberg*. Part I, Chapter 7 for Dostoevsky’s critique of the Socratic Paradox.

From the reading...

“...if virtue is entirely knowledge, as you are seeking to show, then I cannot but suppose that virtue is capable of being taught.”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Under Athenian law, one could not be prosecuted for a crime if it could be shown that the action was done unwillingly, under duress, by threat of force, or from ignorance. If Socrates’s view is correct, how could anyone be responsible for his or her actions? If one acts under the influence of passion or other nonrational motives, is one morally responsible? Can one be “willfully ignorant” in order to escape the law?
2. The central tenet of the Socratic ethics is “virtue is knowledge.” “Virtue” is to be thought of as *areté* or “the peculiar excellence of a thing.” In other words, just as we say a tool is useful in *virtue* of the way it performs a proper function, so also a person’s virtue is his or her peculiar excellence or proper function. What, then, is the source of the lack of excellence or *areté* in a person? Why is the lack of *areté* considered “bad”?
3. Fyodor Dostoevsky writes in *Notes From Underground*:

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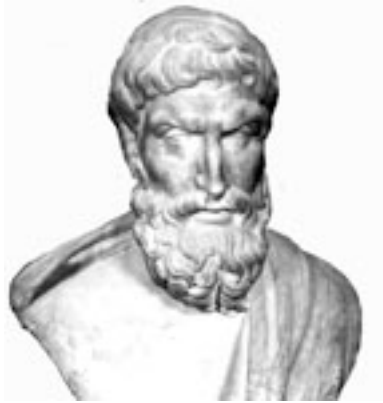
Oh, tell me, who was it first announced, who was it first proclaimed, that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble because, being enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would see his own advantage in the good and nothing else, and we all know that not one man can, consciously, act against his own interests, consequently, so to say, thought necessity, he would begin doing good? Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure innocent child!

Dostoevsky concludes, “And what if it so happens that a man’s advantage, *sometimes*, not only may, but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous.” Can you construct any specific examples of which Dostoevsky might have in mind?

4. Sigmund Freud regards both Socrates and the Socratic Method so highly that he patterned psychoanalytic theory in part around the methods used in dialogue. Even so, is the Socratic Paradox consistent with the notion of the “unconscious”? Explain whether or not Socrates can admit either the existence of the subconscious or the unconscious.

Chapter 19

“Pleasure is the Good” by Epicurus



Epicurus, Kapitolisches Museum, Rome

About the author...

Epicurus (341-271 BCE) lived in the generation after Plato and Aristotle. Although he spent his early years in the Athenian colony of Sámos, in Athenian military service, and in Lampsacus, he was able to study the philosophy of Plato and Democritus while developing a thoroughly empiricist mechanistic materialism. Later he moved to Athens to establish the *Garden*, a devoted school and community of followers including both men and women with an attending, at times, scandalous reputation. Diogenes Laëtiuss the Roman historian who lived five centuries later noted that Epicurus wrote extensively on physics, ethics, and religion. Even so,

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with the exception of several writings, all were destroyed during the development of early Christianity. Much of our information about Epicurus is based on the Roman writers, especially the biographer Diogenes Laëtius. Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* develops and extends the Epicurean philosophy.

About the work...

In this reading, several fragments of Epicurus’ writing¹ are taken as representative of Epicurean ethics. Epicurus believes that nature is made up of atoms (and compounds of atoms) developing by natural selection. On his view, although the universe is unbounded space and time, the soul is bound and distributed throughout the body which disintegrates at death. Free will is based on the nondeterministic motion of some atoms. The Epicurean ethics of sometimes popularly confused with the hedonism of the Cyrenaics since both philosophies believe pleasure is the greatest good. However, Epicurus emphasized a calm and tranquil life based on pleasures of the soul rather than pleasures of the body. Happiness is based on the reduction of pain and fear through the employment practical reasoning. Because happiness is empirically identified with pleasure, Epicurus’s philosophy is often described as “egoistic hedonism.”

From the reading...

“When therefore we say pleasure is a chief good... we mean the freedom of the body from pain, and the soul from confusion.”

Ideas of Interest from “The Life of Epicurus”

1. According to Epicurus, why is death not to be feared?

1. Diogenes Laëtius. Book X “The Life of Epicurus,” in *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by C. D. Yonge. 230 AD.

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2. Does Epicurus distinguish between “good” and “pleasure”? In what does pleasure consist?
3. How does Epicurus distinguish between good and contentment?
4. According to Epicurus, what kinds of things make life pleasant?
5. What virtue is even more important than the study of philosophy?
6. According to Epicurus, what is logically equivalent to living “prudently, and honorably, and justly”?
7. What does Epicurus say is the most important thing for a whole life of happiness? What reasons does he give for why this aspect of wisdom is needed? Does his reasoning imply that the nature of man is, as Aristotle points out, “a social animal”?
8. Explain Epicurus’ theory of justice.

From the reading...

“Therefore, the most formidable of evils, death, is nothing to us, since, when we exist, death is not present to us; and when death is present, then we have no existence.”

The Reading Selection from “The Life of Epicurus ”

Epicurus to Menœceus, Greeting

Let no one delay to study philosophy while he is young, and when he is old let him not become weary of the study; for no man can ever find the time unsuitable or too late to study the health of his soul. And he who asserts either that it is not yet time to philosophize, or that the hour is passed, is like a man who should say that the time is not yet come to be happy, or that it is too late. So that both young and old should study philosophy, the one in order that, when he is old, he may be young in good things through the pleasing recollection of the past, and the other in order that he may be at

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the same time both young and old, in consequence of his absence of fear for the future.

It is right then for a man to consider the things which produce happiness, since, if happiness is present, we have everything, and when it is absent, we do everything with a view to possess it. Now, what I have constantly recommended to you, these things I would have you do and practice, considering them to be the elements of living well.

First of all, believe that a god is an incorruptible and happy being, as the common opinion of the world dictates; and attach to your theology nothing which is inconsistent with incorruptibility or with happiness; and think that a deity is invested with everything which is able to preserve this happiness, in conjunction with incorruptibility. For there are gods; for our knowledge of them is distinct. But they are not of the character which people in general attribute to them; for they do not pay a respect to them which accords with the ideas that they entertain of them. And that man is not impious who discards the gods believed in by the many, but he who applies to the gods the opinions entertained of them by the many. For the assertions of the many about the gods are not anticipations, but false opinions. And in consequence of these, the greatest evils which befall wicked men, and the benefits which are conferred on the good, are all attributed to the gods; for they connect all their ideas of them with a comparison of human virtues, and everything which is different from human qualities, they regard as incompatible with the divine nature.

Accustom yourself also to think death a matter with which we are not at all concerned, since all good and all evil is in sensation, and since death is only the privation of sensation. On which account, the correct knowledge of the fact that death is no concern of ours, makes the mortality of life pleasant to us, inasmuch as it sets forth no illimitable time, but relieves us for the longing for immortality. For there is nothing terrible in living to a man who rightly comprehends that there is nothing terrible in ceasing to live; so that he was a silly man who said that he feared death, not because it would grieve him when it was present, but because it did grieve him while it was future. For it is very absurd that that which does not distress a man when it is present, should afflict him only when expected. Therefore, the most formidable of evils, death, is nothing to us, since, when we exist, death is not present to us; and when death is present, then we have no existence. It is no concern then either of the living or of the dead; since to the one it has no existence, and the other class has no existence itself.

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But people in general, at times flee from death as the greatest of evils, and at times wish for it as a rest from the evils in life. Nor is the not-living a thing feared, since living is not connected with it: nor does the wise man think not-living an evil; but, just as he chooses food, not preferring that which is most abundant, but that which is nicest; so too, he enjoys time, not measuring it as to whether it is of the greatest length, but as to whether it is most agreeable. And, they say, he who enjoins a young man to live well, and an old man to die well, is a simpleton, not only because of the constantly delightful nature of life, but also because the care to live well is identical with the care to die well. And he was still more wrong who said:

'Tis well to taste of life, and then when born
To pass with quickness to the
shades below.²

For if this really was his opinion, why did he not quit life? For it was easily in his power to do so, if it really was his belief. But if he was joking, then he was talking foolishly in a case where it ought not to be allowed; and, we must recollect, that the future is not our own, nor, on the other hand, is it wholly no our own, I mean so that we can never altogether await it with a feeling of certainty that it will be, nor altogether despair of it as what will never be.

From the reading...

"To accustom one's self, therefore, to simple and inexpensive habits is a great ingredient in the perfecting of health, and makes a man free from hesitation with respect to the necessary uses of life."

And we must consider that some of the passions are natural, and some empty; and of the natural ones some are necessary, and some merely natural. And of the necessary ones, some are necessary to happiness, and others, with regard to the exemption of the body from trouble; and others with respect to living itself; for a correct theory, with regard to these things, can refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the freedom from disquietude of the soul. Since this is the end of living happily; for it is for the sake of this that we do everything, wishing to avoid

2. Theongis

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grief and fear; and when once this is the case, with respect to us, then the storm of the soul is, as I may say, put an end to; since the animal is unable to go as if to something deficient, and to seek something different from that by which the good of the soul and body will be perfected.

For then we have need of pleasure when we grieve, because pleasure is not present; but when we do not grieve, then we have no need of pleasure; and on this account, we affirm, that pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily; for we have recognized this as the first good, being connate with us; and with reference to it, it is that we begin every choice and avoidance; and to this we come as if we judged of all good by passion as the standard; and, since this is the first good and connate with us, on this account we do not choose every pleasure, but at times we pass over many pleasures when any difficulty is likely to ensue from them; and we think many pains better than pleasures, when a greater pleasure follows them, if we endure the pain for time.

Every pleasure is therefore a good on account of its own nature, but it does not follow that every pleasure is worthy of being chosen; just as every pain is an evil, and yet every pain must not be avoided. But it is right to estimate all these things by the measurement and view of what is suitable and unsuitable; for at times we may feel the good as an evil, and at times, on the contrary, we may feel the evil as good. And, we think, contentment a great good, not in order that we may never have but a little, but in order that, if we have not much, we may make use of a little, being genuinely persuaded that those men enjoy luxury most completely who are the best able to do without it; and that everything which is natural is easily provided, and what is useless is not easily procured. And simple flavors give as much pleasure as costly fare, when everything that can give pain, and every feeling of want, is removed; and bread and water give the most extreme pleasure when any one in need eats them. To accustom one's self, therefore, to simple and inexpensive habits is a great ingredient in the perfecting of health, and makes a man free from hesitation with respect to the necessary uses of life. And when we, on certain occasions, fall in with more sumptuous fare, it makes us in a better disposition towards it, and renders us fearless with respect to fortune. When, therefore, we say that pleasure is a chief good, we are not speaking of the pleasures of the debauched man, or those which lie in sensual enjoyment, as some think who are ignorant, and who do not entertain our opinions, or else interpret them perversely; but we mean the freedom of the body from pain, and the soul

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from confusion. For it is not continued drinkings and revels, or the enjoyment of female society, or feasts of fish and other such things, as a costly table supplies, that make life pleasant, but sober contemplation, which examines into the reasons for all choice and avoidance, and which puts to flight the vain opinions from which the greater part of the confusion arises which troubles the soul.

From the reading...

"Of all the things which wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship."

Now, the beginning and the greatest good of all these things is Prudence, on which account Prudence is something more valuable than even philosophy, inasmuch as all the other virtues spring from it, teaching us that it is not possible to live pleasantly unless one also lives prudently, and honorably, and justly; and that one cannot live prudently, and honestly, and justly, without living pleasantly; for the virtues are connate with living agreeably, and living agreeably is inseparable from the virtues. Since, who can you think better than that man who has holy opinions respecting the gods, and who is utterly fearless with respect to death, and who has properly contemplated the end of nature, and who comprehends that the chief good is easily perfected and easily provided; and the greatest evil lasts but a short period, and causes but brief pain. And who has no belief in necessity, which is set up by some as the mistress of all things, but he refers some things to fortune, some to ourselves, because necessity is an irresponsible power, and because he sees that fortune is unstable, while our own will is free; and this freedom constitutes, in our case, a responsibility which makes us encounter blame and praise. Since it would be better to follow the fables about the gods than to be a slave to the fate of the natural philosopher; for the fables which are told give us a sketch, as if we could avert the wrath of god by paying him honor; but the other presents us with necessity who is inexorable.

And he, not thinking fortune a goddess, as the generality esteem her (for nothing is done at random by a god), nor a cause which no man can rely on, for the things that good or evil is not given by her to men so as to make them live happily, but that the principles of great goods, or great evils are

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supplied by her; thinking it better to be unfortunate in accordance with reason, than to be fortunate irrationally; for that those actions which are judged to be the best, are rightly done in consequence of reason.

Do you then study these precepts, and those which are akin to them, by all means day and night, pondering on them by yourself, and discussing them with any one like yourself, and then you will never be disturbed by either sleeping or waking fancies, but you will live like a god among men; for a man living amid immortal gods, is in no respect like a mortal being...



The Parthenon, west and east sides, Library of Congress

[Fundamental Maxims]

1. That which is happy and imperishable, neither has trouble itself, nor does it cause it to anything; so that it is not subject to feelings of either anger or gratitude; for these feelings only exist in what is weak.³
2. Death is nothing to us; for that which is dissolved is devoid of sensation, and that which is devoid of sensation is nothing to us.
3. The limit of the greatness of the pleasures is the removal of everything which can give pain. And where pleasure is, as long as it lasts, that which gives pain, or that which feels pain, or both of them, are absent.
4. Pain does not abide continuously in the flesh, but in its extremity it is present only a very short time. That pain which only just exceeds the

3. In other passages he says that the gods are speculated on by reason, some existing according to number, and others according to some similarity of form, arising from the continual flowing on of similar images, perfected for this very purpose in human form.

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pleasure in the flesh, does not last many days. But long diseases have in them more that is pleasant than painful to the flesh.

5. It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, and honorably, and justly; nor to live prudently, and honorably, and justly, without living pleasantly. But to whom it does not happen to live prudently, honorably, and justly cannot possibly live pleasantly.

6. For the sake of feeling confidence and security with regard to men, and not with reference to the nature of government and kingly power being a good, some men have wished to be eminent and powerful, in order that others might attain this feeling by their means; thinking that so they would secure safety as far as men are concerned. So that if the life of such men are is safe, they have attained to the nature of good; but if it is not safe, then they have failed in obtaining that for the sake of which they originally desired power according to the sake for which they originally desired power according the order of nature.

7. No pleasure is intrinsically bad: but the effective causes of some pleasures bring with them a great many perturbations of pleasure.

8. If every pleasure were condensed, if one may so say, and if each lasted long, and affected the whole body, or the essential parts of it, then there would be no difference between one pleasure and another.

9. If those things which make the pleasures of debauched men, put an end to the fears of the mind, and to those which arise about the heavenly bodies, and death, and pain; and if they taught us what ought to be the limit of our desires, we should have no pretense for blaming those who wholly devote themselves to pleasure, and who never feel any pain or grief (which is the chief evil) from any quarter.

10. If apprehensions relating to the heavenly bodies did not disturb us, and if the terrors of death have no concern with us, and if we had the courage to contemplate the boundaries of pain and of the desires, we should have no need of physiological studies.

11. It would not be possible for a person to banish all fear about those things which are called most essential, unless he knew what is the nature of the universe, or if he had any idea that the fables told about it could be true; and therefore it is, that a person cannot enjoy unmixed pleasure without physiological knowledge.

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12. It would be no good for a man to secure himself safety as far as men are concerned, while in a state of apprehension as to all the heavenly bodies, and those under the earth, and in short, all those in the infinite.

13. Irresistible power and great wealth may, up to a certain point, give us security as far as men are concerned; both the security of men in general depends upon the tranquillity of their souls, and their freedom from ambition.

14. The riches of nature are defined and easily procurable; but vain desires are insatiable.

15. The wise man is but little favored by fortune; but his reason procures him the greatest and most valuable goods, and these he does enjoy, and will enjoy the whole of his life.

16. The just man is the freest of all men from disquietude; but the unjust man is a perpetual prey to it.

17. Pleasure in the flesh is not increased, when once the pain arising from want is removed; it is only diversified.

18. The most perfect happiness of the soul depends on these reflections, and on opinions of a similar character on all those questions which cause the greatest alarm to the mind.

19. Infinite and finite time both have equal pleasure, if any one measures its limits by reason.

From the reading...

"If the flesh could experience boundless pleasure, it would want to dispose of eternity."

20. If the flesh could experience boundless pleasure, it would want to dispose of eternity.

21. But reason, enabling us to conceive the end and dissolution of the body, and liberating us from the fears relative to eternity, procures for us all the happiness of which life is capable, so completely that we have no further occasion to include eternity in our desires. In this disposition of mind, man

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is happy even when his troubles engage him to quit life; and to die thus, is for him only to interrupt a life of happiness.

22. He who is acquainted with the limits of life knows that that which removes the pain which arises from want and which makes the whole of life perfect, is easily procurable; so that he has no need of those things which can only be attained with trouble.

23. But as to the subsisting end, we ought to consider it with all the clearness and evidence which we refer to whatever we think and believe; otherwise, all things will be full of confusion and uncertainty of judgment.

24. If you resist all the senses, you will not even have anything left which you can refer, or by which you may be able to judge of the falsehood of the senses which you condemn.

25. If you simply discard one sense, and do not distinguish between the different elements of the judgment, so as to know on the one hand, the induction which goes beyond the actual sensation, or, on the other, the actual and immediate notion; the affections, and all the conceptions of the mind which lean directly on the sensible representation, you will be imputing trouble into the other sense, and destroying in that quarter every species of criterion.

26. If you allow equal authority to the ideas, which being only inductive, require to be verified, and to those which bear about them an immediate certainty, you will not escape error; for you will be confounding doubtful opinions with those which are not doubtful, and true judgments with those of a different character.

From the reading...

"... that pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily..."

27. If, on every occasion, we do not refer every one of our actions to the chief end of nature, if we turn aside from that to seek or avoid some other object, there will be a want of agreement between our words and our actions. All such desires as lead to no pain when they remain ungratified are unnecessary, and the longing is easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to procure or when the desires seem likely to produce harm.

Chapter 19. "Pleasure is the Good" by Epicurus

28. Of all the things which wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship.

29. The same opinion encourages man to trust that no evil will be everlasting, or even of long duration; as it sees that, in the space of life allotted to us, the protection of friendship is most sure and trustworthy.

30. Of the desires, some are natural and necessary, some natural, but not necessary, and some are neither natural nor necessary, but owe their existence to vain opinions.⁴

31. Those desires which do not lead to pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary. It is easy to impose silence on them when they appear difficult to gratify, or likely to produce injury.

32. When the natural desires, the failing to satisfy which is nevertheless, not painful, are violent and obstinate, it is a proof that there is an admixture of vain opinion in them; for then energy does not arise from their own nature, but from the vain opinions of men.

33. Natural justice is a covenant of what is suitable for leading men to avoid injuring one another, and being injured.

34. Those animals which are unable to enter into an argument of this nature, or the guard against doing or sustaining mutual injury, have no such thing as justice or injustice. And the case is the same with those nations, the members of which are either unwilling or unable to enter into a covenant to respect their mutual interests.

35. Justice has no independent existence; it results from mutual contracts, and establishes itself wherever there is a mutual engagement to guard against doing or sustaining mutual injury.

36. Injustice is not intrinsically bad; it has this character only because there is joined with it a fear of not escaping those who are appointed to punish actions marked with the character.

37. It is not possible for a man who secretly does anything in contravention of the agreement which men have made with one another, to guard against doing, or sustaining mutual injury, to believe that he shall always escape

4. Epicurus thinks that those are natural and necessary which put an end to pains as drink when one is thirsty; and that those are natural but not necessary which only diversify pleasure, but do not remove pain, such as expensive food; and that these are neither natural nor necessary, which are such as crowns, or the erection of statues.

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notice, even if he has escaped notices already then thousand times; for till, his death, it is uncertain whether he will not be detected.

38. In a general point of view, justice is the same thing to every one; for there is something advantageous in mutual society. Nevertheless, the difference of place, and diverse other circumstances, make justice vary.

39. From the moment that a thing declared just by the law is generally recognized as useful for the mutual relations of men, it becomes really just, whether it is universally regarded as such or not.

40. But if, on the contrary, a thing established by law is not really useful for the social relations, then it is not just; and if that which was just, inasmuch as it was useful, loses this character, after having been for some time considered so, it is not less true that during that time, it was really just, at least for those who do not perplex themselves about vain words, but who prefer in every case, examining and judging for themselves.

41. When, without any fresh circumstances arising a thing which has been declared just in practice does not agree with the impressions of reason, that is a proof that the thing was not really just. In the same way, when in consequence of new circumstances, a thing which has been pronounced just does not any longer appear to agree with utility, the thing which was just, inasmuch as it was useful to the social relations and intercourse of mankind, ceases to be just the moment when it ceases to be useful.

42. He who desires to live tranquilly without having anything to fear from other men, ought to make himself friends; those whom he cannot make friends of, he should, at least avoid rendering enemies; and if that is not in his power, he should, as far as possible, avoid all intercourse with them, and keep them aloof, as far as it is for his interest to do so.

43. The happiest men are they who have arrived at the point of having nothing to fear from those who surround them. Such men live with one another most agreeably, having the firmest grounds of confidence in one another, enjoying the advantages of friendship in all their fullness, and not lamenting as a pitiable circumstance, the premature death of their friends.

