

# **Reading for Philosophical Inquiry**

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by Lee Archie

by John G. Archie

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# Chapter 1

## “Preface”



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

### Why Open Source?

Almost all classic major works in philosophy and literature are accessible *via* online sources on the Internet. Fortunately, many of the influential and abiding works in philosophy are in the public domain; these readings provide a convenient way to produce quality learning experiences for almost anyone seeking information and help. Our present collection of edited readings is free, subject to the legal notice following the title page.

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By placing these selections in the public domain under the GFDL, this product is being open-sourced, in part, to minimize costs to interested students of philosophy and, in part to make it widely available in a form convenient for a wide variety of readers. Moreover, users themselves can improve the product if they wish to do so. Viewed in this way, the release of these readings is in a genuine sense a small test of the Delphi effect in open source publishing.

This particular edition should not be viewed as a completed work. It is the first step in the development of the open-source text. The development model of *Reading for Philosophical Inquiry* is loosely patterned on the “release early, release often” model championed by Eric S. Raymond.<sup>1</sup> With the completion of version 1.0, various formats of this work can be made available for distribution. If the core reading and commentary prove useful, the successive revisions, readings, commentary, and other improvements by users can be released in incrementally numbered “stable” versions.

## A Note about Selections

Reading selections in this collection of papers are often selections with deletions of text *in passim*; consequently, the ideas of the writers are examined out of their literary and historical context. The main focus for our approach to philosophy, however, is not so much on historical understanding as it is on the use of those germinal ideas which spark thinking about some significant issues of life and thought.

In general, as the difficulty of the reading increases, the length of the selection decreases. The primary consideration of selection and inclusion 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 of publication.

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

<philbook@philosophy.lander.edu>

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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/>)

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# Part I. Personal Uses of Philosophy



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

In this introduction to philosophical thinking, we will read some essays specially chosen from four main areas of interest: (1) the philosophy of life, (2) the philosophy of religion, (3) ethics, and (4) metaphysics and theory of knowledge. Although our approach is not comprehensive, it is reasonably representative of some of the more significant areas of philosophical inquiry. The readings are intended to illustrate the interrelations between these subject areas of philosophy and, as well, to provide the foundations for future investigations of these and related problems.

Since the study of philosophy involves working with concepts rather than facts, the activity of philosophy seeks understanding rather than knowledge. In other words, emphasis in this course of study is placed on the reasoning process. Memorizing the subject matter of philosophy is less likely to give insight into the discipline than is engaging actively in process doing philosophy.

In order to make the most of the present opportunity, it will be helpful

if we can invoke what has been called the principle of charity as we approach new ways of looking at things. That is, we ought to attempt to set aside, provisionally and temporarily, preconceptions about the philosophical views presented—especially when our initial reaction is to disagree. While suspending our own beliefs and tolerating for the moment any ambiguity and inconsistencies, we can obtain an accurate, sympathetic understanding of the presentation of ideas. In many instances, invoking the principle of charity takes some acculturation.

For example, as Bertrand Russell notes in his essay in the first part of this set of readings, our experience can be broadened and our thinking can be enriched. Once ideas are well understood, only then, can they be meaningfully analyzed, critiqued, or evaluated. Philosophical inquiry might not be the be-all and end-all of a good life, yet, to paraphrase Socrates's view in our first reading, a life worth living is an "examined life."

We begin our study of philosophy in Part I by first discussing the nature of learning and the different perspectives insightful understanding can entail. The nature of philosophical disagreement then is sketched, and philosophy is distinguished from other kinds of inquiry. Philosophy as a discipline is characterized, and its major branches are elaborated and illustrated. A preliminary definition describes philosophy as an inquiry into the basic assumptions of any field of interest.

In Part I, a brief overview of the nature of philosophy is sketched before we begin our inquiry into questions concerning some of the personal uses of philosophy. In the first two chapters, a traditional overview of some of the main parts of philosophy introduces some important terms and approaches used in our study. These chapters represent a personal characterization of philosophy; some philosophers might warmly disagree with our beginning description.

In these first readings, we consider several different perspectives on the applications of philosophical methods of thought. These ways of thinking can radically affect how we think and live. For instance, the philosophers Socrates and Bertrand Russell emphasize the role of insight and understanding in our efforts to live well and do well in the affairs of the world, whereas Albert Camus and Leo Tolstoy emphasize the role of will to establish a meaning for our lives. Even if the purpose and the significance of the universe itself cannot be known, Tolstoy and Camus believe our lives can have meaning.

Socrates enjoins us to think and do *only* what is right; if we do so, he thinks no harm can come to a us. He assumes that if we know how to live well and do well, we will attempt to do so. Initially, his doctrine appears naive, until we realize he is not denying that many unfortunate things happen to good people, nor that many fortunate things happen to ignorant people. On Socrates' point of view, we can endure physical pain as well as life's vicissitudes without great difficulty; the genuine pain in life is the harm to the soul or mental anguish occurring from our lack of self-knowledge. He believes individual excellence is accomplished by "tending our soul," seeking insight, and doing what's right.

Certainly, in any life, faith as well as reason play a part. On the one hand, Bertrand Russell explains how understanding synoptic philosophy enlarges our world by showing unexpected dimensions of life. Russell emphasizes the rôle of reason in a life of self-enlargement. Self-enlargement involves a healthy skepticism, a sympathetic understanding, and a respect for all modes of understanding. On the other hand, Leo Tolstoy concludes from his personal crisis only faith, not philosophy, can provide authentic meaning for our lives. Philosophy, he believes, is limited by rational understanding, art is in a fundamental sense a distraction from life, and science reduces the meaning of human existence to the trivial. Tolstoy, unlike Russell, believes our relation to the infinite is only meaningful through faith's irrational knowledge.

We conclude the reading in this section with an introduction to the thought of Albert Camus. Albert Camus believes the fundamental question of philosophy is not the choosing of a philosophical way of living or even of seeking a philosophical way of understanding. Instead, by choosing to impose a value on our lives, Camus illumines the "absurdity" of the human predicament: the objectivity of the external world can never measure or reflect the the subjectivity of human existence.

**Where to go for help**

Notes, quizzes, and tests for many of the selections from this part of the readings, "Personal Uses of Philosophy," can be found at *Philosophy of Life* (<http://philosophy.lander.edu/intro/life.html>).

# Chapter 2

## The Nature of Learning: Recognition of Different Perspectives



*Road to Nicholson Hollow, Shenandoah National Park, Virginia, Library of Congress*

### **Ideas of Interest From “The Nature of Learning”**

1. Explain what John Dewey means when he points out, “The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself.”

2. Samuel Scudder writes, "... what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation..." What is it that Samuel Scudder thinks he learned by studying with Professor Agassiz?
3. If we seek an explanation for a state of affairs, how do we select the relevant facts of the situation? Does an explanatory theory need to be based on *all* of the facts in order to be true?
4. How does Samuel Scudder's experience illustrate the view that philosophy begins when "we don't know our way about?"
5. Discuss whether or not Tycho Brahe and Nicolaus Copernicus see the same thing at dawn.

## The Role of Facts In Understanding

Our introduction to philosophical inquiry is designed to illustrate some of the basic methods of thinking about different modes of understanding. Its purpose is not only to present some of the most profound ideas from thinkers of the past but also to suggest specific methods of analysis and to encourage the use of creative thinking. Philosophy is an investigation of the fundamental questions of human existence. Such questions include wondering about such things as the meaning of life, what kinds of things the universe is made of, whether there can be a theory of everything, how we can know what's the right thing to do, and what is the beautiful in life and art. Other disciplines are concerned with these sorts of questions also, but philosophers, more often than not, either attempt to provide adequate reasons and justifications for their beliefs or attempt to clarify and examine the basis for those beliefs.

**From the reading...**

"... only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future."

An attempt has been made to select readable and enjoyable essays to help develop these approaches, even though many of the constitutive philosoph-



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ical sources require slow and careful reading, and some passages are notoriously difficult to interpret. Beginning a study of philosophy for the first time involves a steep learning curve. Even so, there is little doubt that if we do not find doing philosophy interesting now, we are unlikely to employ these methods in the future in the effort to make sense of our lives and careers. As John Dewey has accurately noted:

The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.<sup>1</sup>

Even though it is sometimes tempting to memorize established, useful ways of solving problems, in philosophy it is often counterproductive to do so. Learning by doing is far more interesting and rewarding than applying standard methods by rote and, indeed, is far more likely to enable us to solve different problems in the future.

**From the reading...**

“... if facts do not have size, shape, weight, color, taste, and so forth, what, then, *are* they?”

In this regard, Henry Hazlitt has provided a useful insight into the dangers of rote learning:

I remember the story in some educational treatise of an inspector who entered a school room, asked the teacher what she had been giving her class, and finally took up a book and asked the following question, “If you were to dig a hole thousands and thousands of feet deep, would it be cooler near the bottom or near the top, and why?” Not a child answered. Finally the teacher said, “I’m sure they know the answer but I don’t think you put the question in the right way.” So taking the book she asked, “In what state is the center

1. John Dewey. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1938, 51.

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of the earth?” Immediately came the reply from the whole class in chorus, “The center of the earth is in a state of *igneous fusion*.”<sup>2</sup>

The techniques provided in this introductory text can help us avoid being caught up in such a dreary educational scheme.

Solving problems involves more than just formulating hypotheses or possible solutions and then seeking facts or ideas to support or falsify those proposals. Far more important is the realization that very often the nature of a fact depends entirely upon one’s world view or conceptual framework. Many times when differing beliefs appear to be factually different, they actually are different only because of the different points of view from which they are apprehended.

Even though people speak about seeking facts, collecting facts, or “sticking” to the facts, the word “fact” proves difficult to define precisely. Facts are sometimes assumed to be in the world and therefore to be present for everyone to experience. However, facts are not usefully thought of as physical objects occurring in space-time. The earth being about eight thousand miles in diameter is not an eight-thousand-mile long fact. A football field is one hundred yards long, but that length is not a “short fact” compared to the “long fact” of the diameter of the earth.

Moreover, unlike things or objects in the world in which we live, facts do not have colors. Many interior doors are brown, but the color of the door is not a brown fact. The door is brown, but the fact, itself, is not colored. So we can reasonably ask, if facts do not have size, shape, weight, color, taste, and so forth, what, then, *are* they? If we do not know *what* they are, how can it be said that we know *the* facts? How, then, how is it possible for us to find or seek the facts? What could be meant by these expressions?

Let’s first look at an extended example of “fact finding” and then attempt to relate this process to how we learn. Samuel H. Scudder recounts his problems with factual observation when he first began study at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Anatomy under Professor Agassiz.

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2. Henry Hazlitt. *Thinking as a Science*. Los Angeles: Nash, 1969, 35.

## “In the Laboratory With Agassiz,” by Samuel H. Scudder

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the Scientific School as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally,<sup>3</sup> the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and, finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that, while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specially to insects.

“When do you wish to begin?” he asked.

“Now,” I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic “Very well!” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol. “Take this fish,” he said, “and look at it; we call it a *haemulon*; by and by I will ask what you have seen.”

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

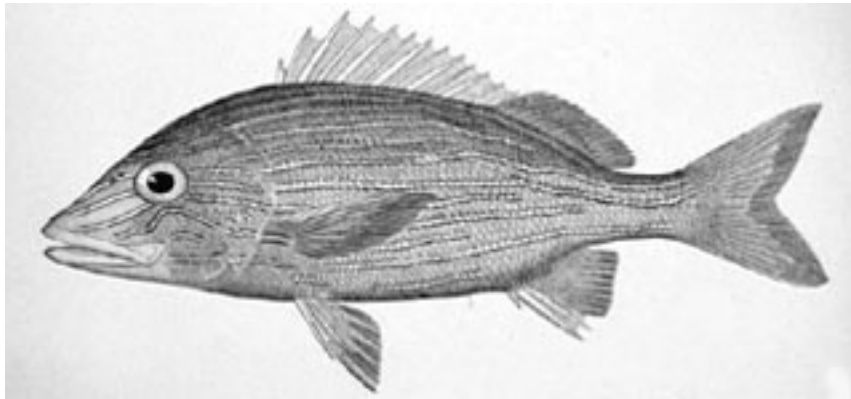
“No man is fit to be a naturalist,” said he, “who does not know how to take care of specimens.”

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3. *Ed.* These “antecedents” as elaborated by another former student of Agassiz may be of interest. (We sometimes underestimate the educational processes of the past by comparison with our own.) Professor Shaler writes “The examination Agassiz gave me was directed first to find that I knew enough Latin and Greek to make use of those languages; that I could patter a little of them evidently pleased him. He didn’t care for those detestable rules for scanning. Then came German and French, which were also approved: I could read both, and spoke the former fairly well. He did not probe me in my weakest place, mathematics, for the good reason that, badly as I was off in that subject, he was in a worse plight. Then asking me concerning my reading, he found that I had read the *Essay on Classification*, and had noted in it the influence of Schelling’s views. Most of his questioning related to this field, and the more than fair beginning of our relations then made was due to the fact that I had some enlargement on that side. So, too, he was pleased to find that I had managed a lot of Latin, Greek, and German poetry, and had been trained with the sword. He completed this inquiry by requiring that I bring my foils and masks for a bout.” Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, *The Autobiography of Nathaniel Southgate Shaler*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1907, 93-100.

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I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly. Those were not the days of ground-glass stoppers and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax-besmeared corks, half eaten by insects, and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the Professor, who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish, was infectious; and though this alcohol had a “very ancient and fishlike smell,” I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed when they discovered that no amount of *eau-de-Cologne* would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.



*Hæmulon elegans*, NOAA, Drawing by H. L. Todd

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the Professor—who had, however, left the Museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate the beast from a fainting fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of the normal sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but to return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passes—an hour—another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face—ghastly;

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from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters' view—just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the Museum, but had gone, and would not return for several hours. My fellow-students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying-glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish: it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp the teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows, until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me—I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the Professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best of eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet, and your bottle corked.”

With these encouraging words, he added, “Well, what is it like?”

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknowns to me: the fringed gill-arches and movable *operculum*; the pores of the head, fleshy lips and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fins and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment, “You have not looked very carefully; why,” he continued more earnestly, “you haven’t even seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is a plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!” and he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my tasks with a will, and discovered on new thing after another, until I saw how just the Professor’s criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly; and when, towards its close, the Professor inquired, “Do you see it yet?”

“No,” I replied, “I am certain I do not, but I see how little I was before.”

“That is next best,” said he, earnestly, “but I won’t hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish.”

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This was disconcerting. Not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also, without reviewing my discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the Professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

“Do you perhaps mean,” I asked, “that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?”

His thoroughly pleased “Of course! of course!” repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically—as he always did—upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

“Oh, look at your fish!” he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned, and heard my new catalogue.

“That is good, that is good!” he repeated; “but that is not all; go on”; and so for three long days he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. “Look, look, look,” was his repeated injunction.

**From the reading...**

“Facts are stupid things.”

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had—a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the Professor had left to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterward, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts on the Museum blackboard. We drew prancing starfishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydra-headed worms; stately crawfishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The Professor came in shortly after, and was as amused as any at our experiments. he looked at the fishes.

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“*Haemulons*, every one of them,” he said; “Mr. ---- drew them.”

True; and to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but *haemulons*.



Louis Agassiz, NOAA

The fourth day, a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old, six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories.

The whole group of *haemulons* was thus brought in review; and, whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, the preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

“Facts are stupid things,” he would say, “until brought into connection with some general law.”

At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.<sup>4</sup>

## Facts and Theories

And we may add to Agassiz's statement, "General Laws are 'stupid' things *until* brought into connection and interrelation with philosophical theories."

Generally speaking, when we seek facts, we are not looking for objects in the world, instead we are genuinely attempting to discover what is true or what is the case about an event or an object. In other words, much of the time, "fact" is used as a suitable paraphrase for "true statement."<sup>5</sup> Some of the time, however, facts are thought to be independent of a world view since newly proposed theories not only can conform to some well-established facts but also can imply the existence of hitherto unknown facts. Whether or not such a view of the relation of facts to theories is entirely true or not, it *is* true that many facts are dependent on theories for their existence. Hence, it is somewhat simplistic to suppose one must always seek facts in order to explain some puzzling state of affairs because what is the case or what is true is often theory-dependent. Somewhat surprisingly, we will discover that *almost always* our view of the facts "changes" as the theories that imply them change.

Another way to illustrate the difficulties involved with just seeking the facts in order to account for the way things are, is to realize that in any given situation, we simply cannot collect *all* the facts, even though our initial presumption is we should leave no stone unturned. For example, if we were to try to explain how this page got in this book, we would not go about seeking every related fact before we invoke possible theories of how this "page-event" occurred. The number of facts concerning this page are limitless.

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4. Samuel H. Scudder, "In the Laboratory With Agassiz", *Every Saturday*, (April 4, 1974) 16, 369-370.

5. Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1960, 44.



Specifically, it is a fact that each letter of each word is a specific distance from any given letter of another word. Each letter is a measurable distance from any given object in the universe—for example, the distance to a ballerina on a New York stage.<sup>6</sup> The facts relevant to the state of affairs described as “the page being in the book” increase and change over time as the ballerina moves, and, of course, the facts change as we uncomfortably fidget while considering the implications of this example. Therefore, we are able to collect as many facts as we please and still not have them all.

In order to make sense of a given state of affairs in the world, we must select only *some* of the facts—presumably, the relevant and important ones. But how can we know beforehand which of the facts will be relevant and important? We need some sort of criterion or rule for selection. In other words, in order to find the relevant facts, we need a *theory* or at least a few ruling assumptions involving what is appropriate in situations similar to this one. We find out the specific *relevant* facts by applying a theory in order to determine what facts we think should be considered in our explanation. At this point our discussion may have become a bit too abstract for an introductory philosophy reading. Perhaps, a specific example can clarify by illustrating the point of what is meant by saying “facts are normally theory-dependent.”

## Facts Are Often Theory-Dependent

Suppose you and your astronomer-friend are camping along the Appalachian Trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. As you awake at dawn from the first sound of stirring wildlife, you sleepily notice a rosy, picturesque sunrise.<sup>7</sup> With a bit of alarm you anticipate rain showers and a muddy hike ahead. As you rouse your friend, you comment, “Look at that sunrise; we’re in for trouble.” Assume, moreover, your friend dimly responds with a slow yawn, “I see the sun, but there is no sunrise today or, for that matter, any day.”

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6. Newton’s law of gravitation is “Every object in the universe attracts every other object with a force directed along the line of centers of the two objects that is proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the separation of the two objects.”

7. “Red in the morning is a sailor’s sure warning.”

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What do you say? Is your friend's statement sensible? Presumably his eyesight is just as good as yours, and evidently he is looking where you are looking. Yet, your friend is apparently claiming he does not see what you see. You see the sunrise; he apparently is stating he does not. Now, is there *any* chance *you* could be mistaken? Let's pause just a moment and see if this exchange makes any sense.

You do see the sun rising today, and you have seen it rise countless times in the past. Your friend, however claims not only is there no sunrise today, but there has never been a sunrise. Is this disagreement a misunderstanding over the meaning of words, a misunderstanding due to personal feelings, or a misunderstanding concerning relevant facts at hand? Also, assuming we know what kind of dispute it is, how should we go about resolving it?



*Sunrise in Smoky Mountains, Clingman's Dome, NC*

You would have to be a gentle person to think this far without suspecting, perhaps in some exasperation, that your friend is half-asleep, does not know what he is saying, or has some other kind of brain-trouble. However, in order to make this disagreement a bit more interesting, let us further suppose that your friend is beginning to warm up to the strange looks you are giving him and proposes a bet. If you can convince him that the sun is rising after all, he will prepare all meals and wash all utensils for the remainder of the camping trip; if not, then you will prepare all the remaining meals and wash the utensils.

Would you take the bet? Only a cursory look at the remains of the previous night's repast might be sufficient to convince you to accept the wager.

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After all, *everybody* knows the sun rises *every* morning whether we see it or not.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to resist the payoff; you accept the bet and begin thinking about proving your case.

**From the reading...**

“I see the sun, but there is no sunrise today...”

On the one hand, how do you go about proving such an obvious and well-known truism? If you proceed somewhat systematically, you might first begin by getting clear and obtaining agreement about the meaning of any key terms in the dispute. Most important, what does “sunrise” mean? Once the significant terms are defined, then facts can be sought to verify the hypothesis. Let us suppose your friend will reply something along the lines of “sunrise” means “the usual daily movement above the eastern horizon of the star which is the center of our solar system.” Second, you might seek to show him that the facts correspond exactly to his definition. That is, while eagerly anticipating his preparing of breakfast, you simply point out the observation that the sun is rising above the horizon, as expected. Finally, you could note that no undue feelings or attitudes have shaped your position on this issue and cloud the judgments and observations of either you or your friend, the other disputant.

On the other hand—let’s say you are beginning to be hungry—no telling how long your dim-witted friend will hold out before admitting that he actually does see the sun rising in the sky. O.K., the sun *does* move rather slowly. Why not put the burden of proof on him? Let *him* prove that the sun is not rising. We often take the approach of assuming we are right if our beliefs cannot be disproved.<sup>9</sup> Thus, here in the Blue Ridge Mountains you

8. Note the *argumentum ad populum*.

9. Note how this presumption, as well as the friend’s original bet could be viewed as an example of an *ad ignorantiam* fallacy. If a statement or a point of view cannot be proved beyond a shadow of doubt, then that statement or point of view cannot be *known* to be mistaken. The *ad ignorantiam* fallacy occurs whenever it is asserted that if no proof of a statement or argument exists, then that statement or argument is incorrect. The error in reasoning is seen when we realize nothing can be validly concluded from the fact that if you can’t prove something right now, then the opposite view must be true.

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put the question directly to your friend. “What could you possibly mean by saying, ‘The sun doesn’t rise and isn’t rising right now’? Just look!”

Your friend sleepily replies, “Do Kepler and Tycho see the same thing in the east as dawn?”<sup>10</sup>

Alas, you probably remember that Tycho Brahe, as well as most other folks at the time, thought that the earth was the center of the heavens. Kepler was one of the first persons to regard the earth as revolving around the sun. If the earth moves around the sun, then it appears as though your friend is correct. The sun does not really rise, the earth turns. Even worse, he’s apparently right when he said the sun has never risen.

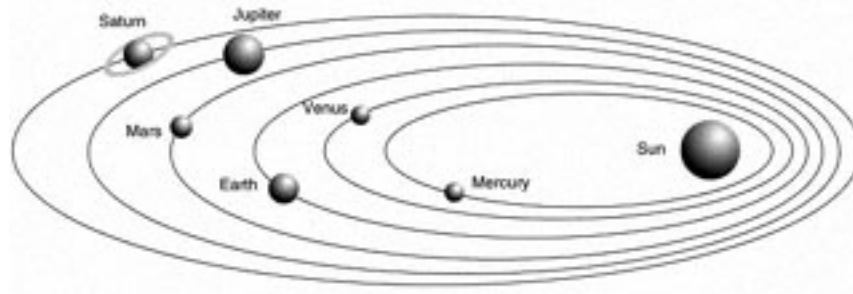
Doesn’t it seem that by now our culture would have this simple fact entrenched in our ordinary language? We do see the sun rise; we do believe the sun rises. Aren’t these facts? Accordingly, both you and your friend do not really have the same visual experience since your conceptual interpretation of what you see differs from what he sees. Even though the patterns of light and color are the similar for you and him, what you experience is largely dependent on the theoretical perspective from which you view the event. Just as we cannot know a foreign language only by listening, so also we cannot know the sun rises only by seeing. It is not at all unusual for two skilled investigators to disagree about their observations, if each is interpreting the the data or “facts of the case” according to different conceptual frameworks.<sup>11</sup> Just as your mind-set affects what you see, so also your awareness of other mental perspectives can affect what you know. The learning of new perspectives is what, in large measure, philosophy is all about.

**From the reading...**

“We find out the specific *relevant* facts by applying a theory in order to determine what facts we think should be considered in our explanation.”

10. For a detailed analysis of this question, see Norwood Russell Hanson’s *Patterns of Discovery*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958, 5.

11. Frederick Grinnell. *The Scientific Attitude*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978, 15.



Solar System, BNSC © HMG

## Related Ideas

*Project Gutenberg* (<http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext04>). *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Louis Agassiz as a Teacher* A compilation by Lane Cooper of descriptions of Agassiz's teaching methods by several well known former students.

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. What is a fact? What are the different kinds of facts? Can we be mistaken about the facts? Do facts change with new discoveries? Are facts discovered or are they constructs of theories?
2. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein indicates the aim of philosophy is "To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."<sup>12</sup> In what ways is this precisely the same problem facing Samuel Scudder when he sits before *Hæmulon elegans*? What is the difference between finding a method and using a method?
3. If the same state of affairs is seen from two different conceptual frameworks, are there different facts involved? How can facts implied by different theories be compared? Can one structurally "translate" from theory to theory?

12. Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan, 1953, §309.

# Chapter 3

## The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry

### Ideas of Interest From “Nature of Philosophical Inquiry”



*Messier 81, NASA, JPL*

1. How is philosophy provisionally defined in this chapter?
2. In what ways does Alexander Calandra's “Barometer Story” illustrate the philosophical approach to a practical problem? What do you think is the difference between thinking about the methods for solving a

### Chapter 3. The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry

problem and applying a method for solving a problem?

3. What are some of the differences between philosophy and science?
4. Briefly characterize the main branches of philosophy.
5. Do you think the kinds of distinct things that exist in the universe are independent of the concepts we use for description? Consider the following koans: “Where does my fist go when I open my hand?” “Where does my lap go when I stand up?”

#### **From the reading...**

“... some people characterize a philosophical problem as *any* question that does not have a well-established method of solution, but that definition is undoubtedly too broad.”

## Characterization of Philosophy

One reasonably good beginning characterization of philosophy is that philosophy is the sustained inquiry into the principles and presuppositions of any field of inquiry. As such, philosophy is not a subject of study like other subjects of study. *Any* given field of inquiry has philosophical roots and extensions. From the philosophy of restaurant management to philosophy of physics, philosophy can be characterized as an attitude, an approach, or perhaps, even a calling, to ask, answer, or even just comment upon certain kinds of questions. These questions involve the nature, scope, and boundaries of that field of interest. In general, then, philosophy is both an activity involving thinking about these kinds of ultimate questions and an activity involving the construction of sound reasons or insights into our most basic assumptions about the universe and our lives.

Quite often, simply asking a series of “why-questions” can reveal these basic presuppositions. Children often ask such questions, sometimes to the annoyance of their parents, in order to get a feel for the way the world works. Asking an exhaustive sequence of “why-questions” can reveal principles upon which life is based. As a first example, let us imagine the fol-

### Chapter 3. *The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry*

lowing dialogue between two persons as to why one of them is reading this philosophy book. Samantha is playing “devil’s advocate.”

Samantha: “Why are you reading *Reading for Philosophical Inquiry*?”

Stephen: “It’s an assigned book in philosophy, one of my college courses.”

Samantha: “Why take philosophy?”

Stephen: “Well, philosophy fulfills the humanities elective.”

Samantha: “Why do you need that elective?”

At this point in the dialog, a growing resemblance to the insatiable curiosity of some children is beginning to be unmistakable. We continue with the cross-examination.

Stephen: “I have to fulfill the humanities elective in order to graduate.”

Samantha: “Why do you want to graduate?”

Stephen: “What? Well, I’d like to get a decent job which pays a decent salary.”

Samantha: “Well, why, then, do you want that?”

Undoubtedly, at this point, the conversation seems artificial because for some persons, the goal of graduating college is about as far as they have thought their life through, if, indeed, they have thought that far—and so for such persons this is where the questioning would have normally stopped. Other persons, however, can see beyond college to more basic ends such as Stephen’s want of an interesting vocation with sufficient recompense, among other things. Even so, we have not yet arrived at the kind of basic presuppositions we have been talking about for Stephen’s life, so we continue with Samantha’s questioning.

Stephen: “What do you mean? A good job which pays well will enable me the resources to have an enjoyable life where I can do some of the important things I want to do.”

Samantha: “Why do you want a life like that?”

Stephen: “Huh? Are you serious?”



### Chapter 3. The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry

When questions finally seem to make no sense, very often, we have reached one of those ultimate fundamental unquestioned assumptions. In this case, a basic principle by which Stephen lives his life seems to be based on seeking happiness. So, in a sense, although he might not be aware of it at the moment, he believes he is working toward this goal by reading this textbook. Of course, his choice of a means to obtain happiness could be mistaken or perhaps even chosen in ignorance—in which case he might not be able to obtain what he wants out of life. If the thought occurs to you that it is sometimes the case that we might not be mistaken about our choices and might actually be choosing knowledgeably and even so might not achieve what we desire, then you are already doing philosophy.

If we assume that Samantha is genuinely asking questions here and has no ulterior motive, then it is evident that her questions relate to a basic presupposition upon which Stephen is basing his life. Perhaps, she thinks the quest for a well-paying job is mistaken or is insufficient for an excellent life. Indirectly, *she* might be assuming that other fundamental values are more important. If the questioning were to continue between Samantha and Stephen, it quite possibly could go along the lines of attempting to uncover some of these additional presuppositions upon which a life of excellence can be based.

In philosophy these kinds of questions are often about the assumptions, presuppositions, postulates, or definitions upon which a field of inquiry is based, and these questions can be concerned with the meaning, significance, or integration of the results discovered or proposed by a field of inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

For example, the answer “Gravity” is often thought to be a meaningful answer to the question, “Why do objects fall in the direction toward the center of the earth?” But for this answer to be meaningful we would have to know what gravity is. If one were to answer “a kind of force,” or “an

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1. Our characterization here omits what are sometimes termed the “antiphilosophies” such as postmodernism, a philosophy opposing the possibility of objectivity and truth, and existentialism, a group of philosophies dismissing the notion that the universe is in any sense rational, coherent, or intelligible. The characterization of philosophy proposed in the text is provisional and is used as a stalking horse for the discipline.

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attraction” between two objects, then the paraphrase gives no insight into the nature of what gravity is, for the paraphrase is viciously circular.

Many scientists hold the view that, “If we know the rules, we consider that we ‘understand’ the world.”<sup>2</sup> The rules for gravity are:

...every object in the universe attracts every other object with a force which for any two bodies is proportional to the mass of each and varies inversely as the square of the distance between them.

...an object responds to a force by accelerating in the direction of the force by an amount that is inversely proportional to the mass of the object...<sup>3</sup>

Yet, there must be more to understanding gravity than this. Consider a mentalist who stands before a door and concentrates deeply. Suppose the door opens, and no one, neither scientist nor magician, is able to see how the mentalist accomplishes the opening of the door. So we ask, “How did you do that?”

The mentalist responds, “Smavity.”

We reply, “What is ‘smavity’?”

The mentalist says, “Smavity is a force—an attraction between me and the door.”

The scientist on the scene observes and measures:

The mentalist attracts the door with a force which between them is proportional to the mass of each and varies inversely as the square of the distance between them.

...and...

The door responds to the mentalist by accelerating in the direction of the force by an amount that is inversely proportional to the mass of the door.

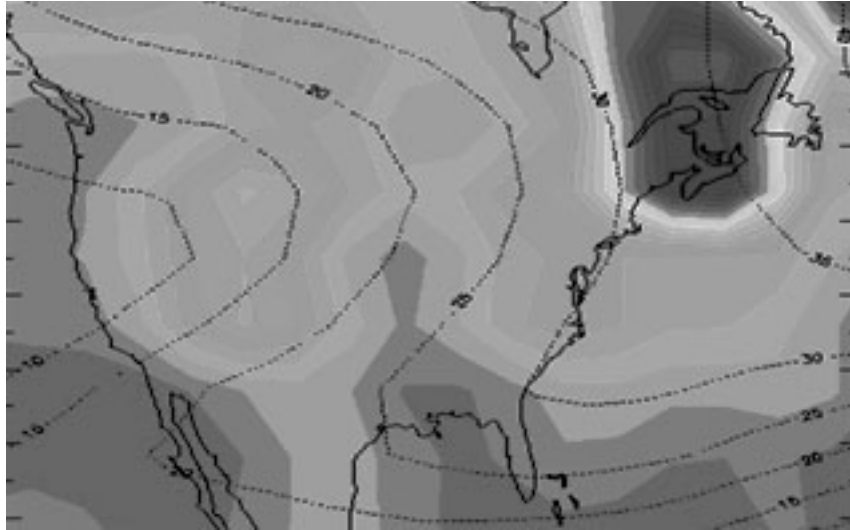
From a philosophical point of view, even though we know the rules, we do not “understand” the phenomenon.

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2. Richard P. Feynman, *et. al.* *The Feynman Lectures on Physics*. Volume 1. Reading, Mass.:Addison-Wesley, 1963, §2-1.

3. *Ibid*, §7-1.

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*Gravity Wave Measurements in the Upper Atmosphere over North America, NASA. JPL*

Philosophy also involves new assumptions or presuppositions as reasons for the explanation of natural phenomena. For example, the questioning of the fifth postulate of Euclid which led to the development of non-Euclidean geometries or the questioning of Aristotle's assumption that heavier bodies fall faster than lighter bodies of similar shape which led to more modern theories of gravitation, are assumptions which helped to establish new fields of knowledge. What's more, the application and reinterpretations of the results and discoveries of the resulting different fields of inquiry properly belong to the domain of philosophy as well—even though, in many instances, the investigators, themselves, might have had no formal philosophic training. Since philosophical questioning covers so much territory, some people characterize a philosophical problem as *any* question that does not have a well-established method of solution, but that definition is undoubtedly too broad.