Chapter 19. “Pleasure is the Good” by Epicurus



Epicurus, detail from Raphael, *School of Athens*, Vatican Museums

From the reading...

“The happiest men are they who have arrived at the point of having nothing to fear from those who surround them.”

Related Ideas

Epicurus and Epicureanism (<http://www.molloy.edu/academic/philosophy/sophia/Epicurus/epicurus.htm>). *Sophia Project*. Background, links, texts, and sources for Epicureanism by Michael Russo at Molloy College.

The Philosophy Garden (<http://www.atomic-swerve.net/tpg/>). *Epicurus and Lucretius*. Texts, articles, links, and discussion of Epicureanism. Over fifty Epicurus-related anthropological pictures from Oenoanda, Herculaneum, and Rome are especially noteworthy.

Chapter 19. “Pleasure is the Good” by Epicurus

Epicurus & Epicurean Philosophy (<http://www.epicurus.net>). General information, links, and readings about Epicureanism.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Do you see any difference between Epicurus’s use of the concept “prudence” and Aristotle’s use of the concept “practical reason” as discussed in our selection from the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Henry Sidgwick defines “prudence” as “Wisdom made more definite by the acceptance of Self-interest as its sole ultimate end: the habit of calculating carefully the best means to the attainment of our own interest, and resisting all irrational impulses which may bend to perturb our calculations or prevent us from acting on them.”⁵ Are these the same kind of capacities? Justify your answer.
2. Does Epicureanism hold the doctrine that all pleasure is intrinsically good? If some pleasures lead to pain and if some pains lead to pleasures, then how can pleasure be intrinsically good? If pleasure is not intrinsically good, then what, if anything, is intrinsically good, according to Epicurus?
3. On what grounds does Epicurus reject asceticism? Compare his view to Bentham’s analysis of asceticism in this text. Does the conscious avoidance of pleasure entail painful consequences?
4. Compare Epicurus’s theory of justice with that espoused by Glaucon in the reading from Plato’s *Republic* in Part V of this text. Does Epicurus’s emphasis on the utility of a just law imply that his maxims foreshadow utilitarianism?
5. Although Epicureanism emphasizes the importance of friendship for the good life, in at least one regard, Epicureanism seems close to Stoicism. How is it possible to be happy, “enjoying the advantages of friendship in all their fullness, and not lamenting as a pitiable circumstance, the premature death of their friends.”? Basing your reasoning on the reading from Epictetus, how does the Stoic answer this question?

5. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Macmillan, 1907, 328.

Chapter 20

We Should Value What's In Our Control by Epictetus



Epictetus Antiquities Project

About the author...

Epictetus (c. 50—c. 130) was born a slave in Asia Minor, earned his freedom after being under Nero's secretary in Rome, and died sometime following his exile by Domitian in northwestern Greece. During the last years of his life, he established a school of study based on a curriculum of logic, physics, and ethics, continuing the Stoic tradition begun by Zeno of

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Citium four centuries earlier. Unlike many other Stoics, Epictetus avoided religious and political activism. In his moral philosophy, he emphasizes Socratic self-knowledge and insight and recognizes that each person is responsible for his choices in accordance with his active perception and interpretation of his circumstances. Epictetus' and, later, Spinoza's notion of active perception undoubtedly influenced Nietzsche's observation that a mark of the "new man" is his ability to will the present moment in spite of its inevitability. Epictetus once wrote, "First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do." "What you are," then, is obviously not determined by the outcome of your choices. "What you are" is not how you are perceived to be but "how you choose to be." He sought a simple, independent life as a citizen of the world.

As a slave, reportedly, Epictetus, was treated harshly by his master, Epaphroditus. On one occasion, as Epaphroditus twisted his leg horribly, Epictetus remarked, "If you keep twisting, the leg will break." His master took no notice and the leg snapped. Epictetus reminded him of the warning. Whether from this incident or whether from birth, Epictetus's lameness remained throughout his life.

About the work...

In his *The Enchiridion*,¹ a work recorded by his student Arrian, Epictetus describes how the philosophical life, achievable by reason, has as its end *eudaimonia* (happiness). Epictetus continued the Stoic character is living with *arete* in accordance with nature; by doing so, he believed any person can attain the practical characteristics of *apatheia* (composedness, willful avoidance of desires) and the resultant *eupatheiai* (feelings of well-being). Since we can control our thoughts and feelings, they have value. Since we cannot control external events or circumstances, these events have no intrinsic value, but are only "that which is to be what they are" and what we choose to make of them. On one hand, Epictetus carefully points out that mistaken judgments are the sole source of fear, greed, envy, and passion. On the other hand, oral and rational *arete* (excellence or virtue) is sufficient for emotional freedom and happiness.

1. Epictetus. *The Enchiridion*. Translated by Elizabeth Carter. 1756.

Ideas of Interest from *The Enchiridion*

1. Clarify Epictetus' distinction between things in our control and things outside of our control.
2. How is it that if you do not find fault with things, you cannot be harmed? What kind of "harm" does Epictetus mean?
3. Why (and how) is death not to be feared, according to Epictetus?
4. Explain how our active awareness can interpret unfortunate circumstances or omens as good events. How is it that situations or events that happen to us are, in themselves neither good or bad?
5. Clarify the implications of the thought that "the essence of good" consists in things in our own control
6. Explain the method elaborated by Epictetus by which we should approach all things. Is there more to this method than might be first supposed?

From the reading...

"... if you desire any of the things which are not in your own control, you must necessarily be disappointed..."

The Reading Selection from *The Enchiridion*

1. Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions.

The things in our control are by nature free, unrestrained, unhindered; but those not in our control are weak, slavish, restrained, belonging to others. Remember, then, that if you suppose that things which are slavish by nature are also free, and that what belongs to others is your own, then you will be hindered. You will lament, you will be disturbed, and you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you suppose that only to be your own

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which is your own, and what belongs to others such as it really is, then no one will ever compel you or restrain you. Further, you will find fault with no one or accuse no one. You will do nothing against your will. No one will hurt you, you will have no enemies, and you not be harmed...

2. Remember that following desire promises the attainment of that of which you are desirous; and aversion promises the avoiding that to which you are averse. However, he who fails to obtain the object of his desire is disappointed, and he who incurs the object of his aversion wretched. If, then, you confine your aversion to those objects only which are contrary to the natural use of your faculties, which you have in your own control, you will never incur anything to which you are averse. But if you are averse to sickness, or death, or poverty, you will be wretched. Remove aversion, then, from all things that are not in our control, and transfer it to things contrary to the nature of what is in our control. But, for the present, totally suppress desire: for, if you desire any of the things which are not in your own control, you must necessarily be disappointed; and of those which are, and which it would be laudable to desire, nothing is yet in your possession. Use only the appropriate actions of pursuit and avoidance; and even these lightly, and with gentleness and reservation.

From the reading...

“If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.”

3. With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup, remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.

4. When you are going about any action, remind yourself what nature the action is. If you are going to bathe, picture to yourself the things which usually happen in the bath: some people splash the water, some push, some use abusive language, and others steal. Thus you will more safely go about

this action if you say to yourself, “I will now go bathe, and keep my own mind in a state conformable to nature.” And in the same manner with regard to every other action. For thus, if any hindrance arises in bathing, you will have it ready to say, “It was not only to bathe that I desired, but to keep my mind in a state conformable to nature; and I will not keep it if I am bothered at things that happen.”

From the reading...

“Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it. If short, of a short one; if long, of a long one.”

5. Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things. Death, for instance, is not terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death that it is terrible. When therefore we are hindered, or disturbed, or grieved, let us never attribute it to others, but to ourselves; that is, to our own principles. An uninstructed person will lay the fault of his own bad condition upon others. Someone just starting instruction will lay the fault on himself. Some who is perfectly instructed will place blame neither on others nor on himself...

15. Remember that you must behave in life as at a dinner party. Is anything brought around to you? Put out your hand and take your share with moderation. Does it pass by you? Don't stop it. Is it not yet come? Don't stretch your desire towards it, but wait till it reaches you. Do this with regard to children, to a wife, to public posts, to riches, and you will eventually be a worthy partner of the feasts of the gods. And if you don't even take the things which are set before you, but are able even to reject them, then you will not only be a partner at the feasts of the gods, but also of their empire. For, by doing this, Diogenes, Heraclitus and others like them, deservedly became, and were called, divine.

16. When you see anyone weeping in grief because his son has gone abroad, or is dead, or because he has suffered in his affairs, be careful that the appearance may not misdirect you. Instead, distinguish within your own mind, and be prepared to say, “It's not the accident that distresses this person, because it doesn't distress another person; it is the judgment which

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he makes about it.” As far as words go, however, don’t reduce yourself to his level, and certainly do not moan with him. Do not moan inwardly either.

17. Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it. If short, of a short one; if long, of a long one. If it is his pleasure you should act a poor man, a cripple, a governor, or a private person, see that you act it naturally. For this is your business, to act well the character assigned you; to choose it is another’s.

18. When a raven happens to croak unluckily, don’t allow the appearance hurry you away with it, but immediately make the distinction to yourself, and say, “None of these things are foretold to me; but either to my paltry body, or property, or reputation, or children, or wife. But to me all omens are lucky, if I will. For whichever of these things happens, it is in my control to derive advantage from it.”

19. You may be unconquerable, if you enter into no combat in which it is not in your own control to conquer. When, therefore, you see anyone eminent in honors, or power, or in high esteem on any other account, take heed not to be hurried away with the appearance, and to pronounce him happy; for, if the essence of good consists in things in our own control, there will be no room for envy or emulation. But, for your part, don’t wish to be a general, or a senator, or a consul, but to be free; and the only way to this is a contempt of things not in our own control.

From the reading...

“When, therefore, anyone provokes you, be assured that it is your own opinion which provokes you.”

20. Remember, that not he who gives ill language or a blow insults, but the principle which represents these things as insulting. When, therefore, anyone provokes you, be assured that it is your own opinion which provokes you. Try, therefore, in the first place, not to be hurried away with the appearance. For if you once gain time and respite, you will more easily command yourself.

21. Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible be daily before your eyes, but chiefly death, and you will never entertain any object

thought, nor too eagerly covet anything...

29. In every affair consider what precedes and follows, and then undertake it. Otherwise you will begin with spirit; but not having thought of the consequences, when some of them appear you will shamefully desist. "I would conquer at the Olympic games." But consider what precedes and follows, and then, if it is for your advantage, engage in the affair. You must conform to rules, submit to a diet, refrain from dainties; exercise your body, whether you choose it or not, at a stated hour, in heat and cold; you must drink no cold water, nor sometimes even wine. In a word, you must give yourself up to your master, as to a physician. Then, in the combat, you may be thrown into a ditch, dislocate your arm, turn your ankle, swallow dust, be whipped, and, after all, lose the victory. When you have evaluated all this, if your inclination still holds, then go to war. Otherwise, take notice, you will behave like children who sometimes play like wrestlers, sometimes gladiators, sometimes blow a trumpet, and sometimes act a tragedy when they have seen and admired these shows. Thus you too will be at one time a wrestler, at another a gladiator, now a philosopher, then an orator; but with your whole soul, nothing at all. Like an ape, you mimic all you see, and one thing after another is sure to please you, but is out of favor as soon as it becomes familiar. For you have never entered upon anything considerately, nor after having viewed the whole matter on all sides, or made any scrutiny into it, but rashly, and with a cold inclination...

31. Be assured that the essential property of piety towards the gods is to form right opinions concerning them, as existing "I" and as governing the universe with goodness and justice. And fix yourself in this resolution, to obey them, and yield to them, and willingly follow them in all events, as produced by the most perfect understanding. For thus you will never find fault with the gods, nor accuse them as neglecting you. And it is not possible for this to be effected any other way than by withdrawing yourself from things not in our own control, and placing good or evil in those only which are. For if you suppose any of the things not in our own control to be either good or evil, when you are disappointed of what you wish, or incur what you would avoid, you must necessarily find fault with and blame the authors...

48. The condition and characteristic of a vulgar person, is, that he never expects either benefit or hurt from himself, but from externals. The condition and characteristic of a philosopher is, that he expects all hurt and benefit from himself. The marks of a proficient are, that he censures no

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one, praises no one, blames no one, accuses no one, says nothing concerning himself as being anybody, or knowing anything: when he is, in any instance, hindered or restrained, he accuses himself; and, if he is praised, he secretly laughs at the person who praises him; and, if he is censured, he makes no defense. But he goes about with the caution of sick or injured people, dreading to move anything that is set right, before it is perfectly fixed. He suppresses all desire in himself; he transfers his aversion to those things only which thwart the proper use of our own faculty of choice; the exertion of his active powers towards anything is very gentle; if he appears stupid or ignorant, he does not care, and, in a word, he watches himself as an enemy, and one in ambush.



Map of the Roman Empire, Antiquities Project

From the reading...

“Like an ape, you mimic all you see, and one thing after another is sure to please you, but is out of favor as soon as it becomes familiar. For you have never entered upon anything considerately, nor after having viewed the whole matter on all sides, or made any scrutiny into it, but rashly, and with a cold inclination.”

Related Ideas

Harvard Classics (<http://www.bartleby.com/00202.html>) *The Golden Sayings of Epictetus*. Aphorisms transcribed by Arrian, translated by Hastings Crossley at Bartleby.com, Great Books Online.

4Literature (<http://4literature.net/epictetus/discourses/>) *Discourses by Epictetus*. Epictetus's teachings presented in greater depth and variety than the aphoristic *Enchiridion*.

Stoic Voice (<http://www.geocities.com/stoicvoice/journal/0201/up020e1.htm>) *The Creed of Epictetus: The Faith of a Stoic*. An introductory essay systematically restructuring Epictetus's works by Ulysses. G. B. Pierce.

Stoicism (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/>) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A thoroughly reliable summary of the principal figures and teachings of the Stoics.



Nero Persecuting the Christians, Antiquity Project

From the reading...

“The condition and characteristic of a vulgar person, is, that he never expects either benefit or hurt from himself, but from externals. The condition and characteristic of a philosopher is, that he expects all hurt and benefit from himself.”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. How is it possible not to be “disturbed” by the death of a loved one? Isn't the Stoic's cultivation of *apatheia* a conscious debilitation and desensitization of life?
2. Assuming the Stoic ideal of *eudaimonia* is to be sought, by what kinds of behavioral conditioning could ensure that we care most deeply only for that which we can control? How is the “simple life” to be accomplished?
3. In what sense, if any, could a Stoic love anything or anybody? Isn't Stoicism a “nay-saying” attitude toward life? Does the Stoic fear risking genuine happiness?
4. Is it genuinely possible to eschew the esteem or affection of others? Is a human being essentially “a social animal” as Aristotle observes?
5. Explicate the difference between Epictetus' admonition, “Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it” and Ortega's observation, “Whether he be original or a plagiarist, man is the novelist of himself.”²
6. Is Stoicism essentially a “selfish philosophy?” Since we have no control over other people, then it would seem to follow that we should not care about them.

2. José Ortega y Gasset. *Historia como sistema*. 1941.

Chapter 21

“Egoism Is Mistaken” by David Hume



David Hume, Thoemmes

About the author...

David Hume (1711-1776) studied law at the University of Edinburgh but soon lost interest. He turned to the study of literature and philosophy; in his words, they were the “ruling passion of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments.” His philosophical writings are noted for their empirically constructive skepticism of knowledge and religion. Hume’s *History of England* in six volumes was quite successful at the time, and his analysis of causality continues to be influential.

About the work...

In his *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*,¹ Hume rewrites much of Book III of his *Treatise of Human Nature* which contained what he thought to be an overly technical account. His emphasis on utility anticipated the work of Bentham and Mill. Hume presents the first wholly secular modern theory emphasizing the role of social practices and emotion in the making of moral judgments. In fact, Hume is especially noted for his recognition that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”² Another point of special emphasis is Hume’s argument that statements about what we “ought” to do can never be proved by statements about what we “can” do. In short, “what ought to be the case” cannot be derived from “what is the case”; we cannot derive a prescriptive statement from a descriptive one. In our reading, Hume provides clear counter-examples to egoism, anticipates the “hedonistic paradox,” and proposes a criterion to distinguish selfish from nonselfish actions.

Ideas of Interest from “Of Self-Love”

1. How does Hume characterize the principle of self-love?
2. What is Hume’s argument concerning *prima facie* counter-examples to the “selfish hypothesis”? What are some of the counter-examples he mentions?
3. Explain how Hume uses the analogy of animal behavior to support his argument against egoism.
4. What additional examples does Hume list supporting the existence of human benevolence? What is his argument proving that the clearest explanation of them is not of self-interest?
5. Explain Hume’s proposed distinction between selfishness and non-selfishness based on the “object of the desire.” Do we ever seek pleasure directly? That is, explain this idea: If the object of my desire is

1. David Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. 1777.

2. David Hume. *A Treatise Concerning Human Understanding*. 1748. Book II, Part III, Sect. 3.

the benefit of someone else, even if I can receive satisfaction from helping that person, the satisfaction is not the object of the want.

From the reading...

“There is another principle... which has been much insisted on... we seek only our own gratification, while we appear the most deeply engaged in schemes for the liberty and happiness of mankind.”

The Reading Selection from “Of Self-Love”

[The Self-Interest Hypothesis]

THERE is a principle, supposed to prevail among many, which is utterly incompatible with all virtue or moral sentiment; and as it can proceed from nothing but the most depraved disposition, so in its turn it tends still further to encourage that depravity. This principle is, that all *benevolence* is mere hypocrisy, friendship a cheat, public spirit a farce, fidelity a snare to procure trust and confidence; and that while all of us, at bottom, pursue only our private interest, we wear these fair disguises, in order to put others off their guard, and expose them the more to our wiles and machinations. What heart one must be possessed of who possesses such principles, and who feels no internal sentiment that belies so pernicious a theory, it is easy to imagine: and also what degree of affection and benevolence he can bear to a species whom he represents under such odious colours, and supposes so little susceptible of gratitude or any return of affection. Or if we should not ascribe these principles wholly to a corrupted heart, we must at least account for them from the most careless and precipitate examination. Superficial reasoners, indeed, observing many false pretences among mankind, and feeling, perhaps, no very strong restraint in their own disposition, might draw a general and a hasty conclusion that all is equally corrupted, and that men, different from all other animals, and indeed from all other species of existence, admit of no degrees of good or bad, but are, in every instance, the same creatures under different disguises and appearances.

Chapter 21. "Egoism Is Mistaken" by David Hume

There is another principle, somewhat resembling the former; which has been much insisted on by philosophers, and has been the foundation of many a system; that, whatever affection one may feel, or imagine he feels for others, no passion is, or can be disinterested; that the most generous friendship, however sincere, is a modification of self-love; and that, even unknown to ourselves, we seek only our own gratification, while we appear the most deeply engaged in schemes for the liberty and happiness of mankind. By a turn of imagination, by a refinement of reflection, by an enthusiasm of passion, we seem to take part in the interests of others, and imagine ourselves divested of all selfish considerations: but, at bottom, the most generous patriot and most niggardly miser, the bravest hero and most abject coward, have, in every action, an equal regard to their own happiness and welfare.

Whoever concludes from the seeming tendency of this opinion, that those, who make profession of it, cannot possibly feel the true sentiments of benevolence, or have any regard for genuine virtue, will often find himself, in practice, very much mistaken. Probity and honour were no strangers to Epicurus and his sect. Atticus and Horace seem to have enjoyed from nature, and cultivated by reflection, as generous and friendly dispositions as any disciple of the austerer schools. And among the modern, Hobbes and Locke, who maintained the selfish system of morals, lived irreproachable lives; though the former lay not under any restraint of religion which might supply the defects of his philosophy.

[Cases of Benevolence]

An epicurean or a Hobbist readily allows, that there is such a thing as a friendship in the world, without hypocrisy or disguise; though he may attempt, by a philosophical chymistry, to resolve the elements of this passion, if I may so speak, into those of another, and explain every affection to be self-love, twisted and moulded, by a particular turn of imagination, into a variety of appearances. But as the same turn of imagination prevails not in every man, nor gives the same direction to the original passion; this is sufficient even according to the selfish system to make the widest difference in human characters, and denominate one man virtuous and humane, another vicious and meanly interested. I esteem the man whose self-love, by whatever means, is so directed as to give him a concern for others, and render him serviceable to society: as I hate or despise him, who has no

regard to any thing beyond his own gratifications and enjoyments. In vain would you suggest that these characters, though seemingly opposite, are at bottom the same, and that a very inconsiderable turn of thought forms the whole difference between them. Each character, notwithstanding these inconsiderable differences, appears to me, in practice, pretty durable and untransmutable. And I find not in this more than in other subjects, that the natural sentiments arising from the general appearances of things are easily destroyed by subtile reflections concerning the minute origin of these appearances. Does not the lively, cheerful colour of a countenance inspire me with complacency and pleasure; even though I learn from philosophy that all difference of complexion arises from the most minute differences of thickness, in the most minute parts of the skin; by means of which a superficies is qualified to reflect one of the original colours of light, and absorb the others?

But though the question concerning the universal or partial selfishness of man be not so material as is usually imagined to morality and practice, it is certainly of consequence in the speculative science of human nature, and is a proper object of curiosity and enquiry. It may not, therefore, be unsuitable, in this place, to bestow a few reflections upon it.³

The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis is, that, as it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions, there is required the highest stretch of philosophy to establish so extraordinary a paradox. To the most careless observer there appear to be such dispositions as benevolence and generosity; such affections as love, friendship, compassion, gratitude. These sentiments have their causes, effects, objects, and operations, marked by common language and observation, and plainly distinguished from those of the selfish passions. And as this is the obvious appearance of things, it must be admitted, till some hypothesis be discovered, which by penetrating deeper into human nature, may prove the

3. Benevolence naturally divides into two kinds, the *general* and the *particular*. The first is, where we have no friendship or connexion or esteem for the person, but feel only a general sympathy with him or a compassion for his pains, and a congratulation with his pleasures. The other species of benevolence is founded on an opinion of virtue, on services done us, or on some particular connexions. Both these sentiments must be allowed real in human nature: but whether they will resolve into some nice considerations of self-love, is a question more curious than important. The former sentiment, to wit, that of general benevolence, or humanity, or sympathy, we shall have occasion frequently to treat of in the course of this inquiry; and I assume it as real, from general experience, without any other proof.

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former affections to be nothing but modifications of the latter. All attempts of this kind have hitherto proved fruitless, and seem to have proceeded entirely from that love of *simplicity* which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy. I shall not here enter into any detail on the present subject. Many able philosophers have shown the insufficiency of these systems. And I shall take for granted what, I believe, the smallest reflection will make evident to every impartial enquirer.



Edinburgh Canongate Tolbooth 1591 and Melrose Abbey, Library of Congress

[Presupposition of Simplicity]

But the nature of the subject furnishes the strongest presumption, that no better system will ever, for the future, be invented, in order to account for the origin of the benevolent from the selfish affections, and reduce all the various emotions of the human mind to a perfect simplicity. The case is not the same in this species of philosophy as in physics. Many an hypothesis in nature, contrary to first appearances, has been found, on more accurate scrutiny, solid and satisfactory. Instances of this kind are so frequent that a judicious, as well as witty philosopher,⁴ has ventured to affirm, if there be more than one way in which any phenomenon may be produced, that there is general presumption for its arising from the causes which are the least obvious and familiar. But the presumption always lies on the other side, in all enquiries concerning the origin of our passions, and of the internal op-

4. Mons. Fontenelle.

erations of the human mind. The simplest and most obvious cause which can there be assigned for any phenomenon, is probably the true one. When a philosopher, in the explication of his system, is obliged to have recourse to some very intricate and refined reflections, and to suppose them essential to the production of any passion or emotion, we have reason to be extremely on our guard against so fallacious an hypothesis. The affections are not susceptible of any impression from the refinements of reason or imagination; and it is always found that a vigorous exertion of the latter faculties, necessarily, from the narrow capacity of the human mind, destroys all activity in the former. Our predominant motive or intention is, indeed, frequently concealed from ourselves when it is mingled and confounded with other motives which the mind, from vanity or self-conceit, is desirous of supposing more prevalent: but there is no instance that a concealment of this nature has ever arisen from the abstruseness and intricacy of the motive. A man that has lost a friend and patron may flatter himself that all his grief arises from generous sentiments, without any mixture of narrow or interested considerations: but a man that grieves for a valuable friend, who needed his patronage and protection; how can we suppose, that his passionate tenderness arises from some metaphysical regards to a self-interest, which has no foundation or reality? We may as well imagine that minute wheels and springs, like those of a watch, give motion to a loaded waggon, as account for the origin of passion from such abstruse reflections.

From the reading...

"The simplest and most obvious cause which can there be assigned for any phenomenon, is probably the true one."

Animals are found susceptible of kindness, both to their own species and to ours; nor is there, in this case, the least suspicion of disguise or artifice. Shall we account for all *sentiments*, too, from refined deductions of self-interest? Or if we admit a disinterested benevolence in the inferior species, by what rule of analogy can we refuse it in the superior?

Love between the sexes begets a complacency and good-will, very distinct from the gratification of an appetite. Tenderness to their offspring, in all sensible beings, is commonly able alone to counter-balance the strongest

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motives of self-love, and has no manner of dependance on that affection. What interest can a fond mother have in view, who loses her health by assiduous attendance on her sick child, and afterwards languishes and dies of grief, when freed, by its death, from the slavery of that attendance?

Is gratitude no affection of the human breast, or is that a word merely, without any meaning or reality? Have we no satisfaction in one man’s company above another’s, and no desire of the welfare of our friend, even though absence or death should prevent us from all participation in it? Or what is it commonly, that gives us any participation in it, even while alive and present, but our affection and regard to him?

From the reading...

“Our predominant motive or intention is, indeed, frequently concealed from ourselves when it is mingled and confounded with other motives which the mind, from vanity or self-conceit, is desirous of supposing more prevalent. . .”

These and a thousand other instances are marks of a general benevolence in human nature, where no *real* interest binds us to the object. And how an *imaginary* interest known and avowed for such, can be the origin of any passion or emotion, seems difficult to explain. No satisfactory hypothesis of this kind has yet been discovered; nor is there the smallest probability that the future industry of men will ever be attended with more favourable success.

[Pleasure Not Directly Sought]

But farther, if we consider rightly of the matter, we shall find that the hypothesis which allows of a disinterested benevolence, distinct from self-love, has really more *simplicity* in it, and is more conformable to the analogy of nature than that which pretends to resolve all friendship and humanity into this latter principle. There are bodily wants or appetites acknowledged by every one, which necessarily precede all sensual enjoyment, and carry us directly to seek possession of the object. Thus, hunger and thirst have eating and drinking for their end; and from the gratification of these

primary appetites arises a pleasure, which may become the object of another species of desire or inclination that is secondary and interested. In the same manner there are mental passions by which we are impelled immediately to seek particular objects, such as fame or power, or vengeance without any regard to interest; and when these objects are attained a pleasing enjoyment ensues, as the consequence of our indulged affections. Nature must, by the internal frame and constitution of the mind, give an original propensity to fame, ere we can reap any pleasure from that acquisition, or pursue it from motives of self-love, and desire of happiness. If I have no vanity, I take no delight in praise: if I be void of ambition, power gives me no enjoyment: if I be not angry, the punishment of an adversary is totally indifferent to me. In all these cases there is a passion which points immediately to the object, and constitutes it our good or happiness; as there are other secondary passions which afterwards arise, and pursue it as a part of our happiness, when once it is constituted such by our original affections. Were there no appetite of any kind antecedent to self-love, that propensity could scarcely ever exert itself; because we should, in that case, have felt few and slender pains or pleasures, and have little misery or happiness to avoid or to pursue.

Now where is the difficulty in conceiving, that this may likewise be the case with benevolence and friendship, and that, from the original frame of our temper, we may feel a desire of another's happiness or good, which, by means of that affection, becomes our own good, and is afterwards pursued, from the combined motives of benevolence and self-enjoyments? Who sees not that vengeance, from the force alone of passion, may be so eagerly pursued, as to make us knowingly neglect every consideration of ease, interest, or safety; and, like some vindictive animals, infuse our very souls into the wounds we give an enemy;⁵ and what a malignant philosophy must it be, that will not allow to humanity and friendship the same privileges which are undisputably granted to the darker passions of enmity and resentment; such a philosophy is more like a satyr than a true delineation or description of human nature; and may be a good foundation for paradoxical wit and raillery, but is a very bad one for any serious argument or reasoning.

5. *Animasque in vulnere ponunt. Virg. Dum alteri noceat, sui negligens* says Seneca of Anger. *De Ira*, I. i.

Chapter 21. “Egoism Is Mistaken” by David Hume



Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh, Library of Congress

From the reading...

“what a malignant philosophy must it be, that will not allow to humanity and friendship the same privileges which are undisputably granted to the darker passions of enmity and resentment”

Related Ideas

David Hume (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Thoroughly reliable summary of Hume’s life and work by William Edward Morris with sections on empiricism, moral philosophy, politics, and religion.

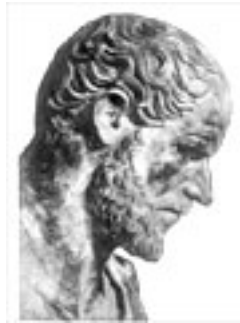
David Hume (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/h/humelife.htm>). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A brief summary of Hume’s life and writings by James Fieser.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Hume argues that cases of friendship, benevolence, and so forth ought be explained in the simplest manner: “The simplest and most obvious cause which can there be assigned for any phenomenon, is probably the true one.” What reason can be given for the simplicity hypothesis? (Cf., Occam’s Razor or the Principle of Parsimony.)
2. Is Hume correct in his argument that we seek objects, not pleasure? When we are hungry, we seek food; when we are tired, we seek rest. Is pleasure only a side-product of activity? Compare Aristotle’s view as expressed in his *Nichomachean Ethics*.
3. Explore the so-called Hedonistic Paradox: “Pleasure to be got, must be forgot.” Relate the paradox to Hume’s distinction between primary and secondary passions.

Chapter 22

“What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle



Aristotle, Thoemmes

About the author...

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) studied at Plato's Academy for twenty years. After a few years in Macedonia as a tutor to the future Alexander the Great, Aristotle returned to Athens and established his own school, the Lyceum. His presentation of courses was encyclopedic. Unlike Plato, Aristotle had an abiding interest in natural science and wrote extensively in physics, zoology, and psychology. Much as Socrates had been charged with impiety, so also Aristotle was charged—in large measure due to his former relationship with Alexander. Unlike Socrates, Aristotle fled Athens, “lest,” as he is quoted, “the Athenians sin twice against philosophy.” His work in logic was not significantly improved upon until the development of symbolic logic in the twenienth century. The central concepts of his poetics and

Chapter 22. “What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle

ethics still remain influential. Charles Darwin once wrote, “Linnaeus and Cuvier have been my two gods...but they were mere schoolboys [compared to] Aristotle.”

About the work...

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*,¹ Aristotle argues that what we seek is *eudaimonia*, a term unfortunately translated in this reading as “happiness.” is better expressed as the “well-being” or the “excellence of performing the proper function.” When Aristotle explains human virtue, he is not discussing what we now refer to as Victorian virtue. He is clarifying the peculiar excellence of human beings in the same manner as we often speak of the peculiar excellence attributable to the nature of a thing. For example, a tool is useful in *virtue* of the fact that it performs its function well. Aristotle’s purpose in the *Nichomachean Ethics* is not just to explain the philosophy of the excellence for human beings but also to demonstrate specifically how human beings can lead lives of excellence as activity in accordance with practical and theoretical reason.

From the reading...

“...human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.”

Ideas of Interest from the *Nichomachean Ethics*

1. According to Aristotle, what is happiness (*eudaimonia*)? How does

1. Aristotle. *Nichomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925.

Chapter 22. “What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle

Aristotle’s definition of happiness differ from the account given by most people?

2. What does Aristotle mean when he writes that the good for man is self-sufficient?
3. How does Aristotle prove that the final good for human beings is “activity of the soul in accordance with [the best and most complete] virtue”?
4. Explain and trace out some examples of Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean.
5. What is the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge? Which kind is the more important for Aristotle?
6. According to Aristotle, how are the habits and character of excellence in human beings attained?
7. What is the relation between the passions and the virtues according to Aristotle?
8. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, does Aristotle trace out a method whereby human beings can change their character? If so, what are the main outlines of his program for change?

The Reading Selection from the *Nicomachean Ethics*

Book I [The Good for Man]

1 [All Activity Aims at Some Good]

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the

end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity—as bridle—making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others—in all of these the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued. It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned. . . .

2 [The Good for Man]

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least to determine what it is. . . .

5 [Popular Notions of Happiness]

Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good. . . what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identifying living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honour; they differ, however, from one another—and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great ideal that is above their comprehension. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another which is self-subsistent and causes the goodness of all these as well. . . .

7 [Definition of Happiness]

Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be. It seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of this that all men do whatever else they do. Therefore, if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.

So the argument has by a different course reached the same point; but we must try to state this even more clearly. Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (*e.g.*, wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. But some limit must be set to this; for if we extend our requirements to ancestors and descendants and friends' friends we are in for an infinite series. . . the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life de-

sirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others—if it were so counted it would clearly be made desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

... [H]uman good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

But we must add "in a complete life." For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.

13 [Kinds of Virtue]

Since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue, we must consider the nature of virtue, for perhaps we shall thus see better the nature of happiness. . . .

Virtue too is distinguished into kinds in accordance with this difference; for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom and understanding and practical wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a man's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise virtues. . . .

Book II [Moral Virtue]

1 [How Moral Virtue is Acquired]

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result

Chapter 22. “What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle

of habit, whence also its name *ethike* is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them. and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, *e.g.*, men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. . . .

Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all

the difference. . . .

5 [Moral Virtue Is Character]

Next we must consider what virtue is. Since things that are found in the soul are of three kinds—passions, faculties, states of character—virtue must be one of these. By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain; by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, *e.g.*, of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity; by states of character the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, *e.g.*, with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately, and similarly with reference to the other passions.

Now neither the virtues nor the vices are passions, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions, but are so called on the ground of our virtues and our vices, and because we are neither praised nor blamed for our passions (for the man who feels fear or anger is not praised, nor is the man who simply feels anger blamed, but the man who feels it in a certain way), but for our virtues and our vices we are praised or blamed. Again, we feel anger and fear without choice, but the virtues are modes of choice or involve choice. Further, in respect of the passions we are said to be moved, but in respect of the virtues and the vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed in a particular way.

For these reasons also they are not faculties; for we are neither called good nor bad, nor praised nor blamed, for the simple capacity of feeling the passions; again, we have the faculties of nature, but we are not made good or bad by nature; we have spoken of this before. If, then, the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be states of character.

Thus we have stated what virtue is in respect of its genus.

From the reading...

“The life of money-making is one under taken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful for the sake of something else.”

6 [Disposition to Choose the Mean]

We must, however, not only describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; *e.g.*, the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Similarly the excellence of the horse makes a horse both good in itself and good at running and at carrying its rider and at awaiting the attack of the enemy. Therefore, if this is true in every case, the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well.

How this is to happen... will be made plain... by the following consideration of the specific nature of virtue. In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little—and this is not one, nor the same for all. For instance, if ten is many and two is few, six is the intermediate, taken in terms of the object; for it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount; this is intermediate according to arithmetical proportion. But the intermediate relatively to us is not to be taken so; if ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little.... Thus a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this—the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us.

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well—by looking to the

Chapter 22. “What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle

intermediate and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work), and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate.

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, *i.e.*, the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right and extreme.



Chapter 22. “What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle

Athens, Greece, 400 BC, Book illustration by Theodor Horydazak, Library of Congress

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, *e.g.*, spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong. It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But as there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is in a sense an extreme, so too of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong; for in general there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean.

7 [The Mean Illustrated]

We must, however, not only make this general statement, but also apply it to the individual facts. For among statements about conduct those which are general apply more widely, but those which are particular are more genuine, since conduct has to do with individual cases, and our statements must harmonize with the facts in these cases. We may take these cases from our table. With regard to feelings of fear and confidence courage is the mean, of the people who exceed, he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name (many of the states have no name), while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward. With regard to pleasures and pains—not all of them, and not so much with regard to the pains—the mean is temperance, the excess self-indulgence. Persons deficient with regard to the pleasures are not often found; hence such persons also have received no name. But let us call them “insensible.”

With regard to giving and taking of money the mean is liberality, the excess

and the defect prodigality and meanness. In these actions people exceed and fall short in contrary ways; the prodigal exceeds in spending and falls short in taking, while the mean man exceeds in taking and falls short in spending. . . . With regard to money there are also other dispositions—a mean, magnificence (for the magnificent man differs from the liberal man; the former deals with large sums, the latter with small ones), and excess, tastelessness and vulgarity, and a deficiency. . . . With regard to honour and dishonour the mean is proper pride, the excess is known as a sort of “empty vanity,” and the deficiency is undue humility; and as we said liberality was related to magnificence, differing from it by dealing with small sums, so there is a state similarly related to proper pride, being concerned with small honours while that is concerned with great. For it is possible to desire honour as one ought, and more than one ought, and less, and the man who exceeds in his desires is called ambitious, the man who falls short unambitious, while the intermediate person has no name. The dispositions also are nameless, except that that of the ambitious man is called ambition. Hence the people who are at the extremes lay claim to the middle place; and we ourselves sometimes call the intermediate person ambitious and sometimes unambitious, and sometimes praise the ambitious man and sometimes the unambitious. . . .

With regard to anger also there is an excess, a deficiency, and a mean. Although they can scarcely be said to have names, yet since we call the intermediate person good-tempered let us call the mean good temper; of the persons at the extremes let the one who exceeds be called irascible, and his vice irascibility, and the man who falls short an inirascible sort of person, and the deficiency inirascibility.

Book X [Pleasure; Happiness]

6 [Happiness Is Not Amusement]

. . . what remains is to discuss in outline the nature of *eudaimonia*, since this is what we state the end of human nature to be. Our discussion will be the more concise if we first sum up what we have said already. We said, then, that it is not a disposition; for if it were it might belong to some one who was asleep throughout his life, living the life of a plant, or, again, to some one who was suffering the greatest misfortunes. If these implications are

Chapter 22. “What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle

unacceptable, and we must rather class happiness as an activity, as we have said before, and if some activities are necessary, and desirable for the sake of something else, while others are so in themselves, evidently happiness must be placed among those desirable in themselves, not among those desirable for the sake of something else; for happiness does not lack anything, but is self-sufficient. Now those activities are desirable in themselves from which nothing is sought beyond the activity. And of this nature virtuous actions are thought to be; for to do noble and good deeds is a thing desirable for its own sake.

Pleasant amusements also are thought to be of this nature; we choose them not for the sake of other things; for we are injured rather than benefited by them, since we are led to neglect our bodies and our property. . . . Happiness, therefore, does not lie in amusement; it would, indeed, be strange if the end were amusement, and one were to take trouble and suffer hardship all one’s life in order to amuse oneself. For, in a word, everything that we choose we choose for the sake of something else—except happiness, which is an end. Now to exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish. But to amuse oneself in order that one may exert oneself, as Anacharsis puts it, seems right; for amusement is a sort of relaxation, and we need relaxation because we cannot work continuously. Relaxation, then, is not an end; for it is taken for the sake of activity.

The happy life is thought to be virtuous; now a virtuous life requires exertion, and does not consist in amusement. And we say that serious things are better than laughable things and those connected with amusement, and that the activity of the better of any two things—whether it be two elements of our being or two men—is the more serious; but the activity of the better is *ipso facto* superior and more of the nature of happiness. And any chance person—even a slave—can enjoy the bodily pleasures no less than the best man; but no one assigns to a slave a share in happiness—unless he assigns to him also a share in human life. For happiness does not lie in such occupations, but, as we have said before, in virtuous activities.

7 [Happiness Is the Contemplative Life]

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this

element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said.

Now this would seem to be in agreement with what we said before and with the truth. For, firstly, this activity is the best (since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects); and, secondly, it is the most continuous, since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything. And we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvellous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher, as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessaries of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. And this activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action.

... And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest.

8 [The Contemplative Life]

But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate. Just and brave acts, and other virtuous acts, we do in relation to each other, observing our respective duties with regard to contracts and services and all manner of actions and with regard to passions; and all of

Chapter 22. “What is the Life of Excellence?” by Aristotle

these seem to be typically human. Some of them seem even to arise from the body, and virtue of character to be in many ways bound up with the passions. Practical wisdom, too, is linked to virtue of character, and this to practical wisdom, since the principles of practical wisdom are in accordance with the moral virtues and rightness in morals is in accordance with practical wisdom. Being connected with the passions also, the moral virtues must belong to our composite nature; and the virtues of our composite nature are human, so, therefore, are the life and the happiness which correspond to these. The excellence of the reason is a thing apart, we must be content to say this much about it, for to describe it precisely is a task greater than our purpose requires. It would seem, however, also to need external equipment but little, or less than moral virtue does. Grant that both need the necessaries, and do so equally, even if the statesman’s work is the more concerned with the body and things of that sort; for there will be little difference there; but in what they need for the exercise of their activities there will be much difference. The liberal man will need money for the doing of his liberal deeds, and the just man too will need it for the returning of services (for wishes are hard to discern, and even people who are not just pretend to wish to act justly); and the brave man will need power if he is to accomplish any of the acts that correspond to his virtue, and the temperate man will need opportunity; for how else is either he or any of the others to be recognized? It is debated, too, whether the will or the deed is more essential to virtue, which is assumed to involve both; it is surely clear that its perfection involves both; but for deeds many things are needed, and more, the greater and nobler the deeds are. But the man who is contemplating the truth needs no such thing, at least with a view to the exercise of his activity; indeed they are, one may say, even hindrances, at all events to his contemplation; but in so far as he is a man and lives with a number of people, he chooses to do virtuous acts; he will therefore need such aids to living a human life.

But, being a man, one will also need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body also must be healthy and must have food and other attention. Still, we must not think that the man who is to be happy will need many things or great things, merely because he cannot be supremely happy without external goods; for self-sufficiency and action do not involve excess, and we can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea; for even with moderate advantages one can act virtuously (this is manifest enough; for private persons are thought to do worthy acts no less than despots—indeed even more); and it is enough

that we should have so much as that; for the life of the man who is active in accordance with virtue will be happy...

From the reading...