Perhaps the point can be clarified by the following excerpt from the legendary story of the barometer problem in physics. This oft-quoted account illustrates great ingenuity in creative problem solving; ultimately, however, the description catalogs admittedly standard, though clever, methods of thinking. Philosophical thinking begins when we are frustratingly con-

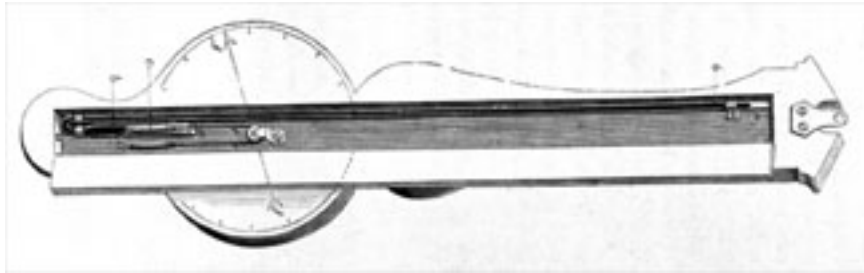
fused as to how to proceed to answer a question, and, after conceptual reframing, philosophy can end with the kinds of solutions summarized here by a physics professor at the University of Washington—St. Louis.

## **“The Barometer Story” by Alexander Calandra**

Some time ago I received a call from a colleague who asked if I would be the referee on the grading of an examination question. He was about to give a student a zero for his answer to a physics question, while the student claimed he should receive a perfect score and would if the system were not set up against the student. The instructor and the student agreed to submit this to an impartial arbiter, and I was selected.

I went to my colleague’s office and read the examination question, “Show how it is possible to determine the height of a tall building with the aid of a barometer.”

The student had answered, “Take a barometer to the top of the building, attach a long rope to it, lower the barometer to the street and then bring it up, measuring the length of the rope. The length of the rope is the height of the building.”



*Wheel Barometer* from Edward J. Dent, *A Treatise on the Aneroid*, NOAA Library Collection

I pointed out that the student really had a strong case for full credit since he had answered the question completely and correctly. On the other hand, if full credit was given, it could well contribute to a high grade for the student in his physics course. A high grade is supposed to certify competence in

### *Chapter 3. The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry*

physics, but the answer did not confirm this. I suggested that the student have another try at answering the question. I was not surprised that my colleague agreed, but I was surprised that the student did.

I gave the student six minutes to answer the question with the warning that the answer should show some knowledge of physics. At the end of five minutes, he had not written anything. I asked if he wished to give up, but he said no. He had many answers to this problem; he was just thinking of the best one. I excused myself for interrupting him and asked him to please go on. In the next minute he dashed off his answer which read, "Take the barometer to the top of the building and lean over the edge of the roof. Drop that barometer, timing its fall with a stopwatch. Then using the formula  $S = \frac{1}{2}at^2$ , calculate the height of the building."

At this point I asked my colleague if he would give up. He conceded, and I gave the student almost full credit.

In leaving my colleague's office, I recalled that the student had said he had many other answers to the problem, so I asked him what they were. "Oh yes," said the student. "There are a great many ways of getting the height of a tall building with a barometer. For example, you could take the barometer out on a sunny day and measure the height of the barometer and the length of its shadow, and the length of the shadow of the building and by the use of a simple proportion, determine the height of the building."

"Fine," I asked. "And the others?"

"Yes," said the student. "There is a very basic measurement method that you will like. In this method you take the barometer and begin to walk up the stairs. As you climb the stairs, you mark off the length of the barometer along the wall. You then count the number of marks, and this will give you the height of the building in barometer units. A very direct method."

"Of course, if you want a more sophisticated method, you can tie the barometer to the end of a string, swing it as a pendulum, and determine the value of 'g' at the street level and at the top of the building. From the difference of the two values of 'g' the height of the building can be calculated."

Finally, he concluded, there are many other ways of solving the problem. "Probably the best," he said, "is to take the barometer to the basement and knock on the superintendent's door. When the superintendent answers, you speak to him as follows, 'Mr. Superintendent, here I have a fine barometer.

If you tell me the height of this building, I will give you this barometer.”

At this point I asked the student if he really did know the conventional answer to this question. He admitted that he did, said that he was fed up with high school and college instructors trying to teach him how to think, using the “scientific method”...<sup>4</sup>

## Main Divisions of Philosophy

It may well be wondered, at this point, as to the exact difference between philosophy and the sciences.<sup>5</sup> The following excerpt from the entry “Philosophy” in the authoritative 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica* explains one aspect of this relation well and is well worth reading carefully:

In distinguishing philosophy from the sciences, it may not be amiss at the outset to guard against the possible misunderstanding that philosophy is concerned with a subject-matter different from, and in some obscure way transcending, the subject-matter of the sciences. Now that psychology, or the observational and experimental study of mind, may be said to have been definitively included among the positive sciences, there is not even the apparent ground which once existed for such an idea. Philosophy, even under its most discredited name of metaphysics, has no other subject-matter than the nature of the real world, as that world lies around us in everyday life, and lies open to observers on every side. But if this is so, it may be asked what function can remain for philosophy when every portion of the field is already lotted out and enclosed by specialists?

Philosophy claims to be the science of the whole; but, if we get the knowledge of the parts from the different sciences, what is there left for philosophy to tell us? To this it is sufficient to answer generally that the synthesis of the parts is something more than that detailed knowledge of the parts in separation which is gained by the man of science. It is with the ultimate synthesis that philosophy concerns itself; it has to show that the subject-matter which we are all dealing with in detail really is a whole, consisting of articulated members. Evidently, therefore, the relation existing between and the sciences will be, to some extent, one of reciprocal influence.

4. Alexander Calandra. *Current Science*. XLIV, 14, 49.

5. This question is taken up in more detail in our reading from Bertrand Russell’s *Problems of Philosophy*, in Part I.

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Newton's *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, title page, pages 354-355, State Library of Victoria

The author of this entry is pointing to the unifying and systematizing methods of philosophy for other disciplines. The coherence of the whole is made possible by consistent fundamental principles. The article continues:

The sciences may be said to furnish philosophy with its matter, but philosophical criticism reacts upon the matter thus furnished, and transforms it. Such transformation is inevitable, for the parts only exist and can only be fully, *i.e.* truly, known in their relation to the whole. A pure specialist, if such a being were possible, would be merely an instrument whose results had to be co-ordinated and used by others. Now, though a pure specialist may be an abstraction of the mind, the tendency of specialists in any department naturally is to lose sight of the whole in attention to the particular categories or modes of nature's working which happen to be exemplified, and fruitfully applied, in their own sphere of investigation; and in proportion as this is the case it becomes necessary for their theories to be co-ordinated with the results of other inquirers, and set, as it were, in the light of the whole.

This task of co-ordination, in the broadest sense, is undertaken by philosophy; for the philosopher is essentially what Plato, in a happy moment, styled him, *συνοπτικός*, the man who takes a "synoptic" or comprehensive view of the universe as a whole. The aim of philosophy (whether fully attainable or not) is to exhibit the universe as a rational system in the harmony of all its parts; and accordingly the philosopher refuses to consider the parts out of their relation to the whole whose parts they are. Philosophy corrects in this way the abstractions which are inevitably made by the scientific specialist,

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and may claim, therefore, to be the only “concrete” science, that is to say, the only science which takes account of all the elements in the problem, and the only science whose results can claim to be true in more than a provisional sense.<sup>6</sup>

The foundational and unifying aspects of philosophy form the characteristics of our beginning study of philosophical inquiry in this introductory set of readings. It is important to point out however that these characteristics are not “the be-all and end-all” of philosophy.

#### **Epistemology: the Study of Knowledge**

Traditionally philosophical questions have been grouped into three areas which we will very briefly describe and suggest a few examples. Given the nature of philosophical inquiry, these areas are interdependent. Undoubtedly, it will occur to you that each example provided below has characteristics related to other areas of philosophy, and, indeed, philosophical problems are rarely limited to just one area of the discipline.

(1) *Epistemology* (theory of knowledge): the inquiry into what knowledge is, what can be known, and what lies beyond our understanding; the investigation into the origin, structure, methods, and validity of justification and knowledge; the study of the interrelation of reason, truth, and experience.

As an example of an epistemological problem, consider the lottery paradox, an argument occasionally used to support skepticism: the doctrine that genuine knowledge is impossible. Some persons believe nothing in this life can be certain, anything is possible, and nothing is “for sure.”<sup>7</sup> Even if we do not accept radical skepticism, supposedly, the best that we can do as human beings is to justify our beliefs in terms of their probability. On this view, we could be justified in believing somethings true if it is highly probable, but we would not be justified in believing something if it

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6. *The 1911 Edition Encyclopædia* (<http://1911encyclopedia.org/P/PH/index.htm>) “*Philosophy*” The Website is a copyright-free reproduction of the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* but is not so-labeled because of trademark concerns.

7. As we will discover when we study the reading on epistemology, this view is not only an oversimplification but is also dangerously misleading.



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has a very low probability of being true. Admittedly, this kind of justification is not certainty or knowledge. Let's examine these assumptions more carefully.

Suppose we, with thousands of other persons, enter a fair-ticket lottery. Since the probability of our winning the lottery is quite low, on the above assumption, we would be fully justified in believing that we will not win.

What's more, since all ticket-holders have the same chance as we do to win, on the same assumption, we would be fully justified in believing that each one of those individuals will not win either. Thus, we are justified in concluding that no ticket will win since the probability of any one ticket winning is quite low.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, at the same time we know that this "reasonable" belief is mistaken because we *know* that in a fair lottery one ticket *will* win. The "lottery paradox" indicates beyond doubt that knowledge cannot result directly from empirical inquiry, since any belief could only involve probable conclusions—conclusions which are fallible.

**From the reading...**

"...how *can* we know that the universe wasn't created a few minutes ago?"

Another perplexing example from epistemology is Bertrand Russell's Five-Minute World Hypothesis: suppose the universe were suddenly created five minutes ago, complete with memories, historical and geological records, and so forth. That is, at the moment of creation, the universe would have all the evidence that it was billions of years old already "packed in." How could it ever be known that the creation of the universe did *not* occur five minutes ago?

The hypothesis initially seems implausible, yet how *can* we know that the universe wasn't created a few minutes ago? Certainly the Five-Minute World hypothesis is inconsistent with many of our other beliefs. If it were true, we would have to give up these other beliefs if we were to hold it, but how could we prove beyond any shadow of doubt what is the case? From

8. Note the structure of this argument can be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

a purely empirical point of view, no evidence is available which could prove that God isn't constantly creating the universe moment by moment. In fact, as we will see in Part III of this text, some persons who believe in predestination eschew the notion of causality and believe God actually does create the universe moment by moment.

Many times in philosophy, proposed solutions to specifically formulated problems such as these lead to amazing shifts in perspective by which the nature of the universe can be comprehended.

### **Metaphysics (Ontology): the Study of Reality**

(2) *Metaphysics* or *Ontology* (theory of reality): the inquiry into what is real as opposed to what is appearance, either conceived as that which the methods of science presuppose, or that with which the methods of science are concerned; the inquiry into the first principles of nature; the study of the most fundamental generalizations as to what exists.

A typical example of an ontological problem is the well-known difficulty of finding “a criterion of individuation” for distinguishing things. Suppose we are asked to sort potatoes into two baskets—one for the large ones and one for small ones. For the most part, we wouldn't expect many problems with such a straightforward task.

Very large potatoes would be placed in the basket selected for the large potatoes, and tiny potatoes would be placed in the basket selected for the small potatoes. But, of course, there is a problem. What shall we do about the potatoes which are difficult to judge—for example, a potato sized somewhere between the large and small ones: *e.g.*, one that is short and wide, one that is long and thin, or one that is just plain “medium-sized”?

We could set up a criterion of “potato-ness” by means of a precisising or an operational definition which clearly distinguishes between “large” and “small”—perhaps by measuring volume, weight, or length in order to mark accurately the difference. But then would such a criterion thereby entail that a medium potato does not exist?

If we admit existence of medium potatoes, then our “criterion of potato-ness” must be revised to take account of the “newly discovered entity” of the medium potato. However, as you may have already guessed, our prob-

### Chapter 3. The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry

lems have now doubled. We now need criteria to distinguish the large from the medium and the medium from the small. *Ontologically*, a new problem arises. Should we admit the existence of medium-large and medium-small potatoes? If so, lamentably, our problem again propagates itself again in the same manner.

Do you think that the kinds of things that exist in the universe are independent of the concepts we use to describe them? Or do our concepts determine the kinds of things we can know to exist? Do the mere actions of perceiving and thinking limit the content of our ideas? What could be the reality beyond our ideas?

## Axiology: the Study of Value

(3) *Axiology* (theory of value): the inquiry into the nature, criteria, and metaphysical status of value. Axiology, in turn, is divided into two main parts: ethics and aesthetics.

Although the term “axiology” is not widely used outside of philosophy, the problems of axiology include (1) how values are experienced, (2) the kinds of value, (3) the standards of value, and (4) in what sense values can be said to exist. Axiology, then is the subject area which tries to answer problems like these:

1. How are values related to interest, desire, will, experience, and means-to-end?
2. How do different kinds of value interrelate?
3. Can the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values be maintained?
4. Are values ultimately rationally or objectively based?
5. What is the difference between a matter of fact and a matter of value?

There are two main subdivisions of axiology: ethics and aesthetics. Ethics involves the theoretical study of the moral valuation of human action—it’s not just concerned with the study of principles of conduct. Aesthetics involves the conceptual problems associated with the describing the rela-

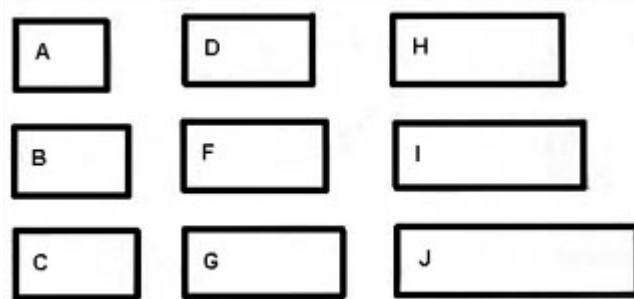
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tionships among our feelings and senses with respect to the experience of art and nature. Each of these subdivisions are briefly characterized below.

**From the reading...**

“The golden section is directly connected with the Fibonacci numbers and the basis of the spiral.”

(a) *Æsthetics*: the inquiry into feelings, judgments, or standards concerning the nature of beauty and related concepts such as the tragic, the sublime, or the moving—especially in the arts; the analysis of the values of sensory experience and the associated feelings or attitudes in art and nature; the theories developed in *les beaux arts*.



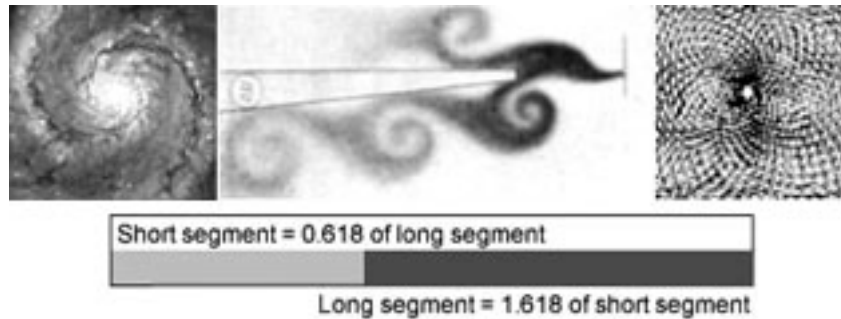
*Fechner's Rectangles: Which rectangle is the the most aesthetically pleasing?*

Gustav Fechner, an early psychologist, asked 228 men and 119 women which of the following rectangles is aesthetically the most pleasing. Take a look at the following figures. Which figure would you choose?

Fechner's experiment has been repeated with variations in methodology many times and occasionally his results have been supported. In general, the rectangle with the ratio of 21:34 was preferred, with the rectangles adjacent to this one in the picture being rated highly also. The ratio of 21:34 is the so called "golden rectangle" because it's based on the golden ratio or "divine proportion." It's rectangle *D* above. Euclid defines the golden proportion as

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A straight line is said to have been cut in extreme and mean ratio when, as the whole line is to the greater segment, so is the greater to the lesser.



*Golden Section, Whirlpool Galaxy; Air Currents from Flue Organ, and Sunflower*

Notice in the accompanying figure of the golden section and accompanying examples, how the reciprocal of this ratio involves the same sequence of digits following the decimal point. This ratio is the golden ratio and is ubiquitous in art and nature. Investigators have discovered the golden proportion as the foundational spatial relation in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Salvador Dali's *Sacrament of the Last Supper*, and numerous other paintings. This number appears in plant and animal growth and has intriguing relationships with architecture and sculpture. The golden section is directly connected with the Fibonacci numbers and the basis of the spiral. Would it be reasonable to conclude, then, that beauty is merely a mathematical relationship?

Or is it more likely that the ubiquitous occurrence of the golden section is just a result of some prosaic numerology and is an example of our ability to manufacture what we want to find by manipulating innumerable numerical relationships which we also create? Moreover, how would these mathematical observations be related to the widespread belief that truly remarkable artists are those who break the rules or laws of past artistic works?

(b) *Ethics*: the inquiry into the nature and concepts of morality, including the important problems of good, right, duty, virtue, and choice; the study

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of the principles of living well and doing well as a human being; the moral principles implicit in mores, religion, or philosophy.

As a philosophical problem in ethics, consider this example analyzed by J. O. Urmson in his well-known essay, “Saints and Heroes”:

We may imagine a squad of soldiers to be practicing the throwing of live hand grenades; a grenade slips from the hand of one of them and rolls on the ground near the squad; one of them sacrifices his life by throwing himself on the grenade and protecting his comrades with his own body. It is quite unreasonable to suppose that such a man must be impelled by the sort of emotion that he might be impelled by if his best friend were in the squad.<sup>9</sup>

Did the soldier who threw himself on the grenade do the right thing? If he did not cover the grenade, probably several soldiers would be killed. His action undoubtedly saved lives; certainly, an action which saves lives is a morally correct action. One might even be inclined to conclude that saving lives is a duty. But if this were so, wouldn't *each* of the soldiers have the moral obligation or duty to save his comrades?

**From the reading...**

“each should then have to fight off the others in order to perform his moral obligation to get to the grenade first.”

Surely this cannot be a correct assessment of the situation because if it were morally obligatory for *each* one of them to fall on the grenade, each should then have to fight off the others in order to perform his moral obligation to get to the grenade first.

What would you conclude about this example? Would it be our duty to save lives in this situation *ceteris paribus*, or would we be “going beyond the call of duty” in such a case? Does our right to self-preservation supersede our obligation to save the lives of other persons? Would the number

9. J. O. Urmson. “Saints and Heroes” in *Moral Concepts*. Ed. by Joel Feinberg. London: Oxford University Press, 1969, 63.

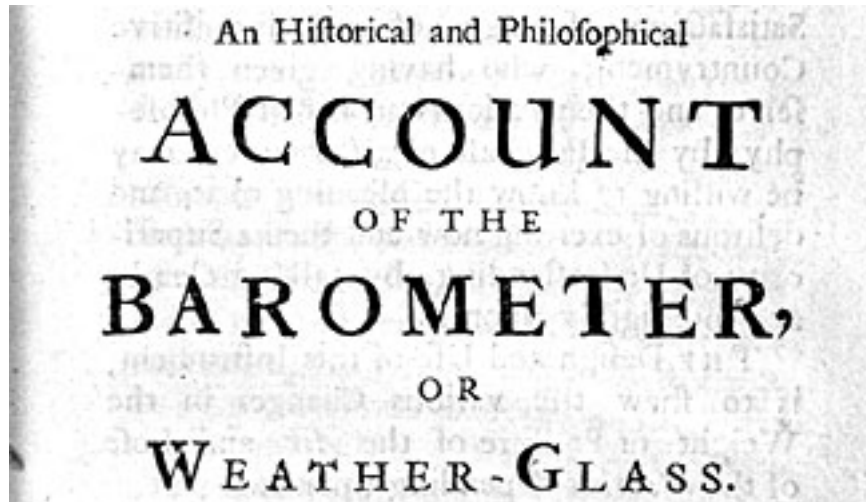
*Chapter 3. The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry*

of lives involved in the instance make an ethical difference? What if such an action were to save the world from nuclear destruction?

Admittedly, these brief descriptions and examples do not adequately reflect the nature of philosophy, and they are not especially typical problems. Even so, they are problems intellectually grasped without attendant dangers of confusion by emotional prejudice, and they involve the same sorts of issues as more socially controversial philosophical problems which often involve a plethora of side-issues and persuasive definitions such as euthanasia, genocide, capital punishment, and abortion.

**From the preface...**

“...he was fed up with high school and college instructors trying to teach him how to think, using the ‘scientific method.’”



Title Page to Edward Saul's *A Historical and Philosophical Account of the Barometer* 1735, NOAA Library Collection

## Related Ideas

*1911 Edition Encyclopedia* (<http://1911encyclopedia.org/P/PH/index.htm>). “*Philosophy*” This copyright-free article from the 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica* offers an insightful introduction to the main divisions of philosophy.

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. How adequate is the definition of philosophy proosed in this chapter? What kinds of philosophical inquiry are omitted by this definition?
2. Sometimes the distinction between science and philosophy is made by noting that philosophy attempts to answer the question “Why?,” and science attempts to answer the question “How?” What do you think is the essential difference between a “why-question” and a “how-question”? Is there a difference in the kinds of answers which would satisfy each kind of question? Is the difference between why-questions and how-questions the same as the difference between arguments and explanations?
3. If everything in the universe were to grow proportionally one-thousand times larger, would we be able to detect it?
4. Does one have the obligation to be a hero? Does one have the obligation to be a saint? Discuss whether or not the needs of others should always be put before one’s own.
5. Which is more fundamental: beauty in nature or beauty in art? *E.g.*, is a sunset beautiful because it is “just like” a painting or is a painting beautiful because it is “just like” a sunset?



# Chapter 4

## “Just Do What’s Right” by Plato



*Plato*, University of St. Andrews, Mathematics Archive

### **About the author...**

Plato (427-347 BC), as a young aristocrat, was Socrates' best known student. Following Socrates' execution, Plato gave up his political ambitions and continued the Socratic philosophical quest. He founded the Academy in 385 BC, the central school of the classical world, where mathematics, astronomy, political science, and natural history were discussed and researched. As an Idealist, Plato regarded the everyday world as a shadow of the real world of unchanging, eternal “Forms” or “Ideas” of things. In *Process and Reality*, A. N. Whitehead noted, “The safest general characterization of the Western philosophical tradition is that it consists in a

## Chapter 4. “Just Do What’s Right” by Plato

series of footnotes to Plato.” The most famous pupil of the Academy was, of course, Aristotle.

### About the work...

In the dialogue entitled *The Apology*,<sup>1</sup> Plato recounts the trial of Socrates. In the first part of *The Apology* Socrates’ philosophy of life becomes evident as he skillfully defends himself from his accusers. In his quest for self-knowledge, Socrates spent many years methodically questioning practically anyone who claimed to be knowledgeable about something and, in so doing, managed to alienate influential persons. The heart of his ethics is “the Socratic Paradox,” a philosophy discussed in the next chapter. Various interpretations of the Socratic ethics form the foundation of most of the ethical theories in the Western World.

#### From the reading...

“... Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the truth of my words, and give heed to that: let the speaker speak truly and the judge decide justly.”

### Ideas of Interest from the *The Apology*, I

1. What are the specific charges brought against Socrates, and why do you think he was so charged? Is Socrates being charged with being a Sophist? Is he being accused of offering scientific explanations for religious matters?
2. Why doesn’t Socrates plead for a lesser charge? Why couldn’t he accept exile?
3. How does Socrates show that he does not corrupt the young people of Athens? Are his arguments convincing?

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1. Plato, *The Apology*. Trans. Benjamin Jowlett. 380 BC.

Chapter 4. “Just Do What’s Right” by Plato

4. Explain Socrates’ defense of his belief in God. How persuasive do you find it?
5. What is Socrates’ philosophy of life? Why has it been called paradoxical?
6. Explain why Socrates compares himself to a “gadfly.” What does he mean when he uses this term?

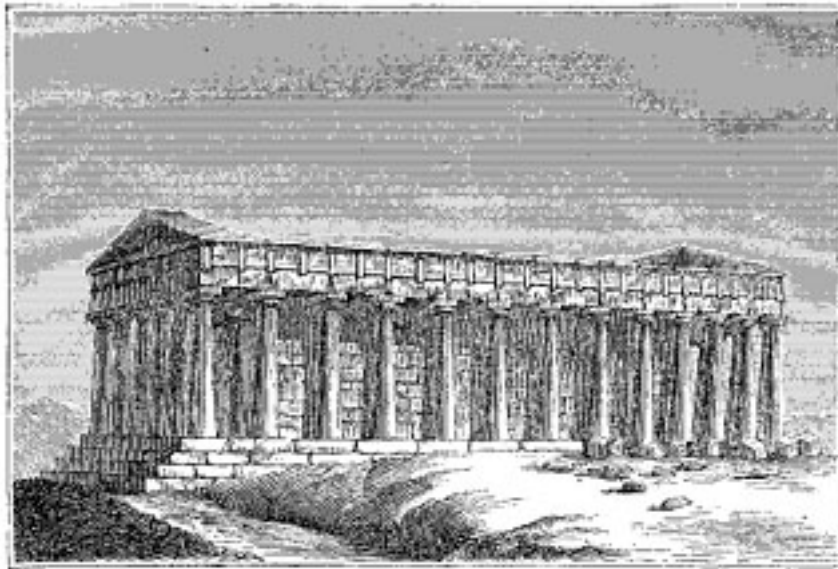
## Reading Selection from *The Apology*, I

### [Socrates Requests a Just Listening]

How you, O Athenians, have been affected by my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that they almost made me forget who I was—so persuasively did they speak; and yet they have hardly uttered a word of truth. But of the many falsehoods told by them, there was one which quite amazed me;—I mean when they said that you should be upon your guard and not allow yourselves to be deceived by the force of my eloquence. To say this, when they were certain to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and proved myself to be anything but a great speaker, did indeed appear to me most shameless—unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for is such is their meaning, I admit that I am eloquent. But in how different a way from theirs! Well, as I was saying, they have scarcely spoken the truth at all; but from me you shall hear the whole truth: not, however, delivered after their manner in a set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases. No, by heaven! but I shall use the words and arguments which occur to me at the moment; for I am confident in the justice of my cause (Or, I am certain that I am right in taking this course.): at my time of life I ought not to be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator—let no one expect it of me. And I must beg of you to grant me a favour:—If I defend myself in my accustomed manner, and you hear me using the words which I have been in the habit of using in the agora, at the tables of the money-changers, or anywhere else, I would ask you not to be surprised, and not to interrupt me on this account. For I am more than seventy years of age, and appearing now for the first time in a court of law, I am quite a stranger to the language of the place; and therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a stranger, whom you would excuse if he spoke in his native tongue, and after the fashion

Chapter 4. “Just Do What’s Right” by Plato

of his country:—Am I making an unfair request of you? Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the truth of my words, and give heed to that: let the speaker speak truly and the judge decide justly.



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

**[Charges of the Older Accusers]**

And first, I have to reply to the older charges and to my first accusers, and then I will go on to the later ones. For of old I have had many accusers, who have accused me falsely to you during many years; and I am more afraid of them than of Anytus and his associates, who are dangerous, too, in their own way. But far more dangerous are the others, who began when you were children, and took possession of your minds with their falsehoods, telling of one Socrates, a wise man, who speculated about the heaven above, and searched into the earth beneath, and made the worse appear the better cause. The disseminators of this tale are the accusers whom I dread; for their hearers are apt to fancy that such enquirers do not

*Chapter 4. "Just Do What's Right" by Plato*

believe in the existence of the gods. And they are many, and their charges against me are of ancient date, and they were made by them in the days when you were more impressible than you are now—in childhood, or it may have been in youth—and the cause when heard went by default, for there was none to answer. And hardest of all, I do not know and cannot tell the names of my accusers; unless in the chance case of a Comic poet. All who from envy and malice have persuaded you—some of them having first convinced themselves—all this class of men are most difficult to deal with; for I cannot have them up here, and cross-examine them, and therefore I must simply fight with shadows in my own defence, and argue when there is no one who answers. I will ask you then to assume with me, as I was saying, that my opponents are of two kinds; one recent, the other ancient: and I hope that you will see the propriety of my answering the latter first, for these accusations you heard long before the others, and much oftener.

Well, then, I must make my defence, and endeavour to clear away in a short time, a slander which has lasted a long time. May I succeed, if to succeed be for my good and yours, or likely to avail me in my cause! The task is not an easy one; I quite understand the nature of it. And so leaving the event with God, in obedience to the law I will now make my defence.

**[Defense Against Older Accusations]**

I will begin at the beginning, and ask what is the accusation which has given rise to the slander of me, and in fact has encouraged Meletus to proof this charge against me. Well, what do the slanderers say? They shall be my prosecutors, and I will sum up their words in an affidavit: "Socrates is an evil-doer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause; and he teaches the aforesaid doctrines to others." Such is the nature of the accusation: it is just what you have yourselves seen in the comedy of Aristophanes, who has introduced a man whom he calls Socrates, going about and saying that he walks in air, and talking a deal of nonsense concerning matters of which I do not pretend to know either much or little—not that I mean to speak disparagingly of any one who is a student of natural philosophy. I should be very sorry if Meletus could bring so grave a charge against me. But the simple truth is, O Athenians, that I have nothing to do with physical speculations. Very many of those here present are witnesses

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to the truth of this, and to them I appeal. Speak then, you who have heard me, and tell your neighbours whether any of you have ever known me hold forth in few words or in many upon such matters. . . You hear their answer. And from what they say of this part of the charge you will be able to judge of the truth of the rest.

As little foundation is there for the report that I am a teacher, and take money; this accusation has no more truth in it than the other. Although, if a man were really able to instruct mankind, to receive money for giving instruction would, in my opinion, be an honour to him. There is Gorgias of Leontium, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis, who go the round of the cities, and are able to persuade the young men to leave their own citizens by whom they might be taught for nothing, and come to them whom they not only pay, but are thankful if they may be allowed to pay them. There is at this time a Parian philosopher residing in Athens, of whom I have heard; and I came to hear of him in this way:—I came across a man who has spent a world of money on the Sophists, Callias, the son of Hipponicus, and knowing that he had sons, I asked him: "Callias," I said, "if your two sons were foals or calves, there would be no difficulty in finding some one to put over them; we should hire a trainer of horses, or a farmer probably, who would improve and perfect them in their own proper virtue and excellence; but as they are human beings, whom are you thinking of placing over them? Is there any one who understands human and political virtue? You must have thought about the matter, for you have sons; is there any one?" "There is," he said. "Who is he?" said I; "and of what country? and what does he charge?" "Evenus the Parian," he replied; "he is the man, and his charge is five minae." Happy is Evenus, I said to myself, if he really has this wisdom, and teaches at such a moderate charge. Had I the same, I should have been very proud and conceited; but the truth is that I have no knowledge of the kind.

**[Delphic Oracle]**

I dare say, Athenians, that some one among you will reply, "Yes, Socrates, but what is the origin of these accusations which are brought against you; there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All these rumours and this talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men: tell us, then, what is the cause of them, for we should be sorry to judge hastily of you." Now I regard this as a fair challenge,

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and I will endeavour to explain to you the reason why I am called wise and have such an evil fame. Please to attend then. And although some of you may think that I am joking, I declare that I will tell you the entire truth. Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come of a certain sort of wisdom which I possess. If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, wisdom such as may perhaps be attained by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe that I am wise; whereas the persons of whom I was speaking have a superhuman wisdom which I may fail to describe, because I have it not myself; and he who says that I have, speaks falsely, and is taking away my character. And here, O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit; that witness shall be the God of Delphi—he will tell you about my wisdom, if I have any, and of what sort it is. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the recent exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether—as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether anyone was wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered, that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself; but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of what I am saying.



Coin of Athens, Smith, *A History of Greece*, 1855

**[Socrates Cross-examines Others]**

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have

*Chapter 4. "Just Do What's Right" by Plato*

such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of his riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What then can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god, and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After long consideration, I thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and still wiser by himself; and thereupon I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is,— for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another who had still higher pretensions to wisdom, and my conclusion was exactly the same. Whereupon I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

Then I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me,—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that others less esteemed were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the "Herculean" labours, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be instantly detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly, I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe



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me? I am almost ashamed to confess the truth, but I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them. The poets appeared to me to be much in the same case; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians.

At last I went to the artisans. I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things; and here I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets;—because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom; and therefore I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made answer to myself and to the oracle that I was better off as I was.

### **[Why Socrates is Wise]**

This inquisition has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies. And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go about the world, obedient to the god, and search and make enquiry into the wisdom of any one, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and my occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.

### [Prejudice Against Socrates]

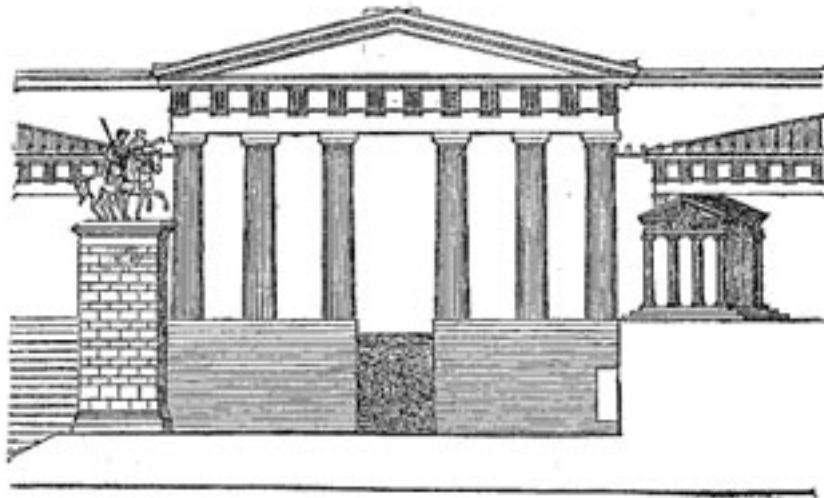
There is another thing:—young men of the richer classes, who have not much to do, come about me of their own accord; they like to hear the pretenders examined, and they often imitate me, and proceed to examine others; there are plenty of persons, as they quickly discover, who think that they know something, but really know little or nothing; and then those who are examined by them instead of being angry with themselves are angry with me: This confounded Socrates, they say; this villainous misleader of youth!— and then if somebody asks them, Why, what evil does he practise or teach? they do not know, and cannot tell; but in order that they may not appear to be at a loss, they repeat the ready-made charges which are used against all philosophers about teaching things up in the clouds and under the earth, and having no gods, and making the worse appear the better cause; for they do not like to confess that their pretence of knowledge has been detected— which is the truth; and as they are numerous and ambitious and energetic, and are drawn up in battle array and have persuasive tongues, they have filled your ears with their loud and inveterate calumnies. And this is the reason why my three accusers, Meletus and Anytus and Lycon, have set upon me; Meletus, who has a quarrel with me on behalf of the poets; Anytus, on behalf of the craftsmen and politicians; Lycon, on behalf of the rhetoricians: and as I said at the beginning, I cannot expect to get rid of such a mass of calumny all in a moment. And this, O men of Athens, is the truth and the whole truth; I have concealed nothing, I have dissembled nothing. And yet, I know that my plainness of speech makes them hate me, and what is their hatred but a proof that I am speaking the truth?—Hence has arisen the prejudice against me; and this is the reason of it, as you will find out either in this or in any future enquiry.

**From the reading...**

“...for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What then can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men?”

### [Defense Against Corruption of the Youth]

I have said enough in my defence against the first class of my accusers; I turn to the second class. They are headed by Meletus, that good man and true lover of his country, as he calls himself. Against these, too, I must try to make a defence:—Let their affidavit be read: it contains something of this kind: It says that Socrates is a doer of evil, who corrupts the youth; and who does not believe in the gods of the state, but has other new divinities of his own. Such is the charge; and now let us examine the particular counts. He says that I am a doer of evil, and corrupt the youth; but I say, O men of Athens, that Meletus is a doer of evil, in that he pretends to be in earnest when he is only in jest, and is so eager to bring men to trial from a pretended zeal and interest about matters in which he really never had the smallest interest. And the truth of this I will endeavour to prove to you.



*The Propylæa of the Acropolis Restored, Smith, A History of Greece, 1855*

Come hither, Meletus, and let me ask a question of you. You think a great deal about the improvement of youth?

Yes, I do.

Tell the judges, then, who is their improver; for you must know, as you have taken the pains to discover their corrupter, and are citing and accus-

*Chapter 4. "Just Do What's Right" by Plato*

ing me before them. Speak, then, and tell the judges who their improver is—observe, Meletus, that you are silent, and have nothing to say. But is not this rather disgraceful, and a very considerable proof of what I was saying, that you have no interest in the matter? Speak up, friend, and tell us who their improver is.

The laws.

But that, my good sir, is not my meaning. I want to know who the person is, who, in the first place, knows the laws.

The judges, Socrates, who are present in court.

What, do you mean to say, Meletus, that they are able to instruct and improve youth?

Certainly they are.

What, all of them, or some only and not others?

All of them.

By the goddess Here, that is good news! There are plenty of improvers, then. And what do you say of the audience—do they improve them?

Yes, they do.

And the senators?

Yes, the senators improve them.

But perhaps the members of the assembly corrupt them?—or do they too improve them?

They improve them.

Then every Athenian improves and elevates them; all with the exception of myself; and I alone am their corrupter? Is that what you affirm?

That is what I stoutly affirm.

I am very unfortunate if you are right. But suppose I ask you a question: How about horses? Does one man do them harm and all the world good? Is not the exact opposite the truth? One man is able to do them good, or at least not many;—the trainer of horses, that is to say, does them good, and others who have to do with them rather injure them? Is not that true, Meletus, of horses, or of any other animals? Most assuredly it is; whether you and Anytus say yes or no. Happy indeed would be the condition of

*Chapter 4. "Just Do What's Right" by Plato*

youth if they had one corrupter only, and all the rest of the world were their improvers. But you, Meletus, have sufficiently shown that you never had a thought about the young: your carelessness is seen in your not caring about the very things which you bring against me.

And now, Meletus, I will ask you another question—by Zeus I will: Which is better, to live among bad citizens, or among good ones? Answer, friend, I say; the question is one which may be easily answered. Do not the good do their neighbours good, and the bad do them evil?

Certainly.

And is there anyone who would rather be injured than benefited by those who live with him? Answer, my good friend, the law requires you to answer—does any one like to be injured?

Certainly not.

And when you accuse me of corrupting and deteriorating the youth, do you allege that I corrupt them intentionally or unintentionally?

Intentionally, I say.

But you have just admitted that the good do their neighbours good, and the evil do them evil. Now, is that a truth which your superior wisdom has recognized thus early in life, and am I, at my age, in such darkness and ignorance as not to know that if a man with whom I have to live is corrupted by me, I am very likely to be harmed by him; and yet I corrupt him, and intentionally, too—so you say, although neither I nor any other human being is ever likely to be convinced by you. But either I do not corrupt them, or I corrupt them unintentionally; and on either view of the case you lie. If my offence is unintentional, the law has no cognizance of unintentional offences: you ought to have taken me privately, and warned and admonished me; for if I had been better advised, I should have left off doing what I only did unintentionally—no doubt I should; but you would have nothing to say to me and refused to teach me. And now you bring me up in this court, which is a place not of instruction, but of punishment.

### **[Defense Against Atheism]**

It will be very clear to you, Athenians, as I was saying, that Meletus has no care at all, great or small, about the matter. But still I should like to know,

*Chapter 4. "Just Do What's Right" by Plato*

Meletus, in what I am affirmed to corrupt the young. I suppose you mean, as I infer from your indictment, that I teach them not to acknowledge the gods which the state acknowledges, but some other new divinities or spiritual agencies in their stead. These are the lessons by which I corrupt the youth, as you say.

Yes, that I say emphatically.

Then, by the gods, Meletus, of whom we are speaking, tell me and the court, in somewhat plainer terms, what you mean! for I do not as yet understand whether you affirm that I teach other men to acknowledge some gods, and therefore that I do believe in gods, and am not an entire atheist—this you do not lay to my charge,—but only you say that they are not the same gods which the city recognizes—the charge is that they are different gods. Or, do you mean that I am an atheist simply, and a teacher of atheism?

I mean the latter—that you are a complete atheist.

What an extraordinary statement! Why do you think so, Meletus? Do you mean that I do not believe in the godhead of the sun or moon, like other men?

I assure you, judges, that he does not: for he says that the sun is stone, and the moon earth.

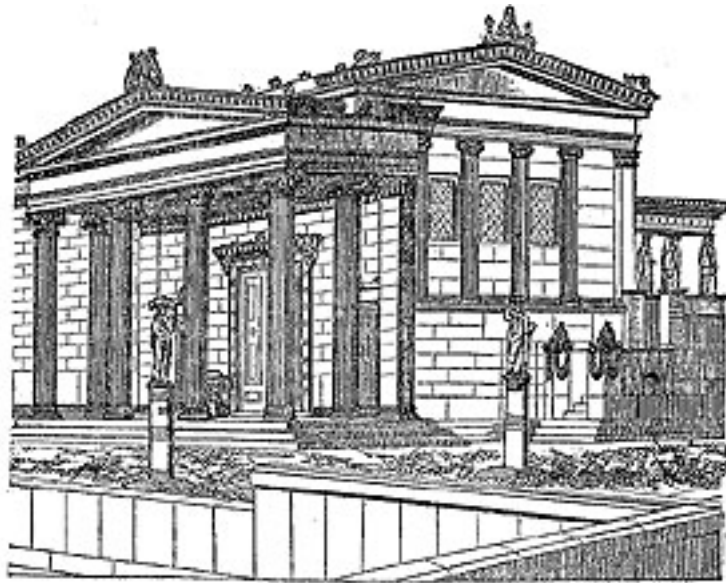
Friend Meletus, you think that you are accusing Anaxagoras: and you have but a bad opinion of the judges, if you fancy them illiterate to such a degree as not to know that these doctrines are found in the books of Anaxagoras the Clazomenian, which are full of them. And so, forsooth, the youth are said to be taught them by Socrates, when there are not unfrequently exhibitions of them at the theatre (Probably in allusion to Aristophanes who caricatured, and to Euripides who borrowed the notions of Anaxagoras, as well as to other dramatic poets.) (price of admission one drachma at the most); and they might pay their money, and laugh at Socrates if he pretends to father these extraordinary views. And so, Meletus, you really think that I do not believe in any god?

I swear by Zeus that you believe absolutely in none at all.

Nobody will believe you, Meletus, and I am pretty sure that you do not believe yourself. I cannot help thinking, men of Athens, that Meletus is reckless and impudent, and that he has written this indictment in a spirit of mere wantonness and youthful bravado. Has he not compounded a rid-

Chapter 4. “Just Do What’s Right” by Plato

dle, thinking to try me? He said to himself:—I shall see whether the wise Socrates will discover my facetious contradiction, or whether I shall be able to deceive him and the rest of them. For he certainly does appear to me to contradict himself in the indictment as much as if he said that Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods, and yet of believing in them—but this is not like a person who is in earnest.



*Erechthēum Restored, from Southwest, Smith, A History of Greece, 1855*

I should like you, O men of Athens, to join me in examining what I conceive to be his inconsistency; and do you, Meletus, answer. And I must remind the audience of my request that they would not make a disturbance if I speak in my accustomed manner:

Did ever man, Meletus, believe in the existence of human things, and not of human beings?... I wish, men of Athens, that he would answer, and not be always trying to get up an interruption. Did ever any man believe in horsemanship, and not in horses? or in flute-playing, and not in flute-players? No, my friend; I will answer to you and to the court, as you refuse to answer for yourself. There is no man who ever did. But now please to answer the next question: Can a man believe in spiritual and divine

Chapter 4. “Just Do What’s Right” by Plato

agencies, and not in spirits or demigods?

He cannot.

How lucky I am to have extracted that answer, by the assistance of the court! But then you swear in the indictment that I teach and believe in divine or spiritual agencies (new or old, no matter for that); at any rate, I believe in spiritual agencies,—so you say and swear in the affidavit; and yet if I believe in divine beings, how can I help believing in spirits or demigods;—must I not? To be sure I must; and therefore I may assume that your silence gives consent. Now what are spirits or demigods? Are they not either gods or the sons of gods?

Certainly they are.

But this is what I call the facetious riddle invented by you: the demigods or spirits are gods, and you say first that I do not believe in gods, and then again that I do believe in gods; that is, if I believe in demigods. For if the demigods are the illegitimate sons of gods, whether by the nymphs or by any other mothers, of whom they are said to be the sons—what human being will ever believe that there are no gods if they are the sons of gods? You might as well affirm the existence of mules, and deny that of horses and asses. Such nonsense, Meletus, could only have been intended by you to make trial of me. You have put this into the indictment because you had nothing real of which to accuse me. But no one who has a particle of understanding will ever be convinced by you that the same men can believe in divine and superhuman things, and yet not believe that there are gods and demigods and heroes.

**From the reading...**

“... a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or of a bad.”

I have said enough in answer to the charge of Meletus: any elaborate defence is unnecessary, but I know only too well how many are the enmities which I have incurred, and this is what will be my destruction if I am destroyed;—not Meletus, nor yet Anytus, but the envy and detraction of the



*Chapter 4. "Just Do What's Right" by Plato*

world, which has been the death of many good men, and will probably be the death of many more; there is no danger of my being the last of them.

**[Do What's Right, Regardless]**

Some one will say: And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end? To him I may fairly answer: There you are mistaken: a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or of a bad. Whereas, upon your view, the heroes who fell at Troy were not good for much, and the son of Thetis above all, who altogether despised danger in comparison with disgrace; and when he was so eager to slay Hector, his goddess mother said to him, that if he avenged his companion Patroclus, and slew Hector, he would die himself—"Fate," she said, in these or the like words, "waits for you next after Hector;" he, receiving this warning, utterly despised danger and death, and instead of fearing them, feared rather to live in dishonour, and not to avenge his friend. "Let me die forthwith," he replies, "and be avenged of my enemy, rather than abide here by the beaked ships, a laughing-stock and a burden of the earth." Had Achilles any thought of death and danger? For wherever a man's place is, whether the place which he has chosen or that in which he has been placed by a commander, there he ought to remain in the hour of danger; he should not think of death or of anything but of disgrace. And this, O men of Athens, is a true saying. Strange, indeed, would be my conduct, O men of Athens, if I who, when I was ordered by the generals whom you chose to command me at Potidaea and Amphipolis and Delium, remained where they placed me, like any other man, facing death—if now, when, as I conceive and imagine, God orders me to fulfil the philosopher's mission of searching into myself and other men, I were to desert my post through fear of death, or any other fear; that would indeed be strange, and I might justly be arraigned in court for denying the existence of the gods, if I disobeyed the oracle because I was afraid of death, fancying that I was wise when I was not wise. For the fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretence of knowing the unknown; and no one knows whether death, which men in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good. Is not this ignorance of a disgraceful sort, the ignorance which is the conceit that a man knows what he does not know? And in this respect only I believe myself to differ from

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men in general, and may perhaps claim to be wiser than they are:—that whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know: but I do know that injustice and disobedience to a better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonourable, and I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil. And therefore if you let me go now, and are not convinced by Anytus, who said that since I had been prosecuted I must be put to death; (or if not that I ought never to have been prosecuted at all); and that if I escape now, your sons will all be utterly ruined by listening to my words—if you say to me, Socrates, this time we will not mind Anytus, and you shall be let off, but upon one condition, that you are not to enquire and speculate in this way any more, and that if you are caught doing so again you shall die;—if this was the condition on which you let me go, I should reply: Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet and saying to him after my manner: You, my friend,—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens,—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? And if the person with whom I am arguing, says: Yes, but I do care; then I do not leave him or let him go at once; but I proceed to interrogate and examine and cross-examine him, and if I think that he has no virtue in him, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less. And I shall repeat the same words to every one whom I meet, young and old, citizen and alien, but especially to the citizens, inasmuch as they are my brethren. For know that this is the command of God; and I believe that no greater good has ever happened in the state than my service to the God. For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, I am a mischievous person. But if any one says that this is not my teaching, he is speaking an untruth. Wherefore, O men of Athens, I say to you, do as Anytus bids or not as Anytus bids, and either acquit me or not; but whichever you do, understand that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times.

Men of Athens, do not interrupt, but hear me; there was an understanding

Chapter 4. “Just Do What’s Right” by Plato

between us that you should hear me to the end: I have something more to say, at which you may be inclined to cry out; but I believe that to hear me will be good for you, and therefore I beg that you will not cry out. I would have you know, that if you kill such an one as I am, you will injure yourselves more than you will injure me. Nothing will injure me, not Meletus nor yet Anytus—they cannot, for a bad man is not permitted to injure a better than himself. I do not deny that Anytus may, perhaps, kill him, or drive him into exile, or deprive him of civil rights; and he may imagine, and others may imagine, that he is inflicting a great injury upon him: but there I do not agree. For the evil of doing as he is doing—the evil of unjustly taking away the life of another—is greater far.



*Socrates standing before seated group*, engravings by L. P. Boitard, Library of Congress

**[Socrates, a Gadfly]**

And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the God by condemning me, who am his gift to you. For if you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that you may feel out of temper (like a person who is suddenly awakened from sleep), and you think that you might easily strike me dead as Anytus advises, and then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless God in

his care of you sent you another gadfly. When I say that I am given to you by God, the proof of my mission is this:—if I had been like other men, I should not have neglected all my own concerns or patiently seen the neglect of them during all these years, and have been doing yours, coming to you individually like a father or elder brother, exhorting you to regard virtue; such conduct, I say, would be unlike human nature. If I had gained anything, or if my exhortations had been paid, there would have been some sense in my doing so; but now, as you will perceive, not even the impudence of my accusers dares to say that I have ever exacted or sought pay of any one; of that they have no witness. And I have a sufficient witness to the truth of what I say—my poverty.

### **[Socrates' Divine Sign]**

Some one may wonder why I go about in private giving advice and busying myself with the concerns of others, but do not venture to come forward in public and advise the state. I will tell you why. You have heard me speak at sundry times and in divers places of an oracle or sign which comes to me, and is the divinity which Meletus ridicules in the indictment. This sign, which is a kind of voice, first began to come to me when I was a child; it always forbids but never commands me to do anything which I am going to do. This is what deters me from being a politician. And rightly, as I think. For I am certain, O men of Athens, that if I had engaged in politics, I should have perished long ago, and done no good either to you or to myself. And do not be offended at my telling you the truth: for the truth is, that no man who goes to war with you or any other multitude, honestly striving against the many lawless and unrighteous deeds which are done in a state, will save his life; he who will fight for the right, if he would live even for a brief space, must have a private station and not a public one.

### **[Doing What's Right, Regardless of Threat]**

I can give you convincing evidence of what I say, not words only, but what you value far more—actions. Let me relate to you a passage of my own life which will prove to you that I should never have yielded to injustice from any fear of death, and that "as I should have refused to yield" I must have died at once. I will tell you a tale of the courts, not very interesting perhaps, but nevertheless true. The only office of state which I ever held, O men of

*Chapter 4. "Just Do What's Right" by Plato*

Athens, was that of senator: the tribe Antiochis, which is my tribe, had the presidency at the trial of the generals who had not taken up the bodies of the slain after the battle of Arginusae; and you proposed to try them in a body, contrary to law, as you all thought afterwards; but at the time I was the only one of the Prytanes who was opposed to the illegality, and I gave my vote against you; and when the orators threatened to impeach and arrest me, and you called and shouted, I made up my mind that I would run the risk, having law and justice with me, rather than take part in your injustice because I feared imprisonment and death. This happened in the days of the democracy. But when the oligarchy of the Thirty was in power, they sent for me and four others into the rotunda, and bade us bring Leon the Salaminian from Salamis, as they wanted to put him to death. This was a specimen of the sort of commands which they were always giving with the view of implicating as many as possible in their crimes; and then I showed, not in word only but in deed, that, if I may be allowed to use such an expression, I cared not a straw for death, and that my great and only care was lest I should do an unrighteous or unholy thing. For the strong arm of that oppressive power did not frighten me into doing wrong; and when we came out of the rotunda the other four went to Salamis and fetched Leon, but I went quietly home. For which I might have lost my life, had not the power of the Thirty shortly afterwards come to an end. And many will witness to my words.

Now do you really imagine that I could have survived all these years, if I had led a public life, supposing that like a good man I had always maintained the right and had made justice, as I ought, the first thing? No indeed, men of Athens, neither I nor any other man. But I have been always the same in all my actions, public as well as private, and never have I yielded any base compliance to those who are slanderously termed my disciples, or to any other. Not that I have any regular disciples. But if any one likes to come and hear me while I am pursuing my mission, whether he be young or old, he is not excluded. Nor do I converse only with those who pay; but any one, whether he be rich or poor, may ask and answer me and listen to my words; and whether he turns out to be a bad man or a good one, neither result can be justly imputed to me; for I never taught or professed to teach him anything. And if any one says that he has ever learned or heard anything from me in private which all the world has not heard, let me tell you that he is lying.

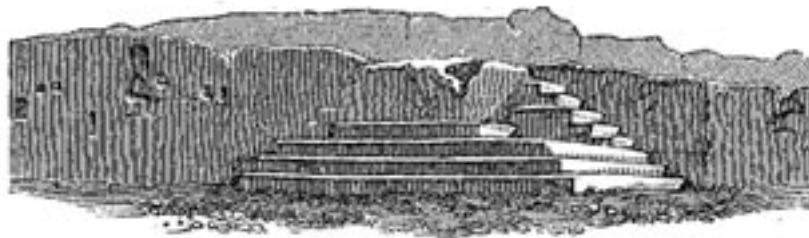
But I shall be asked, Why do people delight in continually conversing with

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you? I have told you already, Athenians, the whole truth about this matter: they like to hear the cross-examination of the pretenders to wisdom; there is amusement in it. Now this duty of cross-examining other men has been imposed upon me by God; and has been signified to me by oracles, visions, and in every way in which the will of divine power was ever intimated to any one. This is true, O Athenians, or, if not true, would be soon refuted. If I am or have been corrupting the youth, those of them who are now grown up and have become sensible that I gave them bad advice in the days of their youth should come forward as accusers, and take their revenge; or if they do not like to come themselves, some of their relatives, fathers, brothers, or other kinsmen, should say what evil their families have suffered at my hands. Now is their time. Many of them I see in the court. There is Crito, who is of the same age and of the same deme with myself, and there is Critobulus his son, whom I also see. Then again there is Lysanias of Sphettus, who is the father of Aeschines—he is present; and also there is Antiphon of Cephissus, who is the father of Epigenes; and there are the brothers of several who have associated with me. There is Nicostratus the son of Theosdotides, and the brother of Theodotus (now Theodotus himself is dead, and therefore he, at any rate, will not seek to stop him); and there is Paralus the son of Demodocus, who had a brother Theages; and Adeimantus the son of Ariston, whose brother Plato is present; and Aeantodorus, who is the brother of Apollodorus, whom I also see. I might mention a great many others, some of whom Meletus should have produced as witnesses in the course of his speech; and let him still produce them, if he has forgotten—I will make way for him. And let him say, if he has any testimony of the sort which he can produce. Nay, Athenians, the very opposite is the truth. For all these are ready to witness on behalf of the corrupter, of the injurer of their kindred, as Meletus and Anytus call me; not the corrupted youth only—there might have been a motive for that—but their uncorrupted elder relatives. Why should they too support me with their testimony? Why, indeed, except for the sake of truth and justice, and because they know that I am speaking the truth, and that Meletus is a liar. Well, Athenians, this and the like of this is all the defence which I have to offer. Yet a word more. Perhaps there may be some one who is offended at me, when he calls to mind how he himself on a similar, or even a less serious occasion, prayed and entreated the judges with many tears, and how he produced his children in court, which was a moving spectacle, together with a host of relations and friends; whereas I, who am probably in danger of my life, will do none of these things. The contrast may occur

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to his mind, and he may be set against me, and vote in anger because he is displeased at me on this account. Now if there be such a person among you,—mind, I do not say that there is,—to him I may fairly reply: My friend, I am a man, and like other men, a creature of flesh and blood, and not "of wood or stone," as Homer says; and I have a family, yes, and sons, O Athenians, three in number, one almost a man, and two others who are still young; and yet I will not bring any of them hither in order to petition you for an acquittal. And why not? Not from any self-assertion or want of respect for you. Whether I am or am not afraid of death is another question, of which I will not now speak. But, having regard to public opinion, I feel that such conduct would be discreditable to myself, and to you, and to the whole state. One who has reached my years, and who has a name for wisdom, ought not to demean himself. Whether this opinion of me be deserved or not, at any rate the world has decided that Socrates is in some way superior to other men. And if those among you who are said to be superior in wisdom and courage, and any other virtue, demean themselves in this way, how shameful is their conduct! I have seen men of reputation, when they have been condemned, behaving in the strangest manner: they seemed to fancy that they were going to suffer something dreadful if they died, and that they could be immortal if you only allowed them to live; and I think that such are a dishonour to the state, and that any stranger coming in would have said of them that the most eminent men of Athens, to whom the Athenians themselves give honour and command, are no better than women. And I say that these things ought not to be done by those of us who have a reputation; and if they are done, you ought not to permit them; you ought rather to show that you are far more disposed to condemn the man who gets up a doleful scene and makes the city ridiculous, than him who holds his peace.



*The Bema of the Pnyx at Athens, Smith, A History of Greece, 1855 (where the Assembly of Athenians held meetings)*

### [The Defense Concluded]

But, setting aside the question of public opinion, there seems to be something wrong in asking a favour of a judge, and thus procuring an acquittal, instead of informing and convincing him. For his duty is, not to make a present of justice, but to give judgment; and he has sworn that he will judge according to the laws, and not according to his own good pleasure; and we ought not to encourage you, nor should you allow yourselves to be encouraged, in this habit of perjury—there can be no piety in that. Do not then require me to do what I consider dishonourable and impious and wrong, especially now, when I am being tried for impiety on the indictment of Meletus. For if, O men of Athens, by force of persuasion and entreaty I could overpower your oaths, then I should be teaching you to believe that there are no gods, and in defending should simply convict myself of the charge of not believing in them. But that is not so—far otherwise. For I do believe that there are gods, and in a sense higher than that in which any of my accusers believe in them. And to you and to God I commit my cause, to be determined by you as is best for you and me.

#### **From the reading...**

“I cared not a straw for death, and that my great and only care was lest I should do an unrighteous or unholy thing.”

### Related Ideas

*Xenophon* (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/x/xenophon.htm>). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A view of Socrates differing considerably from Plato’s account.

*Sophists* (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/sophists.htm>). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A short entry summarizing the Sophists’ thought in ancient Greece.

*Commentary on Plato’s Apology* (<http://www.friesian.com/apology.htm>). *Friesian School*. Analysis of Plato’s *Apology* by Kelley Ross using the Grube translation.



**From the reading...**

"Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life."



*Erechtheion and Parthenon, Bruno Balestrini*

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Do people act wrongly because they are ignorant or because they do not have the will to do what they know they should do? In your analysis, carefully consider the difference between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge.
2. Thomas Common wrote in his preface to his 1907 introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* "many people, in spite of Socrates, instinctively choose the bad, when it is most profitable to themselves." Do people knowingly and deliberately choose evil? How would Socrates respond to this view? Can it be argued that if one acts against reason, then one does not have the unqualified knowledge to know the proper basis for action?

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3. In his trial, Socrates is accused of being a Sophist,<sup>2</sup> *i.e.*, he "makes the worse argument the stronger." Can a highly skilled person use rhetoric and logic to prove conclusions which are not true? Are the uses of logic and argument to be trusted for methods of knowledge?
4. Søren Kierkegaard, in his *On the Concept of Irony*,<sup>3</sup> points out that a rigid society produces persons who share common thoughts and values. These social stereotypes no longer have to think for themselves, instead they rely on dogmatic answers. Would a sociologist agree that Socrates' use of irony<sup>4</sup> and satire poked holes in conventional wisdom and undermined the common person's dogmatic answers? Is Kierkegaard right in his claim that it is terrifying for us to take personal responsibility for ourselves? Is Socrates being prosecuted solely because he was a constant irritation and threat to the *status quo*?

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2. Originally in ancient Greece, a sophist was considered a wise and knowledgeable person who inquired into ethics and nature. With Plato, many sophists were itinerant thinkers who often taught the art of rhetoric for use in the Athenian courts.

3. Søren Kierkegaard. *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates*. New York: Octagon, 1978.

4. Socrates usually understated his insight, pretended ignorance, and used subtle sarcasm intended to be understood by his followers, hence the origin of the expression "Socratic irony." *Ed.*

# Chapter 5

## “Seek Truth Rather Than Escape Death,” by Plato



*Socrates, Thoemmes*

### **About the author . . .**

There is little doubt that Plato conversed with Socrates during Socrates' last years. Plato was probably in his early 30's when Socrates was charged, and it is quite possible he was forced to leave Athens after Socrates was executed. Perhaps, either as a result of Socrates' trial or of the fact that Plato came from an aristocratic family, Plato distrusted democracy as an effective form of government. With respect to the *psyche*, Plato struggled with the problem of the soul having parts or being divisible, yet being eternal. He argues in *Phaedo* that life is the preparation for death. At death, the soul separates from the body and is released from the body's restrictions.

### About the work...

Plato continues his account of the trial of Socrates. In this, the final part of *The Apology*,<sup>1</sup> Socrates is found guilty of the charges by a vote of 281 to 220; undoubtedly, the ethical seriousness with which Socrates spent his final days profoundly affected Plato as the young student. Socrates now explains why he has nothing to fear from death. Socrates argues that even if the soul were not immortal, death would be a good. Nevertheless, Socrates did not doubt the immortality of the soul.

#### From the reading...

"Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to be a politician and live, I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to every one of you, thither I went, and sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests, and look to the state before he looks to the interests of the state; and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions."

### Ideas of Interest from the *The Apology*, II

1. Why doesn't Socrates plead for a lesser charge in order to save his life? Why did he feel that he couldn't accept exile?
2. Explain how Socrates' argument that death should not be feared rests on "the Socratic Paradox."<sup>2</sup>

1. Plato, *The Apology* (380 B.C.) in *The Dialogues of Plato* (2. Vols.) Trans. Benjamin Jowett, New York, Random House, 1937.

2. Socrates believed that we all seek what we think is most genuinely in our own interest. If we act with knowledge, then we will obtain what is good for our soul, but if the consequences of our action are not what is good for our soul, then we

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3. Characterize as clearly as possible Socrates’ conception of the soul. Does the existence of the soul presuppose an afterlife? Explain why or why not from a Socratic point of view.
4. In what way do you think Socrates’ defense exhibits irony? How is his irony related to his being a “gadfly”?

## Reading from *The Apology*, II

[*Socrates Is Found Guilty*]

### [Response to the Verdict]

There are many reasons why I am not grieved, O men of Athens, at the vote of condemnation. I expected it, and am only surprised that the votes are so nearly equal; for I had thought that the majority against me would have been far larger; but now, had thirty votes gone over to the other side, I should have been acquitted. And I may say, I think, that I have escaped Meletus. I may say more; for without the assistance of Anytus and Lycon, any one may see that he would not have had a fifth part of the votes, as the law requires, in which case he would have incurred a fine of a thousand drachmae.

And so he proposes death as the penalty. And what shall I propose on my part, O men of Athens? Clearly that which is my due. And what is my due? What return shall be made to the man who has never had the wit to be idle during his whole life; but has been careless of what the many care for—wealth, and family interests, and military offices, and speaking in the assembly, and magistracies, and plots, and parties. Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to be a politician and live, I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to every one of you, thither I went, and sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek

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had to have acted in ignorance. In a sense, for Socrates, there is no ethical good or evil—instead “knowledge” is logically equivalent to “good,” “excellence,” or “*areté*,” and “ignorance” is logically equivalent to “evil” or what is “harmful.” Since we never intentionally harm ourselves, if harm happens to us, then, at some point, we acted with a lack of knowledge. In this manner, Socrates concludes we are “morally responsible” for obtaining knowledge.

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virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests, and look to the state before he looks to the interests of the state; and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions. What shall be done to such an one? Doubtless some good thing, O men of Athens, if he has his reward; and the good should be of a kind suitable to him. What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, and who desires leisure that he may instruct you? There can be no reward so fitting as maintenance in the Prytaneum, O men of Athens, a reward which he deserves far more than the citizen who has won the prize at Olympia in the horse or chariot race, whether the chariots were drawn by two horses or by many. For I am in want, and he has enough; and he only gives you the appearance of happiness, and I give you the reality. And if I am to estimate the penalty fairly, I should say that maintenance in the Prytaneum is the just return.



*The Prison of Socrates and Statue of Pan, Theatre Bacchus, Library of Congress*

**[Why Exile Is Not Acceptable]**

Perhaps you think that I am braving you in what I am saying now, as in what I said before about the tears and prayers. But this is not so. I speak rather because I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged any one, although I cannot convince you—the time has been too short; if there were a law at Athens, as there is in other cities, that a capital cause should not be decided in one day, then I believe that I should have convinced you. But I cannot in a moment refute great slanders; and, as I am convinced that I never wronged another, I will assuredly not wrong myself. I will not say

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of myself that I deserve any evil, or propose any penalty. Why should I? because I am afraid of the penalty of death which Meletus proposes? When I do not know whether death is a good or an evil, why should I propose a penalty which would certainly be an evil? Shall I say imprisonment? And why should I live in prison, and be the slave of the magistrates of the year—of the Eleven? Or shall the penalty be a fine, and imprisonment until the fine is paid? There is the same objection. I should have to lie in prison, for money I have none, and cannot pay. And if I say exile (and this may possibly be the penalty which you will affix), I must indeed be blinded by the love of life, if I am so irrational as to expect that when you, who are my own citizens, cannot endure my discourses and words, and have found them so grievous and odious that you will have no more of them, others are likely to endure me. No indeed, men of Athens, that is not very likely. And what a life should I lead, at my age, wandering from city to city, ever changing my place of exile, and always being driven out! For I am quite sure that wherever I go, there, as here, the young men will flock to me; and if I drive them away, their elders will drive me out at their request; and if I let them come, their fathers and friends will drive me out for their sakes.

**From the reading . . .**

"I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than speak in your manner and live. . . . The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death."

Someone will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that to do as you say would be a disobedience to the God, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that daily to discourse about virtue, and of those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still less likely to believe me. Yet I say what is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. Also, I have never been accustomed to think that I deserve to suffer any harm. Had I money I might have estimated the offence at what I was able to pay, and not have

*Chapter 5. "Seek Truth Rather Than Escape Death," by Plato*

been much the worse. But I have none, and therefore I must ask you to proportion the fine to my means. Well, perhaps I could afford a mina, and therefore I propose that penalty: Plato, Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus, my friends here, bid me say thirty minae, and they will be the sureties. Let thirty minae be the penalty; for which sum they will be ample security to you. . . .