“Happiness, therefore, does not lie in amusement; it would, indeed, be strange if the end were amusement, and one were to take trouble and suffer hardship all one’s life in order to amuse oneself.”

Related Ideas

Archelogos Projects (<http://www.archelogos.com>) Over fifty classical philosophers are constructing a complete database of arguments drawn from the works of Plato and Aristotle in order to demonstrate the complex interconnections of inferences.

Literature on Aristotle (<http://ethics.acusd.edu/theories/aristotle>) *Literature on Aristotle and Virtue Ethics* A survey on Internet resources on Aristotle and virtue ethics, including RealAudio lectures and interviews.

From the reading...

“If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us.”



Parthenon, Athens, Greece, (detail) Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Clarify as much as possible Aristotle’s distinction between practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge. Does an understanding of this distinction help account for why persons who know certain habits or behaviors are harmful, still persist in those behaviors? Relate your analysis to a defense of the Socratic paradox.
2. Explore the similarities of Aristotle’s theory of the development of habits and character with the James-Lange theory of emotion. Do you think a change of actions precedes a change in states of mind, attitudes, or thoughts or do you think states of mind usually precede actions in our attempts to change our behavior? How do the cognitive behaviorists stand on this issue. Would the psychoanalytic approach to human behavior entail a different account of behavioral change?
3. Aristotle’s ethics is considered to be a teleological system of ethics since he is concerned with action conducive to the good of human beings rather than action considered right independently of human purpose. The rightness of actions is said to be judged by its purposes. Bentham’s hedonistic calculus is also a teleological system. Since Aristotle’s

Chapter 22. "What is the Life of Excellence?" by Aristotle

He regards ethics as a branch of political or social science and since Aristotle asserts that political science studies the good for man, could Aristotle be considered an early adherent of utilitarianism? Discuss this possibility by referring to the main tenets of both ethical systems.

4. Aristotle's theory of ethics is difficult to resolve in terms of moral obligations of human beings. A second major approach to ethics is sometimes called a duty ethics or a deontological ethics. Should the rightness of human actions be based on laws, principles, or rules of moral behavior? The deontologists believe ethics should be based on duty and rights and those ethical theories are often based on social-contract theory. Explore the possibility that socially-based moral laws and principles are incompatible with the moral well-being of the individual. Where would the existentialist stand on this issue?

Part V. Ethics and Society



Plato, at the beginning of *The Republic*, raises a fascinating question: If we had every assurance we could never get caught and punished, would we be foolish to continue to obey ethical rules? The answer to this question suggests a reason why people can obtain their wants while minimizing their fear of threat and harm by forming a social contract.

In this, the final section of our readings, we look at the some of social implications of ethics. Certainly the ethical good of the individual is bound to the ethical good of the community; hence, human beings as social animals must be related in ethical ways to the societies in which they live.

Our study, as many philosophical inquiries before it, tends to raise more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, we conclude with William James' positive, pragmatic assessment of what makes a life significant.

Where to go for help...

Notes, quizzes, and tests for some of the selections from this part of the readings, "Ethics and Society," can be found at Utilitarianism (http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/utility_topics.html).

Chapter 23

“The Ring of Gyges” by Plato



Relief of Plato Thoemmes Press

About the author...

Other than a few anecdotal accounts, not much is known about Plato's early life. The association with his friend and mentor Socrates was undoubtedly a major influence. Plato's founding of the Academy, a school formed for scientific and mathematical investigation, not only established the systematic beginning of Western science but also influenced the structure of higher education from medieval to modern times. Plutarch once wrote, "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy is Plato."

About the work...

Glaucon, the main speaker of this reading from Plato’s *The Republic*,¹ expresses a widely and deeply-held ethical point of view known as egoism—a view taught by a Antiphon, a sophistic contemporary of Socrates. Egoistic theories are founded on the belief that everyone acts only from the motive of self-interest. For example, the egoist accounts for the fact that people help people on the basis of what the helpers might get in return from those helped or others like them. This view, neither representative of Plato’s nor of Socrates’s philosophy, is presented here by Glaucon as a stalking horse for the development of a more thoroughly developed ethical theory. Although Socrates held that everyone attempts to act from the motive of “self-interest,” his interpretation of that motive is quite different from the view elaborated by Glaucon because Glaucon seems unaware of the attendant formative effects on the soul by actions for short-term pleasure.

From the reading...

“...those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust. . .”

Ideas of Interest from *The Republic*

1. According to the Glaucon’s brief, why do most persons act justly? Explain whether you think Glaucon’s explanation is psychologically correct.
2. If a person could be certain not only that an action resulting in personal benefit would not be found out but also that if this action were discovered, no punishing consequences would follow, then would there any reason for that person to act morally?

1. Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowlett. Book II, 358d—361d.

Chapter 23. “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato

3. Is it true that sometimes our self-interest is served by *not* acting in our self-interest? Construct an example illustrating this view, and attempt to resolve the paradoxical expression of the question.
4. Quite often people are pleased when they can help others. Analyze whether this fact is sufficient to prove that the motive for helping others is ultimately one of pleasure or of self-interest.
5. According to Glaucon, how does the practice of justice arise? On the view he expresses, would there be any reason prior to living in a society to do the right thing? Does the practice of ethics only make sense in the context of living in a society?

The Reading Selection from *The Republic*

I am delighted, he replied, to hear you say so, and shall begin by speaking, as I proposed, of the nature and origin of justice. They say that to do injustice is, by nature, good; to suffer injustice, evil; but that the evil is greater than the good. And so when men have both done and suffered injustice and have had experience of both, not being able to avoid the one and obtain the other, they think that they had better agree among themselves to have neither; hence there arise laws and mutual covenants; and that which is ordained by law is termed by them lawful and just. This they affirm to be the origin and nature of justice; —it is a mean or compromise, between the best of all, which is to do injustice and not be punished, and the worst of all, which is to suffer injustice without the power of retaliation; and justice, being at a middle point between the two, is tolerated not as a good, but as the lesser evil, and by reason of the inability of men to do injustice. For no man who is worthy to be called a man would ever submit to such an agreement if he were able to resist; he would be mad if he did. Such is the received account, Socrates, of the nature and origin of justice.

Now that those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust will best appear if we imagine something of this kind: having given both to the just and the unjust power to do what they will, let us watch and see whither desire will lead them; then we shall discover in the very act the just and unjust man to be proceeding along the same road, following their interest, which all natures deem to be their good, and are only diverted into the path of justice by the force of law. The liberty which we are supposing may be most completely given to them in

Chapter 23. “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato

the form of such a power as is said to have been possessed by Gyges the ancestor of Croesus the Lydian.

According to the tradition, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia; there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. Amazed at the sight, he descended into the opening, where, among other marvels, he beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he stooping and looking in saw a dead body of stature, as appeared to him, more than human, and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and reascended. Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king; into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the collet of the ring inside his hand, when instantly he became invisible to the rest of the company and they began to speak of him as if he were no longer present. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outwards and reappeared; he made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result—when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Whereupon he contrived to be chosen one of the messengers who were sent to the court; where as soon as he arrived he seduced the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom.

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other. No man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men.

From the reading...

“For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice. . . .”

Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm

Chapter 23. "The Ring of Gyges" by Plato

to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice. Enough of this. Now, if we are to form a real judgment of the life of the just and unjust, we must isolate them; there is no other way; and how is the isolation to be effected?

I answer: Let the unjust man be entirely unjust, and the just man entirely just; nothing is to be taken away from either of them, and both are to be perfectly furnished for the work of their respective lives. First, let the unjust be like other distinguished masters of craft; like the skilful pilot or physician, who knows intuitively his own powers and keeps within their limits, and who, if he fails at any point, is able to recover himself. So let the unjust make his unjust attempts in the right way, and lie hidden if he means to be great in his injustice (he who is found out is nobody): for the highest reach of injustice is: to be deemed just when you are not. Therefore I say that in the perfectly unjust man we must assume the most perfect injustice; there is to be no deduction, but we must allow him, while doing the most unjust acts, to have acquired the greatest reputation for justice. If he have taken a false step he must be able to recover himself; he must be one who can speak with effect, if any of his deeds come to light, and who can force his way where force is required his courage and strength, and command of money and friends.

And at his side let us place the just man in his nobleness and simplicity, wishing, as Aeschylus says, to be and not to seem good. There must be no seeming, for if he seem to be just he will be honoured and rewarded, and then we shall not know whether he is just for the sake of justice or for the sake of honours and rewards; therefore, let him be clothed in justice only, and have no other covering; and he must be imagined in a state of life the opposite of the former. Let him be the best of men, and let him be thought the worst; then he will have been put to the proof; and we shall see whether he will be affected by the fear of infamy and its consequences.

Chapter 23. “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato

And let him continue thus to the hour of death; being just and seeming to be unjust.

When both have reached the uttermost extreme, the one of justice and the other of injustice, let judgment be given which of them is the happier of the two.

From the reading...

“Now suppose there were just two magic rings. . .”

Related Ideas

Social Contract (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/soc-cont.htm>) *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A short summary of the history of social contract theory.

Prisoner’s Dilemma (<http://plato.standord.edu/entries/prisoner-dilemma/>) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. An outstanding summary of a variety of characterizations of the philosophical and mathematical aspects of the dilemma.

Opening Pages of the The Selfish Gene (<http://www.world-of-dawkins.com/Dawkins/Works/Books/selfpage.htm>) *The World of Richard Dawkins: Evolution, Science, and Reason*. A short excerpt from Richard Dawkin’s *The Selfish Gene*, introducing the biology of egoism and altruism.

Chapter 23. “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato



The Parthenon, Library of Congress

From the reading...

“For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice. . .”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Psychological egoism is the view that all persons, without exception, seek their own self-interest. Ethical egoism is the view that recognizes that perhaps not all persons seek their own self-interest but all should do so. Explain whether Glaucon’s account supports psychological hedonism or ethical egoism or both. Explain whether psychological egoism implies ethical egoism. Can you construct an unambiguous example of an action that could not possibly be construed to be a self-interested action? Would people always steal when the expected return greatly exceeds any expected penalty? You might want to consult such subjects as rational decision theory, the oft-termed “Chicago school” economics, and the Prisoner’s Dilemma.
2. A closely related view to egoism is psychological hedonism: the presumption that all persons seek pleasure. If I go out of my way to help

Chapter 23. “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato

others, and it gives me pleasure to do so, am I necessarily acting as a psychological hedonist? Explain this apparent paradox. If psychological hedonism were true, would that imply that ethical hedonism would be true? Ethical hedonism is the view that all persons ought to seek pleasure, even though some persons might not actually do so.

3. Compare Glaucon’s account of the origin of covenants with the idea of the social contract described by Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau. Social contract theory holds that people in a society implicitly agree to abide by unwritten or written agreements among themselves because it is in their interest to do so. Does Glaucon presuppose a actual “state of nature” prior to the formation of covenants or is his account only a logical justification of mutual agreements?
4. If human beings have a biological nature just as other living things have a nature, then what arguments can you propose that that the nature of human beings is primarily social rather than individual? Aristotle wrote, “A man living outside of society is either a man or a beast.” In the language of Richard Dawkins, are our genes “selfish”? Do human genetic factors favor cooperation among the species? Do you think this question empirically resolvable?

Chapter 24

“Human Beings Are Selfish” by Bernard Mandeville



Bee on Hive, (detail) ©Smithsonian Institution

About the author...

Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) was born in Rotterdam and attended the University of Leiden where he studied medicine and philosophy. He settled in London where he published *The Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, which he revised over a quarter century in response to criticism directed by many of his contemporaries. Although shocking to the 18th century moralists, his economic thought profoundly affected Adam Smith.

About the work...

In his *The Fable of the Bees*,¹ Mandeville constructs a somewhat satirical explanation praising the “private vices” of selfishness because they produce virtues and “public benefits,” including those of social origins, social welfare, and social progress. Mandeville’s shrewd insight into the motivations of human beings has often delighted many persons who believe that human nature is less than noble. The reading is drawn from Mandeville’s introductory explanation of the fable.

From the reading...

“One of the greatest reasons why so few people understand themselves is that most writers are always teaching men what they should be, and hardly ever trouble their heads with telling them what they really are.”

Ideas of Interest from *The Fable of the Bees*

1. Characterize Mandeville’s description of human nature.
2. According to Mandeville, why do some persons practice self-denial? How have politicians convinced persons to overcome their self-interest?
3. How, according to Mandeville, were the brutes, or the lower-class, made civilized by the politicians? What are the origins of “virtue” and “vice”? Do you agree that virtuous actions are only fictions contrary to human nature invented by politicians?
4. In what ways do “private vices” become “public benefits” according to Mandeville? Does the absence of “self-love” destroy progress?

1. Bernard Mandeville. *The Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. 2nd Ed., 1723. London: Edmund Parker, 1714. 493-502.

The Reading Selection from *The Fable of the Bees*

Introduction to the Remarks

One of the greatest reasons why so few people understand themselves is that most writers are always teaching men what they should be, and hardly ever trouble their heads with telling them what they really are. As for my part, without any compliment to the courteous reader, or myself, I believe man (besides skin, flesh, bones, *etc.*, that are obvious to the eye) to be a compound of various passions, that all of them as they are provoked and come uppermost, govern him by turns, whether he will or no. To show that these qualifications, which we all pretend to be ashamed of, are the great support of a flourishing society has been the subject of the foregoing poem [The Fable of the Bees]. But there being some passages in it seemingly paradoxical, I have in the Preface promised some explanatory Remarks on it; which to render more useful, I have thought fit to inquire how man, no better qualified, might yet by his own imperfections be taught to distinguish between virtue and vice: and here I must desire the reader once for all to take notice that when I say men, I mean neither Jews nor Christians; but mere man, in the state of nature and ignorance of the true Deity.

An Inquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue

[State of Nature]

All untaught animals are only solicitous of pleasing themselves, and naturally follow the bent of their own inclinations, without considering the good or harm that from their being pleased will accrue to others. This is the reason that in the wild state of nature those creatures are fittest to live peaceably together in great numbers that discover the least of understanding, and have the fewest appetites to gratify. And consequently no species of animals is, without the curb of government, less capable of agreeing long together in multitudes than that of man; yet such are his qualities, whether good or bad I shall not determine, that no creature besides himself can ever be made sociable: but being an extraordinary selfish

Chapter 24. "Human Beings Are Selfish" by Bernard Mandeville

and headstrong, as well as cunning, animal, however he may be subdued by, superior strength, it is impossible by force alone to make him tractable, and receive the improvements he is capable of.

From the reading...

"The chief thing, therefore, which lawgivers and other wise men that have laboured for the establishment of society have endeavoured, has been to make the people they were to govern believe that it was more beneficial for everybody to conquer than indulge his appetites, and much better to mind the public than what seemed his private interest."

The chief thing, therefore, which lawgivers and other wise men that have laboured for the establishment of society have endeavoured, has been to make the people they were to govern believe that it was more beneficial for everybody to conquer than indulge his appetites, and much better to mind the public than what seemed his private interest. As this has always been a very difficult task, so no wit or eloquence has been left untried to compass it; and the moralists and philosophers of all ages employed their utmost skill to prove the truth of so useful an assertion. But whether mankind would have ever believed it or not, it is not likely that anybody could have persuaded them to disapprove of their natural inclinations, or prefer the good of others to their own, if at the same time he had not showed them an equivalent to be enjoyed as a reward for the violence which by so doing they of necessity must commit upon themselves. Those that have undertaken to civilize mankind were not ignorant of this; but being unable to give so many real rewards as would satisfy all persons for every individual action, they were forced to contrive an imaginary one, that as a general equivalent for the trouble of self-denial should serve on all occasions, and without costing anything either to themselves or others, be yet a most acceptable recompense to the receivers.

[Uses of Praise and Flattery]

They thoroughly examined all the strength and frailties of our nature, and, observing that none were either so savage as not to be charmed with praise, or so despicable as patiently to bear contempt, justly concluded that flat-

Chapter 24. "Human Beings Are Selfish" by Bernard Mandeville

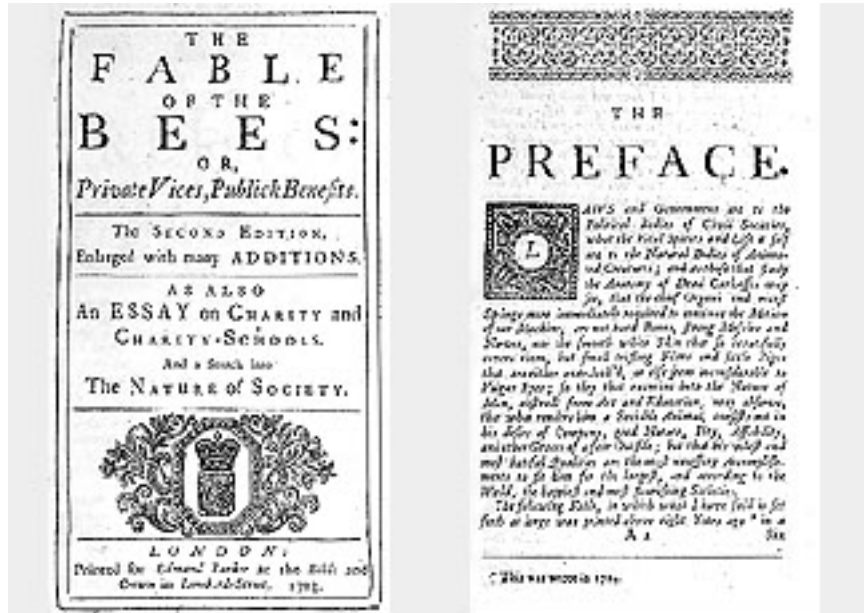
tery must be the most powerful argument that could be used to human creatures. Making use of this bewitching engine, they extolled the excellency of our nature above other animals, and setting forth with unbounded praises the wonders of our sagacity and vastness of understanding, bestowed a thousand encomiums on the rationality of our souls, by the help of which we were capable of performing the most noble achievements. Having by this artful way of flattery insinuated themselves into the hearts of men, they began to instruct them in the notions of honour and shame; representing the one as the worst of all evils, and the other as the highest good to which mortals could aspire: which being done, they laid before them how unbecoming it was the dignity of such sublime creatures to be solicitous about gratifying those appetites which they had in common with brutes, and at the same time unmindful of those higher qualities that gave them the pre-eminence over all visible beings. They indeed confessed that those impulses of nature were very pressing; that it was troublesome to resist, and very difficult wholly to subdue them: but this they only used as an argument to demonstrate how glorious the conquest of them was on the one hand, and how scandalous on the other not to attempt it.

[Classes of People]

To introduce, moreover, an emulation amongst men, they divided the whole species in two classes, vastly differing from one another: the one consisted of abject, low-minded people that, always hunting in after immediate enjoyment, were wholly incapable of self-denial, and, without regard to the good of others, had no higher aim than their private advantage; such as, being enslaved by voluptuousness, yielded without resistance to every gross desire, and made no use of their irrational faculties but to heighten their sensual pleasures. These vile, grovelling wretches, they said, were the dross of their kind, and having only the shape of men, differed from brutes in nothing but their outward figure. But the other class was made up of lofty, high-spirited creatures that, free from sordid selfishness, esteemed the improvements of the mind to be their fairest possessions; and, setting a true value upon themselves, took no delight but in embellishing that part in which their excellency consisted; such as, despising whatever they had in common with irrational creatures, opposed by the help of reason their most violent inclinations; and, making a continual war with themselves to promote the peace of others, aimed at no less than the public welfare and the conquest of their own

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passions. *Fortior est qui se quam quifortissima vincitl Moenia i.*² These they called the true representatives of their sublime species, exceeding in worth the first class by more degrees than that itself was superior to the beasts of the field.



Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*

As, in all animals that are not too imperfect to discover pride, we find that the finest and such as are the most beautiful and valuable of their kind have generally the greatest share of it; so in man, the most perfect of animals, it is so inseparable from his very essence (how cunningly soever some may learn to hide or disguise it) that without it the compound he is made of would want one of the chiefest ingredients: which, if we consider, it is hardly to be doubted but lessons and remonstrances so skilfully adapted to the good opinion man has of himself as those I have mentioned must if scattered amongst a multitude, not only gain the assent of most of them, as to the speculative part, but likewise induce several, especially the fiercest, most resolute, and best among them, to endure a thousand inconveniences

2. Stronger is he who conquers himself than he who breaches the strongest fortifications.

Chapter 24. “Human Beings Are Selfish” by Bernard Mandeville

and undergo as many hardships, that they may have the pleasure of counting themselves men of the second class, and consequently appropriating to themselves all the excellences they have heard of it.

From what has been said we ought to expect, in the first place, that the heroes who took such extraordinary pains to master some of their natural appetites, and preferred the good of others to any visible interest of their own, would not recede an inch from the fine notions they had received concerning the dignity of rational creatures; and, having ever the authority of the government on their side, with all imaginable vigour assert the esteem that was due to those of the second class, as well as their superiority over the rest of their kind. In the second, that those who wanted a sufficient stock of either pride or resolution to buoy them up in mortifying of what was dearest to them, [and] followed the sensual dictates of nature, would yet be ashamed of confessing themselves to be those despicable wretches that belonged to the inferior class, and were generally reckoned to be so little removed from brutes; and that, therefore, in their own defence they would say as others did, and, hiding their own imperfections as well as they could, cry up self-denial and public-spiritedness as much as any. For it is highly probable that some of them, convinced by the real proofs of fortitude and self-conquest they had seen, would admire in others what they found wanting in themselves; others be afraid of the resolution and prowess of those of the second class; and that all of them were kept in awe by the power of their rulers. Wherefore it is reasonable to think that none of them (whatever they thought in themselves) would dare openly contradict what by everybody else was thought criminal to doubt of.

From the reading...

“... the more intent they were in seeking their own advantage, without regard to others, the more they were hourly convinced that none were so obnoxious to them as those that were most like themselves.”

[Origins of Morality]

This was (or at least might have been) the manner after which savage man was broke; from whence it is evident that the first rudiments of morality,

Chapter 24. "Human Beings Are Selfish" by Bernard Mandeville

broached by skilful politicians to render men useful to each other as well as tractable, were chiefly contrived that the ambitious might reap the more benefit from and govern vast numbers of them with the greater ease and security. This foundation of politics being once laid, it is impossible that man should long remain uncivilized: for even those who only strove to gratify their appetites, being continually crossed by others of the same stamp, could not but observe that whenever they checked their inclinations, or but followed them with more circumspection, they avoided a world of troubles, and often escaped many of the calamities that generally attended the too eager pursuit after pleasure.

First, they received, as well as others, the benefit of those actions that were done for the good of the whole society, and consequently could not forbear wishing well to those of the superior class that performed them. Secondly, the more intent they were in seeking their own advantage, without regard to others, the more they were hourly convinced that none were so obnoxious to them as those that were most like themselves.

It being the interest then of the very worst of them, more than any, to preach up public-spiritedness, that they might reap the fruits of the labour and self-denial of others, and at the same time indulge their own appetites with less disturbance, they agreed with the rest to call everything which, without regard to the public, man should commit to gratify any of his appetites *vice* if in that action there could be observed the least prospect that it might either be injurious to any of the society, or ever render himself less serviceable to and to give the name of *virtue* to every performance by which man, contrary to the impulse of nature, should endeavour the benefit of others, or the conquest of his own passions out of a rational ambition of being good.

It shall be objected that no society was ever anyways civilized before the major part had agreed upon some worship or other of an overruling power, and consequently that the notions of good and evil, and the distinction between virtue and vice, were never the contrivance of politicians, but the pure effect of religion. Before I answer this objection, I must repeat what I have said already, that in this Inquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue—I speak neither of Jews or Christians, but man in his state of nature and ignorance of the true Deity; and then I affirm that the idolatrous superstitions of all other nations, and the pitiful notions they had of the Supreme Being, were incapable of exciting man to virtue, and good for nothing but to awe and amuse a rude and unthinking multitude. It is evident from history

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that in all considerable societies, how stupid or ridiculous soever peoples received notions have been as to the deities they worshipped, human nature has ever exerted itself in all its branches, and that there is no earthly wisdom or moral virtue but at one time or other men have excelled in it in all monarchies and commonwealths that for riches and power have been anyways remarkable.

The Egyptians, not satisfied with having deified all the ugly monsters they could think on, were so silly as to adore the onions of their own sowing; yet at the same time their country was the most famous nursery of arts and sciences in the world, and themselves more eminently skilled in the deepest mysteries of nature than any nation has. been since. No states or kingdoms under heaven have yielded more or greater patterns in all sorts of moral virtues than the Greek and Roman empires, more especially the latter; and yet how loose, absurd and ridiculous were their sentiments as to sacred matters: for without reflecting on the extravagant number of their deities, if we only consider the infamous stories they fathered upon them, it is not to be denied but that their religion, far from teaching men the conquest of their passions, and the way to virtue, seemed rather contrived to justify their appetites and encourage their vices. But if we would know what made them excel in fortitude, courage, and magnanimity, we must cast our eyes on the pomp of their triumphs, the magnificence of their monuments and arches; their trophies, statues, and inscriptions; the variety of their military crowns, their honours decreed to the dead, public encomiums on the living, and other imaginary rewards they bestowed on men of merit; and we shall find that what carried so many of them to the utmost pitch of self-denial was nothing but their policy in making use of the most effectual means that human pride could be flattered with.

It is visible, then, that it was not any heathen religion or other idolatrous superstition that first put man upon crossing his appetites and subduing his dearest inclinations, but the skilful management of wary politicians; and the nearer we search into human nature the more we shall be convinced that the moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride.

There is no man, of what capacity or penetration soever, that is wholly proof against the witchcraft of flattery, if artfully performed and suited to his abilities. Children and fools will swallow personal praise, but those that are more cunning must be managed with greater circumspection; and the more general the flattery is, the less it is suspected by those it is levelled at.

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What you say in commendation of a whole town is received with pleasure by all the inhabitants; speak in commendation of letters in general, and every man of learning will think himself in particular obliged to you. You may safely praise the employment a man is of, or the country he was born in, because you give him an opportunity of screening the joy he feels upon his own account under the esteem which he pretends to have for others.



"Van der Werf" Park, Leyden, Holland, Library of Congress

It is common among cunning men that understand the power which flattery has upon pride, when they are afraid they shall be imposed upon, to enlarge, though much against their conscience, upon the honour, fair dealing, and integrity of the family, country, or sometimes the profession of him they suspect; because they know that men often will change their resolution, and act against their inclination, that they may have the pleasure of continuing to appear in the opinion of some what they are conscious not to be in reality. Thus sagacious moralists draw men like angels, in hopes that the pride at least of some will put them upon copying after the beautiful originals which they are represented to be.

When the incomparable Mr Steele, in the usual elegance of his easy style, dwells on the praises of his sublime species, and with all the embellishments of rhetoric sets forth the excellency of human nature, it is impossible not to be charmed with his happy turns of thought, and the politeness of his expressions. But though I have been often moved by the force of his eloquence, and ready to swallow the ingenious sophistry with pleasure, yet I could never be so serious but, reflecting on his artful encomiums, I thought on the tricks made use of by the women that would teach children to be mannerly.

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When an awkward girl, before she can either speak or go, begins after many entreaties to make the first rude essays of curtsying, the nurse falls in an ecstasy of praise: “There’s a delicate curtsy! Oh fine miss! There’s a pretty lady! Mama! Miss can make a better curtsy than her sister Molly!” The same is echoed over by the maids, whilst Mama almost hugs the child to pieces; only Miss Molly, who,—being four years older, knows how to make a very handsome curtsy, wonders at the perverseness of their judgement, and, swelling with indignation, is ready to cry at the injustice that is done her, till, being whispered in the ear that it is only to please the baby, and that she is a woman, she grows proud at being let into the secret, and, rejoicing at the superiority of her understanding, repeats what has been said with large additions, and insults over the weakness of her sister, whom all this while she fancies to be the only bubble among them.

These extravagant praises would, by any one above the capacity of an infant, be called fulsome flatteries, and, if you will, abominable lies; yet experience teaches us that by the help of such gross encomiums young misses will be brought to make pretty curtsies, and behave themselves womanly much sooner, and with less trouble, than they would without them. It is the same with boys, whom they’ll strive to persuade that all fine gentlemen do as they are bid, and that none but beggar boys are rude, or dirty their clothes; nay, as soon as the wild brat with his untaught fist begins to fumble for his hat, the mother, to make him pull it off, tells him, before he is two years old, that he is a man; and if he repeats that action when she desires him, he’s presently a captain, a lord mayor, a king, or something higher if she can think of it, till, egged on by the force of praise, the little urchin endeavours to imitate Man as well as he can, and strains all his faculties to appear what his shallow noddle imagines he is believed to be.

From the reading...

“There is no merit in saving an innocent babe ready to drop into the fire: the action is neither good nor bad...”

The meanest wretch puts an inestimable value upon himself, and the highest wish of the ambitious man is to have all the world, as to that particular, of his opinion: so that the most insatiable thirst after fame that ever

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hero was inspired with was never more than an ungovernable greediness to engross the esteem and admiration of others in future ages as well as his own; and (what mortification soever this truth might be to the second thoughts of an Alexander or a Caesar) the great recompense in view, for which the most exalted minds have with so much alacrity sacrificed their quiet, health, sensual pleasures, and every inch of themselves, has never been anything else but the breath of man, the aerial coin of praise. Who can forbear laughing when he thinks on all the great men that have been so serious on the subject of that Macedonian madman: his capacious soul, that mighty heart, in one corner of which, according to Lorenzo Gracian, the world was so commodiously lodged, that in the whole there was room for six more? Who can forbear laughing, I say, when he compares the fine things that have been said of Alexander with the end he proposed to himself from his vast exploits, to be proved from his own mouth when the vast pains he took to pass the Hydaspes forced him to cry out: "Oh ye Athenians, could you believe what dangers I expose myself to, to be praised by you!"? To define then the reward of glory in the amplest manner, the most that can be said of it is that it consists in a superlative felicity which a man who is conscious of having performed a noble action enjoys in self-love, whilst he is thinking on the applause he expects of others.

[Public Benefits]

But here I shall be told that, besides the noisy toils of war and public bustle of the ambitious, there are noble and generous actions that are performed in silence; that virtue being its own reward, those who are really good have a satisfaction in their consciousness of being so, which is all the recompense they expect from the most worthy performances; that among the heathens there have been men who, when they did good to others, were so far from coveting thanks and applause that they took all imaginable care to be for ever concealed from those on whom they bestowed their benefits, and consequently that pride has no hand in spurring man on to the highest pitch of self-denial.

In answer to this I say that it is impossible to judge of a man's performance unless we are thoroughly acquainted with the principle and motive from which he acts. Pity, though it is the most gentle and the least mischievous of all our passions, is yet as much a frailty of our nature as anger, pride, or fear. The weakest minds have generally the greatest share of it, for which

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reason none are more compassionate than women and children. It must be owned that of all our weaknesses it is the most amiable, and bears the greatest resemblance to virtue; nay, without a considerable mixture of it the society could hardly subsist: but as it is an impulse of nature that consults neither the public interest nor our own reason, it may produce evil as well as good. It has helped to destroy the honour of virgins, and corrupted the integrity of judges, and whoever acts from it as a principle, what good soever he may bring to the society, has nothing to boast of but that he has indulged a passion that has happened to be beneficial to the public. There is no merit in saving an innocent babe ready to drop into the fire: the action is neither good nor bad, and what benefit soever the infant received we only obliged ourselves; for to have seen it fall, and not strove to hinder it, would have caused a pain which self-preservation compelled us to prevent. Nor has a rich prodigal that happens to be of a commiserating temper, and loves to gratify his passions, greater virtue to boast of when he relieves an object of compassion with what to himself is a trifle.

But such men as, without complying with any weakness of their own, can part from what they value themselves, and, from no other motive but their love to goodness, perform a worthy action in silence; such men, I confess, have acquired more refined notions of virtue than those I have hitherto spoke of; yet even in these (with which the world has yet never swarmed) we may discover no small symptoms of pride, and the humblest man alive must confess that the reward of a virtuous action, which is the satisfaction that ensues upon it, consists in a certain pleasure he procures to himself by contemplating on his own worth: which pleasure, together with the occasion of it, are as certain signs of pride as looking pale and trembling at any imminent danger are the symptoms of fear.

If the too scrupulous reader should, at first view, condemn these notions concerning the origin of moral virtue, and think them perhaps offensive to Christianity, I hope he will forbear his censures when he shall consider that nothing can render the unsearchable depth of divine wisdom more conspicuous than that man, whom providence had designed for society, should not only by his own frailties and imperfections be led into the road to temporal happiness, but likewise receive, from a seeming necessity of natural causes a tincture of that knowledge in which he was afterwards to be made perfect by the true religion, to his eternal welfare.

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The Embankment, Rotterdam, Holland, Library of Congress

Related Ideas

The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turn'd Honest by Bernard Mandeville (<http://newark.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/hive.html>). Mandeville's text edited by Jack Lynch.

Mandeville, Geoffrey de (<http://1911encyclopedia.org/M/index.htm>). *The 1911 Encyclopedia*. An excellent short presentation of Mandeville's thought.

From the reading...

"... every species of virtue is at bottom some form of gross selfishness, more or less modified."

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare Mandeville's characterization of two types of human be-

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ings with Friedrich Nietzsche's master and slave-morality and Jeremy Bentham's principles of sympathy and antipathy. What are the central similarities among these three theories?

2. If "private vices" are the origin of "public benefits" does it follow that "the end justify the means"? How is the distinction between virtue and vice to be drawn if Mandeville is correct in his analysis of selfishness?
3. Attempt to justify on Mandeville's suppositions why "There is no merit in saving an innocent babe ready to drop into the fire: the action is neither good nor bad. . ." Contrast Mandeville's view with Kant's explanation of the good will.
4. Kantian ethics and egoism are opposed in many of their doctrines. Kantian ethics emphasizes the good will, whereas egoistic ethics emphasizes self-interest. Use your knowledge of each ethical theory to explain the apparent conflict in the following two quotations:

Immanuel Kant, [Actions for the Sake of Duty].

. . . it is always a matter of duty that a dealer should not over charge an inexperienced purchaser; and wherever there is much commerce the prudent tradesman does not overcharge, but keeps a fixed price for everyone, so that a child buys of him as well as any other. Men are thus honestly served; but this is not enough to make us believe that the tradesman has so acted from duty and from principles of honesty: his own advantage required it; it is out of the question in this case to suppose that he might besides have a direct inclination in favour of the buyers, so that, as it were, from love he should give no advantage to one over another. Accordingly the action was done neither from duty nor from direct inclination, but merely with a selfish view.

Bernard Mandeville, [Public Benefits].

[Pity] has helped to destroy the honour of virgins, and corrupted the integrity of judges, and whoever acts from it as a principle, what good soever he may bring to the society, has nothing to boast of but that he has indulged a passion that has happened to be beneficial to the public. There is no merit in saving an innocent babe ready to drop into the fire: the action is neither good nor bad, and what benefit soever the infant received we only obliged ourselves; for to have seen it fall, and not strove to hinder it, would have caused a pain which self-preservation compelled us to prevent.

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Chapter 25

“Happiness Is the Greatest Good” by Jeremy Bentham



Bentham, The Warren J. Samuels Portrait Collection at Duke University

About the author...

Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) abiding concern in life was the total reform of British society and law based on the principle of utility. He believed this principle was the most reasonable guide to both individual morality and public policy. He formed the *Westminster Review* and convinced radicals, opposed to both the Whigs and Tories, to join the Benthamite movement. The group founded University College, London.

About the work...

In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*,¹ Bentham attributes the inconsistency of English law, its complexity as well as its inhumanness, to its foundation on the moral feelings of "sympathy" and "antipathy." He argues that the laws of all nations should be rationally based, not emotionally based, on what appeared to him to be the self-evident principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. In an effort to apply this principle of utility to legal reform, Bentham develops the hedonistic, or as it is sometimes called, the felicific calculus. As an ethical teleologist,² Bentham devises a method of calculating the most pleasure *vis-à-vis* the least pain by means of a quantitative scale. Historically, the hedonistic calculus was a major step in the development of rational decision theory and utility theory.

From the reading...

"An action then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility... when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it."

Ideas from *Principles of Morals and Legislation*

1. According to Bentham, what are the causes of human action? What is the principle of utility?
2. Explain what Bentham means by the principle of asceticism. Is this principle related to the principle of sympathy and antipathy? Why does Bentham think that these principles lead to inconsistent application and undue punishment?

1. Jeremy Bentham. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907.

2. *I.e.*, Bentham believes our behavior is directed toward and shaped by the purpose of seeking pleasure.

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3. Can pleasure be quantified? Explain whether you think the use of the hedonistic calculus for the individual and for society is feasible.
4. What does Bentham mean when he explains that motives are neither bad nor good? Why doesn't Bentham think that evil motives can be productive of over-all good? Explain his analysis of motives.

The Reading Selection from *Principles of Morals and Legislation*

Of the Principle of Utility

Chapter I—i. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain, subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.

But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.

Chapter I—ii. The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

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Chapter I—iii. By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

Chapter I—iv. The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost. When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what is it?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.

Chapter I—v. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.

Chapter I—vi. An action then may be said to be conformable to then principle of utility, or, for shortness sake, to utility, (meaning with respect to the community at large) when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it.

From the reading...

“The principle of asceticism never was, nor ever can be, consistently pursued by any living creature. Let but one tenth part of the inhabitants of this earth pursue it consistently, and in a day’s time they will have turned it into a hell.”

Chapter I—vii. A measure of government (which is but a particular kind of action, performed by a particular person or persons) may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when in like manner the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it. . . .

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Chapter I—viii. Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. One may say also, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. When thus interpreted, the words ought, and right and wrong and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none. . . .



A Tea Resale Establishment near Lincoln's Inn Fields, where Bentham studied law after Oxford, Library of Congress

Of Principles Adverse to that of Utility

Chapter II—ii. A principle may be different from that of utility in two ways: 1. By being constantly opposed to it: this is the case with a principle which may be termed the principle of asceticism. 2. By being sometimes opposed to it, and sometimes not, as it may happen: this is the case with another, which may be termed the principle of sympathy and antipathy.

Chapter II—iii. By the principle of asceticism I mean that principle, which, like the principle of utility, approves or disapproves of any action, accord-

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ing to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; but in an inverse manner: approving of actions in as far as they tend to diminish his happiness; disapproving of them in as far as they tend to augment it. . . .

Chapter II—ix. The principle of asceticism seems originally to have been the reverie of certain hasty speculators, who having perceived, or fancied, that certain pleasures, when reaped in certain circumstances, have, at the long run, been attended with pains more than equivalent to them, took occasion to quarrel with every thing that offered itself under the name of pleasure. Having then got thus far, and having forgot the point which they set out from, they pushed on, and went so much further as to think it meritorious to fall in love with pain. Even this, we see, is at bottom but the principle of utility misapplied.

Chapter II—x. The principle of utility is capable of being consistently pursued; and it is but tautology to say, that the more consistently it is pursued, the better it must ever be for human-kind. The principle of asceticism never was, nor ever can be, consistently pursued by any living creature. Let but one tenth part of the inhabitants of this earth pursue it consistently, and in a day's time they will have turned it into a hell.

Chapter II—xi. Among principles adverse to that of utility, that which at this day seems to have most influence in matters of government, is what may be called the principle of sympathy and antipathy. By the principle of sympathy and antipathy, I mean that principle which approves or disapproves of certain actions, not on account of their tending to augment the happiness, nor yet on account of their tending to diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question, but merely because a man finds himself disposed to approve or disapprove of them: holding up that approbation or disapprobation as a sufficient reason for itself, and disclaiming the necessity of looking out for any extrinsic ground. Thus far in the general department of morals: and in the particular department of politics, measuring out the quantum (as well as determining the ground) of punishment, by the degree of the disapprobation.

Chapter II—xii. It is manifest, that this is rather a principle in name than in reality: it is not a positive principle of itself, so much as a term employed to signify the negation of all principle. What one expects to find in a principle is something that points out some external consideration, as a means of warranting and guiding the internal sentiments of approbation and disapprobation: this expectation is but ill fulfilled by a proposition,

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which does neither more nor less than hold up each of those sentiments as a ground and standard for itself.

Chapter II—xiii. In looking over the catalogue of human actions (says a partizan of this principle) in order to determine which of them are to be marked with the seal of disapprobation, you need but to take counsel of your own feelings: whatever you find in yourself a propensity to condemn, is wrong for that very reason. For the same reason it is also meet for punishment: in what proportion it is adverse to utility, or whether it be adverse to utility at all, is a matter that makes no difference. In that same proportion also is it meet for punishment: if you hate much, punish much: if you hate little, punish little: punish as you hate. If you hate not at all, punish not at all: the fine feelings of the soul are not to be overborne and tyrannized by the harsh and rugged dictates of political utility.

Chapter II—xiv. The various systems that have been formed concerning the standard of right may all be reduced to the principle of sympathy and antipathy. One account may serve to for all of them. They consist all of them in so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing upon the reader to accept of the author's sentiment or opinion as a reason for itself.

Value... How to be Measured

Chapter IV—i. Pleasures then, and the avoidance of pains, are the ends that the legislator has in view; it behooves him therefore to understand their value. Pleasures and pains are the instruments he has to work with: it behooves him therefore to understand their force, which is again, in other words, their value.

Chapter IV—ii. To a person considered by himself, the value of a pleasure or pain considered by itself, will be greater or less, according to the four following circumstances:

1. Its intensity.
2. Its duration.
3. Its certainty or uncertainty.
4. Its propinquity or remoteness.

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The Royal Gallery, House of Lords, London, England, Library of Congress

Chapter IV—iii. These are the circumstances which are to be considered in estimating a pleasure or a pain considered each of them by itself. But when the value of any pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of any act by which it is produced, there are two other circumstances to be taken into the account; these are,

5. Its fecundity, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind: that is, pleasures, if it be a pleasure: pains, if it be a pain.

6. Its purity, or the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the opposite kind: that is, pains, if it be a pleasure: pleasures, if it be a pain.

These two last, however, are in strictness scarcely to be deemed properties of the pleasure or the pain itself; they are not, therefore, in strictness to be taken into the account of the value of that pleasure or that pain. They are in strictness to be deemed properties only of the act, or other event, by which such pleasure or pain has been produced; and accordingly are only to be taken into the account of the tendency of such act or such event.