**[Truth, More Important Than Life]**

Not much time will be gained, O Athenians, in return for the evil name which you will get from the detractors of the city, who will say that you killed Socrates, a wise man; for they will call me wise, even although I am not wise, when they want to reproach you. If you had waited a little while, your desire would have been fulfilled in the course of nature. For I am far advanced in years, as you may perceive, and not far from death. I am speaking now not to all of you, but only to those who have condemned me to death. And I have another thing to say to them: you think that I was convicted because I had no words of the sort which would have procured my acquittal—I mean, if I had thought fit to leave nothing undone or unsaid. Not so; the deficiency which led to my conviction was not of words—certainly not. But I had not the boldness or impudence or inclination to address you as you would have liked me to do, weeping and wailing and lamenting, and saying and doing many things which you have been accustomed to hear from others, and which, as I maintain, are unworthy of me. I thought at the time that I ought not to do anything common or mean when in danger: nor do I now repent of the style of my defence; I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than speak in your manner and live. For neither in war nor yet at law ought I or any man to use every way of escaping death. Often in battle there can be no doubt that if a man will throw away his arms, and fall on his knees before his pursuers, he may escape death; and in other dangers there are other ways of escaping death, if a man is willing to say and do anything. The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death. I am old and move slowly, and the slower runner has overtaken me, and my accusers are keen and quick, and the faster runner, who is unrighteousness, has overtaken them. And now I depart hence condemned by you to suffer the penalty of death,—they too go their ways condemned by the truth to suffer the penalty of villainy and wrong; and I must abide by my award—let them abide by theirs. I suppose that these things may be



regarded as fated,—and I think that they are well.

### [Socrates' Advice]

And now, O men who have condemned me, I would fain prophesy to you; for I am about to die, and in the hour of death men are gifted with prophetic power. And I prophesy to you who are my murderers, that immediately after my departure punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you. Me you have killed because you wanted to escape the accuser, and not to give an account of your lives. But that will not be as you suppose: far otherwise. For I say that there will be more accusers of you than there are now; accusers whom hitherto I have restrained: and as they are younger they will be more inconsiderate with you, and you will be more offended at them. If you think that by killing men you can prevent some one from censuring your evil lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honourable; the easiest and the noblest way is not to be disabling others, but to be improving yourselves. This is the prophecy which I utter before my departure to the judges who have condemned me.



Chapter 5. "Seek Truth Rather Than Escape Death," by Plato

*Homer Enshrined*, Smith, *A History of Greece*, 1855

Friends, who would have acquitted me, I would like also to talk with you about the thing which has come to pass, while the magistrates are busy, and before I go to the place at which I must die. Stay then a little, for we may as well talk with one another while there is time. You are my friends, and I should like to show you the meaning of this event which has happened to me. O my judges—for you I may truly call judges—I should like to tell you of a wonderful circumstance. Hitherto the divine faculty of which the internal oracle is the source has constantly been in the habit of opposing me even about trifles, if I was going to make a slip or error in any matter; and now as you see there has come upon me that which may be thought, and is generally believed to be, the last and worst evil. But the oracle made no sign of opposition, either when I was leaving my house in the morning, or when I was on my way to the court, or while I was speaking, at anything which I was going to say; and yet I have often been stopped in the middle of a speech, but now in nothing I either said or did touching the matter in hand has the oracle opposed me. What do I take to be the explanation of this silence? I will tell you. It is an intimation that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error. For the customary sign would surely have opposed me had I been going to evil and not to good.

### **[Argument That Death Is a Good]**

Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good; for one of two things—either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man, I will not say a private man, but even the great king will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. Now if death be of such a nature, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as

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men say, all the dead abide, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. I myself, too, shall have a wonderful interest in there meeting and conversing with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and any other ancient hero who has suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions: assuredly not. For besides being happier than we are, they will be immortal, if what is said is true.

**From the reading . . .**

"Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death."

Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that the time had arrived when it was better for me to die and be released from trouble; wherefore the oracle gave no sign. For which reason, also, I am not angry with my condemners, or with my accusers; they have done me no harm, although they did not mean to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them.

Still I have a favour to ask of them. When my sons are grown up, I would

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ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing,—then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, both I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.



Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, Metropolitan Museum of Art

## Related Ideas

*Moral Character* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/topics/moral-character>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Socrates' influence on the history of Western ethics is traced and discussed.

*Psychology as Science of Self* (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/author.htm>).

Chapter 5. “Seek Truth Rather Than Escape Death,” by Plato

*Classics in the History of Psychology*. Mary Whiton Calkins’ series of papers in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* proposing a psychological approach to the nature of the “self.”

*Socrates* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14119a.htm>). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Entry on Socrates’ life and thought from a Catholic point of view.

**From the reading...**

“... the unexamined life is not worth living...”

## 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’ 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” of 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. Socrates’ argument that even if he left Athens, he would be driven out of city after city is voiced as a simple constructive dilemma. The major premise is a conditional statement with two different antecedents and two identical consequents (hence, the name “simple”). The minor premiss affirms (hence the name “constructive”) alternatively the antecedents of the major premise. The conclusion affirms the consequent. For example, “If I study at the library, I will learn, and if I study in my room I will learn. But I must study either in the library or

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in my room. Hence, I will learn." Is Socrates' dilemma valid? Check a good logic text in order to evaluate it. Can the dilemma's conclusion be avoided by taking the dilemma by the horns, by escaping between the horns, or by proposing a counterdilemma?

4. Socrates' argument that death is a good is phrased as a *reductio ad absurdum* (i.e., an argument often of the form, "If *A* implies *B*, and *B* is absurd, then *A* is absurd"). He couples this argument with the argument by elimination (disjunctive syllogism). A disjunctive syllogism is of the form, "Either *A* or *B* is true, but *A* is not true, so *B* must be true." Consult a good logic text in order to explain, on Socrates' view, as it is expressed in these two argument forms, how Hades could not be a bad place. Hint: you must consider the import of the Socratic Paradox.
5. Could an indefinitely extended life have meaning? In economics, value and worth are dependent upon supply; is this true for the length of life, as well?
6. Fyodor Dostoevsky writes in *Notes From Underground*:

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!<sup>3</sup>

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?

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3. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*. Trans. Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Random House. 1993.

Chapter 5. "Seek Truth Rather Than Escape Death," by Plato

7. 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<sup>4</sup> or the unconscious.<sup>5</sup>

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4. *I.e.*, processes affecting consciousness or personality of which the ego is unaware; or the partially unconscious. *Ed.*

5. *I.e.*, irrational primary processes inaccessible to the conscious mind, discovered only through dreams, amnesias (forgotten events), and slips of the tongue. *Ed.*

# Chapter 6

## “Enlargement of Self” by Bertrand Russell



*Bertrand Russell, University of St. Andrews*

### **About the author...**

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) may well be considered the most influential British philosopher of the twentieth century. Early in his career, because of his pacifist activities, he was dismissed from Trinity College, Cambridge. Subsequently, he supported himself by public lecturing and continued to write in many different fields of philosophy. Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature “in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought.”



### About the work...

In this short reading selection, Russell concludes his *Problems of Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> an early work introducing philosophical inquiry. He thoughtfully summarizes many uses of philosophy. The depth of the thinking evident here will probably only be evident after careful re-reading. Philosophy is not just another academic subject along side the others, instead philosophy is the systematic inquiry into the presuppositions of any field of study. Often philosophical wonderings form the historical genesis of those disciplines.

### From the reading...

“...as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy and becomes a separate science.”

## Ideas of Interest From Russell’s *Problems of Philosophy*

1. How would you describe Russell’s practical person?
2. Why not live one’s life as a practical person?
3. What are the goals of philosophy?
4. What does Russell think is the central value of philosophical inquiry?
5. Characterize the instinctive individual.
6. What is “enlargement of self”?
7. How does philosophical thinking relate to living and acting in the world? Suggest some examples.

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1. Bertrand Russell. *Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912.

## The Reading Selection from *Problems of Philosophy*

### [Indirect Values of Philosophy]

Having now come to the end of our brief and very incomplete review of the problems of philosophy, it will be well to consider, in conclusion, what is the value of philosophy and why it ought to be studied. It is the more necessary to consider this question, in view of the fact that many men, under the influence of science or of practical affairs, are inclined to doubt whether philosophy is anything better than innocent but useless trifling, hair-splitting distinctions, and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible.

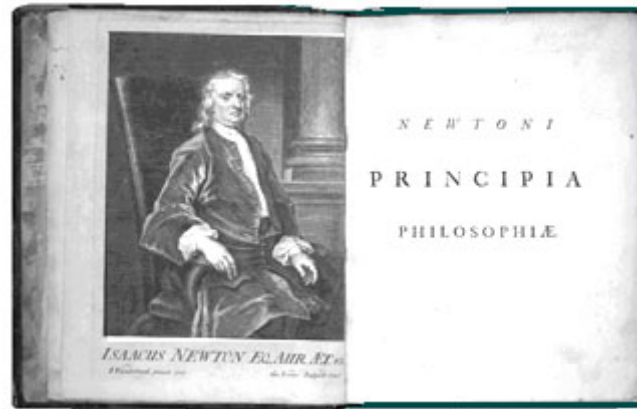
This view of philosophy appears to result, partly from a wrong conception of the ends of life, partly from a wrong conception of the kind of goods which philosophy strives to achieve. Physical science, through the medium of inventions, is useful to innumerable people who are wholly ignorant of it; thus the study of physical science is to be recommended, not only, or primarily, because of the effect on the student, but rather because of the effect on mankind in general. Thus utility does not belong to philosophy. If the study of philosophy has any value at all for others than students of philosophy, it must be only indirectly, through its effects upon the lives of those who study it. It is in these effects, therefore, if anywhere, that the value of philosophy must be primarily sought.

### [The Practical Person]

But further, if we are not to fail in our endeavour to determine the value of philosophy, we must first free our minds from the prejudices of what are wrongly called "practical" men. The "practical" man, as this word is often used, is one who recognizes only material needs, who realizes that men must have food for the body, but is oblivious of the necessity of providing food for the mind. If all men were well off, if poverty and disease had been reduced to their lowest possible point, there would still remain much to be done to produce a valuable society; and even in the existing world the goods of the mind are at least as important as the goods of the body. It is exclusively among the goods of the mind that the value of philosophy is

Chapter 6. “Enlargement of Self” by Bertrand Russell

to be found; and only those who are not indifferent to these goods can be persuaded that the study of philosophy is not a waste of time.



Isaac Newton. *Philosophiæ naturalis principia mathematica*. London: Royal Society, 3rd. ed., 1726. Library of Congress

### [Philosophy and Science]

Philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge. The knowledge it aims at is the kind of knowledge which gives unity and system to the body of the sciences, and the kind which results from a critical examination of the grounds of our convictions, prejudices, and beliefs. But it cannot be maintained that philosophy has had any very great measure of success in its attempts to provide definite answers to its questions. If you ask a mathematician, a mineralogist, a historian, or any other man of learning, what definite body of truths has been ascertained by his science, his answer will last as long as you are willing to listen. But if you put the same question to a philosopher, he will, if he is candid, have to confess that his study has not achieved positive results such as have been achieved by other sciences. It is true that this is partly accounted for by the fact that, as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science. The whole study of the heavens, which now belongs to astronomy, was once included in philosophy; Newton's great work was called "the mathematical principles of natural

philosophy". Similarly, the study of the human mind, which was a part of philosophy, has now been separated from philosophy and has become the science of psychology. Thus, to a great extent, the uncertainty of philosophy is more apparent than real: those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the residue which is called philosophy.

### [Philosophical Questions]

This is, however, only a part of the truth concerning the uncertainty of philosophy. There are many questions—and among them those that are of the profoundest interest to our spiritual life—which, so far as we can see, must remain insoluble to the human intellect unless its powers become of quite a different order from what they are now. Has the universe any unity of plan or purpose, or is it a fortuitous concourse of atoms? Is consciousness a permanent part of the universe, giving hope of indefinite growth in wisdom, or is it a transitory accident on a small planet on which life must ultimately become impossible? Are good and evil of importance to the universe or only to man? Such questions are asked by philosophy, and variously answered by various philosophers. But it would seem that, whether answers be otherwise discoverable or not, the answers suggested by philosophy are none of them demonstrably true. Yet, however slight may be the hope of discovering an answer, it is part of the business of philosophy to continue the consideration of such questions, to make us aware of their importance, to examine all the approaches to them, and to keep alive that speculative interest in the universe which is apt to be killed by confining ourselves to definitely ascertainable knowledge.

**From the reading...**

"The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty."

Many philosophers, it is true, have held that philosophy could establish the truth of certain answers to such fundamental questions. They have supposed that what is of most importance in religious beliefs could be proved

by strict demonstration to be true. In order to judge of such attempts, it is necessary to take a survey of human knowledge, and to form an opinion as to its methods and its limitations. On such a subject it would be unwise to pronounce dogmatically; but if the investigations of our previous chapters have not led us astray, we shall be compelled to renounce the hope of finding philosophical proofs of religious beliefs. We cannot, therefore, include as part of the value of philosophy any definite set of answers to such questions. Hence, once more, the value of philosophy must not depend upon any supposed body of definitely ascertainable knowledge to be acquired by those who study it.

### **[The Values of Philosophy]**

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. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find, as we saw in our opening chapters, that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never traveled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.

Apart from its utility in showing unsuspected possibilities, philosophy has a value—perhaps its chief value—through the greatness of the objects which it contemplates, and the freedom from narrow and personal aims resulting from this contemplation. The life of the instinctive man is shut up within the circle of his private interests: family and friends may be included, but the outer world is not regarded except as it may help or hinder what comes within the circle of instinctive wishes. In such a life there

is something feverish and confined, in comparison with which the philosophic life is calm and free. The private world of instinctive interests is a small one, set in the midst of a great and powerful world which must, sooner or later, lay our private world in ruins. Unless we can so enlarge our interests as to include the whole outer world, we remain like a garrison in a beleaguered fortress, knowing that the enemy prevents escape and that ultimate surrender is inevitable. In such a life there is no peace, but a constant strife between the insistence of desire and the powerlessness of will. In one way or another, if our life is to be great and free, we must escape this prison and this strife.

**From the reading...**

"Apart from its utility in showing unsuspected possibilities—philosophy has a value, perhaps its chief value—through the greatness of the objects which it contemplates, and the freedom from narrow personal aims resulting from this contemplation."

**[Enlargement of Self]**

One way of escape is by philosophic contemplation. Philosophic contemplation does not, in its widest survey, divide the universe into two hostile camps—friends and foes, helpful and hostile, good and bad—it views the whole impartially. Philosophic contemplation, when it is unalloyed, does not aim at proving that the rest of the universe is akin to man. All acquisition of knowledge is an enlargement of the Self, but this enlargement is best attained when it is not directly sought. It is obtained when the desire for knowledge is alone operative, by a study which does not wish in advance that its objects should have this or that character, but adapts the Self to the characters which it finds in its objects. This enlargement of Self is not obtained when, taking the Self as it is, we try to show that the world is so similar to this Self that knowledge of it is possible without any admission of what seems alien. The desire to prove this is a form of self-assertion and, like all self-assertion, it is an obstacle to the growth of Self which it desires, and of which the Self knows that it is capable. Self-assertion, in

*Chapter 6. "Enlargement of Self" by Bertrand Russell*

philosophic speculation as elsewhere, views the world as a means to its own ends; thus it makes the world of less account than Self, and the Self sets bounds to the greatness of its goods. In contemplation, on the contrary, we start from the not-Self, and through its greatness the boundaries of Self are enlarged; through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share in infinity.



*Trinity College, Cambridge*, Russell, after being home schooled, a very high Wrangler, and a First Class with distinction in philosophy, took up residence and was later elected a fellow to Trinity College in 1895. Library of Congress

For this reason greatness of soul is not fostered by those philosophies which assimilate the universe to Man. Knowledge is a form of union of Self and not-Self; like all union, it is impaired by dominion, and therefore by any attempt to force the universe into conformity with what we find in ourselves. There is a widespread philosophical tendency towards the view which tells us that Man is the measure of all things, that truth is man-made, that space and time and the world of universals are properties of the mind, and that, if there be anything not created by the mind, it is unknowable and of no account for us. This view, if our previous discussions were correct, is untrue; but in addition to being untrue, it has the effect of robbing philosophic contemplation of all that gives it value, since it fetters contemplation to Self. What it calls knowledge is not a union with the not-Self, but a set of prejudices, habits, and desires, making an impenetrable veil between us and the world beyond. The man who finds pleasure in such a theory of knowledge is like the man who never leaves the domestic circle

for fear his word might not be law.

The true philosophic contemplation, on the contrary, finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating. Everything, in contemplation, that is personal or private, everything that depends upon habit, self-interest, or desire, distorts the object, and hence impairs the union which the intellect seeks. By thus making a barrier between subject and object, such personal and private things become a prison to the intellect. The free intellect will see as God might see, without a here and now, without hopes and fears, without the trammels of customary beliefs and traditional prejudices, calmly, dispassionately, in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge—knowledge as impersonal, as purely contemplative, as it is possible for man to attain. Hence also the free intellect will value more the abstract and universal knowledge into which the accidents of private history do not enter, than the knowledge brought by the senses, and dependent, as such knowledge must be, upon an exclusive and personal point of view and a body whose sense-organs distort as much as they reveal.

### **[Freedom of Contemplation]**

The mind which has become accustomed to the freedom and impartiality of philosophic contemplation will preserve something of the same freedom and impartiality in the world of action and emotion. It will view its purposes and desires as parts of the whole, with the absence of insistence that results from seeing them as infinitesimal fragments in a world of which all the rest is unaffected by any one man's deeds. The impartiality which, in contemplation, is the unalloyed desire for truth, is the very same quality of mind which, in action, is justice, and in emotion is that universal love which can be given to all, and not only to those who are judged useful or admirable. Thus contemplation enlarges not only the objects of our thoughts, but also the objects of our actions and our affections: it makes us citizens of the universe, not only of one walled city at war with all the rest. In this citizenship of the universe consists man's true freedom, and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears.

Thus, to sum up our discussion of the value of philosophy; Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for



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the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.

## Related Ideas

*Bertrand Russell Archives* ([www.mcmaster.ca/russdocs/russell1.htm](http://www.mcmaster.ca/russdocs/russell1.htm)). *McMaster University*. Catalogs, writing, lectures, quotations, and other information about Russell.

*Bertrand Russell* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/russell>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A brief but interesting biographical account of Russell and a discussion of his works. The site also includes some sound clips.

Bertrand Russell. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967. An entertaining and fascinating, if not wholly accurate, survey of Western philosophy.

**From the reading . . .**

“All acquisition of knowledge is an enlargement of self, but this enlargement of self is best obtained when it is not directly sought.”

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. How does Russell’s distinction between the philosophic mind and the practical mind compare with William James’ distinction between the tough and tender-minded person? The characteristics are listed in the accompanying table. Can it be argued that even the philosophically

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minded person must exert some of the characteristics of the practical person in order to live well and do well in the world? James writes:

The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of temperaments. . . Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries, while philosophizing to sink the fact of his temperament. Temperament is no conventionally recognized reason, so he urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions. Yet his temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other, making for a more sentimental or more hard-hearted view of the universe, just as this fact or that principle would. He trusts his temperament.<sup>2</sup>

The Tender-Minded	The Tough-Minded
Rationalistic	Empiricist
going by "principles"	going by "facts"
Intellectualistic	Sensationalistic
Idealistic	Materialistic
Optimistic	Pessimistic
Religious	Irreligious
Free-willist	Fatalistic
Monistic	Pluralistic
Dogmatical	Sceptical

- Russell praises the contemplative life and the virtues of encyclopedic knowledge. In this day and age, is a synoptic philosophical understanding of the world practicable? Doesn't one have to specialize in order to be successful? What are the "goods of the mind" that Russell refers to at the beginning of the chapter?
- In this essay, Russell mentions the "greatness of the objects" of philosophy and also lists some typical questions with which philosophy is concerned. What are these objects and are they related in any way

2. William James. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1907.

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to the main division of philosophy: epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics? Consider the following "objects":

John Keats, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*

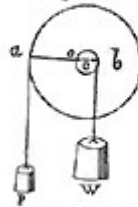
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain in midst of other woe,  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye need to know on earth, and all ye need to know."

4. Russell writes in response to Socrates: "I would never die for my beliefs because I might be wrong." How would Socrates respond to this remark? How would you resolve the paradox?

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in which  $c$ , the centre of the axle, represents the fulcrum,  $a c b$ , a horizontal lever with the weight,  $W$ , and the power,  $P$ , at opposite ends. The radius or spoke of the wheel, acts as the longer arm of the lever, and the radius of the axle as the shorter arm. Therefore there is an equilibrium when the power bears the same proportion to the weight, as the radius of the axle,  $c a$ , bears to the radius of the wheel,  $o a$ . Thus, if the diameter of the wheel is ten times that of the axle, a power of one pound will balance a weight of ten pounds.



Mrs. Phelps, *Natural Philosophy for Beginners*. New York: Huntington and Savage, 1849.

# Chapter 7

## "Only Faith Can Give Truth" by Leo Tolstoy



*Portrait of Tolstoy, (detail) by Vasily Perov, State Tretyakov Gallery*

### **About the author...**

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), orphaned at the age of nine, was reared by relatives. Following his study of oriental languages at the University of Kazan, Tolstoy fought as an artillery officer in the Crimean War. The beginning of his second period of his writing was marked by the selected reading below. Following his "arrest of life," described here, Tolstoy followed the Sermon on the Mount as a guide for living, and sought a simple, humble life of regular manual work and ethical writing.

### About the work...

A *Confession*<sup>1</sup> from which the following selection is drawn, marks a significant change from Tolstoy's earlier *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. These works, composed during his so-called first writing period, established the Russian realistic novel as a major literary genre. However, the mental crisis described below, from his later writings, led to his own elucidation of the meaning of life. His writings from this period have greatly influenced subsequent Utopians, pacifists, and social activists.

### From the reading...

"I felt that what I had been standing on had collapsed and that I had nothing left under my feet. What I had lived on no longer existed, and there was nothing left."

## Ideas of Interest from *A Confession*

1. Explain Tolstoy's "arrest of life" from both a philosophical and a psychological point of view.
2. In this reading, Tolstoy gives several different definitions of "truth." He first states "truth" as "everyday life"; he second states "truth" is "death", and finally concludes "truth" is "faith." Explain what each definition of "truth" means, and then explain what aspect of each definition has in common with the other definitions Tolstoy offers. Which, if any, of these definitions do you think most people would agree is the "truth" of their lives?
3. Explain for each case, according to Tolstoy, why understanding of the fields of knowledge (science), abstract science (mathematics and

1. Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy. *A Confession*, 1882.

metaphysics), or speculative understanding (philosophy) cannot yield substantive meaning to life? Do you agree with his assessments?

4. Why does the working person, the person with the least theoretical knowledge, have no doubt about life's meaning? In what ways is Tolstoy's characterization of this type of person similar to Russell's characterization of the practical person?
5. Carefully characterize Tolstoy's conception of faith. In what sense is "faith" another kind of "truth" for Tolstoy? Is the notion of "irrational knowledge" meaningful from a philosophical point of view?

## The Reading Selection from *A Confession*

### [Everyday Life]

Returning from there I married. The new conditions of happy family life completely diverted me from all search for the general meaning of life. My whole life was centered at that time in my family, wife and children, and therefore in care to increase our means of livelihood. My striving after self-perfection, for which I had already substituted a striving for perfection in general, *i.e.* progress, was now again replaced by the effort simply to secure the best possible conditions for myself and my family.

So another fifteen years passed.

In spite of the fact that I now regarded authorship as of no importance—the temptation of immense monetary rewards and applause for my insignificant work—and I devoted myself to it as a means of improving my material position and of stifling in my soul all questions as to the meaning of my own life or life in general. I wrote: teaching what was for me the only truth, namely, that one should live so as to have the best for oneself and one's family.

So I lived; but five years ago something very strange began to happen to me. At first I experienced moments of perplexity and arrest of life, and though I did not know what to do or how to live; and I felt lost and became dejected. But this passed and I went on living as before. Then these moments of perplexity began to recur oftener and oftener, and always in the

same form. They were always expressed by the questions: What is it for? What does it lead to?

### **[Being Undermined]**

At first it seemed to me that these were aimless and irrelevant questions. I thought that it was all well known, and that if I should ever wish to deal with the solution it would not cost me much effort; just at present I had no time for it, but when I wanted to I should be able to find the answer. The questions however began to repeat themselves frequently, and to demand replies more and more insistently; and like drops of ink always falling on one place they ran together into one black blot.

Then occurred what happens to everyone sickening with a mortal internal disease. At first trivial signs of indisposition appear to which the sick man pays no attention; then these signs reappear more and more often and merge into one uninterrupted period of suffering. The suffering increases, and before the sick man can look round, what he took for a mere indisposition has already become more important to him than anything else in the world— it is death!

That is what happened to me. I understood that it was no casual indisposition but something very important, and that if these questions constantly repeated themselves they would have to be answered. And I tried to answer them. The questions seemed such stupid, simple, childish ones; but as soon as I touched them and tried to solve them I at once became convinced, first, that they are not childish and stupid but the most important and profound of life's questions; and secondly that, occupying myself with my Samara estate, the education of my son, or the writing of a book, I had to know why I was doing it. As long as I did not know why, I could do nothing and could not live. Amid the thoughts of estate management which greatly occupied me at that time, the question would suddenly occur: "Well, you will have 6,000 desyatinas of land in Samara Government and 300 horses, and what then?"... And I was quite disconcerted and did not know what to think. Or when considering plans for the education of my children, I would say to myself: "What for?" Or when considering how the peasants might become prosperous, I would suddenly say to myself: "But what does it matter to me?" Or when thinking of the fame my works would bring me, I would say to myself, "Very well; you will be more famous than Gogol or Pushkin or Shakespeare or Moliere, or than all the writers in the world—and what

*Chapter 7. "Only Faith Can Give Truth" by Leo Tolstoy*

of it?" And I could find no reply at all. The questions would not wait, they had to be answered at once, and if I did not answer them it was impossible to live. But there was no answer.

I felt that what I had been standing on had collapsed and that I had nothing left under my feet. What I had lived on no longer existed, and there was nothing left....

And all this befell me at a time when all around me I had what is considered complete good fortune. I was not yet fifty; I had a good wife who loved me and whom I loved, good children, and a large estate which without much effort on my part improved and increased. I was respected by my relations and acquaintances more than at any previous time. I was praised by others and without much self-deception could consider that my name was famous. And far from being insane or mentally diseased, I enjoyed on the contrary a strength of mind and body such as I have seldom met with among men of my kind; physically I could keep up with the peasants at mowing, and mentally I could work for eight and ten hours at a stretch without experiencing any ill results from such exertion. And in this situation I came to this—that I could not live, and, fearing death, had to employ cunning with myself to avoid taking my own life.





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*L.N. Tolstoi v kabinetie. V IAsnoi polianie*, (L.N. Tolstoi in his study),  
Library of Congress

My mental condition presented itself to me in this way: my life is a stupid and spiteful joke someone has played on me. Though I did not acknowledge a "someone" who created me, yet such a presentation—that someone had played an evil and stupid joke on my by placing me in the world—was the form of expression that suggested itself most naturally to me.



*Peasants Haying. Russian Empire*, Library of Congress

Involuntarily it appeared to me that there, somewhere, was someone who amused himself by watching how I lived for thirty or forty years: learning, developing, maturing in body and mind, and how, having with matured mental powers reached the summit of life from which it all lay before me, I stood on that summit—like an arch-fool—seeing clearly that there is nothing in life, and that there has been and will be nothing. And he was amused...

But whether that "someone" laughing at me existed or not, I was none the better off. I could give no reasonable meaning to any single action or to my whole life. I was only surprised that I could have avoided understanding this from the very beginning—it has been so long known to all. Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (they had come already) to those

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I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort?... How can man fail to see this? And how go on living? That is what is surprising! One can only live while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud! That is precisely what it is: there is nothing either amusing or witty about it, it is simply cruel and stupid.

**From the reading...**

"Loving them, I could not hold the truth from them: each step in knowledge leads them to the truth. And the truth is death."

**[Truth of Death]**

There is an Eastern fable, told long ago, of a traveler overtaken on a plain by an enraged beast. Escaping from the beast he gets into a dry well, but sees at the bottom of the well a dragon that has opened its jaws to swallow him. And the unfortunate man, not daring to climb out lest he should be destroyed by the enraged beast, and not daring to leap to the bottom of the well lest he should be eaten by the dragon, seizes twig growing in a crack in the well and clings to it. His hands are growing weaker and he feels he will soon have to resign himself to the destruction that awaits him above or below, but still he clings on. Then he sees that two mice, a black one and a white one, go regularly round and round the stem of the twig to which he is clinging and gnaw at it. And soon the twig itself will snap and he will fall into the dragon's jaws. The traveler sees this and knows that he will inevitably perish; but while still hanging he looks around, sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the twig, reaches them with his tongue and licks them. So I too clung to the twig of life, knowing that the dragon of death was inevitably awaiting me, ready to tear me to pieces; and I could not understand why I had fallen into such torment. I tried to lick the honey which formerly consoled me, but the honey no longer gave me pleasure, and the white and black mice of day and night gnawed at the branch by which I hung. I saw the dragon clearly and the honey no longer tasted

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sweet. I only saw the unescapable dragon and the mice, and I could not tear my gaze from them. and this is not a fable but the real unanswerable truth intelligible to all.

The deception of the joys of life which formerly allayed my terror of the dragon now no longer deceived me. No matter how often I may be told, "You cannot understand the meaning of life so do not think about it, but live," I can no longer do it: I have already done it too long. I cannot now help seeing day and night going round and bringing me to death. That is all I see, for that alone is true. All else is false.

The two drops of honey which diverted my eyes from the cruel truth longer than the rest: my love of family, and of writing—art as I called it—were no longer sweet to me.

"Family"... said I to myself. But my family—wife and children—are also human. They are placed just as I am: they must either live in a lie or see the terrible truth. Why should they live? Why should I love them, guard them, bring them up, or watch them? That they may come to the despair that I feel, or else be stupid? Loving them, I cannot hide the truth from them: each step in knowledge leads them to the truth. And the truth is death.

**From the reading...**

"If one turns to the branches of science... one knows in advance that they give no reply to life's problems."

**[Art Is a Decoy]**

"Art, poetry?"... Under the influence of success and the praise of men, I had long assured myself that this was a thing one could do though death was drawing near—death which destroys all things, including my work and its remembrance; but soon I saw that that too was a fraud. It was plain to me that art is an adornment of life, an allurement to life. But life had lost its attraction for me, so how could I attract others? As long as I was not living my own life but was borne on the waves of some other life—as long as I believed that life had a meaning, though one I could not express—the reflection of life in poetry and art of all kinds afforded me pleasure: it was

pleasant to look at life in the mirror of art. But when I began to seek the meaning of life and felt the necessity of living my own life, that mirror became for me unnecessary, superfluous, ridiculous, or painful. I could no longer soothe myself with what I now saw in the mirror, namely, that my position was stupid and desperate. It was all very well to enjoy the sight when in the depth of my soul I believed that my life had a meaning. Then the play of lights—comic, tragic, touching, beautiful, and terrible—in life amused me. No sweetness of honey could be sweet to me when I saw the dragon and saw the mice gnawing away my support.

Nor was that all. Had I simply understood that life had no meaning I could have borne it quietly, knowing that that was my lot. But I could not satisfy myself with that. Had I been like a man living in a wood from which he knows there is no exit, I could have lived; but I was like one lost in a wood who, horrified at having lost his way, rushes about wishing to find the road. He knows that each step he takes confuses him more and more, but still he cannot help rushing about. . .

### **[Science Renders Life Meaningless]**

If one turns to the division of sciences which attempt to reply to the questions of life—to physiology, psychology, biology, sociology—one encounters an appalling poverty of thought, the greatest obscurity, a quite unjustifiable pretension to solve irrelevant question, and a continual contradiction of each authority by others and even by himself. If one turns to the branches of science which are not concerned with the solution of the questions of life, but which reply to their own special scientific questions, one is enraptured by the power of man's mind, but one knows in advance that they give no reply to life's questions. Those sciences simply ignore life's questions. They say: "To the question of what you are and why you live we have no reply, and are not occupied with that; but if you want to know the laws of light, of chemical combinations, the laws of development of organisms, if you want to know the laws of bodies and their form, and the relation of numbers and quantities, if you want to know the laws of your mind, to all that we have clear, exact and unquestionable replies."

In general the relation of the experimental sciences to life's question may be expressed thus: Question: "Why do I live?" Answer: "In infinite space, in infinite time, infinitely small particles change their forms in infinite

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complexity, and when you have understood the laws of those mutations of form you will understand why you live on the earth." . . .

Yielding myself to the bright side of knowledge, I understood that I was only diverting my gaze from the question. However alluringly clear those horizons which opened out before me might be, however alluring it might be to immerse oneself in the limitless expanse of those sciences, I already understood that the clearer they were the less they met my need and the less they applied to my question.

"I know," said I to myself, "what science so persistently tries to discover, and along that road there is no reply to the question as to the meaning of my life." In the abstract sphere I understood that notwithstanding the fact, or just because of the fact, that the direct aim of science is to reply to my question, there is no reply but that which I have myself already given: "What is the meaning of my life?" "There is none." Or: "What will come of my life?" "Nothing." Or: "Why does everything exist that exists, and why do I exist?" "Because it exists."



*Dom L.N. Tolstogo, V IAsnoi polianie (Tolstoy's Estate), (crop) Library of Congress*

Inquiring for one region of human knowledge, I received an innumerable quantity of exact replies concerning matters about which I had not asked: about the chemical constituents of the stars, about the movement of the sun towards the constellation Hercules, about the origin of species and of man, about the forms of infinitely minute imponderable particles of ether; but in this sphere of knowledge the only answer to my question, "What is the meaning of my life?" was: "You are what you call your 'life'; you are a transitory, casual cohesion of particles. The mutual interactions and

changes of these particles produce in you what you call your 'life'. That cohesion will last some time; afterwards the interaction of these particles will cease and what you call 'life' will cease, and so will all your questions. You are an accidentally united little lump of something. that little lump ferments. The little lump calls that fermenting its 'life'. The lump will disintegrate and there will be an end of the fermenting and of all the questions." So answers the clear side of science and cannot answer otherwise if it strictly follows its principles.

From such a reply one sees that the reply does not answer the question. I want to know the meaning of my life, but that it is a fragment of the infinite, far from giving it a meaning destroys its every possible meaning. The obscure compromises which that side of experimental exact science makes with abstract science when it says that the meaning of life consists in development and in cooperation with development, owing to their inexactness and obscurity cannot be considered as replies. . .