Chapter IV—iv. To a number of persons, with reference to each of whom to the value of a pleasure or a pain is considered, it will be greater or less, according to seven circumstances: to wit, the six preceding ones; *viz.*

1. Its intensity.

2. Its duration.

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3. Its certainty or uncertainty.
4. Its propinquity or remoteness.
5. Its fecundity.
6. Its purity.

And one other; to wit:

7. Its extent;

that is, the number of persons to whom it extends; or (in other words) who are affected by it.

Chapter IV—v. To take an exact account then of the general tendency of any act, by which the interests of a community are affected, proceed as follows. Begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,

1. Of the value of each distinguishable pleasure which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.
2. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.
3. Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pleasure and the impurity of the first pain.
4. Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pain, and the impurity of the first pleasure.
5. Sum up all the values of all the pleasures on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the good tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that individual person; if on the side of pain, the bad tendency of it upon the whole.
6. Take an account of the number of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. Sum up the numbers expressive of the degrees of good tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again

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with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is bad upon the whole. Take the balance which if on the side of pleasure, will give the general good tendency of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of pain, the general evil tendency, with respect to the same community.

Chapter IV—vi. It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one.

Chapter IV—vii. The same process is alike applicable to pleasure and pain, in whatever shape they appear: and by whatever denomination they are distinguished: to pleasure, whether it be called good (which is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure) or profit (which is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of, distant pleasure,) or convenience, or advantage, benefit, emolument, happiness, and so forth: to pain, whether it be called evil, (which corresponds to good) or mischief, or inconvenience. or disadvantage, or loss, or unhappiness, and so forth. . . .

Of Motives

Chapter X—ix. No motives either constantly good or constantly bad. In all this chain of motives, the principal or original link seems to be the last internal motive in prospect: it is to this that all the other motives in prospect owe their materiality: and the immediately acting motive its existence. This motive in prospect, we see, is always some pleasure, or some pain; some pleasure, which the act in question is expected to be a means of continuing or producing: some pain which it is expected to be a means of discontinuing or preventing. A motive is substantially nothing more than pleasure or pain, operating in a certain manner.

Chapter X—x. Now, pleasure is in itself a good: nay, even setting aside immunity from pain, the only good: pain is in itself an evil; and, indeed, without exception, the only evil; or else the words good and evil have no meaning. And this is alike true of every sort of pain, and of every sort of pleasure. It follows, therefore, immediately and incontestably, that there is no such thing as any sort of motive that is in itself a bad one.

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General View and High Street, Oxford, England, Library of Congress

Chapter X—xi. It is common, however, to speak of actions as proceeding from good or bad motives: in which case the motives meant are such as are internal. The expression is far from being an accurate one; and as it is apt to occur in the consideration of most every kind of offence, it will be requisite to settle the precise meaning of it, and observe how far it quadrates with the truth of things.

Chapter X—xii. With respect to goodness and badness, as it is with very thing else that is not itself either pain or pleasure, so is it with motives. If they are good or bad, it is only on account of their effects: good, on account of their tendency to produce pleasure, or avert pain: bad, on account of their tendency to produce pain, or avert pleasure. Now the case is, that from one and the same motive, and from every kind of motive, may proceed actions that are good, others that are bad, and others that are indifferent. . . .

Chapter X—xxix. It appears then that there is no such thing as any sort of motive which is a bad one in itself: nor, consequently, any such thing as a sort of motive, which in itself is exclusively a good one. And as to their effects, it appears too that these are sometimes bad, at other times either indifferent or good: and this appears to be the case with every sort of motive. If any sort of motive then is either good or bad on the score of its effects, this is the case only on individual occasions, and with individual

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motives; and this is the case with one sort of motive as well as with another. If any sort of motive then can, in consideration of its effects, be termed with any propriety a bad one, it can only be with reference to the balance of all the effects it may have had of both kinds within a given period, that is, of its most usual tendency.

Chapter X—xxx. What then? (it will be said) are not lust, cruelty, avarice, bad motives? Is there so much as any one individual occasion, in which motives like these can be otherwise than bad? No, certainly: and yet the proposition, that there is no one sort of motive but what will on many occasions be a good one, is nevertheless true. The fact is, that these are names which, if properly applied, are never applied but in the cases where the motives they signify happen to be bad. The names of those motives, considered apart from their effects, are sexual desire, displeasure, and pecuniary interest. To sexual desire, when the effects of it are looked upon as bad, is given the name of lust. Now lust is always a bad motive. Why? Because if the case be such, that the effects of the motive are not bad, it does not go, or at least ought not to go, by the name of lust. The case is, then, that when I say, “Lust is a bad motive,” it is a proposition that merely concerns the import of the word lust; and which would be false if transferred to the other word used for the same motive, sexual desire. Hence we see the emptiness of all those rhapsodies of common-place morality, which consist in the taking of such names as lust, cruelty, and avarice, and branding them with marks of reprobation: applied to the thing, they are false; applied to the name, they are true indeed, but nugatory. Would you do a real service to mankind, show them the cases in which sexual desire merits the name of lust; displeasure, that of cruelty; and pecuniary interest, that of avarice.

From the *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ch. 13,

“All punishment is mischief; all punishment in itself is evil.”

Related Ideas

Classical Utilitarianism Web (<http://www.la.utexas.edu/cuws/index.html>).

Chapter 25. “Happiness Is the Greatest Good” by Jeremy Bentham

Writings and commentary on Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick being developed by Dan Bonevac at the University of Texas.

Decision Sciences: How the Game Is Played (<http://www.nsf.gov/od/lpa/news/publicat/nsf0050/decision/decision.htm>). *National Science Foundation*. An introductory overview of utility and game theory, including a discussion of its limitations.

Jeremy Bentham (<http://www.utm.edu/research/ep/b/bentham.htm>). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. An excellent encyclopedic overview of Bentham’s life and thought.

From the Bentham’s *The Commonplace Book*

“The greatest happiness for the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.”



Houses of Parliament from the River, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Utilitarianism is often cited as a consequentialist or teleological ethics. Consequentialism is the doctrine that the morally correct action is an action maximizing the good; hence, consequentialism is not so much concerned with the means used as it is concerned with probable outcomes, ends, or goals of activities. Utilitarianism holds only pleasure or happiness is an intrinsic good, whereas consequentialism implies that there may well be other intrinsic goods, such as knowledge, that some persons might not desire. In any case, the question arises whether or not something instrumentally bad can lead to something intrinsically good. Do we actually judge the goodness of an action only by its consequences? Do the ends justify the means in some cases? Construct and analyze a few examples in support of your view.
2. Bentham seems to equate happiness with pleasure. Are there significant differences between pleasure and happiness? Do the characteristics of time, sensation, or emotion differ for each? Can one be happy while in painful circumstances? Provide some specific examples in support of some of the distinctions you notice.
3. If pleasure for Bentham is intrinsically good, would anything count as being intrinsically bad? Bentham is often called a hedonist. Hedonism is the ethical view that pleasure alone is an intrinsic good for persons. Does Bentham believe the descriptive generalization that all persons in fact *do* seek pleasure (a view called psychological hedonism), or does he believe that all persons *should* or *ought* to seek pleasure, even though some persons might not (a view called ethical hedonism)? Relate your answer to Bentham's theory of motives.
4. When Bentham explains the principle of utility in terms of the individual and in terms of the community, does he commit the fallacy of composition?³ He writes above, Chapter I, V, "It is in vain to talk

3. The fallacy of composition involves the implication that a characteristic of a part of a something is attributable as the same characteristic of the whole. For example, the inference, "Since human beings are mortal, someday the human race must come to an end" is an instance of this fallacy. If all the players on an all-star team are excellent players, it would not logically follow that the team is an excellent team. In other words, in the fallacy of composition, the name of the characteristic in the predicate is

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of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual.”

5. Vince Lombardi, the legendary football coach has said, “Show me a good loser, and I’ll show you a loser” and “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” Compare these statements to “As a man thinketh in his heart so is he.”⁴ What would be Bentham’s reaction to the later statement? Has Bentham overlooked anything in asserting that motives are not an exception to his theory?
6. Attempt to do a detailed calculation of the total amount of pleasure and pain comparing sleeping-in with attending philosophy class. If you are sleeping, then would it follow that you are experiencing neither pleasure nor pain because you are not conscious? In your calculation, be sure to include the extent of the pleasure you bring to the other members of the class. If you have problems in your assignment of values, try assigning pleasure as an ordinal relation rather than a cardinal relation, or check the Internet to see if anyone else has attempted calculating some specific instances.

used ambiguously.

4. *Proverbs*, 23: 7.

Chapter 26

“Slave and Master Morality” by Friedrich Nietzsche



Nietzsche, Thoemmes

About the author...

Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) intuitive and visceral rejection of the economics, politics, and science of European civilization in the 19th century led him to predict, "There will be wars such as there have never been on earth before." His dominant aphoristic style of writing and his insistence of truth as convenient fiction, or irrefutable error, have puzzled philosophers who think in traditional ways. Nietzsche seeks to undermine the traditional quest of philosophy as recounted by Russell and, instead, seeks to reveal the objects of philosophy (truth, reality, and value) to be based on the "Will to Power."

About the work...

In *Beyond Good and Evil*¹ Nietzsche detects two types of morality mixed not only in higher civilization but also in the psychology of the individual. Master-morality values power, nobility, and independence: it stands “beyond good and evil.” Slave-morality values sympathy, kindness, and humility and is regarded by Nietzsche as “herd-morality.” The history of society, Nietzsche believes, is the conflict between these two outlooks: the herd attempts to impose its values universally but the noble master transcends their “mediocrity.”

From the reading...

“Every elevation of the type *man*, has hitherto been the work of an aristocratic society and so... requiring slavery in one form or another.”

Ideas of Interest from *Beyond Good and Evil*

1. How does Nietzsche explain the origins of society? What are the essential characteristics of a healthy society?
2. Nietzsche states that a consequence of the “Will to Power” is the exploitation of man by man, and this exploitation is the essence of life. What does he mean by this statement? Is exploitation a basic biological function of living things?
3. What does Nietzsche mean when he says that the noble type of man is “beyond good and evil” and is a creator of values?

1. Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Helen Zimmern. 257-261.

4. Explain in some detail the differences among the master-morality and the slave-morality. Are these concepts useful in the analysis of interpersonal dynamics?
5. Explain Nietzsche’s insight into the psychology of vanity. Why is vanity essential to the slave-morality? How does it relate to the individual’s need for approval? Is Nietzsche asserting that the vanity of an individual is a direct consequence of the individual’s own sense of inferiority?

The Reading Selection from *Beyond Good and Evil*

[Origin of Aristocracy]

257. Every elevation of the type “man,” has hitherto been the work of an aristocratic society and so it will always be—a society believing in a long scale of gradations of rank and differences of worth among human beings, and requiring slavery in some form or other. Without the *pathos of distance*, such as grows out of the incarnated difference of classes, out of the constant out-looking and down-looking of the ruling caste on subordinates and instruments, and out of their equally constant practice of obeying and commanding, of keeping down and keeping at a distance—that other more mysterious pathos could never have arisen, the longing for an ever new widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, further, more extended, more comprehensive states, in short, just the elevation of the type “man,” the continued “self-surmounting of man,” to use a moral formula in a supermoral sense.

To be sure, one must not resign oneself to any humanitarian illusions about the history of the origin of an aristocratic society (that is to say, of the preliminary condition for the elevation of the type “man”): the truth is hard. Let us acknowledge unprejudicedly how every higher civilization hitherto has *originated!* Men with a still natural nature, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, men of prey, still in possession of unbroken strength of will and desire for power, threw themselves upon weaker, more moral, more peaceful races (perhaps trading or cattle-rearing communities), or upon old mellow civilizations in which the final vital force was flickering

out in brilliant fireworks of wit and depravity. At the commencement, the noble caste was always the barbarian caste: their superiority did not consist first of all in their physical, but in their psychical power—they were more *complete* men (which at every point also implies the same as “more complete beasts”).

[Higher Class of Being]

258. Corruption—as the indication that anarchy threatens to break out among the instincts, and that the foundation of the emotions, called “life,” is convulsed—is something radically different according to the organization in which it manifests itself. When, for instance, an aristocracy like that of France at the beginning of the Revolution, flung away its privileges with sublime disgust and sacrificed itself to an excess of its moral sentiments, it was corruption:—it was really only the closing act of the corruption which had existed for centuries, by virtue of which that aristocracy had abdicated step by step its lordly prerogatives and lowered itself to a *function* of royalty (in the end even to its decoration and parade-dress). The essential thing, however, in a good and healthy aristocracy is that it should not regard itself as a function either of the kingship or the commonwealth, but as the *significance* highest justification thereof—that it should therefore accept with a good conscience the sacrifice of a legion of individuals, who, *for its sake*, must be suppressed and reduced to imperfect men, to slaves and instruments. Its fundamental belief must be precisely that society is *not* allowed to exist for its own sake, but only as a foundation and scaffolding, by means of which a select class of beings may be able to elevate themselves to their higher duties, and in general to a higher *existence*: like those sun-seeking climbing plants in Java—they are called Sipo Matador,—which encircle an oak so long and so often with their arms, until at last, high above it, but supported by it, they can unfold their tops in the open light, and exhibit their happiness.

[Life Denial]

259. To refrain mutually from injury, from violence, from exploitation, and put one’s will on a par with that of others: this may result in a certain rough sense in good conduct among individuals when the necessary conditions are given (namely, the actual similarity of the individuals in

Chapter 26. “Slave and Master Morality” by Friedrich Nietzsche

amount of force and degree of worth, and their co-relation within one organization). As soon, however, as one wished to take this principle more generally, and if possible even as the *fundamental principle of society*, it would immediately disclose what it really is—namely, a Will to the *denial* of life, a principle of dissolution and decay.

Here one must think profoundly to the very basis and resist all sentimental weakness: life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation;—but why should one for ever use precisely these words on which for ages a disparaging purpose has been stamped?

Even the organization within which, as was previously supposed, the individuals treat each other as equal—it takes place in every healthy aristocracy—must itself, if it be a living and not a dying organization, do all that towards other bodies, which the individuals within it refrain from doing to each other it will have to be the incarnated Will to Power, it will endeavour to grow, to gain ground, attract to itself and acquire ascendancy—not owing to any morality or immorality, but because it *lives*, and because life *is* precisely Will to Power. On no point, however, is the ordinary consciousness of Europeans more unwilling to be corrected than on this matter, people now rave everywhere, even under the guise of science, about coming conditions of society in which “the exploiting character” is to be absent—that sounds to my ears as if they promised to invent a mode of life which should refrain from all organic functions.

From the reading...

“The noble type of man regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of... he is a creator of values.”

“Exploitation” does not belong to a depraved, or imperfect and primitive society it belongs to the nature of the living being as a primary organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power, which is precisely the Will to Life—Granting that as a theory this is a novelty—as a reality it is the *fundamental fact* of all history let us be so far honest towards ourselves!

[Master Morality]

260. In a tour through the many finer and coarser moralities which have hitherto prevailed or still prevail on the earth, I found certain traits recurring regularly together, and connected with one another, until finally two primary types revealed themselves to me, and a radical distinction was brought to light.

There is *master-morality* and *slave-morality*,—I would at once add, however, that in all higher and mixed civilizations, there are also attempts at the reconciliation of the two moralities, but one finds still oftener the confusion and mutual misunderstanding of them, indeed sometimes their close juxtaposition—even in the same man, within one soul. The distinctions of moral values have either originated in a ruling caste, pleasantly conscious of being different from the ruled—or among the ruled class, the slaves and dependents of all sorts.

In the first case, when it is the rulers who determine the conception "good," it is the exalted, proud disposition which is regarded as the distinguishing feature, and that which determines the order of rank. The noble type of man separates from himself the beings in whom the opposite of this exalted, proud disposition displays itself he despises them. Let it at once be noted that in this first kind of morality the antithesis "good" and "bad" means practically the same as "noble" and "despicable",—the antithesis "good" and "evil" is of a different origin. The cowardly, the timid, the insignificant, and those thinking merely of narrow utility are despised; moreover, also, the distrustful, with their constrained glances, the self-abasing, the dog-like kind of men who let themselves be abused, the mendicant flatterers, and above all the liars:—it is a fundamental belief of all aristocrats that the common people are untruthful. "We truthful ones"—the nobility in ancient Greece called themselves.

It is obvious that everywhere the designations of moral value were at first applied to *men*; and were only derivatively and at a later period applied to *actions*; it is a gross mistake, therefore, when historians of morals start with questions like, "Why have sympathetic actions been praised?" The noble type of man regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of; he passes the judgment: What is injurious to me is injurious in itself; he knows that it is he himself only who confers honour on things; he is a *creator of values*. He honours whatever he recognizes in himself: such morality equals self-glorification. In the foreground there is the feeling of plenitude, of power, which seeks to overflow, the

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happiness of high tension, the consciousness of a wealth which would fain give and bestow:—the noble man also helps the unfortunate, but not—or scarcely—out of pity, but rather from an impulse generated by the superabundance of power. The noble man honours in himself the powerful one, him also who has power over himself, who knows how to speak and how to keep silence, who takes pleasure in subjecting himself to severity and hardness, and has reverence for all that is severe and hard. "Wotan placed a hard heart in my breast," says an old Scandinavian Saga: it is thus rightly expressed from the soul of a proud Viking. Such a type of man is even proud of not being made for sympathy; the hero of the Saga therefore adds warningly: "He who has not a hard heart when young, will never have one." The noble and brave who think thus are the furthest removed from the morality which sees precisely in sympathy, or in acting for the good of others, or in *dèintèressement*, the characteristic of the moral; faith in oneself, pride in oneself, a radical enmity and irony towards "selflessness," belong as definitely to noble morality, as do a careless scorn and precaution in presence of sympathy and the "warm heart."

It is the powerful who *know* how to honour, it is their art, their domain for invention. The profound reverence for age and for tradition—all law rests on this double reverence,— the belief and prejudice in favour of ancestors and unfavourable to newcomers, is typical in the morality of the powerful; and if, reversely, men of "modern ideas" believe almost instinctively in "progress" and the "future," and are more and more lacking in respect for old age, the ignoble origin of these "ideas" has complacently betrayed itself thereby.

A morality of the ruling class, however, is more especially foreign and irritating to present-day taste in the sternness of its principle that one has duties only to one's equals; that one may act towards beings of a lower rank, towards all that is foreign, just as seems good to one, or "as the heart desires," and in any case "beyond good and evil": it is here that sympathy and similar sentiments can have a place. The ability and obligation to exercise prolonged gratitude and prolonged revenge—both only within the circle of equals,—artfulness in retaliation, *refinement* of the idea in friendship, a certain necessity to have enemies (as outlets for the emotions of envy, quarrelsomeness, arrogance—in fact, in order to be a good *friend*): all these are typical characteristics of the noble morality, which, as has been pointed out, is not the morality of "modern ideas," and is therefore at present difficult to realize, and also to unearth and disclose.

[Slave Morality]

It is otherwise with the second type of morality, *slave-morality*. Supposing that the abused, the oppressed, the suffering, the unemancipated, the weary, and those uncertain of themselves should moralize, what will be the common element in their moral estimates? Probably a pessimistic suspicion with regard to the entire situation of man will find expression, perhaps a condemnation of man, together with his situation. The slave has an unfavourable eye for the virtues of the powerful; he has a skepticism and distrust, a *refinement* of distrust of everything “good” that is there honoured—he would fain persuade himself that the very happiness there is not genuine. On the other hand, *those* qualities which serve to alleviate the existence of sufferers are brought into prominence and flooded with light; it is here that sympathy, the kind, helping hand, the warm heart, patience, diligence, humility, and friendliness attain to honour; for here these are the most useful qualities, and almost the only means of supporting the burden of existence. Slave-morality is essentially the morality of utility.

Here is the seat of the origin of the famous antithesis “good” and “evil”:—power and dangerousness are assumed to reside in the evil, a certain dreadfulness, subtlety, and strength, which do not admit of being despised. According to slave-morality, therefore, the “evil” man arouses fear; according to master-morality, it is precisely the “good” man who arouses fear and seeks to arouse it, while the bad man is regarded as the despicable being.

The contrast attains its maximum when, in accordance with the logical consequences of slave-morality, a shade of depreciation—it may be slight and well-intentioned—at last attaches itself to the “good” man of this morality; because, according to the servile mode of thought, the good man must in any case be the *safe* man: he is good-natured, easily deceived, perhaps a little stupid, *un bonhomme*. Everywhere that slave-morality gains the ascendancy, language shows a tendency to approximate the significations of the words “good” and “stupid.”

[Creation of Values]

A last fundamental difference: the desire for *freedom*, the instinct for happiness and the refinements of the feeling of liberty belong as necessarily to slave-morals and morality, as artifice and enthusiasm in reverence and

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devotion are the regular symptoms of an aristocratic mode of thinking and estimating.— Hence we can understand without further detail why love *as a passion*—it is our European specialty—must absolutely be of noble origin; as is well known, its invention is due to the Provençal poet-cavaliers, those brilliant, ingenious men of the "gai saber," to whom Europe owes so much, and almost owes itself.

261. Vanity is one of the things which are perhaps most difficult for a noble man to understand: he will be tempted to deny it, where another kind of man thinks he sees it self-evidently. The problem for him is to represent to his mind beings who seek to arouse a good opinion of themselves which they themselves do not possess—and consequently also do not "deserve,"—and who yet *believe* in this good opinion afterwards. This seems to him on the one hand such bad taste and so self-disrespectful, and on the other hand so grotesquely unreasonable, that he would like to consider vanity an exception, and is doubtful about it in most cases when it is spoken of.