### **[Four Common Solutions]**

Not finding an explanation in science I began to seek for it in life, hoping to find it among the people around me. And I began to observe how the people around me—people like myself—lived, and what their attitude was to this question which had brought me to despair.

And this is what I found among people who were in the same position as myself as regards education and manner of life.

I found that for people of my circle there were four ways out of the terrible position in which we are all placed.

The first was that of ignorance. It consists in not knowing, not understanding, that life is an evil and an absurdity. People of this sort—chiefly women, or very young or very dull people—have not yet understood that question of life which presented itself to Schopenhauer, Solomon, and Buddha. They see neither the dragon that awaits them nor the mice gnawing the shrub by which they are hanging, and they lick the drops of honey. but they lick those drops of honey only for a while: something will turn their attention to the dragon and the mice, and there will be an end to their licking. From them I had nothing to learn—one cannot cease to know what one does know.

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The second way out is epicureanism. It consists, while knowing the hopelessness of life, in making use meanwhile of the advantages one has, disregarding the dragon and the mice, and licking the honey in the best way, especially if there is much of it within reach. Solomon expresses this way out thus: "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: and that this should accompany him in his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun."

The third escape is that of strength and energy. It consists in destroying life, when one has understood that it is an evil and an absurdity. A few exceptionally strong and consistent people act so. Having understood the stupidity of the joke that has been played on them, and having understood that it is better to be dead than to be alive, and that it is best of all not to exist, they act accordingly and promptly end this stupid joke, since there are means: a rope round one's neck, water, a knife to stick into one's heart, or the trains on the railways; and the number of those of our circle who act in this way becomes greater and greater, and for the most part they act so at the best time of their life, when the strength of their mind is in full bloom and few habits degrading to the mind have as yet been acquired.

**From the reading...**

"Rational knowledge...denies the meaning of life, but the enormous masses of men, the whole of mankind receive that meaning in irrational knowledge."

I saw that this was the worthiest way of escape and I wished to adopt it.

The fourth way out is that of weakness. It consists in seeing the truth of the situation and yet clinging to life, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it. People of this kind know that death is better than life, but not having the strength to act rationally—to end the deception quickly and kill themselves—they seem to wait for something. This is the escape of weakness, for if I know what is best and it is within my power, why not yield to what is best?... I found myself in that category.

So people of my class evade the terrible contradiction in four ways. Strain my attention as I would, I saw no way except those four...

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I long lived in this state of lunacy, which, in fact if not in words, is particularly characteristic of us very liberal and learned people. But thanks either to the strange physical affection I have for the real labouring people, which compelled me to understand them and to see that they are not so stupid as we suppose, or thanks to the sincerity of my conviction that I could know nothing beyond the fact that the best I could do was to hang myself, at any rate I instinctively felt that if I wished to live and understand the meaning of life, I must seek this meaning not among those who have lost it and wish to kill themselves, but among those milliards of the past and the present who make life and who support the burden of their own lives and of ours also. And I considered the enormous masses of those simple, unlearned, and poor people who have lived and are living and I saw something quite different. I saw that, with rare exceptions, all those milliards who have lived and are living do not fit into my divisions, and that I could not class them as not understanding the question, for they themselves state it and reply to it with extraordinary clearness. Nor could I consider them epicureans, for their life consists more of privations and sufferings than of enjoyments. Still less could I consider them as irrationally dragging on a meaningless existence, for every act of their life, as well as death itself, is explained by them. To kill themselves they consider the greatest evil. It appeared that all mankind had a knowledge, unacknowledged and despised by me, of the meaning of life. It appeared that reasonable knowledge does not give the meaning of life, but excludes life: while the meaning attributed to life by milliards of people, by all humanity, rests on some despised pseudo-knowledge....

**[Rational Knowledge Is Indefinite]**

My position was terrible. I knew I could find nothing along the path of reasonable knowledge except a denial of life; and there—in faith—was nothing but a denial of reason, which was yet more impossible for me than a denial of life. From rational knowledge it appeared that life is an evil, people know this and it is in their power to end life; yet they lived and still live, and I myself live, though I have long known that life is senseless and an evil. By faith it appears that in order to understand the meaning of life I must renounce my reason, the very thing for which alone a meaning is required.

A contradiction arose from which there were two exits. Either that which



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I called reason was not so rational as I supposed, or that which seemed to me irrational was not so irrational as I supposed. And I began to verify the line of argument of my rational knowledge.



*L. N. Tolstoy's Study, Library of Congress*

Verifying the line of argument of rational knowledge I found it quite correct. The conclusion that life is nothing was inevitable; but I noticed a mistake. The mistake lay in this, that my reasoning was not in accord with the question I had put. The question was: "Why should I live, that is to say, what real, permanent result will come out of my illusory transitory life—what meaning has my finite existence in this infinite world?" And to reply to that question I had studied life.

The solution of all the possible questions of life could evidently not satisfy me, for my question, simple as it at first appeared, included a demand for an explanation of the finite in terms of the infinite, and vice versa.

I asked: "What is the meaning of my life, beyond time, cause, and space?" And I replied to quite another question: "What is the meaning of my life within time, cause, and space?" With the result that, after long efforts of thought, the answer I reached was: "None."

In my reasonings I constantly compared (nor could I do otherwise) the finite with the finite, and the infinite with the infinite; but for that reason I

reached the inevitable result: force is force, matter is matter, will is will, the infinite is the infinite, nothing is nothing—and that was all that could result. It was something like what happens in mathematics, when thinking to solve an equation, we find we are working on an identity. The line of reasoning is correct, but results in the answer that  $a$  equals  $a$ , or  $x$  equals  $x$ , or  $\phi$  equals  $\phi$ ; the same thing happened with my reasoning in relation to the question of the meaning of my life. The replies given by all science to that question only result in—identity.

And really, strictly scientific knowledge—that knowledge which begins, as Descartes' did, with complete doubt about everything—rejects all knowledge admitted on faith and builds everything afresh on the laws of reason and experience, and cannot give any other reply to the question of life than that which I obtained: an indefinite reply. Only at first had it seemed to me that knowledge had given a positive reply—the reply of Schopenhauer: that life has no meaning and is an evil. But on examining the matter I understood that the reply is not positive, it was only my feeling that so expressed it. Strictly expressed, as it is by the Brahmins and by Solomon and Schopenhauer, the reply is merely indefinite, or an identity:  $\phi$  equals  $\phi$ , life is nothing. So that philosophic knowledge denies nothing, but only replies that the question cannot be solved by it—that for it the solution remains indefinite.

### [Faith's Solution]

Having understood this, I understood that it was not possible to seek in rational knowledge for a reply to my question, and that the reply given by rational knowledge is a mere indication that a reply can only be obtained by a different statement of the question and only when the relation of the finite to the infinite is included in the question. And I understood that, however irrational and distorted might be the replies given by faith, they have this advantage, that they introduce into every answer a relation between the finite and the infinite, without which there can be no solution.

In whatever way I stated the question, that relation appeared in the answer. How am I to live?—According to the law of God. What real result will come of my life?—Eternal torment or eternal bliss. What meaning has life that death does not destroy?—Union with the eternal God: heaven.

So that besides rational knowledge, which had seemed to me the only

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knowledge, I was inevitably brought to acknowledge that all live humanity has another irrational knowledge—faith which makes it possible to live. Faith still remained to me as irrational as it was before, but I could not but admit that it alone gives mankind a reply to the questions of life, and that consequently it makes life possible. Reasonable knowledge had brought me to acknowledge that life is senseless— my life had come to a halt and I wished to destroy myself. Looking around on the whole of mankind I saw that people live and declare that they know the meaning of life. I looked at myself—I had lived as long as I knew a meaning of life and had made life possible.

Looking again at people of other lands, at my contemporaries and at their predecessors, I saw the same thing. Where there is life, there since man began faith has made life possible for him, and the chief outline of that faith is everywhere and always identical.

**From the reading...**

"I was inevitably brought to acknowledge that all live humanity has another irrational knowledge—faith which makes it possible to live."

Whatever the faith may be, and whatever answers it may give, and to whomsoever it gives them, every such answer gives to the finite existence of man an infinite meaning, a meaning not destroyed by sufferings, deprivations, or death. This means that only in faith can we find for life a meaning and a possibility. What, then, is this faith? And I understood that faith is not merely "the evidence of things not seen," *etc.*, and is not a revelation (that defines only one of the indications of faith, is not the relation of man to God (one has first to define faith and then God, and not define faith through God); it not only agreement with what has been told one (as faith is most usually supposed to be), but faith is a knowledge of the meaning of human life in consequence of which man does not destroy himself but lives. Faith is the strength of life. If a man lives he believes in something. If he did not believe that one must live for something, he would not live. If he does not see and recognize the illusory nature of the finite, he believes in the finite; if he understands the illusory nature of the finite, he must believe in the infinite. Without faith he cannot live.

## Related Ideas

*Leo Tolstoy* (<http://ltolstoy.com>). Jared Lyman, a BYU student. Biography, writings, gallery, and other sources concerning Tolstoy are offered at this engaging site.

*Jung's General Description of the Psychological Types* (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/author.htm>). *Classics in the History of Psychology*. C. G. Jung. Chapter 10 of *Psychological Types*. (Original work published 1921.) Key chapter of Jung's explanation of personality.

*Anna Karenina*. Directed by Bernard Rose. Warner Studios, 1997. VHS. PG-13. A film of Tolstoy's 1896 novel starring Sophie Marceau and Sean Bean with compositions by Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, and Rachmaninoff.



*The Place Snamjensky, St. Petersburg, Russia, Library of Congress*

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. How does Tolstoy distinguish "belief," "faith," and "revelation"? Why does Tolstoy point out "one has first to define 'faith' and then define 'God,' and not define 'faith' through 'God'"?
2. Tolstoy observed that the people around him answered the question of the meaning of life in four different ways. Briefly describe those four ways. Do you know anyone who takes a different approach than one of these four ways?

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3. Can you relate the objectives of the main divisions of philosophy to some of the typical answers Tolstoy evaluates for the question of life's meaning? Additionally, can you relate Carl Jung's theory of temperaments to these approaches to finding meaning in life?<sup>2</sup>
4. Analyze the following passage from Abraham Joshua Heschel's *God in Search of Man* in light of Tolstoy's understanding of philosophy and religion:

Theology starts with dogmas, philosophy begins with problems. Philosophy sees the problem first, theology has the answer in advance. We must not, however, disregard another important difference. Not only are the problems of philosophy not identical with the problems of religion; their status is not the same. Philosophy is, in a sense, a kind of thinking that has a beginning but no end. In it, the awareness of the problem outlives all solutions. Its answers are questions in disguise; every new answer giving rise to new questions. In religion, on the other hand, the mystery of the answer hovers over all questions.<sup>3</sup>

5. How do you think Tolstoy would respond to William James' praise and criticism for *A Confession* as argued in his essay "What Makes a Life Significant?"? James writes:

Tolstoy'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.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Jung observed that personality types fall typically into four main categories superficially described here as (1) thinking type—persons who rely on principles, theories, and facts; (2) feeling type—persons who rely on appropriate social or personal value; (3) sensation type—persons who seek experience and interactive change; and (4) intuitive type—persons who rely on perception *via* the unconscious.

3. Abraham Joshua Heschel. *God in Search of Man*. New York: Octagon, 1978.

4. William James. "What Makes a Life Significant?" in *Talks to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. 1899.

# Chapter 8

## Le Mythe de Sisyphe by Albert Camus - trans. by Hélène Brown



*Albert Camus, Library of Congress*

### **About the author...**

In 1957 the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Albert Camus whose “clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience...” Camus’s background as an Algerian journalist, as an essayist and playwright, as well as his role in the French resistance during World War II, form the well-spring of his belief in the possibility of the moral life and the consequent triumph of human value in response to the experience of “the absurd.” Camus’ work exemplifies our capacity to impose mean-

ing *vis-à-vis* the desolation of human existence. Although he is thought of as an existentialist, Camus rejected that label because of his devotion to personal moral value. For Camus, morality is not a matter of expediency.

### About the work...

Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*<sup>1</sup> affirms that only by facing the absurd can I act authentically; otherwise, I adopt a convenient attitude of wishful thinking. Although I cannot count on the consequences of my actions, my life's meaning comes from seizing awareness of what I do. I must act in the face of meaninglessness—I must revolt against the absurd—if I am not to despair from the ultimate hopelessness and limitations of my life.

#### From the reading...

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain from which the huge stone would roll down by its own weight. They had thought with some reason that no punishment is more dreadful than labor for which there is no use and no hope.”

### Ideas of Interest from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

1. Explain in what way Camus believes that Sisyphus is representative of our own lives.
2. What does Camus mean by the observation that “Sisyphus is the absurd hero”?
3. Explain how “A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself.”

1. Albert Camus. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in *Essais*. Paris: Gallimard et Calmann-Lévy., 1965. Part IV.

4. Explain what Camus means when he writes, “There is no destiny that cannot be surmounted by scorn.” In what way does scorn make Sisyphus superior to his fate?
5. Explain how (and why) “when the call of happiness becomes too oppressive,” the rock becomes victorious. What does this insight mean for everyday life?
6. What is the relation between happiness and the absurd? What does Camus mean by absurdity?



*The Cascades, Constantine, Algeria, Library of Congress*

## The Reading Selection from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

### [The Myth of Sisyphus]

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain from which the huge stone would roll down by its own weight. They had thought with some reason that no punishment is more dreadful than labor for which there is no use and no hope.



If we believe Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. However, according to another tradition, he tended to commit highway robbery. I see no contradiction in this. Opinions vary as to the reasons why he was given to be the worthless laborer of the underworld. First of all, he is accused of taking the gods a bit lightly. He betrayed their secrets. Ægina—the daughter of Æsopus—was abducted by Jupiter. Her father found her disappearance disturbing and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to inform Æsopus on the condition that he Æsopus, give water to the citadel of Corinth. Rather than the wrath of the gods, Sisyphus preferred the benediction of water. He was punished for this in the underworld. Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his desert and silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

**From the reading...**

“It has already been understood that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much because of his passions as because of his torment.”

Also, it is said that Sisyphus, being near death, unwarily tried to test his wife’s love. He ordered her to leave his body unburied and to dispose of it publicly on the forum. Sisyphus next found himself in the underworld. There, angered by an example of obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return on earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed the water and the sun, the warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to return to the darkness of the underworld. Promptings, anger, and warnings of the gods were all in vain. For many years thereafter, he lived facing the curved shoreline, the dazzling blue sea, and enjoying the smiles of the earth. The gods found necessary to summon him. Mercury arrived and grabbed the impudent Sisyphus by the collar, and, snatching him away from his joys, forced him back to the underworld where his rock was ready for him.

### [Sisyphus: The Absurd Hero]

It has already been understood that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much because of his passions as because of his torment. His disdain for the gods, his hatred of death and his passion for life won him that unspeakable torture of exerting his whole being to achieving nothing. It is the price that one must pay for the passions of this earth. We are told nothing about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are created for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body that is straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up the slope hundred of times over; one sees the face twisted by the effort, the cheek pressing against the rock, the shoulder being used to brace against a mass covered with clay, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the truly human safeguard of two hands clotted with earth. When this long effort which is commensurate with boundless space, no sky, and fathomless time comes through the very end of its course, the purpose of it is achieved. Sisyphus then watches the rock as it hurtles down with a few bounds toward that lower world from whence he will have to push it up back to the summit. Again, he returns to the bottom of the slope.



*The River, El Cantara, Algeria, Library of Congress*

It is during his return, his pause there, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I imagine that man with a heavy yet even step walking down the slope to the torment of which he

will never know the end. That brief time, like breathing, which returns as regularly and certainly as his torment, that is the moment of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the summit and enters a little deeper into the lair of the gods, Sisyphus is superior to his destiny. He is stronger than his rock.

### [The Absurd Victory]

If this myth is tragic, it is because the hero is conscious. What would his torment be if at each step the hope of succeeding sustained him? In today's world, a worker works everyday of his life at the same tasks, making his destiny no less absurd. But the tone is tragic during the rare moments only when Sisyphus becomes conscious. Proletarian of the gods, powerless and bearing inner revolt, he knows the extent of his wretched condition: the thought of it never leaves him while he walks down to meet his rock. The lucidity that was supposed to be his torment by the same token is the achievement of his victory. There is no destiny that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

**From the reading...**

"It is during his return, his pause there, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself!"

If sorrow is sometimes being felt on the way down, so might be joy. This word is not too emphatic. Again I imagine Sisyphus returning toward his rock. His sorrow was at the beginning. When the images of the earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too oppressive, it happens that sadness rises in a man's heart: this is the victory of the rock; this is the rock itself. This vast distress is too heavy to bear. There come our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being recognized. Thus, *Œdipus* at first obeys his fate without knowing it. From the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the very same moment, blind and in despair, he realizes that the only bond that ties him to the world is a feminine young hand of which he feels the freshness. His words ring out immoderately: "Despite so many ordeals, on account of my wiser age and the nobility of my soul I judge that all is well." Sophocles's *Œdipus*,

like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the formula for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom pairs with modern heroism.

### **[Absurdity and Happiness]**

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What! By such narrow ways...?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. The error would be to say that happiness is necessarily born of the absurd; it happens as well that the feeling of absurdity is born of happiness. "I judge that all is well" says Ædipus, and this remark is sacred. It rings out in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches us that all was not and is not yet exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had entered it with dissatisfaction and a liking for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.



*From the Admiralty, Algiers, Algeria, Library of Congress*

All Sisyphus's silent joy is here: his fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, when he contemplates his torment, the absurd man makes all idols be silent. In the universe suddenly given back to its silence, thousands of marveling little voices of the world arise. Unconscious secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and the price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and one has to know darkness. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth have no ending. If there is a fated life destiny which is personal to each man, there

is no superhuman destiny; more truly, there is only one for us all which the absurd man concludes is fatal and despicable. For the rest, he knows that he alone is master of his life. At that subtle instant when a man looks back over his life, Sisyphus walking downward to his rock contemplates the series of actions all together like dots on the curve of his destiny that has truly become his: it was created by him, is being perfected under the watchful eye of his memory, and will soon be sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the very human origin of everything that is human, a blind man having the desire to see and knowing that the night has no end, Sisyphus is not out of step. The rock is still rolling.

### [Sisyphus' Fate]

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One will always find one's own burden again. But Sisyphus teaches that higher sense of faithfulness that negates the gods and is capable of lifting rocks. He too judges that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master, appears to him neither sterile nor futile. Each particle of that stone, each mineral flake of that mountain filled with darkness, in its singularity constitutes a world. The struggle itself toward summits is enough alone to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

#### **From the reading...**

"There is no destiny that cannot be surmounted by scorn."

## Related Ideas

Motion Picture and Video: *The Plague*, directed by Luis Puenzo, 1993. Cast: William Hurt, Robert Duvall, and Raul Julia. The film is based on Albert Camus's *La Peste*. Rated R; 1 hour, 45 minutes (video 1 hour, 5 minutes).

*Literary Outlaw* (<http://inch.com/~ari/ac1.html>) (*Photographs of Albert Camus*. Copyrighted (and rarely seen) photographs scanned by

Chapter 8. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* by Albert Camus - trans. by Hélène Brown

Ari Frankel from photographs in the Herbert R. Lottman biography of Camus.

*BBCi—Books by Author* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/books/author/camus/>) *Albert Camus*. Three page biography of Camus.

*Nobel eMuseum* (<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1957/camus-speech.html>) *Albert Camus—Banquet Speech*. Albert Camus's speech at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, December 10, 1957.

*Solitaire et Solidaire* (<http://www.spikemagazine.com/0397camu.htm>) *Spike Magazine*—interview by Russell Wilkinson with Catherine Camus about her father's book *The First Man*, a work first published in 1995, composed of the unedited and unfinished manuscript found in the car crash in which Camus was tragically killed in 1960. If you like, you can practice your French translation skills for this interview at this location: *Solitaire et Solidaire*. (<http://www.spikemagazine.com/0899camu.htm>)

*Difficult Choices for France's Most Reluctant Existentialist* ([http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m1571/n8\\_v14/20351800/p1/article.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1571/n8_v14/20351800/p1/article.jhtml)) Roger Kaplan's article on Camus's enduring appeal from *Insight Magazine*—a brief overview of Camus's outlook for beginners.

*Albert Camus—Links* (<http://www.littlebluelight.com/lblphp/links.php?ikey=3>). *Little Blue Light*. Excellent list of Camus links for works, quotes, articles, and book reviews.

**From the reading...**

“One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness.”



*Camus's Grave Site and Home*, Hélène Brown

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Camus states, "A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself!" If life is tragic when we become conscious of the work and roles we play, and we become as an object when we are not conscious of the work and roles we play, how then does it become possible to think that our lives can have meaning?
2. From a psychological point of view, do some persons lose themselves in any and all activities in order to avoid consciousness of their predicament? What kind of courage would it take to become aware of their situation? Finally, what could be done about it?
3. According to Camus, how can we establish a meaning for our lives? How is it that Sisyphus can be happy? How can it be that "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth"?

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4. What is the significance of the concept of fate in Camus's explanation of the myth? Would the reality of a person's fate preclude the possibility of that person having some control over that person's life?
5. What does Camus mean by there being no higher destiny than "a personal fate"? How is this notion related to the possibility of happiness for human beings?



## Part II. Philosophy of Religion



*Cathedral at Marseilles, France, Library of Congress*

The nature and existence of God is of vital concern to many persons as their answer to the question of how we can live meaningfully. What insights, if any, can philosophy secure about the existence of God and the presence of evil in the universe? If no knowledge or proof can be had about these essential foundations of belief and action, then how useful can philosophy be in determining matters of ultimate concern? Toward these ends, we study a number of philosophers throughout the history of Western civilization. As it turns out, however, these classical inquiries are mainly influential not so much in the philosophy of religion as in establishing useful methods of reasoning and in articulating the limits of established forms of proof.

St. Anselm forcefully argues that if the nature of God is conceptually understood, then God must be known to exist—he believes the object of an idea of ultimate perfection could not be possible unless it existed. So, in a

basic sense for Anselm, “perfection” implies “existence.”

Thomas Aquinas, building on ideas derived from Aristotelian science, attempts to show that many of the fundamental concepts by which we understand the nature of the universe only make sense under the assumption of the existence of God. Thomas offers five ingenious arguments; his last argument, that the intricate complexity of the physical world seems to imply God as the source of the functional unity of the universe, is, many centuries later, forcefully re-argued by analogy by William Paley.

Nevertheless, all of these ingenious proofs, according to Blaise Pascal, are “feeble reasonings.” Pascal observes that the most important things in life are lived through passion and commitment, not through theoretical insight or proof. Indeed, the insightful and clever proofs for God’s existence are subject to additional stunning obstacles noted by more cautious thinkers such as Gaunilo, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

In the end, any positive results for the proofs for God’s existence are left unanswered. Even so, important concepts, distinctions, and methods of analysis are discovered and found useful in other areas of philosophy.

**Where to go for help . . .**

Notes, quizzes, tests, and related materials for this section of readings, “Philosophy of Religion,” can be found at *Philosophy of Religion* (<http://philosophy.lander.edu/intro/religion.html>).

# Chapter 9

## God and the World



*Fort Defiance, Arizona, Library of Congress*

### **Meaning of Life and God's Existence**

From raising the initial question of Socrates, “What should be your central concern in life?,” we have moved to the question of Tolstoy and Camus, “What is the meaning of Life?”

In order to answer this question, another question can be raised first about the existence of God, for this second question is directly related to the first one. The second question can be put in three parts:

Axiologically: Is the source of the meaning of life God?

Epistemologically: Can we prove that God exists?

Ontologically: Does God exist?

Hence, we turn our attention to the arguments for the existence of God.

This task, that of attempting to prove God's existence, is properly in the philosophy of religion; philosophy of religion is mainly an epistemological inquiry. This task involves such questions as whether religious knowledge is a special kind of knowledge, how religious knowledge is obtained, and the implications of religious knowledge or conduct.

Philosophy of religion is not explicitly concerned with the history of religions, comparative religion, or specific religious or church doctrines except insofar as these subjects illumine the epistemological task. Philosophy of Religion does not specifically seek historical facts or interpretations of church doctrine.

## Natural and Deductive Theology

Philosophers investigate two broad kinds of religious knowledge claims:

First, *natural theology* is the attempt to prove the existence of God, and sometimes human immortality, from premisses provided by observation of the ordinary course of nature. Natural theology usually involves *à posteriori* proofs.

Second, *deductive theology* involves the attempt to prove the existence of God from premisses known to be true by reason alone; that is the reasoning is done independently of sensory experience and is called *à priori* reasoning.

# Chapter 10

## “The Ontological Argument by St. Anselm”



*Canterbury Cathedral*, Library of Congress, ©Detroit Publishing

### **About the author...**

St. Anselm (1033-1109), a member of the Benedictine Order and Bishop of Canterbury, extended the Augustine tradition of seeking to believe in

## Chapter 10. “The Ontological Argument by St. Anselm”

order to understand the truth and existence of God rather than seeking to understand in order to believe in the truth and existence of God. Even so, St. Anselm does not distinguish clearly between religious and philosophical pursuits. Many theologians avoid trusting reason from the fear of the specter of skepticism; however, Anselm believes reason is necessary to elucidate and validate faith. Anselm is often considered to be the father of scholastic philosophy since his work emphasizes linguistic and analytical thinking. Scholasticism was the dominant approach to philosophical and theological problems during the medieval period.

### About the work...

Although Anselm’s argument for God’s existence presented in this article is based on predominately on reason, Anselm presents the argument as clarification of Christian faith. The heart of his argument is the insight that if God is defined as a “being than which no greater can be conceived,” then God could not be conceived of as not existing because perfection, he thinks, implies existence. Baruch Spinoza and René Descartes employed versions of the ontological argument where the very concept of God as a perfect being implies existence as a property. In philosophical jargon, a feature of the essence of God is said to be existence.

### From the reading...

“... we believe that you are a being of which nothing greater can be conceived...”

### Ideas of Interest from the *Proslogium*

1. Explain whether you think St. Anselm believes understanding the nature of religious belief is a necessary condition for believing in the nature and existence of God.

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2. As clearly as possible, restate Anselm’s ontological argument.
3. Clearly explain what St. Anselm means when he writes there is only one way God can be conceived not to exist.
4. Explain why, according to St. Anselm, only God and nothing else cannot *not* exist? According to Anselm, why couldn’t other necessary beings exist?

## The Reading Selection from the *Proslogium*

Lord, I acknowledge and I thank you that you have created me in this your image, in order that I may be mindful of you, may conceive of you, and love you; but that image has been so consumed and wasted away by vices, and obscured by the smoke of wrong-doing, that it cannot achieve that for which it was made, except you renew it, and create it anew. I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate your sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, —that unless I believed, I should not understand. . . .

Truly there is a God, although the fool has said in his heart, There is no God.

AND so, Lord, do you, who do give understanding to faith, give me, so far as you knowest it to be profitable, to understand that you are as we believe; and that you are that which we believe. And indeed, we believe that you are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool has said in his heart, there is no God? (*Psalms* xiv. 1). But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak—a being than which nothing greater can be conceived—understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.

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Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.

**From the reading...**

"That which can be conceived not to exist is not God."

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality. . . .

God cannot be conceived not to exist. —God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. —That which can be conceived not to exist is not God.

AND it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For, it is possible to conceive of a being which cannot be conceived not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that, than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is an irreconcilable contradiction. There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being you are, O Lord, our God.

So truly, therefore, do you exist, O Lord, my God, that you can not be conceived not to exist; and rightly. For, if a mind could conceive of a being better than you, the creature would rise above the Creator; and this is most absurd. And, indeed, whatever else there is, except you alone, can be conceived not to exist. To you alone, therefore, it belongs to exist more truly than all other beings, and hence in a higher degree than all others.



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For, whatever else exists does not exist so truly, and hence in a less degree it belongs to it to exist. Why, then, has the fool said in his heart, there is no God (*Psalms* xiv. 1), since it is so evident, to a rational mind, that you do exist in the highest degree of all? Why, except that he is dull and a fool?

...

How the fool has said in his heart what cannot be conceived. —A thing may be conceived in two ways: (1) when the word signifying it is conceived; (2) when the thing itself is understood. As far as the word goes, God can be conceived not to exist; in reality he cannot.

BUT how has the fool said in his heart what he could not conceive; or how is it that he could not conceive what he said in his heart? since it is the same to say in the heart, and to conceive.

But, if really, nay, since really, he both conceived, because he said in his heart; and did not say in his heart, because he could not conceive; there is more than one way in which a thing is said in the heart or conceived. For, in one sense, an object is conceived, when the word signifying it is conceived; and in another, when the very entity, which the object is, is understood.

In the former sense, then, God can be conceived not to exist; but in the latter, not at all. For no one who understands what fire and water are can conceive fire to be water, in accordance with the nature of the facts themselves, although this is possible according to the words. So, then, no one who understands what God is can conceive that God does not exist; although he says these words in his heart, either without any or with some foreign, signification. For, God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived. And he who thoroughly understands this, assuredly understands that this being so truly exists, that not even in concept can it be non-existent. Therefore, he who understands that God so exists, cannot conceive that he does not exist.

I thank you, gracious Lord, I thank you; because what I formerly believed by your bounty, I now so understand by your illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that you do exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.

## Related Ideas

*Anselm of Canterbury* (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/a/anselm.htm>) *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A summary of life, writings, and theology of Anselm.

*St. Anselm* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01546a.htm>) *Catholic Encyclopedia*. An extensive historical background summary of St. Anselm's life and works by W. H. Kent.



*Canterbury Cathedral, Norman Staircase*, Library of Congress, ©Detroit Publishing

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Anselm believes even a foolish person can understand the definition of "God" as "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived." Is this phrase clear and distinct? For example, does a number than which

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no greater number can be conceived, exist in the same manner as any given number is said to exist?

2. If an apple has the qualities of being red, fresh, round, and on a tree, need we add an additional quality assuring the apple exists? Is existence a characteristic of things? In what way is something existing in reality greater than something existing only in the mind?
3. Compare "being in the highest degree" with "existence in the highest degree." Is existence an ordinal or a cardinal property? Can a thing partly or imperfectly exist?

# Chapter 11

## “An Answer to Anselm” by Gaunilo



*Abbey at Marmoutier, [www.thais.it](http://www.thais.it)*

### About the author...

Gaunilo, a Benedictine monk of Marmoutier, expressed his objections to Anselm’s argument by means of devising a logical analogy. Gaunilo’s argument appeared soon after the writing of the *Proslogion* and was accepted by many philosophers.

### About the work...

Gaunilo replies to Anselm’s ontological argument in his *Pro Insipiente*<sup>1</sup> (a “take-off” of Anselm’s reference to the fool of *Psalms*) that the use of a concept does not imply that the concept has an existent reference. He argues by analogy that many ideas are only hypothetical. Note how in a later reading St. Thomas Aquinas agrees with Gaunilo’s analysis. Nathan Salmon has observed, “Philosophers who address the questions of what it is for an individual to exist, or what it is for an individual to be actual, often do so with reference to the fallacy they have uncovered in the classical Ontological Argument for God’s existence. Indeed, the Ontological Argument is useful as a vehicle by which this and other issues in ontology and the philosophy of logic may be introduced and sharpened.”<sup>2</sup>

### From the reading...

“This, in the mean time, is the answer the fool could make in the arguments urged against him. . .”

## Ideas of Interest from *Pro Insipiente*

1. Restate in your own words, Gaunilo’s perfect island objection.

1. Gaunilo. *Pro Insipiente*. “In Behalf of the Fool.” 1078.  
2. Nathan Salmon. “Existence” in *Philosophical Perspectives: Metaphysics, Volume 1*. Edited by James E. Tomberlin. Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing Co, 1987, 49.

2. Does the concept of a being "than which no greater can be conceived" differ from other kinds of concepts on the basis that this concept *cannot* be conceived not to exist?
3. Does the ontological argument of Anselm or does the perfect island objection of Gaunilo commit the fallacy of *petitio principii*?

### The Reading Selection from *Pro Insipiente*

For example: it is said that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island. And they say that this island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of the Blest; and that having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all other countries, which are inhabited by mankind, in the abundance with which it is stored.

Now if some one should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by a logical inference: "You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist. For if it does not exist, any land which really exists will be more excellent than it; and so the island already understood by you to be more excellent will not be more excellent."

If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island. For he ought to show first that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, or one whose existence is uncertain, in my understanding.

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**From the reading...**

“...I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him. . .”

This, in the mean time, is the answer the fool could make to the arguments urged against him. When he is assured in the first place that this being is so great that its non-existence is not even conceivable, and that this in turn is proved on no other ground than the fact that otherwise it will not be greater than all things, the fool may make the same answer, and say:

When did I say that any such being exists in reality, that is, a being greater than all others?—that on this ground it should be proved to me that it also exists in reality to such a degree that it cannot even be conceived not to exist? Whereas in the first place it should be in some way proved that a nature which is higher, that is, greater and better, than all other natures, exists; in order that from this we may then be able to prove all attributes which necessarily the being that is greater and better than all possesses.



[*The Island*], NOAA, John Bortnaik

Moreover, it is said that the non-existence of this being is inconceivable. It might better be said, perhaps, that its non-existence, or the possibility of its non-existence, is unintelligible. For according to the true meaning of the word, unreal objects are unintelligible. Yet their existence is conceivable in the way in which the fool conceived of the non-existence of God. I am most certainly aware of my own existence; but I know, nevertheless, that my non-existence is possible. As to that supreme being, moreover, which God is, I understand without any doubt both his existence, and the impossibility of his non-existence. Whether, however, so long as I am most positively aware of my existence, I can conceive of my non-existence, I am not sure. But if I can, why can I not conceive of the non-existence of whatever else I know with the same certainty? If, however, I cannot, God will not be the only being of which it can be said, it is impossible to conceive of his non-existence.

**From the reading...**

"Moreover, it is said that the non-existence of this being is inconceivable. It might better be said, perhaps, that its non-existence... is unintelligible."

## Related Ideas

*Existence* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existence/>) An excellent historical summary of the topic of "existence" in the *Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

*Ontological Arguments* (<http://http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/>) Summary of all ontological arguments including recent work by the *Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.



Chapter 11. “An Answer to Anselm” by Gaunilo



*Abbey Ruins at Marmoutier, France*

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Do you think that Gaunilo would agree the following objection applies to Anselm’s Ontological Argument?

Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction. Whatever we can conceive as existent, we can also conceive of as nonexistent. There is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being whose existence is demonstrable.<sup>3</sup>

2. Explain the differences between “inconceivable” and “unintelligible.”

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3. David Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. 1779.

# Chapter 12

## “Existence Is Not a Predicate” by Immanuel Kant



*Immanuel Kant, Thoemmes*

### **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 the history of Western Civilization, was constructed to forge empiricism and rationalism into a “critical” philosophy which sought to overcome the many pressing shortcomings of each. What we call objective reality, Kant argues, is subject to whatever conforms to the structures of our perception and thinking. Virtually every

Chapter 12. “Existence Is Not a Predicate” by Immanuel Kant

epistemological theory since Kant, directly or indirectly, is oriented in reference to his *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

**About the work...**

In “Section IV. Of the Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God,”<sup>1</sup> drawn from his *Critique*, Kant addresses the logical problem of existential import. How do we talk or think about things without supposing, in some sense at least, that they exist? Bertrand Russell expressed one aspect of the problem this way: If it’s false that the present King of France is bald, then why doesn’t this fact imply that it’s true the present King of France is not bald? When the existence of the subjects of our statements are in question, the normal use of logic becomes unreliable. Kant argues that the use of words (or “predicates”) alone does not necessarily imply the existence of their referents. We can only assume the existence of entities named by our words; we cannot prove “existence” by means of the use of language alone.

**From the reading...**

“Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing.”

**Ideas of Interest from *The Critique of Pure Reason***

1. Define the term “*á priori* judgment” with the help of a dictionary, and give several different examples of an *á priori* judgment.

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn. 1781. Bk.2 Ch. 3 § IV, ¶ 55.

2. Use a good dictionary to define the term "analytic judgment," and give several different examples. Is there any difference between an analytic judgment and a tautology?
3. Construct a good definition of the term "synthetic judgment," and give several examples.
4. What is Kant's argument that "existence is not a predicate"? How does this argument relate to Anselm's Ontological argument?

## The Reading Selection from *The Critique of Pure Reason*

### [Existence Is Not a Property]

...It is absurd to introduce—under whatever term disguised—into the conception of a thing, which is to be cogitated solely in reference to its possibility, the conception of its existence. If this is admitted, you will have apparently gained the day, but in reality have enounced nothing but a mere tautology. I ask, is the proposition, this or that thing (which I am admitting to be possible) exists, an analytical<sup>2</sup> *E.g.*, or a synthetical proposition? If the former, there is no addition made to the subject of your thought by the affirmation of its existence; but then the conception in your minds is identical with the thing itself, or you have supposed the existence of a thing to be possible, and then inferred its existence from its internal possibility—which is but a miserable tautology. The word reality in the conception of the thing, and the word existence in the conception of the predicate, will not help you out of the difficulty. For, supposing you were to term all positing of a thing reality, you have thereby posited the thing with all its predicates in the conception of the subject and assumed its actual existence, and this you merely repeat in the predicate. But if you confess, as

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2. An analytical statement is reducible to a valid formula of logic because the concept of the predicate can be shown to be inherent in the subject by means of synonyms or suitable paraphrases. *E.g.*, "Twins are two in number" or "A lodestone is magnetic." The predicate of a synthetic statement adds additional information to its subject and so is not considered trivial or tautologous in the manner of which an analytic statement is. The critical question for the possibility of knowledge for Kant is whether or not all *a priori* statements are essentially analytic. *Ed.*

Chapter 12. “Existence Is Not a Predicate” by Immanuel Kant

every reasonable person must, that every existential proposition is synthetic, how can it be maintained that the predicate of existence cannot be denied without contradiction?—a property which is the characteristic of analytical propositions, alone.

I should have a reasonable hope of putting an end for ever to this sophistical mode of argumentation, by a strict definition of the conception of existence, did not my own experience teach me that the illusion arising from our confounding a logical with a real predicate (a predicate which aids in the determination of a thing) resists almost all the endeavours of explanation and illustration. A logical predicate may be what you please, even the subject may be predicated of itself; for logic pays no regard to the content of a judgement. But the determination of a conception is a predicate, which adds to and enlarges the conception. It must not, therefore, be contained in the conception.



*Thalers, used during Immanuel Kant’s lifetime, (The Prussian “dollar.”)*

Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations in it. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgement. The proposition, God is omnipotent, contains two conceptions, which have a certain object or content; the word is, is no additional predicate—it merely indicates the relation of the predicate to the subject. Now, if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say: God is, or, There is a God, I add no new

Chapter 12. “Existence Is Not a Predicate” by Immanuel Kant

predicate to the conception of God, I merely posit or affirm the existence of the subject with all its predicates—I posit the object in relation to my conception. The content of both is the same; and there is no addition made to the conception, which expresses merely the possibility of the object, by my cogitating the object—in the expression, it is—as absolutely given or existing. Thus the real contains no more than the possible.

A hundred real dollars contain no more than a hundred possible dollars. For, as the latter indicate the conception, and the former the object, on the supposition that the content of the former was greater than that of the latter, my conception would not be an expression of the whole object, and would consequently be an inadequate conception of it. But in reckoning my wealth there may be said to be more in a hundred real dollars than in a hundred possible dollars—that is, in the mere conception of them. For the real object—the dollars—is not analytically contained in my conception, but forms a synthetical addition to my conception (which is merely a determination of my mental state), although this objective reality—this existence—apart from my conceptions, does not in the least degree increase the aforesaid hundred dollars.<sup>3</sup>



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

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3. Bk. 2, Ch. 3, ¶ 70.

Chapter 12. “Existence Is Not a Predicate” by Immanuel Kant

By whatever and by whatever number of predicates—even to the complete determination of it—I may cogitate a thing, I do not in the least augment the object of my conception by the addition of the statement: This thing exists. Otherwise, not exactly the same, but something more than what was cogitated in my conception, would exist, and I could not affirm that the exact object of my conception had real existence. If I cogitate a thing as containing all modes of reality except one, the mode of reality which is absent is not added to the conception of the thing by the affirmation that the thing exists; on the contrary, the thing exists—if it exist at all—with the same defect as that cogitated in its conception; otherwise not that which was cogitated, but something different, exists. Now, if I cogitate a being as the highest reality, without defect or imperfection, the question still remains—whether this being exists or not? For, although no element is wanting in the possible real content of my conception, there is a defect in its relation to my mental state, that is, I am ignorant whether the cognition of the object indicated by the conception is possible *á posteriori*. And here the cause of the present difficulty becomes apparent. If the question regarded an object of sense merely, it would be impossible for me to confound the conception with the existence of a thing. For the conception merely enables me to cogitate an object as according with the general conditions of experience; while the existence of the object permits me to cogitate it as contained in the sphere of actual experience. At the same time, this connection with the world of experience does not in the least augment the conception, although a possible perception has been added to the experience of the mind. But if we cogitate existence by the pure category alone, it is not to be wondered at, that we should find ourselves unable to present any criterion sufficient to distinguish it from mere possibility.

**From the reading...**

“Now, if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say: God is, or, There is a God, I add no new predicate to the conception of God. . .”

Whatever be the content of our conception of an object, it is necessary to go beyond it, if we wish to predicate existence of the object. In the case of sensuous objects, this is attained by their connection according to

empirical laws with some one of my perceptions; but there is no means of cognizing the existence of objects of pure thought, because it must be cognized completely *á priori*. But all our knowledge of existence (be it immediately by perception, or by inferences connecting some object with a perception) belongs entirely to the sphere of experience—which is in perfect unity with itself; and although an existence out of this sphere cannot be absolutely declared to be impossible, it is a hypothesis the truth of which we have no means of ascertaining.

### [The Notion of God Does Not Imply Existence]

The notion of a Supreme Being is in many respects a highly useful idea; but for the very reason that it is an idea, it is incapable of enlarging our cognition with regard to the existence of things. It is not even sufficient to instruct us as to the possibility of a being which we do not know to exist. The analytical criterion of possibility, which consists in the absence of contradiction in propositions, cannot be denied it. But the connection of real properties in a thing is a synthesis of the possibility of which an *á priori* judgement cannot be formed, because these realities are not presented to us specifically; and even if this were to happen, a judgement would still be impossible, because the criterion of the possibility of synthetical cognitions must be sought for in the world of experience, to which the object of an idea cannot belong. And thus the celebrated Leibnitz has utterly failed in his attempt to establish upon *á priori* grounds the possibility of this sublime ideal being.

**From the reading . . .**

“Whatever be the content of our conception of an object, it is necessary to go beyond it, if we wish to predicate existence of the object.”

The celebrated ontological or Cartesian argument for the existence of a Supreme Being is therefore insufficient; and we may as well hope to increase our stock of knowledge by the aid of mere ideas, as the merchant to augment his wealth by the addition of noughts to his cash account.



## Related Ideas

*Ontological Argument* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A thorough survey of the Ontological Argument and its objections, including contemporary philosophical interest in the problem.

“*Two Dogmas of Empiricism*” by Willard van Orman Quine (<http://www.ditext.com/quine/quine.html>). *Digital Texts in Philosophy*. A revision of Quine’s classic investigation of whether a criterion of synonymy is available to legitimize the distinction between analytic and synthetic. Difficult for beginners but worth the struggle.



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

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Relate Kant’s argument that “existence is not a predicate” to the problem of existential import in syllogistic logic. Are we faced with two radically different logics?
2. Søren Kierkegaard writes

If it were proposed to prove Napoleon’s existence from Napoleon’s deeds, would it not be a most curious proceeding? His existence does in-

Chapter 12. "Existence Is Not a Predicate" by Immanuel Kant

deed explain his deeds, but the deeds do not prove his existence, unless I have already understood the word "his" so as thereby to have assumed his existence. But Napoleon is only an individual, and insofar there exists no absolute relationship between him and his deeds; some other person might have performed the same deeds. Perhaps this is the reason why I cannot pass from the deeds to existence. If I call these deeds the deeds of Napoleon, the proof becomes superfluous, since I have already named him; if I ignore this, I can never prove the deeds that they are Napoleon's, but only in a purely ideal manner that such deeds are the deeds of a great general, and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

Evaluate Kierkegaard's argument by setting up a syllogism to the conclusion, "Napoleon is an existent being" from the premises Kierkegaard mentions. Why must "existence" be presupposed in the argument?

3. Aristotle argues in his "*The Sea-Fight Tomorrow*," a selection in this book, as follows:

For it is manifest that the circumstances are not influenced by the fact of an affirmation or denial on the part of anyone. For events will not take place or fail to take place because it was stated that they would or would not take place, nor is this any more the case if the prediction dates back ten thousand years or any other space of time. Wherefore, if through all time the nature of things was so constituted that a prediction about an event was true, then through all time it was necessary that that should find fulfillment; and with regard to all events, circumstances have always been such that their occurrence is a matter of necessity.<sup>5</sup>

Is the problem concerning "future truths" related to the problem of existential import? Try to relate the problem of existential import to the notions of possibility and actuality.

4. William C. Kneale, a well known historian of logic, writes:

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4. Søren Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. David F. Swenson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, 32-33.

5. Aristotle. *On Interpretation*, 8:35-9:4.

Chapter 12. “Existence Is Not a Predicate” by Immanuel Kant

Too often philosophers merely remark that Kant refuted the argument by showing that existence is not a predicate and that “one cannot build bridges from the conceptual realm to the real world.” But it is very doubtful that Kant specified a sense of “is a predicate” such that, in that sense, it is clear both that existence is not a predicate and that Anselm’s argument requires that it be one. Nor are the mere claims that no existential propositions are necessary or the above comment about bridge building impressive as refutations of Anselm—after all, he claims to have an argument for the necessity of at least one existential proposition. So one must either show just where his argument goes wrong, or else produce a solid argument for the claim that no existential (in the appropriate sense) propositions can be necessary—and this, I think, no one has succeeded in doing.<sup>6</sup>

If I state, “Pegasus exists,” aren’t I making a false claim that Pegasus is an existent thing? In what sense could existence in the statement be a predicate?

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6. William Calvert Kneale. “Is Existence a Predicate?” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. 15. Reprinted in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*. Ed. Herbert Feigl and Wilfrid Sellars. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1949, 29.

# Chapter 13

## “From the Nature of the Universe” by Thomas Aquinas



*St. Thomas Aquinas, Thoemmes*

### **About the author...**

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275), is generally considered to be the most prominent thinker during the Medieval period. Thomas, although primarily a theologian, argues philosophically in many of his works and, unlike St. Anselm, clearly distinguishes between the methods of philosophy and religion. He uses the scientific thought of Aristotle as a method of theological and philosophical understanding. Nevertheless, for Thomas, phi-

Chapter 13. “From the Nature of the Universe” by Thomas Aquinas

Philosophy is primarily based on the use of reason, whereas religion is primarily based on the use of divine revelation provided by faith. Both kinds of knowledge, according to Thomas, are consistent and compatible. He is convinced metaphysics is the most important aspect of philosophy.

**About the work...**

Philosophical reasoning, according to Thomas, is sufficient by itself, without faith or revelation, to demonstrate that God exists. Thomas believes God’s existence, although not self-evident, can be made evident using reasoning drawn from the nature and structure of the world. The so-called “five ways” are taken from his *Summa Theologica*.<sup>1</sup> Thomas, as do many philosophers, believes that we can know by reason *that* God is, but we cannot know *what* God is. In other words, the nature of God, often defined by the characteristics of perfection, is, according to Thomas, only a linguistic approximation.

**From the reading...**

“I answer that, The existence of God can be proved five ways.”

**Ideas of Interest from *Summa Theologica***

1. What is Thomas’s objection to the ontological argument?
2. Why doesn’t the observation “whatever is in motion is put in motion by another,” logically apply to the First Mover?
3. Search, locate, and restate a good definition of “efficient cause.”

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* second and revised edition, 1920 by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

Chapter 13. "From the Nature of the Universe" by Thomas Aquinas

4. Can you suggest ways to distinguish physical from logical necessity? Provide some examples. Would Thomas distinguish between physical and logical necessity?
5. What is the difference between the First Cause and the First Mover?
6. Research the term, "teleology." Explain why Thomas's fifth argument is often called the "teleological" argument.
7. Restate each of Thomas's five arguments as clearly as possible. What is the major premiss<sup>2</sup> of each argument? What objections can you construct to each of Thomas's arguments?

## The Reading Selection from *Summa Theologica*

### Whether God exists?

*Objection 1.* It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word "God" means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

*Objection 2.* Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence.

On the contrary, It is said in the person of God: "I am Who am." (Exodus 3:14)

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2. Rhetorically, the major premiss can be thought of as the rule or main generalization upon which the argument is based. *I.e.*, in the argument, "All men are mortal, and Socrates is a man; thus, Socrates is mortal," the major premiss is "All men are mortal."

## The Five Ways

I answer that, The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

### [The Argument from Motion]

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from to . But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, *i.e.* that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

### [The Argument from First Cause]

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the

Chapter 13. “From the Nature of the Universe” by Thomas Aquinas

intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.



*Il Posillipo, Naples, Italy, Library of Congress*

### **[The Argument from Necessity]**

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings



are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

### **[The Argument from Gradation]**

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph. ii*. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

### **[The Argument from Design]**

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

Reply to Objection 1. As Augustine says (*Enchiridion xi*): "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works,

*Chapter 13. "From the Nature of the Universe" by Thomas Aquinas*

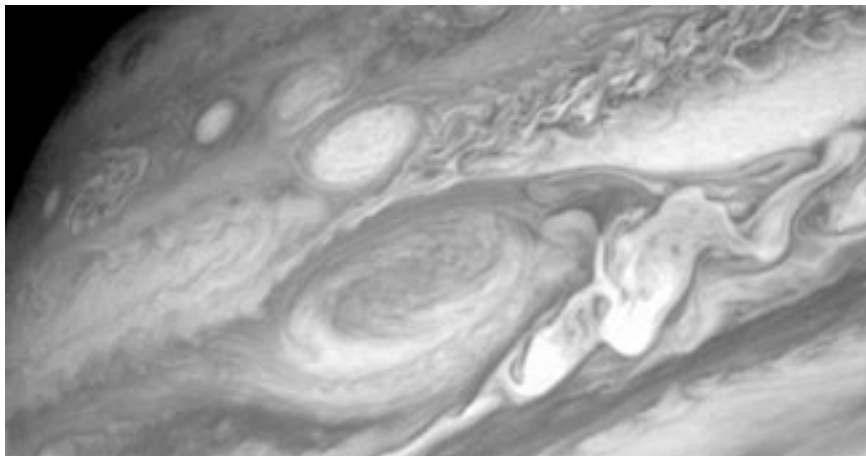
unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil." This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

Reply to Objection 2. Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article.

## **Related Ideas**

*Summa Theologica* (<http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>). The online text of *Summa Theologica* available for download.

*Stephen Loughlin's HomePage* (<http://www4.desales.edu/~philtheo/aquinas/>). *St. Thomas Aquinas*. A site dedicated to St. Thomas Aquinas with bibliography and major links.



*Jupiter's Great Red Spot and Surrounds, JPL, NASA*

**From the reading...**

“This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.”

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. How do you think Thomas would respond to the following objection to the First Cause argument for God’s existence?

The argument that there must be a First Cause is one that cannot have any validity...If anything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God.<sup>3</sup>

2. Research the concept of the “Great Chain of Being.” Relate this pre-supposition to the levels of being and goodness described by Thomas.<sup>4</sup> Would the assumption of “Great Chain of Being” indicate how someone viewed contemporary moral issues such as animal rights, extinction of species, or other ecological issues?
3. If the premisses in the First Cause argument were true, how could Thomas account for miracles? How could he account for chance events? Is the First Cause argument inconsistent with either the ideas of predestination or fatalism?
4. Which of Thomas’s arguments are most open to the objection of the existence of non-moral<sup>5</sup> evil?

3. Bertrand Russell. *Why I Am Not a Christian*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957.

4. A. O. Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being: The Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

5. *I.e.*, natural events such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes—non-moral evil includes events not dependent on human free will—the so-called “acts of God” as sometimes labeled in insurance policies.

# Chapter 14

## “The Teleological Argument” by William Paley



*William Paley, Thoemmes*

### **About the author...**

Charles Darwin wrote that Paley’s *Natural Theology* gave him as much pleasure as did his study of Euclid. William Paley (1743-1805) elaborates the main tenets of natural theology—the belief that the nature of God could be shown by an examination of the natural world. Although Hume devastated the teleological argument two decades before the publication of *Natural Theology*, Paley’s argument continues to exert influence in nonphilosophical circles.

### About the work...

William Paley in his *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*<sup>1</sup> argues for the existence of God based upon the intricate design of the universe. On Paley’s view, just as the function and complexity of a watch implies a watch-maker so likewise the function and complexity of the universe implies the existence of a universe-maker.

### From the reading...

“It is a perversion of language to assign any law as the efficient operative cause of anything. A law presupposes an agent. . . ”

## Ideas of Interest from *Natural Theology*

1. What are the similarities between Paley’s watch argument and Thomas’s fifth way?
2. State Paley’s argument for God’s existence as clearly as possible.
3. How does Paley answer the objection that the universe could have come into order and pattern by chance?
4. To what extent is Paley’s argument an *ad hominem*<sup>2</sup> attack on the skeptic?
5. Explain whether laws of nature are discovered or whether they are invented.

1. William Paley. *Natural Theology*. Philadelphia: Parker, 1802.

2. An *ad hominem* is the fallacy of attacking the character or circumstances of an individual who is advancing an argument rather than trying to disprove the truth or validity of what that individual is attempting to prove.

## The Reading Selection from *Natural Theology*

### [Statement of the Watch Argument]

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had given—that, for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other; *viz.*, that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, *e.g.* that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that, if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, if a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it. To reckon up a few of the plainest of these parts, and of their offices, all tending to one result:—We see a cylindrical box containing a coiled elastic spring, which, by its endeavor to relax itself, turns round the box. We next observe a flexible chain (artificially wrought for the sake of flexure) communicating the action of the spring from the box to the fusee. We then find a series of wheels, the teeth of which catch in, and apply to, each other, conducting the motion from the fusee to the balance, and from the balance to the pointer, and, at the same time, by the size and shape of those wheels, so regulating that motion as to terminate in causing an index, by an equable and measured progression, to pass over a given space in a given time. We take notice that the wheels are made of brass, in order to keep them from rust; the springs of steel, no other metal being so elastic; that over the face of the watch there is placed a glass, a material employed in no other part of the work, but in the room of which, if there had been any other than a transparent substance, the hour could not be seen without opening the case. This mechanism being observed, (it requires indeed an examination

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of the instrument, and perhaps some previous knowledge of the subject, to perceive and understand it; but being once, as we have said, observed and understood,) the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.

I. Nor would it, I apprehend, weaken the conclusion, that we had never seen a watch made; that we had never known an artist capable of making one; that we were altogether incapable of executing such a piece of workmanship ourselves, or of understanding in what manner it was performed; all this being no more than what is true of some exquisite remains of ancient art, of some lost arts, and, to the generality of mankind, of the more curious productions of modern manufacture. Does one man in a million know how oval frames are turned? Ignorance of this kind exalts our opinion of the unseen and unknown artists skill, if he be unseen and unknown, but raises no doubt in our minds of the existence and agency of such an artist, at some former time, and in some place or other. Nor can I perceive that it varies at all the inference, whether the question arise concerning a human agent, or concerning an agent of a different species, or an agent possessing, in some respect, a different nature.

II. Neither, secondly, would it invalidate our conclusion, that the watch sometimes went wrong, or that it seldom went exactly right. The purpose of the machinery, the design, and the designer, might be evident, and, in the case supposed, would be evident, in whatever way we accounted for the irregularity of the movement, or whether we could account for it or not. It is not necessary that a machine be perfect, in order to show with what design it was made; still less necessary, where the only question is, whether it were made with any design at all.<sup>3</sup>

III. Nor, thirdly, would it bring any uncertainty into the argument, if there were a few parts of the watch, concerning which we could not discover, or had not yet discovered, in what manner they conduced to the general effect; or even some parts, concerning which we could not ascertain whether they conduced to that effect in any manner whatever. For, as to the first branch of the case, if by the loss, or disorder, or decay of the parts in question, the movement of the watch were found in fact to be stopped, or

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3. Relate this possible objection to the problem of evil. *Ed.*

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disturbed, or retarded, no doubt would remain in our minds as to the utility or intention of these parts, although we should be unable to investigate the manner according to which, or the connection by which, the ultimate effect depended upon their action or assistance; and the more complex is the machine, the more likely is this obscurity to arise. Then, as to the second thing supposed, namely, that there were parts which might be spared without prejudice to the movement of the watch, and that he had proved this by experiment, these superfluous parts, even if we were completely assured that they were such, would not vacate the reasoning which we had instituted concerning other parts. The indication of contrivance remained, with respect to them, nearly as it was before.

IV. Nor, fourthly, would any man in his senses think the existence of the watch, with its various machinery, accounted for, by being told that it was one out of possible combinations of material forms; that whatever he had found in the place where he found the watch, must have contained some internal configuration or other; and that this configuration might be the structure now exhibited, *viz.*, of the works of a watch, as well as a different structure.

V. Nor, fifthly, would it yield his inquiry more satisfaction, to be answered, that there existed in things a principle of order, which had disposed the parts of the watch into their present form and situation. He never knew a watch made by the principle of order; nor can he even form to himself an idea of what is meant by a principle of order, distinct from the intelligence of the watchmaker.

VI. Sixthly, he would be surprised to hear that the mechanism of the watch was no proof of contrivance, only a motive to induce the mind to think so.

VII. And not less surprised to be informed, that the watch in his hand was nothing more than the result of the laws of metallic nature. It is a perversion of language to assign any law as the efficient, operative cause of anything. A law presupposes an agent; for it is only the mode according to which an agent proceeds; it implies a power; for it is the order according to which that power acts. Without this agent, without this power, which are both distinct from itself, the law does nothing, is nothing. The expression, "the law of metallic nature," may sound strange and harsh to a philosophic ear; but it seems quite as justifiable as some others which are more familiar to him such as "the law of vegetable nature," "the law of animal nature," or, indeed, as "the law of nature" in general, when assigned as the cause of phenomena in exclusion of agency and power, or when it is substituted



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into the place of these.

VIII. Neither, lastly, would our observer be driven out of his conclusion, or from his confidence in its truth, by being told that he knew nothing at all about the matter. He knows enough for his argument: he knows the utility of the end: he knows the subserviency and adaptation of the means to the end.

These points being known, his ignorance of other points, his doubts concerning other points, affect not the certainty of his reasoning. The consciousness of knowing little need not beget a distrust of that which he does know. . .

### [Application of the Argument]

Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation. I mean that the contrivances of nature surpass the contrivances of art, in the complexity, subtlety, and curiosity of the mechanism; and still more, if possible, do they go beyond them in number and variety; yet in a multitude of cases, are not less evidently mechanical, not less evidently contrivances, not less evidently accommodated to their end, or suited to their office, than are the most perfect productions of human ingenuity. . .

**From the reading. . .**

“Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which exists in the watch, exists in the works of nature. . .”

### Related Ideas

*Teleological argument* ([http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teleological\\_argument/](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teleological_argument/)) *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* A summary article of the history of the teleological argument for God’s existence.



Watch, freeimage

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. What disanalogies or points of difference are there between the design of the watch and the design of the universe?
2. Should a distinction be made between “prescriptive law” and “descriptive law”? *I.e.*, a distinction between legal rules and laws of science?
3. If the watch or universe were defective in any way, would that point to an imperfection in the maker?

# Chapter 15

## “Critique of the Design Argument” by David Hume



*David Hume, Thoemmes*

### **About the author...**

Often considered a skeptic, David Hume (1711-1776) is perhaps the most influential philosopher to write in English. Although he sought acclaim as a historian, his empirical thought places “Logic, Morals, Criticism, and Politics” as a “science of man.” As part of his radical empiricism, Hume rejected the existence of causation, scientific law, material substance, spiritual substance, and the individual self. For him, only relationships among ideas can be known.

### About the work...

Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* published several years after his death, argued that God's existence can neither be proved by *á priori* nor *á posteriori* means. Hume's skepticism, however, left some room for empirical inquiry into the nature of the world. Nevertheless, consider his famous conclusion in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning, concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.<sup>1</sup>

### From the reading...

"For, as the cause ought only be proportioned to the effect. . . what pretensions have we, upon your suppositions, to ascribe perfection to the deity?"

## Ideas of Interest from *Natural Religion*

1. Explain the meaning of the phrase, "as the cause ought only be proportioned to the effect. . ." Aren't the effects of causes often surprising? How do you think the notion of cause is related to scientific law?
2. List the analogical respects, pointed out by Philo, between the characteristics of the world and the inferred characteristics of the Deity.

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1. David Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. 1779.

## The Reading Selection from *Natural Religion*

### [Cleanthes's Design Argument]

Not to lose any time in circumlocutions, said Cleanthes, addressing himself to Demea, much less in replying to the pious declamations of Philo; I shall briefly explain how I conceive this matter. Look round the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since, therefore, the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument *á posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.

### [Philo's Objections]

What I chiefly scruple in this subject, said Philo, is not so much that all religious arguments are by Cleanthes reduced to experience, as that they appear not to be even the most certain and irrefragable of that inferior kind. That a stone will fall, that fire will burn, that the earth has solidity, we have observed a thousand and a thousand times; and when any new instance of this nature is presented, we draw without hesitation the accustomed inference. The exact similarity of the cases gives us a perfect assurance of a similar event; and a stronger evidence is never desired nor sought after. But wherever you depart, in the least, from the similarity of the cases, you diminish proportionably the evidence; and may at last bring it to a very weak analogy, which is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty. After having experienced the circulation of the blood in human creatures, we make no doubt that it takes place in Titius and Maevius. But from its cir-

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culatation in frogs and fishes, it is only a presumption, though a strong one, from analogy, that it takes place in men and other animals. The analogical reasoning is much weaker, when we infer the circulation of the sap in vegetables from our experience that the blood circulates in animals; and those, who hastily followed that imperfect analogy, are found, by more accurate experiments, to have been mistaken.

If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely that species of effect which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm, that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house, that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking, that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning a similar cause; and how that pretension will be received in the world, I leave you to consider. . .

Now, Cleanthes, said Philo, with an air of alacrity and triumph, mark the consequences. First, By this method of reasoning, you renounce all claim to infinity in any of the attributes of the Deity. For, as the cause ought only to be proportioned to the effect, and the effect, so far as it falls under our cognisance, is not infinite; what pretensions have we, upon your suppositions, to ascribe that attribute to the Divine Being? You will still insist, that, by removing him so much from all similarity to human creatures, we give in to the most arbitrary hypothesis, and at the same time weaken all proofs of his existence.

**From the reading...**

"Could a peasant, if the *Aeneid* were read to him, pronounce that poem to be absolutely faultless. . ."

Secondly, You have no reason, on your theory, for ascribing perfection to the Deity, even in his finite capacity, or for supposing him free from every error, mistake, or incoherence, in his undertakings. There are many inexplicable difficulties in the works of Nature, which, if we allow a perfect author to be proved *á priori*, are easily solved, and become only seeming difficulties, from the narrow capacity of man, who cannot trace infinite relations. But according to your method of reasoning, these difficulties be-

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come all real; and perhaps will be insisted on, as new instances of likeness to human art and contrivance. At least, you must acknowledge, that it is impossible for us to tell, from our limited views, whether this system contains any great faults, or deserves any considerable praise, if compared to other possible, and even real systems. Could a peasant, if the *Æneid* were read to him, pronounce that poem to be absolutely faultless, or even assign to it its proper rank among the productions of human wit, he, who had never seen any other production?



*Building the John N. Cobb, NOAA*

But were this world ever so perfect a production, it must still remain uncertain, whether all the excellences of the work can justly be ascribed to the workman. If we survey a ship, what an exalted idea must we form of the ingenuity of the carpenter who framed so complicated, useful, and beautiful a machine? And what surprise must we feel, when we find him a stupid mechanic, who imitated others, and copied an art, which, through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies, had been gradually improving? Many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out; much labour lost, many fruitless trials made; and a slow, but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the art of world-making. In such subjects, who can determine, where the truth; nay, who can conjecture where the probability lies, amidst a great number of hypotheses which may be proposed, and a still greater which may be

imagined?

And what shadow of an argument, continued Philo, can you produce, from your hypothesis, to prove the unity of the Deity? A great number of men join in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in framing a commonwealth; why may not several deities combine in contriving and framing a world? This is only so much greater similarity to human affairs. By sharing the work among several, we may so much further limit the attributes of each, and get rid of that extensive power and knowledge, which must be supposed in one deity, and which, according to you, can only serve to weaken the proof of his existence. And if such foolish, such vicious creatures as man, can yet often unite in framing and executing one plan, how much more those deities or demons, whom we may suppose several degrees more perfect!

**From the reading...**

"This world, for aught he knows... was only the first rude essay of some infant deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance..."

To multiply causes without necessity, is indeed contrary to true philosophy: but this principle applies not to the present case. Were one deity antecedently proved by your theory, who were possessed of every attribute requisite to the production of the universe; it would be needless, I own, (though not absurd,) to suppose any other deity existent. But while it is still a question, Whether all these attributes are united in one subject, or dispersed among several independent beings, by what phenomena in nature can we pretend to decide the controversy? Where we see a body raised in a scale, we are sure that there is in the opposite scale, however concealed from sight, some counterpoising weight equal to it; but it is still allowed to doubt, whether that weight be an aggregate of several distinct bodies, or one uniform united mass. And if the weight requisite very much exceeds any thing which we have ever seen conjoined in any single body, the former supposition becomes still more probable and natural. An intelligent being of such vast power and capacity as is necessary to produce the universe, or, to speak in the language of ancient philosophy, so prodigious an animal exceeds all analogy, and even comprehension.



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But further, Cleanthes: men are mortal, and renew their species by generation; and this is common to all living creatures. The two great sexes of male and female, says MILTON, animate the world. Why must this circumstance, so universal, so essential, be excluded from those numerous and limited deities? Behold, then, the theogony of ancient times brought back upon us.

And why not become a perfect Anthropomorphite? Why not assert the deity or deities to be corporeal, and to have eyes, a nose, mouth, ears, *etc.*? Epicurus maintained, that no man had ever seen reason but in a human figure; therefore the gods must have a human figure. And this argument, which is deservedly so much ridiculed by Cicero, becomes, according to you, solid and philosophical.

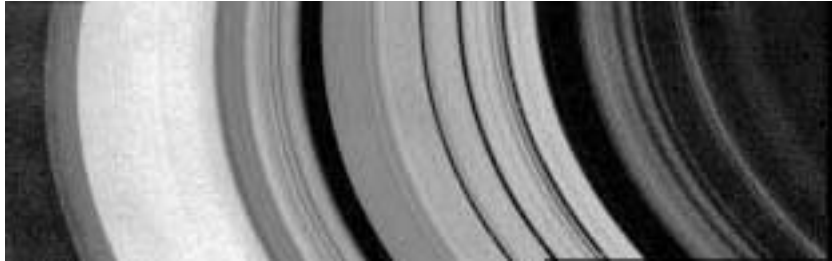
In a word, Cleanthes, a man who follows your hypothesis is able perhaps to assert, or conjecture, that the universe, sometime, arose from something like design: but beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance; and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis. This world, for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance: it is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity; and ever since his death, has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him.