He will say, for instance: "I may be mistaken about my value, and on the other hand may nevertheless demand that my value should be acknowledged by others precisely as I rate it:—that, however, is not vanity (but self-conceit, or, in most cases, that which is called 'humility,' and also 'modesty')." Or he will even say: "For many reasons I can delight in the good opinion of others, perhaps because I love and honour them, and rejoice in all their joys, perhaps also because their good opinion endorses and strengthens my belief in my own good opinion, perhaps because the good opinion of others, even in cases where I do not share it, is useful to me, or gives promise of usefulness:—all this, however, is not vanity."

The man of noble character must first bring it home forcibly to his mind, especially with the aid of history, that, from time immemorial, in all social strata in any way dependent, the ordinary man *was* only that which he *passed for*:—not being at all accustomed to fix values, he did not assign even to himself any other value than that which his master assigned to him (it is the peculiar *right of masters* to create values).

It may be looked upon as the result of an extraordinary atavism, that the ordinary man, even at present, is still always *waiting* for an opinion about himself, and then instinctively submitting himself to it; yet by no means only to a "good" opinion, but also to a bad and unjust one (think, for instance, of the greater part of the self-appreciations and self-depreciations which believing women learn from their confessors, and which in general

the believing Christian learns from his Church).

From the reading...

“Everywhere slave-morality gains ascendancy, language shows a tendency to approximate the meanings of the words ‘good’ and ‘stupid.’”

In fact, conformably to the slow rise of the democratic social order (and its cause, the blending of the blood of masters and slaves), the originally noble and rare impulse of the masters to assign a value to themselves and to “think well” of themselves, will now be more and more encouraged and extended; but it has at all times an older, ampler, and more radically ingrained propensity opposed to it—and in the phenomenon of “vanity” this older propensity overmasters the younger. The vain person rejoices over *every* good opinion which he hears about himself (quite apart from the point of view of its usefulness, and equally regardless of its truth or falsehood), just as he suffers from every bad opinion: for he subjects himself to both, he feels himself subjected to both, by that oldest instinct of subjection which breaks forth in him.

It is “the slave” in the vain man’s blood, the remains of the slave’s craftiness—and how much of the “slave” is still left in woman, for instance!—which seeks to *seduce* to good opinions of itself; it is the slave, too, who immediately afterwards falls prostrate himself before these opinions, as though he had not called them forth.—And to repeat it again: vanity is an atavism.

Related Ideas

Friedrich Nietzsche (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/>) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: An excellent first resource for discovering Nietzsche’s life and writings.

Perspectives of Nietzsche (<http://www.pitt.edu/~wbcurry/nietzsche.html>) An accessible introduction to some main concepts of Nietzsche’s philosophy by Bill Curry.

From the reading...

“...it is the peculiar *right of masters* to create values.”



The University of Bonn, the Rhine, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare Nietzsche’s view of life as the “Will to Power” with Glaucon’s account in Plato’s “The Ring of Gyges.” Do both accounts presuppose a state of nature prior to the development of society? How would social contract theory regard the so-called “master-morality”?
2. Nietzsche scholar Walter Kaufmann suggests that master-morality is revealed in the *Iliad*, and the slave-morality is indicated by the *New Testament*. Characterize the main ethical suppositions of both of these works. Does your characterization support Kaufmann’s observation?
3. Compare Nietzsche’s concept of the “Will to Power” with Alfred Adler’s insight that Nietzsche’s “Will to Power” is not essential to human nature, but is, in fact, a neurotic pattern of behavior based on

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a "fictional goal" created by the individual in order to cope with the demands of society.

4. Explain Nietzsche's observation that love as passion is of noble or master origin. The origin Nietzsche cites is the "gai saber," the "gay science," of the medieval troubadour. What does he mean which he asserts Europe almost "owes itself" to these poet-cavaliers?
5. Compare Nietzsche's notion of "will to power" with C. G. Jung's insight quoted the following citation: "Where love rules, there is no will to power, and where power predominates, love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other."²

2. C. G. Jung, *On the Psychology of the Unconscious*, 1917.

Chapter 27

“What Makes a Life Significant?” by William James



William James, Thoemmes Press

About the author...

William James (1842-1910), perhaps the most prominent American philosopher and psychologist, was an influential formulator and spokesperson for pragmatism. Early in his life, James studied art, but later his curiosity turned to a number of scientific fields. After graduation from Harvard Medical College, James's intellectual pursuits broadened to include literary criticism, history, and philosophy. He read widely and contributed to many different academic fields. The year following

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graduation, James accompanied Louis Agassiz on an expedition to Brazil. As a Harvard professor in philosophy and psychology, James achieved recognition as one of the most outstanding writers and lecturers of his time.

About the work...

In his *Talks to Students*,¹ James presents three lectures to students—two of them, being “The Gospel of Relaxation,” and “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” The third talk is the one presented here. His second, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” has as its thesis that the worth of things depends upon the feelings we have toward them. Read it online as a companion piece to this reading at the *William James Website* noted below in the section entitled “Related Ideas.”

From the reading...

“Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold.”

The Reading from “What Makes Life a Significant?”

[Life’s Values and Meanings]

IN my previous talk, “On a Certain Blindness,” I tried to make you feel how soaked and shot-through life is with values and meanings which we fail to realize because of our external and insensible point of view. The meanings are there for the others, but they are not there for us. There lies more than a mere interest of curious speculation in understanding this. It

1. William James. *Talks to Students*. 1899.

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has the most tremendous practical importance. I wish that I could convince you of it as I feel it myself. It is the basis of all our tolerance, social, religious, and political. The forgetting of it lies at the root of every stupid and sanguinary mistake that rulers over subject-peoples make. The first thing to learn in intercourse with others is non-interference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not assume to interfere by violence with ours. No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep.

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence, as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anæsthesia as regards Jill's magical importance? Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely poor Jill's palpitating little life-throbs *are* among the wonders of creation, *are* worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles toward a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires, understanding her limits as manfully as he can, and yet inadequately, too; for he is also afflicted with some blindness, even here. Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that that portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not. Jill, who knows her inner life, knows that Jack's way of taking it—so importantly—is the true and serious way; and she responds to the truth in him by taking him truly and seriously, too. May the ancient blindness never wrap its clouds about either of them again! Where would any of *us* be, were there no one willing to know us as we really are or ready to repay us for *our* insight by making recognizant return? We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic, and important way.

If you say that this is absurd, and that we cannot be in love with everyone at once, I merely point out to you that, as a matter of fact, certain persons do exist with an enormous capacity for friendship and for taking delight in other people's lives; and that such persons know more of truth than if their hearts were not so big. The vice of ordinary Jack and Jill affection is not its intensity, but its exclusions and its jealousies. Leave those out, and

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you see that the ideal I am holding up before you, however impracticable to-day, yet contains nothing intrinsically absurd.

We have unquestionably a great cloud-bank of ancestral blindness weighing down upon us, only transiently riven here and there by fitful revelations of the truth. It is vain to hope for this state of things to alter much. Our inner secrets must remain for the most part impenetrable by others, for beings as essentially practical as we are necessarily short of sight. But, if we cannot gain much positive insight into one another, cannot we at least use our sense of our own blindness to make us more cautious in going over the dark places? Cannot we escape some of those hideous ancestral intolerances; and cruelties, and positive reversals of the truth?

From the reading...

“... I merely point out to you that, as a matter of fact, certain persons do exist with an enormous capacity for friendship and for taking delight in other people’s lives; and that such persons know more of truth than if their hearts were not so big.”

For the remainder of this hour I invite you to seek with me some principle to make our tolerance less chaotic. And, as I began my previous lecture by a personal reminiscence, I am going to ask your indulgence for a similar bit of egotism now.

A few summers ago I spent a happy week at the famous Assembly Grounds on the borders of Chautauqua Lake. The moment one treads that sacred enclosure, one feels one’s self in an atmosphere of success. Sobriety and industry, intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality, prosperity and cheerfulness, pervade the air. It is a serious and studious picnic on a gigantic scale. Here you have a town of many thousands of inhabitants, beautifully laid out in the forest and drained, and equipped with means for satisfying all the necessary lower and most of the superfluous higher wants of man. You have a first-class college in full blast. You have magnificent music—a chorus of seven hundred voices, with possibly the most perfect open-air auditorium in the world. You have every sort of athletic exercise from sailing, rowing, swimming, bicycling, to the ball-field and the more artificial doings which the gymnasium affords. You have kindergartens and model secondary schools. You have

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general religious services and special club-houses for the several sects. You have perpetually running soda-water fountains, and daily popular lectures by distinguished men. You have the best of company, and yet no effort. You have no zymotic diseases, no poverty, no drunkenness, no crime, no police. You have culture, you have kindness, you have cheapness, you have equality, you have the best fruits of what mankind has fought and bled and striven for under the name of civilization for centuries. You have, in short, a foretaste of what human society might be, were it all in the light, with no suffering and no dark corners.

I went in curiosity for a day. I stayed for a week, held spell-bound by the charm and ease of everything, by the middle-class paradise, without a sin, without a victim, without a blot, without a tear.



The Boat Landing, Lake Chautauqua, New York, Library of Congress

And yet what was my own astonishment, on emerging into the dark and wicked world again, to catch myself quite unexpectedly and involuntarily saying: "Ouf! what a relief! Now for something primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as an Armenian massacre, to set the balance straight again. This order is too tame, this culture too second-rate, this goodness too uninspiring. This human drama without a villain or a pang; this community so refined that ice-cream soda-water is the utmost offering it can make to the brute animal in man; this city simmering in the tepid lakeside sun; this atrocious harmlessness of all things,—I cannot abide with them. Let me take my chances again in the big outside worldly wilder-

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ness with all its sins and sufferings. There are the heights and depths, the precipices and the steep ideals, the gleams of the awful and the infinite; and there is more hope and help a thousand times than in this dead level and quintessence of every mediocrity."

Such was the sudden right-about-face performed for me by my lawless fancy! There had been spread before me the realization—on a small, sample scale of course—of all the ideals for which our civilization has been striving: security, intelligence, humanity, and order; and here was the instinctive hostile reaction, not of the natural man, but of a so-called cultivated man upon such a Utopia. There seemed thus to be a self-contradiction and paradox somewhere, which I, as a professor drawing a full salary, was in duty bound to unravel and explain, if I could.

So I meditated. And, first of all, I asked myself what the thing was that was so lacking in this Sabbatical city, and the lack of which kept one forever falling short of the higher sort of contentment. And I soon recognized that it was the element that gives to the wicked outer world all its moral style, expressiveness and picturesqueness,—the element of precipitousness, so to call it, of strength and strenuousness, intensity and danger. What excites and interests the looker-on at life, what the romances and the statues celebrate and the grim civic monuments remind us of, is the everlasting battle of the powers of light with those of darkness; with heroism, reduced to its bare chance, yet ever and anon snatching victory from the jaws of death. But in this unspeakable Chautauqua there was no potentiality of death in sight anywhere, and no point of the compass visible from which danger might possibly appear. The ideal was so completely victorious already that no sign of any previous battle remained, the place just resting on its oars. But what our human emotions seem to require is the sight of the struggle going on. The moment the fruits are being merely eaten, things become ignoble. Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still—this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the higher forms of literature and fine art to bring home to us and suggest. At Chautauqua there were no racks, even in the place's historical museum; and no sweat, except possibly the gentle moisture on the brow of some lecturer, or on the sides of some player in the ball-field.

Such absence of human nature *in extremis* anywhere seemed, then, a suf-

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ficient explanation for Chautauqua's flatness and lack of zest.

But was not this a paradox well calculated to fill one with dismay? It looks indeed, thought I, as if the romantic idealists with their pessimism about our civilization were, after all, quite right. An irremediable flatness is coming over the world. Bourgeoisie and mediocrity, church sociables and teachers' conventions, are taking the place of the old heights and depths and romantic *chiaroscuro*. And, to get human life in its wild intensity, we must in future turn more and more away from the actual, and forget it, if we can, in the romancer's or the poet's pages. The whole world, delightful and sinful as it may still appear for a moment to one just escaped from the Chautauquan enclosure, is nevertheless obeying more and more just those ideals that are sure to make of it in the end a mere Chautauqua Assembly on an enormous scale. *Was im Gesang soll leben muss im Leben untergehn*. Even now, in our own country, correctness, fairness, and compromise for every small advantage are crowding out all other qualities. The higher heroisms and the old rare flavors are passing out of life.²

With these thoughts in my mind, I was speeding with the train toward Buffalo, when, near that city, the sight of a workman doing something on the dizzy edge of a sky-scaling iron construction brought me to my senses very suddenly. And now I perceived, by a flash of insight, that I had been steeping myself in pure ancestral blindness, and looking at life with the eyes of a remote spectator. Wishing for heroism and the spectacle of human nature on the rack, I had never noticed the great fields of heroism lying round about me, I had failed to see it present and alive. I could only think of it as dead and embalmed, labelled and costumed, as it is in the pages of romance. And yet there it was before me in the daily lives of the laboring classes. Not in clanging fights and desperate marches only is heroism to be looked for, but on every railway bridge and fire-proof building that is going up to-day. On freight-trains, on the decks of vessels, in cattleyards and mines, on lumber-rafts, among the firemen and the policemen, the demand for courage is incessant; and the supply never fails. There, every day of the year somewhere, is human nature *in extremis* for you. And wherever a scythe, an axe, a pick, or a shovel is wielded, you have it sweating and aching and with its powers of patient endurance racked to the utmost under the length of hours of the strain.

2. This address was composed before the Cuban and Philippine wars. Such outbursts of the passion of mastery are, however, only episodes in a social process which in the long run seems everywhere heading toward the Chautauquan ideals.

From the reading...

“An irremediable flatness is coming over the world. Bourgeoisie and mediocrity, church sociables and teachers’ conventions, are taking the place of the old heights and depths and romantic *chiaroscuro*.”

As I awoke to all this unidealized heroic life around me, the scales seemed to fall from my eyes; and a wave of sympathy greater than anything I had ever before felt with the common life of common men began to fill my soul. It began to seem as if virtue with horny hands and dirty skin were the only virtue genuine and vital enough to take account of. Every other virtue poses; none is absolutely unconscious and simple, and unexpectant of decoration or recognition, like this. These are our soldiers, thought I, these our sustainers, these the very parents of our life.

Many years ago, when in Vienna, I had had a similar feeling of awe and reverence in looking at the peasant women, in from the country on their business at the market for the day. Old hags many of them were, dried and brown and wrinkled, kerchiefed and short-petticoated, with thick wool stockings on their bony shanks, stumping through the glittering thoroughfares, looking neither to the right nor the left, bent on duty, envying nothing, humble-hearted, remote;—and yet at bottom, when you came to think of it, bearing the whole fabric of the splendors and corruptions of that city on their laborious backs. For where would any of it have been without their unremitting, unrewarded labor in the fields? And so with us: not to our generals and poets, I thought, but to the Italian and Hungarian laborers in the Subway, rather, ought the monuments of gratitude and reverence of a city like Boston to be reared.

[Courage of the Everyday Person]

If any of you have been readers of Tolstoï, you will see that I passed into a vein of feeling similar to his, with its abhorrence of all that conventionally passes for distinguished, and its exclusive deification of the bravery, patience, kindness, and dumbness of the unconscious natural man.

Where now is our Tolstoï, I said, to bring the truth of all this home to our American bosoms, fill us with a better insight, and wean us away from that

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spurious literary romanticism on which our wretched culture—as it calls itself—is fed? Divinity lies all about us, and culture is too bide-bound to even suspect the fact. Could a Howells or a Kipling be enlisted in this mission? or are they still too deep in the ancestral blindness, and not humane enough for the inner joy and meaning of the laborer's existence to be really revealed? Must we wait for some one born and bred and living as a laborer himself, but who, by grace of Heaven, shall also find a literary voice?

And there I rested on that day, with a sense of widening of vision, and with what it is surely fair to call an increase of religious insight into life. In God's eyes the differences of social position, of intellect, of culture, of cleanliness, of dress, which different men exhibit? and all the other rarities and exceptions on which they so fantastically pin their pride, must be so small as practically quite to vanish; and all that should remain is the common fact that here we are, a countless multitude of vessels of life, each of us pent in to peculiar difficulties, with which we must severally struggle by using whatever of fortitude and goodness we can summon up. The exercise of the courage, patience, and kindness, must be the significant portion of the whole business; and the distinctions of position can only be a manner of diversifying the phenomenal surface upon which these underground virtues may manifest their effects. At this rate, the deepest human life is everywhere, is eternal. And, if any human attributes exist only in particular individuals, they must belong to the mere trapping and decoration of the surface-show.

Thus are men's lives levelled up as well as levelled down,—levelled up in their common inner meaning, levelled down in their outer gloriousness and show. Yet always, we must confess, this levelling insight tends to be obscured again; and always the ancestral blindness returns and wraps us up, so that we end once more by thinking that creation can be for no other purpose than to develop remarkable situations and conventional distinctions and merits. And then always some new leveller in the shape of a religious prophet has to arise—the Buddha, the Christ, or some Saint Francis, some Rousseau or Tolstoi—to redispel our blindness. Yet, little by little, there comes some stable gain; for the world does get more humane, and the religion of democracy tends toward permanent increase.

This, as I said, became for a time my conviction, and gave me great content. I have put the matter into the form of a personal reminiscence, so that I might lead you into it more directly and completely, and so save time. But now I am going to discuss the rest of it with you in a more impersonal

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way.



Three Peasants Walking to Market, Library of Congress

Tolstoï’s levelling philosophy began long before he had the crisis of melancholy commemorated in that wonderful document of his entitled *My Confession*, which led the way to his more specifically religious works. In his masterpiece *War and Peace*,—assuredly the greatest of human novels,—the rôle of the spiritual hero is given to a poor little soldier named Karataïeff, so helpful, so cheerful, and so devout that, in spite of his ignorance and filthiness, the sight of him opens the heavens, which have been closed, to the mind of the principal character of the book; and his example evidently is meant by Tolstoï to let God into the world again for the reader. Poor little Karataïeff is taken prisoner by the French; and, when too exhausted by hardship and fever to march, is shot as other prisoners were in the famous retreat from Moscow. The last view one gets of him is his little figure leaning against a white birch-tree, and uncomplainingly awaiting the end.

“The more,” writes Tolstoï in the work *My Confession*, “the more I examined the life of these laboring folks, the more persuaded I became that they veritably have faith, and get from it alone the sense and the possibil-

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ity of life... Contrariwise to those of our own class, who protest against destiny and grow indignant at its rigor, these people receive maladies and misfortunes without revolt, without opposition, and with a firm and tranquil confidence that all had to be like that, could not be otherwise, and that it is all right so... The more we live by our intellect, the less we understand the meaning of life. We see only a cruel jest in suffering and death, whereas these people live, suffer, and draw near to death with tranquillity, and oftener than not with joy... There are enormous multitudes of them happy with the most perfect happiness, although deprived of what for us is the sole of good of life. Those who understand life's meaning, and know how to live and die thus, are to be counted not by twos, threes, tens, but by hundreds, thousands, millions. They labor quietly, endure privations and pains, live and die, and throughout everything see the good without seeing the vanity. I had to love these people. The more I entered into their life, the more I loved them; and the more it became possible for me to live, too. It came about not only that the life of our society, of the learned and of the rich, disgusted me—more than that, it lost all semblance of meaning in my eyes. All our actions, our deliberations, our sciences, our arts, all appeared to me with a new significance. I understood that these things might be charming pastimes, but that one need seek in them no depth, whereas the life of the hardworking populace, of that multitude of human beings who really contribute to existence, appeared to me in its true light. I understood that there veritably is life, that the meaning which life there receives is the truth; and I accepted it.”³

In a similar way does Stevenson appeal to our piety toward the elemental virtue of mankind.

“What a wonderful thing,” he writes,⁴ “is this Man! How surprising are his attributes! Poor soul, here for so little, cast among so many hardships, savagely surrounded, savagely descended, irremediably condemned to prey upon his fellow-lives,—who should have blamed him, had he been of a piece with his destiny and a being merely barbarous?... [Yet] it matters not where we look, under what climate we observe him, in what stage of society, in what depth of ignorance, burdened with what erroneous morality; in ships at sea, a man inured to hardship and vile pleasures, his brightest hope a fiddle in a tavern, and a bedizened trull who sells herself to rob him, and he, for all that, simple, innocent, cheerful, kindly like a

3. *My Confession*, X. (condensed).

4. *Across the Plains*: “*Pulvis et Umbra*” (abridged).

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child, constant to toil, brave to drown, for others; . . . in the slums of cities, moving among indifferent millions to mechanical employments, without hope of change in the future, with scarce a pleasure in the present, and yet true to his virtues, honest up to his lights, kind to his neighbors, tempted perhaps in vain by the bright gin-palace, . . . often repaying the world's scorn with service, often standing firm upon a scruple; . . . everywhere some virtue cherished or affected, everywhere some decency of thought and courage, everywhere the ensign of man's ineffectual goodness,—ah! if I could show you this! If I could show you these men and women all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still obscurely fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging to some rag of honor, the poor jewel of their souls."