**From the reading...**

“Many worlds may be botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out...”

## Related Ideas

*David Hume* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/>) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* An outstanding and reliable summary of Hume’s contribution to philosophy.



*Mosaic of Saturn's Rings, JPL, NASA*

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Carefully reconstruct Cleanthes' argument. How does his argument differ from Thomas's fifth way, the argument from governance? How does it differ from Paley's Watch argument?
2. Since the conclusion of an inductive argument only follows with probability do you think that, for most persons, the teleological argument remains persuasive in light Hume's criticisms? Explain your point of view by reference to Hume's objections.

# Chapter 16

## “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;

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 Søren Kierkegaard’s. The *Pensées*<sup>1</sup> 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*

### [That God Is]

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 is 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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

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 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."

### **[The Wager]**

—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 in finitely

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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.

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.

**From the reading...**

"So we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is."

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?"

### [The Heart Has Its Reasons]

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, 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 its objections 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, McGraw-Hill, 1954. A engaging introduction to game-



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theory (or the mathematics of everyday decisions) requiring only simple algebra and some curiosity to read.



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

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Pascal writes in this essay:

... 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.

In what sense of the word "exist" is God said to exist? *I.e.* consider the different senses of existence for the following kinds of things: (1) matter, (2) mind, (3) numbers, (4) imaginary numbers, (5) space, and (6) nothing. How the ontological argument for God's existence related to the problem of existential import in elementary logic?

2. Discuss the following criticism of Pascal's Wager:

Pascal's wager suffers from the logical fallacy of false dilemma, relying on the assumption that the only possibilities are:

Chapter 16. "The Wager" by Blaise Pascal

1. the Christian God exists and punishes or rewards as stated in the Bible, or
2. no God exists.

The wager cannot rule out the possibility that there is a God who instead rewards skepticism and punishes blind faith, or rewards honest reasoning and punishes feigned faith. In societies where faith is often rewarded by economic and social benefit, its potential moral significance is dubious. It also assumes faith costs nothing, but there may be both direct (time, health, wealth) costs and opportunity costs: those who choose to believe in, say, scientific theories that may contradict scripture may be able to discover things and accomplish things the believer could not.<sup>3</sup>

Is the opportunity cost of belief in any manner comparable with an infinite payoff? Can the false dilemma be avoided by acknowledging the following Hindu belief? Krishna states:

With whatever motive people worship Me, I fulfill their desires accordingly. People worship Me with different motives.<sup>4</sup>

Would a God who understands the limitations of human reasoning permit any belief which is appropriate to the believer?

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3. Pascal's Wager ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascals\\_wager](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascals_wager)). *Wikipedia*.

4. *Bhagavad Gita*, § 4.11.

# Chapter 17

## “The Problem of Evil ” by Fyodor Dostoevsky



*Dostoevsky, (detail) portrait by Vasily Perov, The State Tretyakov Gallery*

### **About the author...**

The novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) spent four years in a Siberian prison and four more years in the army as punishment for his role in a clandestine Utopian-socialist discussion group. He became scornful of the rise of humanistic science in the West and chronicled its threat to human freedom. Dostoevsky's writings challenged the notion of the essential rationality of human beings and anticipated many ideas in existential psychoanalysis. For Dostoevsky, the essence of being human is freedom.

### About the work...

In the *The Brothers Karamazov*,<sup>1</sup> Dostoevsky reveals deep psychological insight into the nature of human morality. In this, his greatest work, he expresses the destructive aspects of human freedom which can only be bound by God. In Chapter 4 of that work, the death of an innocent child is seen to be an inescapable objection to God's goodness. In this chapter Alyosha is the religious foil to Ivan, his intellectual older brother.

#### From the reading...

"But then there is the children, and what am I to do about them? That's a question I can't answer."

### Ideas of Interest from *The Brothers Karamazov*

1. Why does Ivan think that children are innocent and adults are not? Why does he think we can love children when they are close, but we can only love our neighbor abstractly?
2. Does the General deserve to be shot for turning his hounds upon the child? Explain an answer from a religious point of view.
3. What does Ivan mean when he says, "I hasten to give back my entrance ticket."
4. List five or six possible explanations which are sometimes taken to account for the death of an innocent child in a universe created by God.

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky. "Rebellion" in the *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879). Trans. by Constance Garnett.

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5. What does Alyosha mean when he says to Ivan, "That is rebellion"?



*Siberian Convict Colony, Russia, Library of Congress*

## The Reading Selection from *The Brothers Karamazov*

### [Love Your Neighbor]

"I must make one confession" Ivan began. "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbours. It's just one's neighbours, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance. I once read somewhere of John the Merciful, a saint, that when a hungry, frozen beggar came to him, he took him into his bed, held him in his arms, and began breathing into his mouth, which was putrid and loathsome from some awful disease. I am convinced that he did that from 'self-laceration,' from the self-laceration of falsity, for the sake of the charity imposed by duty, as a penance laid on him. For anyone to love a man, he must be hidden, for as soon as he shows his face, love is gone."

"Father Zossima has talked of that more than once," observed Alyosha; "he, too, said that the face of a man often hinders many people not practised in love, from loving him. But yet there's a great deal of love in mankind, and almost Christ-like love. I know that myself, Ivan."

"Well, I know nothing of it so far, and can't understand it, and the innumerable mass of mankind are with me there. The question is, whether that's due to men's bad qualities or whether it's inherent in their nature. To

my thinking, Christ-like love for men is a miracle impossible on earth. He was God. But we are not gods. Suppose I, for instance, suffer intensely. Another can never know how much I suffer, because he is another and not I. And what's more, a man is rarely ready to admit another's suffering (as though it were a distinction). Why won't he admit it, do you think? Because I smell unpleasant, because I have a stupid face, because I once trod on his foot. Besides, there is suffering and suffering; degrading, humiliating suffering such as humbles me—hunger, for instance—my benefactor will perhaps allow me; but when you come to higher suffering—for an idea, for instance—he will very rarely admit that, perhaps because my face strikes him as not at all what he fancies a man should have who suffers for an idea. And so he deprives me instantly of his favour, and not at all from badness of heart. Beggars, especially genteel beggars, ought never to show themselves, but to ask for charity through the newspapers. One can love one's neighbours in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it's almost impossible. If it were as on the stage, in the ballet, where if beggars come in, they wear silken rags and tattered lace and beg for alms dancing gracefully, then one might like looking at them. But even then we should not love them. But enough of that. I simply wanted to show you my point of view. I meant to speak of the suffering of mankind generally, but we had better confine ourselves to the sufferings of the children. That reduces the scope of my argument to a tenth of what it would be. Still we'd better keep to the children, though it does weaken my case. But, in the first place, children can be loved even at close quarters, even when they are dirty, even when they are ugly (I fancy, though, children never are ugly). The second reason why I won't speak of grown-up people is that, besides being disgusting and unworthy of love, they have a compensation—they've eaten the apple and know good and evil, and they have become 'like gods.' They go on eating it still. But the children haven't eaten anything, and are so far innocent. Are you fond of children, Alyosha? I know you are, and you will understand why I prefer to speak of them. If they, too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers' sins, they must be punished for their fathers, who have eaten the apple; but that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth. The innocent must not suffer for another's sins, and especially such innocents! You may be surprised at me, Alyosha, but I am awfully fond of children, too. And observe, cruel people, the violent, the rapacious, the Karamazovs are sometimes very fond of children. Children while they are quite little—up to seven, for instance—are so remote

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from grown-up people they are different creatures, as it were, of a different species. I knew a criminal in prison who had, in the course of his career as a burglar, murdered whole families, including several children. But when he was in prison, he had a strange affection for them. He spent all his time at his window, watching the children playing in the prison yard. He trained one little boy to come up to his window and made great friends with him. . . You don't know why I am telling you all this, Alyosha? My head aches and I am sad.”

**From the reading...**

“I think if the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness.”

“You speak with a strange air,” observed Alyosha uneasily, “as though you were not quite yourself.”

**[The Inhumanity of Man]**

“By the way, a Bulgarian I met lately in Moscow,” Ivan went on, seeming not to hear his brother's words, “told me about the crimes committed by Turks and Circassians in all parts of Bulgaria through fear of a general rising of the Slavs. They burn villages, murder, outrage women and children, they nail their prisoners by the ears to the fences, leave them so till morning, and in the morning they hang them—all sorts of things you can't imagine. People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it. These Turks took a pleasure in torturing children,—too; cutting the unborn child from the mothers womb, and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mothers' eyes. Doing it before the mothers' eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They've planned a diversion: they pet the baby, laugh to make it laugh. They succeed, the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol four

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inches from the baby's face. The baby laughs with glee, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and he pulls the trigger in the baby's face and blows out its brains. Artistic, wasn't it? By the way, Turks are particularly fond of sweet things, they say."

"Brother, what are you driving at?" asked Alyosha.

"I think if the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness."

"Just as he did God, then?" observed Alyosha. "'It's wonderful how you can turn words,' as Polonius says in Hamlet," laughed Ivan. "You turn my words against me. Well, I am glad. Yours must be a fine God, if man created Him in his image and likeness. You asked just now what I was driving at. You see, I am fond of collecting certain facts, and, would you believe, I even copy anecdotes of a certain sort from newspapers and books, and I've already got a fine collection. The Turks, of course, have gone into it, but they are foreigners. I have specimens from home that are even better than the Turks. You know we prefer beating—rods and scourges—that's our national institution. Nailing ears is unthinkable for us, for we are, after all, Europeans. But the rod and the scourge we have always with us and they cannot be taken from us. Abroad now they scarcely do any beating. Manners are more humane, or laws have been passed, so that they don't dare to flog men now. But they make up for it in another way just as national as ours. And so national that it would be practically impossible among us, though I believe we are being inoculated with it, since the religious movement began in our aristocracy. I have a charming pamphlet, translated from the French, describing how, quite recently, five years ago, a murderer, Richard, was executed—a young man, I believe, of three and twenty, who repented and was converted to the Christian faith at the very scaffold. This Richard was an illegitimate child who was given as a child of six by his parents to some shepherds on the Swiss mountains. They brought him up to work for them. He grew up like a little wild beast among them. The shepherds taught him nothing, and scarcely fed or clothed him, but sent him out at seven to herd the flock in cold and wet, and no one hesitated or scrupled to treat him so."

"Quite the contrary, they thought they had every right, for Richard had been given to them as a chattel, and they did not even see the necessity of feeding him. Richard himself describes how in those years, like the Prodigal Son in the Gospel, he longed to eat of the mash given to the pigs, which were fattened for sale. But they wouldn't even give that, and beat him when



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he stole from the pigs. And that was how he spent all his childhood and his youth, till he grew up and was strong enough to go away and be a thief. The savage began to earn his living as a day labourer in Geneva. He drank what he earned, he lived like a brute, and finished by killing and robbing an old man. He was caught, tried, and condemned to death. They are not sentimentalists there. And in prison he was immediately surrounded by pastors, members of Christian brotherhoods, philanthropic ladies, and the like. They taught him to read and write in prison, and expounded the Gospel to him. They exhorted him, worked upon him, drummed at him incessantly, till at last he solemnly confessed his crime. He was converted. He wrote to the court himself that he was a monster, but that in the end God had vouchsafed him light and shown grace. All Geneva was in excitement about him—all philanthropic and religious Geneva. All the aristocratic and well-bred society of the town rushed to the prison, kissed Richard and embraced him; 'You are our brother, you have found grace.' And Richard does nothing but weep with emotion, 'Yes, I've found grace! All my youth and childhood I was glad of pigs' food, but now even I have found grace. I am dying in the Lord.' 'Yes, Richard, die in the Lord; you have shed blood and must die. Though it's not your fault that you knew not the Lord, when you coveted the pigs' food and were beaten for stealing it (which was very wrong of you, for stealing is forbidden); but you've shed blood and you must die.' And on the last day, Richard, perfectly limp, did nothing but cry and repeat every minute: 'This is my happiest day. I am going to the Lord.' 'Yes,' cry the pastors and the judges and philanthropic ladies. 'This is the happiest day of your life, for you are going to the Lord!' They all walk or drive to the scaffold in procession behind the prison van. At the scaffold they call to Richard: 'Die, brother, die in the Lord, for even thou hast found grace!' And so, covered with his brothers' kisses, Richard is dragged on to the scaffold, and led to the guillotine. And they chopped off his head in brotherly fashion, because he had found grace. Yes, that's characteristic."

"That pamphlet is translated into Russian by some Russian philanthropists of aristocratic rank and evangelical aspirations, and has been distributed gratis for the enlightenment of the people. The case of Richard is interesting because it's national. Though to us it's absurd to cut off a man's head, because he has become our brother and has found grace, yet we have our own specialty, which is all but worse. Our historical pastime is the direct satisfaction of inflicting pain. There are lines in Nekrassov describing how a peasant lashes a horse on the eyes, 'on its meek eyes,' everyone must

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have seen it. It's peculiarly Russian. He describes how a feeble little nag has foundered under too heavy a load and cannot move. The peasant beats it, beats it savagely, beats it at last not knowing what he is doing in the intoxication of cruelty, thrashes it mercilessly over and over again. 'However weak you are, you must pull, if you die for it.' The nag strains, and then he begins lashing the poor defenceless creature on its weeping, on its 'meek eyes.' The frantic beast tugs and draws the load, trembling all over, gasping for breath, moving sideways, with a sort of unnatural spasmodic action—it's awful in Nekrassov. But that only a horse, and God has horses to be beaten. So the Tatars have taught us, and they left us the knout as a remembrance of it. But men, too, can be beaten. A well-educated, cultured gentleman and his wife beat their own child with a birch-rod, a girl of seven. I have an exact account of it. The papa was glad that the birch was covered with twigs. 'It stings more,' said he, and so he began stinging his daughter. I know for a fact there are people who at every blow are worked up to sensuality, to literal sensuality, which increases progressively at every blow they inflict. They beat for a minute, for five minutes, for ten minutes, more often and more savagely. The child screams. At last the child cannot scream, it gasps, 'Daddy daddy!' By some diabolical unseemly chance the case was brought into court. A counsel is engaged. The Russian people have long called a barrister 'a conscience for hire.' The counsel protests in his client's defence. 'It's such a simple thing,' he says, 'an everyday domestic event. A father corrects his child. To our shame be it said, it is brought into court.' The jury, convinced by him, give a favourable verdict. The public roars with delight that the torturer is acquitted. Ah, pity I wasn't there! I would have proposed to raise a subscription in his honour! Charming pictures. But I've still better things about children. I've collected a great, great deal about Russian children, Alyosha. There was a little girl of five who was hated by her father and mother, 'most worthy and respectable people, of good education and breeding.' You see, I must repeat again, it is a peculiar characteristic of many people, this love of torturing children, and children only. To all other types of humanity these torturers behave mildly and benevolently, like cultivated and humane Europeans; but they are very fond of tormenting children, even fond of children themselves in that sense. It's just their defencelessness that tempts the tormentor, just the angelic confidence of the child who has no refuge and no appeal, that sets his vile blood on fire. In every man, of course, a demon lies hidden—the demon of rage, the demon of lustful heat at the screams of the tortured victim, the demon of lawlessness let off the

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chain, the demon of diseases that follow on vice, gout, kidney disease, and so on."



*Four Children in Hayfield, Russia, Library of Congress*

"This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty—shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn't ask to be taken up at night (as though a child of five sleeping its angelic, sound sleep could be trained to wake and ask), they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child's groans! Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good

and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to dear, kind God! I say nothing of the sufferings of grown-up people, they have eaten the apple, damn them, and the devil take them all! But these little ones! I am making you suffer, Alyosha, you are not yourself. I'll leave off if you like."

"Nevermind. I want to suffer too," muttered Alyosha.

### [The Death of an Innocent Child]

"One picture, only one more, because it's so curious, so characteristic, and I have only just read it in some collection of Russian antiquities. I've forgotten the name. I must look it up. It was in the darkest days of serfdom at the beginning of the century, and long live the Liberator of the People! There was in those days a general of aristocratic connections, the owner of great estates, one of those men—somewhat exceptional, I believe, even then—who, retiring from the service into a life of leisure, are convinced that they've earned absolute power over the lives of their subjects. There were such men then. So our general, settled on his property of two thousand souls, lives in pomp, and domineers over his poor neighbours as though they were dependents and buffoons. He has kennels of hundreds of hounds and nearly a hundred dog-boys—all mounted, and in uniform. One day a serf-boy, a little child of eight, threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general's favourite hound. 'Why is my favourite dog lame?' He is told that the boy threw a stone that hurt the dog's paw. 'So you did it.' The general looked the child up and down. 'Take him.' He was taken—taken from his mother and kept shut up all night. Early that morning the general comes out on horseback, with the hounds, his dependents, dog-boys, and huntsmen, all mounted around him in full hunting parade. The servants are summoned for their edification, and in front of them all stands the mother of the child. The child is brought from the lock-up. It's a gloomy, cold, foggy, autumn day, a capital day for hunting. The general orders the child to be undressed; the child is stripped naked. He shivers, numb with terror, not daring to cry. . . 'Make him run,' commands the general. 'Run! run!' shout the dog-boys. The boy runs. . . 'At him!' yells the general, and he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes! . . . I believe the general was afterwards declared incapable of administering his estates. Well—what did he deserve? To be shot? To be shot for the satisfaction of

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our moral feelings? Speak, Alyosha!"

"To be shot," murmured Alyosha, lifting his eyes to Ivan with a pale, twisted smile.

"Bravo!" cried Ivan delighted. "If even you say so... You're a pretty monk! So there is a little devil sitting in your heart, Alyosha Karamazov!"

"What I said was absurd, but..."

"That's just the point, that 'but'!" cried Ivan. "Let me tell you, novice, that the absurd is only too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and perhaps nothing would have come to pass in it without them. We know what we know!"

"What do you know?"

"I understand nothing," Ivan went on, as though in delirium. "I don't want to understand anything now. I want to stick to the fact. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand anything, I shall be false to the fact, and I have determined to stick to the fact."

"Why are you trying me?" Alyosha cried, with sudden distress. "Will you say what you mean at last?"

**From the reading...**

"And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible."

"Of course, I will; that's what I've been leading up to. You are dear to me, I don't want to let you go, and I won't give you up to your Zossima."

Ivan for a minute was silent, his face became all at once very sad.

**[The Problem of Evil]**

"Listen! I took the case of children only to make my case clearer. Of the other tears of humanity with which the earth is soaked from its crust to its centre, I will say nothing. I have narrowed my subject on purpose. I am a bug, and I recognise in all humility that I cannot understand why the

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world is arranged as it is. Men are themselves to blame, I suppose; they were given paradise, they wanted freedom, and stole fire from heaven, though they knew they would become unhappy, so there is no need to pity them. With my pitiful, earthly, Euclidian understanding, all I know is that there is suffering and that there are none guilty; that cause follows effect, simply and directly; that everything flows and finds its level—but that's only Euclidian nonsense, I know that, and I can't consent to live by it! What comfort is it to me that there are none guilty and that cause follows effect simply and directly, and that I know it?—I must have justice, or I will destroy myself. And not justice in some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth, and that I could see myself. I have believed in it. I want to see it, and if I am dead by then, let me rise again, for if it all happens without me, it will be too unfair. Surely I haven't suffered simply that I, my crimes and my sufferings, may manure the soil of the future harmony for somebody else. I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lion and the victim rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for. All the religions of the world are built on this longing, and I am a believer. But then there are the children, and what am I to do about them? That's a question I can't answer. For the hundredth time I repeat, there are numbers of questions, but I've only taken the children, because in their case what I mean is so unanswerably clear. Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It's beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony. Why should they, too, furnish material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future? I understand solidarity in sin among men. I understand solidarity in retribution, too; but there can be no such solidarity with children. And if it is really true that they must share responsibility for all their fathers' crimes, such a truth is not of this world and is beyond my comprehension. Some jester will say, perhaps, that the child would have grown up and have sinned, but you see he didn't grow up, he was torn to pieces by the dogs, at eight years old. Oh, Alyosha, I am not blaspheming! I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.' When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is

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that I can't accept that harmony. And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures. You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child's torturer, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' but I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God'! It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket."

"That's rebellion," murmured Alyosha, looking down.

**From the reading...**

"I don't want harmony. From love of humanity I don't want it."

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“Rebellion? I am sorry you call it that,” said Ivan earnestly. “One can hardly live in rebellion, and I want to live. Tell me yourself, I challenge your answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.”

“No, I wouldn’t consent,” said Alyosha softly.



*Kazan Cathedral, St. Petersburg, Library of Congress*

## Related Ideas

*TPM Online* ([http://www.philosophers.co.uk/portal\\_article.php?id=33](http://www.philosophers.co.uk/portal_article.php?id=33)).

*Free to Do Evil: An Interview with Richard Swinburne* . Philosopher and theologian Richard Swinburne explains his theodicy, *i.e.*, his attempt to reconcile God’s goodness with the presence of evil in the world.

*Dostoevsky Research Station* (<http://www.kiosek.com/dostoevsky/>) . If you wish to track down anything about Dostoevsky, this site constructed by Christiaan Stange is a good place to begin.

*Dostoevsky as Philosopher, Lecture Notes, Philosophy 151* (<http://www-philosophy.ucdavis.edu/phi151/NOV28LEC.HTM>). A guest lecture at the University of California—Davis by Jay Gallagher.



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*Dostoevsky on Freedom, Lecture Notes, Philosophy 151*  
(<http://www-philosophy.ucdavis.edu/phi151/nov30lec.htm>). Lecture at the University of California on the problem of evil.

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. The problem of evil is often put in this form of a dilemma:

If God is perfectly good, then God would seek to abolish all evil.  
If God is all-powerful, then God could abolish all evil  
Yet, evil exists.  
Therefore, either God is not perfectly good or God is not all powerful or both.

From a logical point of view, what kind of dilemma is the problem of evil? It does not appear to be either a constructive or a destructive dilemma.

2. Many medieval thinkers thought of evil as a privation or the absence of good. Since a privation or absence has no cause, God is not causally implicated in the existence of evil. Discuss the adequacy of this argument.
3. Joseph de Maistre states, "If there were no moral evil upon earth, there would be no physical evil."<sup>2</sup> What must we assume for this conditional statement to be true?
4. In the *Apology*, Socrates states, "No evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death." Given Ivan's story of the death of an innocent child, how can this be so?

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2. Joseph de Maistre. "First Dialogue" in *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*. Ed. by Jack Lively. New York: Schocken Books, 1965.

## Part III. Philosophical Ethics



*Auction's End, Douglas Georgia, Library of Congress*

Even though philosophy apparently cannot prove conclusively the existence of God, still the question of how we should lead our lives is a question of the utmost gravity. Whether I can “live well and do well” in the affairs of the world, as Aristotle suggests, or whether I have no free choices as Spinoza thought, is intrinsically related to what it is to be human.

In this section of our introductory readings, the close relation between philosophy and psychology is explored from the standpoint as to what constitutes a *good* life. Readings from the philosophies of Baruch Spinoza, William James, Plato, Aristotle, Jeremy Bentham, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean Paul Sartre suggest a number of insights into the questions of human existence—especially those concerning free will and determinism, egoism and altruism, obligation and hedonism, as well as the individual’s relation to society.

We begin Part III of the readings with a thumbnail sketch of some of the main philosophic positions on the free will-determinism issue. The crux of this problem is sometimes related as the dilemma known as *Hume’s Fork*.

This dilemma recognizes, on the one hand, if my actions are entirely subject to causal laws, then I cannot be responsible for my actions—any more than an apple can be responsible for falling from a tree. (Notice on this view, an uncaused event would be the same thing as what is called “a miracle”—*i.e.*, an event without cause or explanation.) On the other hand, if my actions are *not* causally determined then my actions are uncaused and so must be random events. In that case also I could not be responsible for my actions because outcomes of random processes cannot be controlled by willing or choosing. Therefore, whether or not events are caused, I cannot be held accountable for my actions. Viewed in this manner, the heart of the philosophical problems of ethics becomes the clarification of the notion of choice.

Baruch Spinoza argues in the first reading that there is a complete unity of God with nature. The soul is part of God and, consequently, is not subject to free will. Since God is “all that there is,” the world and everything in it is perfect. William James, on the other hand, argues that the free will-determinism controversy cannot be settled by metaphysical reasoning, instead, he believes, the issue must be settled pragmatically. He reasons that if you do not believe in the power of your own choices, your life will be subject to the vicissitudes of everyday events. But if you exercise the power of choice, your faith in a fact can help make that fact come true. You are far more likely to do well in life if you believe you can (or at least if you act as if you believed you could), than if you believe it’s all a matter of luck or fate.

The quest for happiness is discussed in readings from Plato, Aristotle, and Jeremy Bentham. In the “Myth of the Ring of Gyges,” Plato gives a powerful voice to a view he actually believes is mistaken—the belief that everyone is selfish and the only thing keeping people from doing harm to others is the fear of punishment. Aristotle presents a philosophy of individual *eudaimonia* based on natural motivation. Pleasure, for him, is only a side-product of activity. He believes a life of living well and doing well in the affairs of the world can be obtained by exercising that peculiar excellence of human beings: the moral excellence of practical reason (*phronesis*). Although intellectual excellence can be taught; for Aristotle, moral excellence is only acquired through actions resulting in the disposition to do what’s right.

The last set of readings involve some considerations of ethics in society. The ethical views of Jeremy Bentham and Friedrich Nietzsche are con-

strated. Bentham believes we should seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number of persons, and he develops a method whereby the “right” choices are based on a “pleasure calculus.” Such a view is harshly scorned by Nietzsche as a “nay-saying attitude toward life.” Nietzsche argues, that power, not the herd-morality of pleasure or happiness, is what is sought in the “master-morality” of superior human beings.

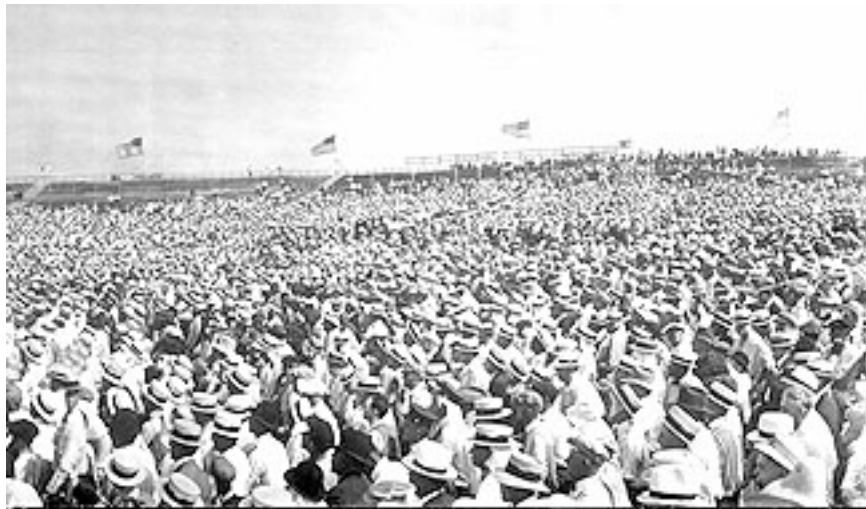
We conclude our study of ethics with Jean Paul Sartre’s well-known lecture on the existential freedom of the individual. Sartre believes that you and you alone are responsible for making yourself not only what you are and but also what you will be. He believes you are condemned to choose, for “to choose not to choose” is itself a choice.

**Where to go for help...**

Notes, quizzes, tests, and related materials for this section of readings, “Philosophical Ethics,” can be found at *Philosophical Ethics* (<http://philosophy.lander.edu/intro/ethics.html>).

# Chapter 18

## Free Will and Determinism



*Crowds at Squires*, Library of Congress

### **Ideas of Interest from “Free Will and Determinism”**

1. Explain the difference between scientific and “soft” determinism.
2. What is the one miracle that would happen in a predeterministic universe?
3. Explain the difference between predestination and fatalism. How does the short characterization of the doctrine of fatalism in this chapter

differ from the lexical definition of “fatalism”?

4. If our choices are not due to chance, reason, or causes, what is the nature of a free decision? If someone freely chooses, then would it follow there could be *no* basis for the decision because any basis would limit the freedom of the choice?
5. Are probabilistic or “chance” predictions simply approximations of deterministic predictions? *I.e.*, are chance outcomes a result of our inability to accurately observe and measure the initial conditions of an event?

## Philosophical Ethics

Historically, the ethics of peoples has been based on religion. Not surprisingly, ethics differ among persons and places, in part, because different cultures have different religions.

If there were to be a philosophical basis for how we ought to lead our lives and seek a good life, then this basis probably cannot be founded on religious tenets of God’s existence. As we have seen, both *à priori* and *à posteriori* proofs for God’s existence are not philosophically well developed enough to be reliable as a foundation 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 were 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 could not recommend or freely decide upon alternative courses of decision or action.

What follows is a very brief summary of some of the philosophical positions in the free will-determinism controversy. These doctrines are introduced here as points of reference for insight into the variety of ethical perspectives expressed in this part of the text.

## Short Glossary of Terms

*Determinism* (hard or scientific) is the philosophical view that all events

Chapter 18. Free Will and Determinism

(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 are no free will, no miracles, and no chance events. Sometimes mental events or "choices" are considered epiphenomena. Some determinists argue that a special sense of "free choice" is compatible with causal determinism (*qv.*, "soft" determinism below). The classic view of determinism was expressed by Laplace. Given sufficient knowledge of every particle in the universe, he believed any future event or past event could be exactly calculated.

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.<sup>1</sup>

*Compatibilism* or *soft determinism* is the philosophical view that all physical events are caused, but some mental processes might not be caused. On this view, choices only involve mental processes and have no actual effect in the external world—a doctrine often espoused by Stoics.

*Implications:* Consider why one sees a movie twice or watches an instant replay on TV. We do not do so in the hope for a different outcome, but we do so as a result of interest in the event and the active perception of it. 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 willing to "let it be."

*Predeterminism* is 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.

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

*Implications:* If world-events are predetermined, there are 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* is 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, significant feats, and so forth will happen regardless of causes or chance. Some philosophical fatalists believe all events are fated—such a view is consistent with predestination without God’s foreknowledge. Hence, on this view, “what will be, will be, and there is nothing we can do about it.”

Assume, for example, by means of some kind of revelation I were to 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 intense heat. After being transported to the hospital, I linger on until Saturday and then die at the appointed time. On the other hand, suppose I did not take the risk of traveling to the airport and instead go home and intend to stay under the bed until Sunday. Unknown to me, however, there is 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 is going to occur anyway. So-called “self-fulfilling prophecies” might be incompatible with fatalism the final outcomes are not necessarily inconsistent.

*Predestination* is 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 and only coincidentally compatible with what would be 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, from our point of view, just



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happen to choose in accordance with God's plan. Consider, for example, the fact that our best friend often seems to know how we will decide a difficult issue before we ourselves actually make the choice. Although it is sometimes said that under predestination all events are "caused" to happen by God, this sense of "cause" is not the normal sense of an "efficient cause." Instead, God foreordains or preordains the occurrence of events.

*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* is 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. Usually, the indeterminist believes some events are caused and some events are not caused, but only the latter belief is essential to indeterminism.

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

*Chance (à priori)* is 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 a toss could be made only by an ideal or imaginary coin having no width (so that it would be impossible to land on its side) and having no distinguishing head or tail which might alter the center of gravity of the coin.

*Chance (à posteriori)* is the philosophical view that the probability of a future occurrence can be calculated from past observations of previous similar occurrences. The *à posteriori* view of chance is wrapped up the intractable problem of induction. For example, we would base the prediction of a coin toss on data derived from past coin tosses of the same coin and coin-tossing mechanism.

*Implications:* The notion of chance is not necessarily incompatible with determinism since it might be that the lack of the knowledge of the exact initial conditions results in an inexact and unpredictable consequence. In

this sense, the outcome can not be known because of our ignorance either of the exact causes of a phenomenon or of the exact measurements of the event. For example, if one *did* know the exact shape, mass, geometry, center of gravity of a coin, and the exact amount and direction of force applied, the relative humidity, wind velocity, and so forth, according to the determinist, an exact prediction of heads or tails could be made.

*Free will* is 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 seen to be prompted by proximate causes. In the view of most philosophers, moral responsibility does seem to require some sort of practical freedom of the will. Often, “free will” is translated to mean “could have done otherwise,” but the word “free” is notoriously difficult to define.

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. 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? If so, then would all human achievements ultimately be just patterns of matter and motion?
2. Carefully clarify the differences between the doctrine of fatalism and the doctrine of determinism. Show which view admits of the most ambiguity.
3. If psychology were to be an exact science and specific human acts could be accurately predicted, could a prediction be accurate if the person about to act were to become 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.

# Chapter 19

## “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

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*,<sup>1</sup> a book published posthumously from the fear of persecution from the charge of the blasphemy of pantheism.<sup>2</sup> 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 monism<sup>3</sup> 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.

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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. Often the view derives from spiritual motives, but a monist could be a strict materialist or a strict idealist. 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 neither controls the body nor controls events in 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?<sup>4</sup>
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



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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/author/interviews/bookinterview\\_damasio.asp](http://www.harcourtbooks.com/author/interviews/bookinterview_damasio.asp)). *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.

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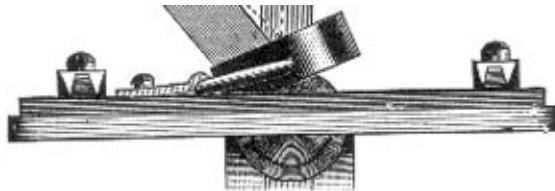
Antonio Damasio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, 2003. A fascinating investigation, based on neurobiology of the differences between bodily emotion and mental feeling and, more important, how this relation elucidates the connection between unconscious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

Roger Scruton. *Spinoza: The Great Philosophers*. London: 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."<sup>5</sup> 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

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5. *The Ethics*, Appendix.