All this is as true as it is splendid, and terribly do we need our Tolstoï and Stevensons to keep our sense for it alive. Yet you remember the Irishman who, when asked, "Is not one man as good as another?" replied, "Yes; and a great deal better, too!" Similarly (it seems to me) does Tolstoï over-correct our social prejudices, when he makes his love of the peasant so exclusive, and hardens his heart toward the educated man as absolutely as he does. Grant that at Chautauqua there was little moral effort, little sweat or muscular strain in view. Still, deep down in the souls of the participants we may be sure that something of the sort was hid, some inner stress, some vital virtue not found wanting when required. And, after all, the question recurs, and forces itself upon us, Is it so certain that the surroundings and circumstances of the virtue do make so little difference in the importance of the result? Is the functional utility, the worth to the universe of a certain definite amount of courage, kindness, and patience, no greater if the possessor of these virtues is in an educated situation, working out far-reaching tasks, than if he be an illiterate nobody, hewing wood and drawing water, just to keep himself alive? Tolstoï's philosophy, deeply enlightening though it certainly is, remains a false abstraction. It savors too much of that Oriental pessimism and nihilism of his, which declares the whole phenomenal world and its facts and their distinctions to be a cunning fraud.

[Ideas of Individuals]

A mere bare fraud is just what our Western common sense will never be-

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lieve the phenomenal world to be. It admits fully that the inner joys and virtues are the *essential* part of life's business, but it is sure that some positive part is also played by the adjuncts of the show. If it is idiotic in romanticism to recognize the heroic only when it sees it labelled and dressed-up in books, it is really just as idiotic to see it only in the dirty boots and sweaty shirt of some one in the fields. It is with us really under every disguise: at Chautauqua; here in your college; in the stock-yards and on the freight-trains; and in the czar of Russia's court. But, instinctively, we make a combination of two things in judging the total significance of a human being. We feel it to be some sort of a product (if such a product only could be calculated) of his inner virtue *and* his outer place,—neither singly taken, but both conjoined. If the outer differences had no meaning for life, why indeed should all this immense variety of them exist? They must be significant elements of the world as well.



Switchtender on Pennsylvania Railroad, Library of Congress

Just test Tolstoi's deification of the mere manual laborer by the facts. This is what Mr. Walter Wyckoff, after working as an unskilled laborer in the demolition of some buildings at West Point, writes of the spiritual condition of the class of men to which he temporarily chose to belong:—

The salient features of our condition are plain enough. We are grown men, and are without a trade. In the labor-market we stand ready to sell to the

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highest bidder our mere muscular strength for so many hours each day. We are thus in the lowest grade of labor. And, selling our muscular strength in the open market for what it will bring, we sell it under peculiar conditions. It is all the capital that we have. We have no reserve means of subsistence, and cannot, therefore, stand off for a "reserve price." We sell under the necessity of satisfying imminent hunger. Broadly speaking, we must sell our labor or starve; and, as hunger is a matter of a few hours, and we have no other way of meeting this need, we must sell at once for what the market offers for our labor.

Our employer is buying labor in a dear market, and he will certainly get from us as much work as he can at the price. The gang-boss is secured for this purpose, and thoroughly does he know his business. He has sole command of us. He never saw us before, and he will discharge us all when the debris is cleared away. In the mean time he must get from us, if he can, the utmost of physical labor which we, individually and collectively, are capable of. If he should drive some of us to exhaustion, and we should not be able to continue at work, he would not be the loser; for the market would soon supply him with others to take our places.

We are ignorant men, but so much we clearly see,—that we have sold our labor where we could sell it dearest, and our employer has bought it where he could buy it cheapest. He has paid high, and he must get all the labor that he can; and, by a strong instinct which possesses us, we shall part with as little as we can. From work like ours there seems to us to have been eliminated every element which constitutes the nobility of labor. We feel no personal pride in its progress, and no community of interest with our employer. There is none of the joy of responsibility, none of the sense of achievement, only the dull monotony of grinding toil, with the longing for the signal to quit work, and for our wages at the end.

And being what we are, the dregs of the labor-market, and having no certainty of permanent employment, and no organization among ourselves, we must expect to work under the watchful eye of a gang-boss, and be driven, like the wage-slaves that we are, through our tasks.

All this is to tell us, in effect, that our lives are hard, barren, hopeless lives.

And such hard, barren, hopeless lives, surely, are not lives in which one ought to be willing permanently to remain. And why is this so? Is it because they are so dirty? Well, Nansen grew a great deal dirtier on his polar expedition; and we think none the worse of his life for that. Is it the insensibility? Our soldiers have to grow vastly more insensible, and we extol them to the skies. Is it the poverty? Poverty has been reckoned the crown-

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ing beauty of many a heroic career. Is it the slavery to a task, the loss of finer pleasures? Such slavery and loss are of the very essence of the higher fortitude, and are always counted to its credit,—read the records of missionary devotion all over the world. It is not any one of these things, then, taken by itself,—no, nor all of them together,—that make such a life undesirable. A man might in truth live like an unskilled laborer, and do the work of one, and yet count as one of the noblest of God's creatures. Quite possibly there were some such persons in the gang that our author describes; but the current of their souls ran underground; and he was too steeped in the ancestral blindness to discern it.



Steelworker with Daughter, Ambridge, Pennsylvania, Library of Congress

If there *were* any such morally exceptional individuals, however, what made them different from the rest? It can only have been this,—that their souls worked and endured in obedience to some inner *ideal*, while their comrades were not actuated by anything worthy of that name. These ideals of other lives are among those secrets that we can almost never penetrate, although something about the man may often tell us when they are there. In Mr. Wyckoff's own case we know exactly what the self-imposed ideal was. Partly he had stumped himself, as the boys say, to carry through a

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strenuous achievement; but mainly he wished to enlarge his sympathetic insight into fellow-lives. For this his sweat and toil acquire a certain heroic significance, and make us accord to him exceptional esteem. But it is easy to imagine his fellows with various other ideals. To say nothing of wives and babies, one may have been a convert of the Salvation Army, and had a nightingale singing of expiation and forgiveness in his heart all the while he labored. Or there might have been an apostle like Tolstoi himself, or his compatriot Bondaïeff, in the gang, voluntarily embracing labor as their religious mission. Class-loyalty was undoubtedly an ideal with many. And who knows how much of that higher manliness of poverty, of which Phillips Brooks has spoken so penetratingly, was or was not present in that gang?

"A rugged, barren land," says Phillips Brooks, "is poverty to live in,—a land where I am thankful very often if I can get a berry or a root to eat. But living in it really, letting it bear witness to me of itself, not dishonoring it all the time by judging it after the standard of the other lands, gradually there come out its qualities. Behold! no land like this barren and naked land of poverty could show the moral geology of the world. See how the hard ribs... stand out strong and solid. No life like poverty could so get one to the heart of things and make men know their meaning, could so let us feel life and the world with all the soft cushions stripped off and thrown away. . . . Poverty makes men come very near each other, and recognize each other's human hearts; and poverty, highest and best of all, demands and cries out for faith in God. . . . I know how superficial and unfeeling, how like mere mockery, words in praise of poverty may seem. . . . But I am sure that the poor man's dignity and freedom, his self-respect and energy, depend upon his cordial knowledge that his poverty is a true region and kind of life, with its own chances of character, its own springs of happiness and revelations of God. Let him resist the characterlessness which often goes with being poor. Let him insist on respecting the condition where he lives. Let him learn to love it, so that by and by, [if] he grows rich, he shall go out of the low door of the old familiar poverty with a true pang of regret, and with a true honor for the narrow home in which he has lived so long."⁵

The barrenness and ignobleness of the more usual laborer's life consist in the fact that it is moved by no such ideal inner springs. The backache, the long hours, the danger, are patiently endured—for what? To gain a quid of

5. *Sermons*, 5th Series, New York, 1893, pp. 166, 167.

tobacco, a glass of beer, a cup of coffee, a meal, and a bed, and to begin again the next day and shirk as much as one can. This really is why we raise no monument to the laborers in the Subway, even though they be out conscripts, and even though after a fashion our city is indeed based upon their patient hearts and enduring backs and shoulders. And this is why we do raise monuments to our soldiers, whose outward conditions were even brutaller still. The soldiers are supposed to have followed an ideal, and the laborers are supposed to have followed none.

From the reading...

“If there *were* any such morally exceptional individuals, however, what made them different from the rest?”

You see, my friends, how the plot now thickens; and how strangely the complexities of this wonderful human nature of ours begin to develop under our hands. We have seen the blindness and deadness to each other which are our natural inheritance; and, in spite of them, we have been led to acknowledge an inner meaning which passeth show, and which may be present in the lives of others where we least descry it. And now we are led to say that such inner meaning can be *complete* and valid for us also, only when the inner joy, courage, and endurance are joined with an ideal.

[Ideals]

But what, exactly, do we mean by an ideal? Can we give no definite account of such a word?

To a certain extent we can. An ideal, for instance, must be something intellectually conceived, something of which we are not unconscious, if we have it; and it must carry with it that sort of outlook, uplift, and brightness that go with all intellectual facts. Secondly, there must be *novelty* in an ideal,—novelty at least for him whom the ideal grasps. Sodden routine is incompatible with ideality, although what is sodden routine for one person may be ideal novelty for another. This shows that there is nothing absolutely ideal: ideals are relative to the lives that entertain them. To keep out of the gutter is for us here no part of consciousness at all, yet for many of our brethren it is the most legitimately engrossing of ideals.

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Now, taken nakedly, abstractly, and immediately, you see that mere ideals are the cheapest things in life. Everybody has them in some shape or other, personal or general, sound or mistaken, low or high; and the most worthless sentimentalists and dreamers, drunkards, shirks and verse-makers, who never show a grain of effort, courage, or endurance, possibly have them on the most copious scale. Education, enlarging as it does our horizon and perspective, is a means of multiplying our ideals, of bringing new ones into view. And your college professor, with a starched shirt and spectacles, would, if a stock of ideals were all alone by itself enough to render a life significant, be the most absolutely and deeply significant of men. Tolstoi would be completely blind in despising him for a prig, a pedant and a parody; and all our new insight into the divinity of muscular labor would be altogether off the track of truth.

But such consequences as this, you instinctively feel, are erroneous. The more ideals a man has, the more contemptible, on the whole, do you continue to deem him, if the matter ends there for him, and if none of the laboring man’s virtues are called into action on his part,—no courage shown, no privations undergone, no dirt or scars contracted in the attempt to get them realized. It is quite obvious that something more than the mere possession of ideals is required to make a life significant in any sense that claims the spectator’s admiration. Inner joy, to be sure, it may *have*, with its ideals; but that is its own private sentimental matter. To extort from us, outsiders as we are, with our own ideals to look after, the tribute of our grudging recognition, it must back its ideal visions with what the laborers have, the sterner stuff of manly virtue; it must multiply their sentimental surface by the dimension of the active will, if we are to have *depth*, if we are to have anything cubical and solid in the way of character.

The significance of a human life for communicable and publicly recognizable purposes is thus the offspring of a marriage of two different parents, either of whom alone is barren. The ideals taken by themselves give no reality, the virtues by themselves no novelty. And let the orientalist and pessimists say what they will, the thing of deepest—or, at any rate, of comparatively deepest—significance in life does seem to be its character of progress, or that strange union of reality with ideal novelty which it continues from one moment to another to present. To recognize ideal novelty is the task of what we call intelligence. Not every one’s intelligence can tell which novelties are ideal. For many the ideal thing will always seem to cling still to the older more familiar good. In this case character,

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though not significant totally, may be still significant pathetically. So, if we are to choose which is the more essential factor of human character, the fighting virtue or the intellectual breadth, we must side with Tolstoï, and choose that simple faithfulness to his light or darkness which any common unintellectual man can show.



Harvard Gate, Harvard College, Library of Congress

[Culture, Courage, Ideals, and Joyful Sympathy]

But, with all this beating and tacking on my part, I fear you take me to be reaching a confused result. I seem to be just taking things up and dropping them again. First I took up Chautauqua, and dropped that; then Tolstoï and the heroism of common toil, and dropped them; finally, I took up ideals, and seem now almost dropping those. But please observe in what sense it is that I drop them. It is when they pretend singly to redeem life from insignificance. Culture and refinement all alone are not enough to do so. Ideal aspirations are not enough, when uncombined with pluck and will. But neither are pluck and will, dogged endurance and insensibility to danger enough, when taken all alone. There must be some sort of fusion, some chemical combination among these principles, for a life objectively and thoroughly significant to result.

Of course, this is a somewhat vague conclusion. But in a question of sig-

nificance, of worth, like this, conclusions can never be precise. The answer of appreciation, of sentiment, is always a more or a less, a balance struck by sympathy, insight, and good will. But it is an answer, all the same a real conclusion. And, in the course of getting it, it seems to me that our eyes have been opened to many important things. Some of you are, perhaps, more livingly aware than you were an hour ago of the depths of worth that lie around you, hid in alien lives. And, when you ask how much sympathy you ought to bestow, although the amount is, truly enough, a matter of ideal on your own part, yet in this notion of the combination of ideals with active virtues you have a rough standard for shaping your decision. In any case, your imagination is extended. You divine in the world about you matter for a little more humility on your own part, and tolerance, reverence, and love for others; and you gain a certain inner joyfulness at the increased importance of our common life. Such joyfulness is a religious inspiration and an element of spiritual health, and worth more than large amounts of that sort of technical and accurate information which we professors are supposed to be able to impart.

[One Last Example]

To show the sort of thing I mean by these words, I will just make one brief practical illustration, and then close.

We are suffering to-day in America from what is called the labor-question; and, when you go out into the world, you will each and all of you be caught up in its perplexities. I use the brief term labor-question to cover all sorts of anarchistic discontents and socialistic projects, and the conservative resistances which they provoke. So far as this conflict is unhealthy and regrettable,—and I think it is so only to a limited extent,—the unhealthiness consists solely in the fact that one-half of our fellow countrymen remain entirely blind to the internal significance of the lives of the other half. They miss the joys and sorrows, they fail to feel the moral virtue, and they do not guess the presence of the intellectual ideals. They are at cross-purposes all along the line, regarding each other as they might regard a set of dangerously gesticulating automata, or, if they seek to get at the inner motivation, making the most horrible mistakes. Often all that the poor man can think of in the rich man is a cowardly greediness for safety, luxury, and effeminacy, and a boundless affectation. What he is, is not a human being, but a pocket-book, a bank-account. And a similar greediness, turned by disap-

Chapter 27. "What Makes a Life Significant?" by William James

pointment into envy, is all that many rich men can see in the state of mind of the dissatisfied poor. And, if the rich man begins to do the sentimental act over the poor man, what senseless blunders does he make, pitying him for just those very duties and those very immunities which, rightly taken, are the condition of his most abiding and characteristic joys! Each, in short, ignores the fact that happiness and unhappiness and significance are a vital mystery; each pins them absolutely on some ridiculous feature of the external situation; and everybody remains outside of everybody else's sight.

Society has, with all this, undoubtedly got to pass toward some newer and better equilibrium, and the distribution of wealth has doubtless slowly got to change: such changes have always happened, and will happen to the end of time. But if, after all that I have said, any of you expect that they will make any *genuine vital difference* on a large scale, to the lives of our descendants, you will have missed the significance of my entire lecture. The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing,—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains.—And, whatever or wherever life may be, there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place.

Fitz-James Stephen wrote many years ago words to this effect more eloquent than any I can speak: "The 'Great Eastern,' or some of her successors," he said, "will perhaps defy the roll of the Atlantic, and cross the seas without allowing their passengers to feel that they have left the firm land. The voyage from the cradle to the grave may come to be performed with similar facility. Progress and science may perhaps enable untold millions to live and die without a care, without a pang, without an anxiety. They will have a pleasant passage and plenty of brilliant conversation. They will wonder that men ever believed at all in clanging fights and blazing towns and sinking ships and praying bands; and, when they come to the end of their course, they will go their way, and the place thereof will know them no more. But it seems unlikely that they will have such a knowledge of the great ocean on which they sail, with its storms and wrecks, its currents and icebergs, its huge waves and mighty winds, as those who battled with it for years together in the little craft, which, if they had few other merits, brought those who navigated them full into the presence of time and eternity, their maker and themselves, and forced them to have some definite

Chapter 27. "What Makes a Life Significant?" by William James

view of their relations to them and to each other."⁶



Harvard Medical College, Boston, Mass., Library of Congress

In this solid and tridimensional sense, so to call it, those philosophers are right who contend that the world is a standing thing, with no progress, no real history. The changing conditions of history touch only the surface of the show. The altered equilibriums and redistributions only diversify our opportunities and open chances to us for new ideals. But, with each new ideal that comes into life, the chance for a life based on some old ideal will vanish; and he would needs be a presumptuous calculator who should with confidence say that the total sum of significances is positively and absolutely greater at any one epoch than at any other of the world.

I am speaking broadly, I know, and omitting to consider certain qualifications in which I myself believe. But one can only make one point in one lecture, and I shall be well content if I have brought my point home to you this evening in even a slight degree. *There are compensations* and no outward changes of condition in life can keep the nightingale of its eternal meaning from singing in all sorts of different men's hearts. That is the main fact to remember. If we could not only admit it with our lips, but really and truly believe it, how our convulsive insitencies, how our antipathies and dreads of each other, would soften down! If the poor and the rich could look at each other in this way, *sub specie æternatis*, How gentle would grow their disputes! what tolerance and good humor, what willingness to live and let live, would come into the world!

6. *Essays by a Barrister*, London, 1862, p. 318.

From the reading...

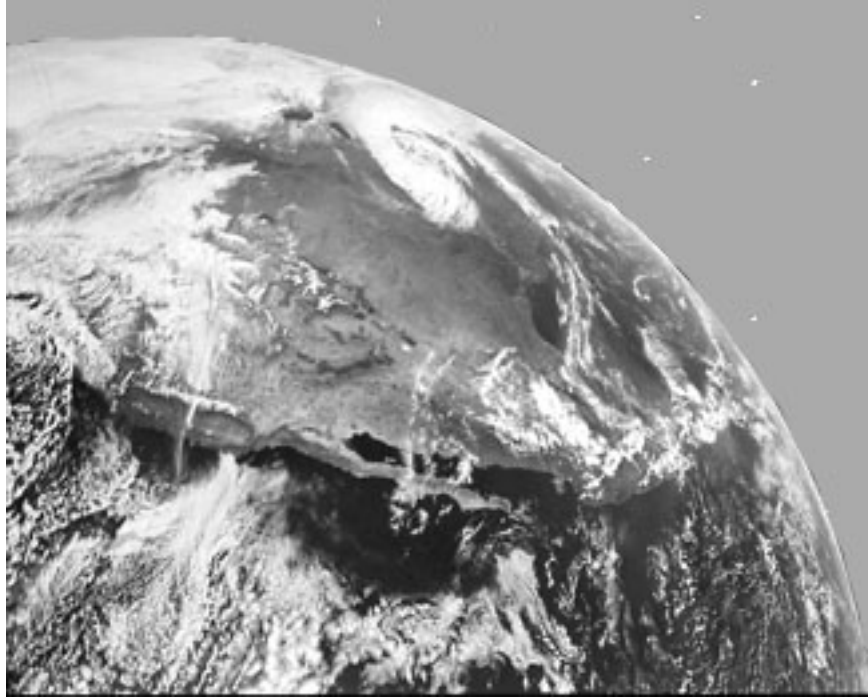
"Now, taken nakedly, abstractly, and immediately, you see that mere ideals are the cheapest things in life. Everybody has them in some shape or other, personal or general, sound or mistaken, low or high; and the most worthless sentimentalists and dreamers, drunkards, shirks and verse-makers, who never show a grain of effort, courage, or endurance, possibly have them on the most copious scale."

Related Ideas

William James (<http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/james.html>). Links, articles, etexts, reviews, and discussion groups are part of what make up this extensive James site.

Classics in the History of Psychology (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/>). *York University History & Theory of Psychology Electronic Resource*. Special collections, extensive open-domain readings in the history of psychology searchable by author or title, and suggested readings.

Appendix A. Useful Philosophy Research Links



View of North America from Apollo 16, NASA

Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

Dictionary of the History of Ideas ([http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/ \ DicHist/dict.html](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/DicHist/dict.html)). Dictionary searchable by a variety of methods; edited by Philip P. Wiener.

Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, ed. James Mark Baldwin (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Baldwin/Dictionary/>). Reprint being developed by Christopher D. Green for *Classics in the History of Psychology*. Entries A—O complete as of 08.15.03.

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Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/>). Edited by James Fieser, general editor, and Bradley Dowden, assistant general editor.

Meta-Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.ditext.com/encyc/ \ frame.html>). A resource comparing entries from Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Dictionary of the Philosophy of Mind, The Ism Book, The Catholic Encyclopedia (1913), A Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names, and the Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Education, maintained by Andrew Chrucky.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>). A Publication of: the Metaphysics Research Lab, Center for the Study of Language and Information Stanford University, edited by Edward N. Zalta.

Philosophy Gateways

EpistemeLinks.com (<http://www.epistemelinks.com/>). Extensive resources and links maintained by Thomas Ryan Stone.

Erratic Impact (<http://www.erraticimpact.com/>). Philosophy gateway maintained by Danne Polk.

Guide to Philosophy (<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/philinks.htm>). Philosophy gateway maintained by Peter Suber

Philosophy in Cyberspace (<http://www-personal.monash.edu.au/ \ ~dey/phil/>). Philosophy gateway at Monash University maintained by Dey Alexander.

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Colophon

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