*Chapter 19. "Human Beings are Determined" by Baruch Spinoza*

of any other being)."

# Chapter 20

## “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. He thought that 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 as described in the first section of these readings. 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*,<sup>1</sup> James argues that it is not unreasonable to believe hypotheses that cannot be known or established to be true by scientific investigation. When some hypotheses of ultimate concern arise, he argues that our faith can pragmatically shape future outcomes. Much as in Pascal's Wager, by not choosing, he thinks, we lose possibility for meaningful encounters.

### 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' 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 conditions<sup>2</sup> for an option to be a momentous one?

1. William James. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. London: 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

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. Discuss whether or not acceptance of the genuine option theory and James' thesis, itself, is a momentous option in a person's life. Could such a decision be related to the philosophy of existentialism?
5. Can you construct an example where James' 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?

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

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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 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*.

Chapter 20. "The Will to Believe" by William James

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.



*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.*

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.

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 an 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' 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 an 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 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:*"<sup>3</sup> 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 your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. . .

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

### [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.

#### **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."

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 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 passionate 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

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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, 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. . .

## 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’ life and writings.

Ralph Barton Perry, *et. al.* *The Thought and Character of William James*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996. A reprint of the 1935 Pulitzer Prize winning biography.

**From the reading. . .**

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



*Hollis Hall, Harvard College, Library of Congress*

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare James' 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' genuine option theory just a modern restatement of Pascal's Wager? Is Pascal's Wager just one instantiation of James' momentous option theory?
2. How would Bertrand Russell respond to James' 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 in an essay printed earlier



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in this text about the values of keeping an open mind and avoiding a pragmatic dogmatism:

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.<sup>4</sup>

3. Discuss whether James’ 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’ view, how could one rule out any of the beliefs of religious extremists?
5. 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”?<sup>5</sup>
6. 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.

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4. Bertrand Russell. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912, 156-157.

5. See Friedrich Nietzsche’s “Beyond Good and Evil” in this section of readings.

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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' option theory with the James-Lange theory.

# Chapter 21

## “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato



*Relief of Plato* Thoemmes Press

### **About the author...**

Other than 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 *Republic*,<sup>1</sup> 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 Ring of Gyges”

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 discovered 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*. Trans. by Benjamin Jowlett, Book II, 358d—361d.

Chapter 21. “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato

3. Is it true that sometimes our self-interest is served by *not* acting in our self-interest? Fyodor Dostoevsky writes:

Advantage! What is advantage? And will you take it upon yourself to define with perfect accuracy in what the advantage of a man consists? 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Ring of Gyges”

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 jus-

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2. Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Notes from Underground*. Trans. Constance Garnett. 1864.

Chapter 21. "The Ring of Gyges" by Plato

tice, 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 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.

**From the reading...**

"For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice. . . ."

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

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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.



*Socrates and Aeschylus*, Antiquities Project

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 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

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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. 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.



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**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.



*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 they 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 psychological studies of 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 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 is 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

*Chapter 21. "The Ring of Gyges" by Plato*

have a nature, then what arguments can you propose 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 22

## “Life of Excellence: Living and Doing Well” by Aristotle



*Aristotle, Thoenmes*

### **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 rela-

Chapter 22. “*Life of Excellence: Living and Doing Well*” by Aristotle

tionship 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 twentieth century. The central concepts of his poetics and 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 *Nicomachean Ethics*,<sup>1</sup> Aristotle argues that what we seek is *eudaimonia*, a term translated in this reading as “happiness.” *Eudaimonia* is better expressed as “well-being” or “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 *Nicomachean 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.”

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. W. D. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925.

## Ideas of Interest from the *Nicomachean Ethics*

1. According to Aristotle, what is happiness (*eudaimonia*)? How does 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 desirable 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 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]**

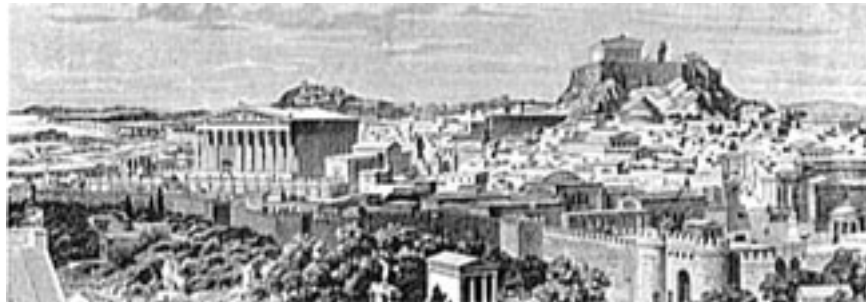
We must, however, not only describe virtue as a state of character, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; *e.g.*, the excellence 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

Chapter 22. “*Life of Excellence: Living and Doing Well*” by Aristotle

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 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.



*Athens, Greece, 400 BC*, Book illustration by Theodor Horydazak, Library of Congress

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.

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

*Chapter 22. "Life of Excellence: Living and Doing Well" by Aristotle*

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 , 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 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 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

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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 their purposes. Bentham's hedonistic calculus is also a teleological system. Since Aristotle's

*Chapter 22. "Life of Excellence: Living and Doing Well" by Aristotle*

Aristotle 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?

# Chapter 23

## “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*,<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 of Interest from *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.

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 *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.



Chapter 23. “Happiness Is the Greatest Good” by Jeremy Bentham

*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. . . .

*Chapter 23. "Happiness Is the Greatest Good" by Jeremy Bentham*

*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-

*Chapter 23. "Happiness Is the Greatest Good" by Jeremy Bentham*

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,

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 of a Lot of Pleasure or Pain**

*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.

Chapter 23. "Happiness Is the Greatest Good" by Jeremy Bentham



*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.

*Chapter 23. "Happiness Is the Greatest Good" by Jeremy Bentham*

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

*Chapter 23. "Happiness Is the Greatest Good" by Jeremy Bentham*

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 23. “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?<sup>3</sup> He writes above, Chapter I, V, "It is in vain to talk

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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

Chapter 23. "Happiness Is the Greatest Good" by Jeremy Bentham

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."<sup>4</sup> 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, 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.

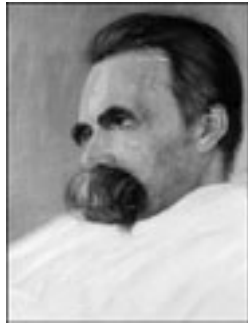
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used ambiguously.

4. *Proverbs*, 23: 7.

# Chapter 24

## “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*<sup>1</sup> 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?
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?

1. Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. by Helen Zimmern (1909-1913), 257-261.

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 noting 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 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



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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

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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.

*The 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 when 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: "Where love rules, there is no will to power, and where power predominates, love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other."<sup>2</sup>

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2. C. G. Jung, *On the Psychology of the Unconscious* in *Collected Papers*. 1917.



# Chapter 25

## “Man Makes Himself” by Jean-Paul Sartre



*Jean-Paul Sartre*, University of Pavia Galleries

### **About the author...**

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a leading existentialist in post World War II France, advocates the radical freedom and concomitant personal responsibility of the individual. Although recognizing the constraints of the human condition and the limitations imposed by our environment, he also emphasizes the Cartesian assumption of the freedom of human consciousness. If we try to be “somebody” or “something,” Sartre argues we become inauthentic and are acting “in bad faith.” To try to make something of ourselves, as a purpose of life, is a mistake, for such an attempt would only tend to objectify what we are. No one wishes to be regarded as an object. Instead, Sartre emphasizes that each person is entirely the author of his choices—all significant aspects of choices are unconstrained by outside influences. When in 1960 Sartre exhorted the troops in the French Foreign

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Legion fighting in Algeria to desert, de Gaulle was asked why he took no action against Sartre. President de Gaulle replied, “One does not arrest Voltaire.” In keeping with Sartre’s view of authenticity, while declining the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964, Sartre replied, “A writer must refuse to allow himself to be transformed into an institution.”

### About the work...

In his *Existentialism Is A Humanism*,<sup>1</sup> a public lecture given in 1946, Sartre provides one of the clearest and most striking insights into the anti-philosophy termed “existentialism.” Many of the issues discussed here are part of the family-relation of concepts often cited as being part of the existential movement. By its very nature existentialism cannot be consistently thought of as a popular philosophy both because of its rejection of crowd values as well as its rejection of a common human nature. Indeed, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Camus all disassociated themselves from existentialism after the enormous success of Sartre’s works. Even Sartre himself later turned away from the unique individuality of existential perspective to a anomalous political Marxism.

### From the reading...

“I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.”

## Ideas of Interest from *Existentialism Is A Humanism*

1. What does Sartre mean when he explains that for human beings “exis-

1. Jean-Paul Sartre. *Existentialism Is A Humanism*. Trans. by Philip Mairet. Public Lecture, 1946.

tence precedes essence"? Is "essence" in this context something particular or something universal?

2. According to Sartre, what is the difference between Christianity and Christian existentialism?
3. Explain how, according to Sartre, there is a universal value in every choice. Does objectivity originate from subjectivity?
4. What is the relation between "anguish" and uniqueness of action? Explain what is meant by "existential anguish". Does anguish create the conditions for inaction in the inauthentic person?
5. What does Sartre mean by "abandonment"? How can I ever know that my choices are right or good?
6. According to Sartre, how is the authentic life distinguished from self-deception? How is each person "condemned to be free"?
7. What is existential despair? How does it arise as one of the conditions of human activity?
8. In what ways are morality and aesthetics comparable?

## The Reading Selection from *Existentialism Is A Humanism*

### ["Existence Precedes Essence"]

... what is alarming in the doctrine that I am about to try to explain to you is—is it not?—that it confronts man with a possibility of choice. To verify this, let us review the whole question upon the strictly philosophic level. What, then, is this that we call existentialism?...

The question is only complicated because there are two kinds of existentialists. There are, on the one hand, the Christians, amongst whom I shall name Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and on the other the existential atheists, amongst whom we must place Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence—or,

if you will, that we must begin from the subjective. What exactly do we mean by that?

If one considers an article of manufacture as, for example, a book or a paper-knife—one sees that it has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it; and he has paid attention, equally, to the conception of a paper-knife and to the pre-existent technique of production which is a part of that conception and is, at bottom, a formula. Thus the paper-knife is at the same time an article producible in a certain manner and one which, on the other hand, serve a definite purpose, for one cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper-knife without knowing what it was for. Let us say, then, of the paperknife that its essence that is to say the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and its definition possible—precedes its existence. The presence of such—and—such a paper-knife or book is thus determined before my eyes. Here, then, we are viewing the world from a technical standpoint, and we can say that production precedes existence.

When we think of God as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a supernal artisan. Whatever doctrine we may be considering, whether it be a doctrine like that of Descartes, or of Leibnitz himself, we always imply that the will follows, more or less, from the understanding or at least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows precisely what he is creating. Thus, the conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of the paper-knife in the mind of the artisan: God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and a formula. Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding.

In the philosophic atheism of the eighteenth century, the notion of God is suppressed, but not, for all that, the idea that essence is prior to existence; something of that idea we still find everywhere, in Diderot, in Voltaire and even in Kant. Man possesses a human nature; that "human nature," which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of a universal conception, the conception of Man. In Kant, this universality goes so far that the wild man of the woods, man in the state of nature and the bourgeois are all contained in the same definition and have the same fundamental qualities. Here again, the essence of man precedes that historic existence which we confront in experience... What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence?

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We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. . . .

Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing—as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its "subjectivity," using the word as a reproach against us. But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table? For we mean to say that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken—much more often than not—after we have made ourselves what we are. I may wish to join a party, to write a book or to marry—but in such a case what is usually called my will is probably a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.

The word "subjectivism" is to be understood in two senses, and our adversaries play upon only one of them. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to

affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. If I am a worker, for instance, I may choose to join a Christian rather than a Communist trade union. And if, by that membership, I choose to signify that resignation is, after all, the attitude that best becomes a man, that man's kingdom is not upon this earth, I do not commit myself alone to that view. Resignation is my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind. Or if, to take a more personal case, I decide to marry and to have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire, I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy. I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.

### [Anguish]

This may enable us to understand what is meant by such terms—perhaps a little grandiloquent—as anguish, abandonment and despair. As you will soon see, it is very simple. First, what do we mean by anguish?—The existentialist frankly states that man is in anguish. His meaning is as follows. When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. There are many, indeed, who show no such anxiety. But we affirm that they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it. Certainly, many people think that in what they are doing they commit no one but themselves to anything: and if you ask them, "What would happen if everyone did so?" they shrug their shoulders and reply, "Everyone does not do so." But in truth, one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception. The man who lies in self-excuse, by saying "Everyone will not do it" must be ill at ease in his conscience, for the act of lying implies the universal value which it denies. By its very dis-

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guise his anguish reveals itself. This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called "the anguish of Abraham." You know the story: An angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son: and obedience was obligatory, if it really was an angel who had appeared and said, "Thou, Abraham, shalt sacrifice thy son." But anyone in such a case would wonder, first, whether it was indeed an angel and secondly, whether I am really Abraham. Where are the proofs? A certain mad woman who suffered from hallucinations said that people were telephoning to her, and giving her orders. The doctor asked, "But who is it that speaks to you?" She replied: "He says it is God." And what, indeed, could prove to her that it was God? If an angel appears to me, what is the proof that it is an angel; or, if I hear voices, who can prove that they proceed from heaven and not from hell, or from my own subconsciousness or some pathological condition? Who can prove that they are really addressed to me?

Who, then, can prove that I am the proper person to impose, by my own choice, my conception of man upon mankind? I shall never find any proof whatever; there will be no sign to convince me of it. If a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not that of an angel. If I regard a certain course of action as good, it is only I who choose to say that it is good and not bad. There is nothing to show that I am Abraham: nevertheless I also am obliged at every instant to perform actions which are examples. Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly. So every man ought to say, "Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do." If a man does not say that, he is dissembling his anguish. Clearly, the anguish with which we are concerned here is not one that could lead to quietism or inaction. It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind well known to all those who have borne responsibilities. When, for instance, a military leader takes upon himself the responsibility for an attack and sends a number of men to their death, he chooses to do it and at bottom he alone chooses. No doubt under a higher command, but its orders, which are more general, require interpretation by him and upon that interpretation depends the life of ten, fourteen or twenty men. In making the decision, he cannot but feel a certain anguish. All leaders know that anguish. It does not prevent their acting, on the contrary it is the very condition of their action, for the action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities, and in choosing one of these, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen. Now it is anguish of that kind which existen-

tialism describes, and moreover, as we shall see, makes explicit through direct responsibility towards other men who are concerned. Far from being a screen which could separate us from action, it is a condition of action itself.

**From the reading...**

"The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion."

**[Abandonment]**

And when we speak of abandonment—"abandonment"—a favorite word of Heidegger—we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end. The existentialist is strongly opposed to a certain type of secular moralism which seeks to suppress God at the least possible expense. Towards 1880, when the French professors endeavoured to formulate a secular morality, they said something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, so we will do without it. However, if we are to have morality, a society and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values should be taken seriously; they must have an *à priori* existence ascribed to them. It must be considered obligatory *à priori* to be honest, not to lie, not to beat one's wife, to bring up children and so forth; so we are going to do a little work on this subject, which will enable us to show that these values exist all the same, inscribed in an intelligible heaven although, of course, there is no God. In other words—and this is, I believe, the purport of all that we in France call radicalism—nothing will be changed if God does not exist; we shall rediscover the same norms of honesty, progress and humanity, and we shall have disposed of God as an out-of-date hypothesis which will die away quietly of itself. The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *à priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that "the good" exists, that one must be



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honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted;" and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse.—We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion. Neither will an existentialist think that a man can find help through some sign being vouchsafed upon earth for his orientation: for he thinks that the man himself interprets the sign as he chooses. He thinks that every man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man. As Ponge has written in a very fine article, "Man is the future of man." That is exactly true. Only, if one took this to mean that the future is laid up in Heaven, that God knows what it is, it would be false, for then it would no longer even be a future. If, however, it means that, whatever man may now appear to be, there is a future to be fashioned, a virgin future that awaits him—then it is a true saying. But in the present one is forsaken.

As an example by which you may the better understand this state of abandonment, I will refer to the case of a pupil of mine, who sought me out in the following circumstances. His father was quarreling with his mother and was also inclined to be a "collaborator;" his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going

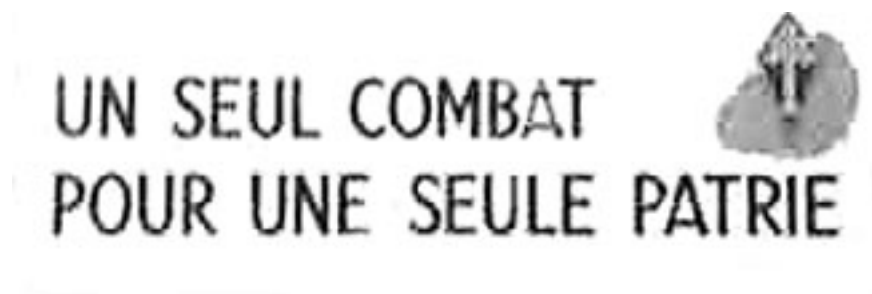
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to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. He fully realized that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance—or perhaps his death—would plunge her into despair. He also realized that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother's behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. For instance, to set out for England he would have to wait indefinitely in a Spanish camp on the way through Spain; or, on arriving in England or in Algiers he might be put into an office to fill up forms. Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed towards only one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous—and it might be frustrated on the way. At the same time, he was hesitating between two kinds of morality; on the one side the morality of sympathy, of personal devotion and, on the other side, a morality of wider scope but of more debatable validity. He had to choose between those two. What could help him to choose? Could the Christian doctrine? No. Christian doctrine says: Act with charity, love your neighbour, deny yourself for others, choose the way which is hardest, and so forth. But which is the harder road? To whom does one owe the more brotherly love, the patriot or the mother? Which is the more useful aim, the general one of fighting in and for the whole community, or the precise aim of helping one particular person to live? Who can give an answer to that *à priori*? No one. Nor is it given in any ethical scripture. The Kantian ethic says, Never regard another as a means, but always as an end. Very well; if I remain with my mother, I shall be regarding her as the end and not as a means: but by the same token I am in danger of treating as means those who are fighting on my behalf; and the converse is also true, that if I go to the aid of the combatants I shall be treating them as the end at the risk of treating my mother as a means.

If values are uncertain, if they are still too abstract to determine the particular, concrete case under consideration, nothing remains but to trust in our instincts. That is what this young man tried to do; and when I saw him he said, "In the end, it is feeling that counts; the direction in which it is really pushing me is the one I ought to choose. If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her—my will to be avenged, all my longings for action and adventure then I stay with her. If, on the contrary, I feel that my love for her is not enough, I go." But how does one estimate

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the strength of a feeling? The value of his feeling for his mother was determined precisely by the fact that he was standing by her. I may say that I love a certain friend enough to sacrifice such or such a sum of money for him, but I cannot prove that unless I have done it. I may say, "I love my mother enough to remain with her," if actually I have remained with her. I can only estimate the strength of this affection if I have performed an action by which it is defined and ratified. But if I then appeal to this affection to justify my action, I find myself drawn into a vicious circle.



*Detail from Poster for French Free Forces, Museum of the Order of the Liberator*

Moreover, as Gide has very well said, a sentiment which is play-acting and one which is vital are two things that are hardly distinguishable one from another. To decide that I love my mother by staying beside her, and to play a comedy the upshot of which is that I do so—these are nearly the same thing. In other words, feeling is formed by the deeds that one does; therefore I cannot consult it as a guide to action. And that is to say that I can neither seek within myself for an authentic impulse to action, nor can I expect, from some ethic, formulae that will enable me to act. You may say that the youth did, at least, go to a professor to ask for advice. But if you seek counsel—from a priest, for example you have selected that priest; and at bottom you already knew, more or less, what he would advise. In other words, to choose an adviser is nevertheless to commit oneself by that choice. If you are a Christian, you will say, Consult a priest; but there are collaborationists, priests who are resisters and priests who wait for the tide to turn: which will you choose? Had this young man chosen a priest of the resistance, or one of the collaboration, he would have decided beforehand the kind of advice he was to receive. Similarly, in coming to me, he knew what advice I should give him, and I had but one reply to make. You are

free, therefore choose that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world. The Catholics will reply, "Oh, but they are!" Very well; still, it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs. While I was imprisoned, I made the acquaintance of a somewhat remarkable man, a Jesuit, who had become a member of that order in the following manner. In his life he had suffered a succession of rather severe setbacks. His father had died when he was a child, leaving him in poverty, and he had been awarded a free scholarship in a religious institution, where he had been made continually to feel that he was accepted for charity's sake, and, in consequence, he had been denied several of those distinctions and honours which gratify children. Later, about the age of eighteen, he came to grief in a sentimental affair; and finally, at twenty-two—this was a trifle in itself, but it was the last drop that overflowed his cup—he failed in his military examination. This young man, then, could regard himself as a total failure: it was a sign—but a sign of what? He might have taken refuge in bitterness or despair. But he took it—very cleverly for him—as a sign that he was not intended for secular success, and that only the attainments of religion, those of sanctity and of faith, were accessible to him. He interpreted his record as a message from God, and became a member of the Order. Who can doubt but that this decision as to the meaning of the sign was his, and his alone? One could have drawn quite different conclusions from such a series of reverses—as, for example, that he had better become a carpenter or a revolutionary. For the decipherment of the sign, however, he bears the entire responsibility. That is what "abandonment" implies, that we ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish.

### [Despair]

As for "despair," the meaning of this expression is extremely simple. It merely means that we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible. Whenever one wills anything, there are always these elements of probability. If I am counting upon a visit from a friend, who may be coming by train or by tram, I presuppose that the train will arrive at the appointed time, or that the tram will not be derailed. I remain in the realm of possibilities; but one does not rely upon any possibilities beyond those that are strictly concerned in one's action. Beyond the point at which the possibilities under consideration cease to affect my action, I ought to dis-

interest myself. For there is no God and no convenient design, which can adapt the world and all its possibilities to my will. When Descartes said, "Conquer yourself rather than the world," what he meant was, at bottom, the same—that we should act without hope...

**From the reading...**

"The doctrine I am presenting before you is precisely the opposite of this, since it declares that there is no reality except in action. It goes further, indeed, and adds, 'Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is.'"

**[You Are What You Live]**

Quietism is the attitude of people who say, "Let others do what I cannot do." The doctrine I am presenting before you is precisely the opposite of this, since it declares that there is no reality except in action. It goes further, indeed, and adds, "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is." Hence we can well understand why some people are horrified by our teaching. For many have but one resource to sustain them in their misery, and that is to think, "Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been. I admit I have never had a great love or a great friendship; but that is because I never met a man or a woman who were worthy of it; if I have not written any very good books, it is because I had not the leisure to do so; or, if I have had no children to whom X could devote myself it is because I did not find the man I could have lived with. So there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions." But in reality and for the existentialist, there is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving; there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art. The genius of Proust is the totality of the works of Proust; the genius of Racine is the series of

his tragedies, outside of which there is nothing. Why should we attribute to Racine the capacity to write yet another tragedy when that is precisely what he—did not write? In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait. No doubt this thought may seem comfortless to one who has not made a success of his life. On the other hand, it puts everyone in a position to understand that reality alone is reliable; that dreams, expectations and hopes serve to define a man only as deceptive dreams abortive hopes, expectations unfulfilled; that is to say, they define him negatively, not positively. Nevertheless, when one says, "You are nothing else but what you live," it does not imply that an artist is to be judged solely by his works of art, for a thousand other things contribute no less to his definition as a man. What we mean to say is that a man is no other than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings...

We have now, I think, dealt with a certain number of the reproaches against existentialism. You have seen that it cannot be regarded as a philosophy of quietism since it defines man by his action; nor as a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic, the destiny of man is placed within himself. Nor is it an attempt to discourage man from action since it tells him that there is no hope except in his action, and that the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed. Upon this level therefore, what we are considering is an ethic of action and self-commitment. However, we are still reproached, upon these few data, for confining man within his individual subjectivity. There again people badly misunderstand us.

### **[Subjectivity]**

Our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual, and that for strictly philosophic reasons. It is not because we are bourgeois, but because we seek to base our teaching upon the truth, and not upon a collection of fine theories, full of hope but lacking real foundations. And at the point of departure there cannot be any other truth than this, I think, therefore I am, which is the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself. Every theory which begins with man, outside of this moment of self-attainment, is a theory which thereby suppresses the truth, for outside of the Cartesian *cogito*, all objects are no more than probable, and any doctrine of probabilities which is not attached to a truth will crumble into nothing. In order to define the probable one must possess the true. Before

there can be any truth whatever, then, there must be an absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self.

### **[Intersubjectivity]**

In the second place, this theory alone is compatible with the dignity of man, it is the only one which does not make man into an object. All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man including oneself as an object—that is, as a set of pre-determined reactions, in no way different from the patterns of qualities and phenomena which constitute a table, or a chair or a stone. Our aim is precisely to establish the human kingdom as a pattern of values in distinction from the material world. But the subjectivity which we thus postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism, for as we have demonstrated, it is not only one's own self that one discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too. Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say "I think" we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He recognizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked or jealous) unless others recognize him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts mine. and which cannot think or will without doing so either for or against me. Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of "inter-subjectivity" It is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are.

### **[Human Condition]**

Furthermore, although it is impossible to find in each and every man a universal essence that can be called human nature, there is nevertheless a human universality of condition. It is not by chance that the thinkers of today are so much more ready to speak of the condition than of the nature

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of man. By his condition they understand, with more or less clarity, all the limitations which *à priori* define man's fundamental situation in the universe. His historical situations are variable: man may be born a slave in a pagan society or may be a feudal baron, or a proletarian. But what never vary are the necessities of being in the world, of having to labor and to die there. These limitations are neither subjective nor objective, or rather there is both a subjective and an objective aspect of them. Objective, because we meet with them everywhere and they are everywhere recognizable: and subjective because they are lived and are nothing if man does not live them—if, that is to say, he does not freely determine himself and his existence in relation to them. And, diverse though man's purpose may be, at least none of them is wholly foreign to me, since every human purpose presents itself as an attempt either to surpass these limitations, or to widen them, or else to deny or to accommodate oneself to them. Consequently every purpose, however individual it may be, is of universal value. Every purpose, even that of a Chinese, an Indian or a Negro, can be understood by a European. To say it can be understood, means that the European of 1945 may be striving out of a certain situation towards the same limitations in the same way, and that he may reconceive in himself the purpose of the Chinese, of the Indian or the African. In every purpose there is universality, in this sense that every purpose is comprehensible to every man. Not that this or that purpose defines man for ever, but that it may be entertained again and again. There is always some way of understanding an idiot, a child, a primitive man or a foreigner if one has sufficient information. In this sense we may say that there is a human universality, but it is not something given; it is being perpetually made. I make this universality in choosing myself; I also make it by understanding the purpose of any other man, of whatever epoch. This absoluteness of the act of choice does not alter the relativity of each epoch.



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*Paris, France, Refugee Camp WW II, Library of Congress*

What is at the very heart and center of existentialism, is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of humanity—a commitment always understandable, to no matter whom in no matter what epoch—and its bearing upon the relativity of the cultural pattern which may result from such absolute commitment. One must observe equally the relativity of Cartesianism and the absolute character of the Cartesian commitment. In this sense you may say, if you like, that every one of us makes the absolute by breathing, by eating, by sleeping or by behaving in any fashion whatsoever. There is no difference between free being—being as self-committal, as existence choosing its essence—and absolute being. And there is no difference whatever between being as an absolute, temporarily localized that is, localized in history—and universally intelligible being.

**From the reading...**

"What is at the very heart and center of existentialism, is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of humanity..."

**[Moral Choice]**

This does not completely refute the charge of subjectivism. Indeed that objection appears in several other forms, of which the first is as follows. People say to us, "Then it does not matter what you do," and they say this in various ways. First they tax us with anarchy; then they say, "You cannot judge others, for there is no reason for preferring one purpose to another;" finally, they may say, "Everything being merely voluntary in this choice of yours, you give away with one hand what you pretend to gain with the other." These three are not very serious objections. As to the first, to say that it does not matter what you choose is not correct. In one sense choice is possible, but what is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must know that if I do not choose, that is still a choice. This, although it may appear merely formal, is of great importance as a limit to fantasy and caprice. For, when I confront a real situation—for example, that I am a sexual being, able to have relations with a being of the other sex and able to have children—I am obliged to choose my attitude to it, and in every respect I bear the responsibility of the choice which, in committing myself, also commits the whole of humanity. Even if my choice is determined by no *à priori* value whatever, it can have nothing to do with caprice: and if anyone thinks that this is only Gide's theory of the *acte gratuit* over again, he has failed to see the enormous difference between this theory and that of Gide. Gide does not know what a situation is, his "act" is one of pure caprice. In our view, on the contrary, man finds himself in an organized situation in which he is himself involved: his choice involves mankind in its entirety, and he cannot avoid choosing. Either he must remain single, or he must marry without having children, or he must marry and have children. In any case, and whichever—he may choose, it is impossible for him, in respect of this situation, not to take complete responsibility. Doubtless he chooses without reference to any pre-established value, but

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it is unjust to tax him with caprice. Rather let us say that the moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art.

But here I must at once digress to make it quite clear that we are not propounding an æsthetic morality, for our adversaries are disingenuous enough to reproach us even with that. I mention the work of art only by way of comparison. That being understood, does anyone reproach an artist, when he paints a picture, for not following rules established *à priori*? Does one ever ask what is the picture that he ought to paint? As everyone knows, there is no pre-defined picture for him to make; the artist applies himself to the composition of a picture, and the picture that ought to be made is precisely that which he will have made. As everyone knows, there are no æsthetic values *à priori*, but there are values which will appear in due course in the coherence of the picture, in the relation between the will to create and the finished work. No one can tell what the painting of tomorrow will be like; one cannot judge a painting until it is done. What has that to do with morality? We are in the same creative situation. We never speak of a work of art as irresponsible; when we are discussing a canvas by Picasso, we understand very well that the composition became what it is at the time when he was painting it, and that his works are part and parcel of his entire life.

It is the same upon the plane of morality. There is this in common between art and morality, that in both we have to do with creation and invention. We cannot decide *à priori* what it is that should be done. I think it was made sufficiently clear to you in the case of that student who came to see me, that to whatever ethical system he might appeal, the Kantian or any other, he could find no sort of guidance whatever; he was obliged to invent the law for himself. Certainly we cannot say that this man, in choosing to remain with his mother—that is, in taking sentiment, personal devotion and concrete charity as his moral foundations—would be making an irresponsible choice, nor could we do so if he preferred the sacrifice of going away to England. Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him. We define man only in relation to his commitments; it is therefore absurd to reproach us for irresponsibility in our choice.

In the second place, people say to us, “You are unable to judge others.” This is true in one sense and false in another. It is true in this sense, that whenever a man chooses his purpose and his commitment in all clearness

and in all sincerity, whatever that purpose may be, it is impossible for him to prefer another. It is true in the sense that we do not believe in progress. Progress implies amelioration; but man is always the same, facing a situation which is always changing, and choice remains always a choice in the situation. The moral problem has not changed since the time when it was a choice between slavery and anti-slavery. . .

### **[Authenticity and Self-Deception]**

We can judge, nevertheless, for, as I have said, one chooses in view of others, and in view of others one chooses himself. One can judge, first—and perhaps this is not a judgment of value, but it is a logical judgment—that in certain cases choice is founded upon an error, and in others upon the truth. One can judge a man by saying that he deceives himself. Since we have defined the situation of man as one of free choice, without excuse and without help, any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver. One may object: "But why should he not choose to deceive himself?" I reply that it is not for me to judge him morally, but I define his self-deception as an error. Here one cannot avoid pronouncing a judgment of truth. The self-deception is evidently a falsehood, because it is a dissimulation of man's complete liberty of commitment. Upon this same level, I say that it is also a self-deception if I choose to declare that certain values are incumbent upon me; I am in contradiction with myself if I will these values and at the same time say that they impose themselves upon me. If anyone says to me, "And what if I wish to deceive myself?" I answer, "There is no reason why you should not, but I declare that you are doing so, and that the attitude of strict consistency alone is that of good faith." Furthermore, I can pronounce a moral judgment. For I declare that freedom, in respect of concrete circumstances, can have no other end and aim but itself; and when once a man has seen that values depend upon himself, in that state of forsakenness he can will only one thing, and that is freedom as the foundation of all values. That does not mean that he wills it in the abstract: it simply means that the actions of men of good faith have, as their ultimate significance, the quest of freedom itself as such. A man who belongs to some communist or revolutionary society wills certain concrete ends, which imply the will to freedom, but that freedom is willed in community. We will freedom for freedom's sake, in and through particular circumstances. And in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of

others and that the freedom of others depends upon our own. Obviously, freedom as the definition of a man does not depend upon others, but as soon as there is a commitment, I am obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as my own. I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim. Consequently, when I recognize, as entirely authentic, that man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and that he is a free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time I realize that I cannot not will the freedom of others. Thus, in the name of that will to freedom which is implied in freedom itself, I can form judgments upon those who seek to hide from themselves the wholly voluntary nature of their existence and its complete freedom. Those who hide from this total freedom, in a guise of solemnity or with deterministic excuses, I shall call cowards. Others, who try to show that their existence is necessary, when it is merely an accident of the appearance of the human race on earth—I shall call scum. But neither cowards nor scum can be identified except upon the plane of strict authenticity. Thus, although the content of morality is variable, a certain form of this morality is universal. Kant declared that freedom is a will both to itself and to the freedom of others. Agreed: but he thinks that the formal and the universal suffice for the constitution of a morality. We think, on the contrary, that principles that are too abstract break down when we come to defining action. To take once again the case of that student; by what authority, in the name of what golden rule of morality, do you think he could have decided, in perfect peace of mind, either to abandon his mother or to remain with her? There are no means of judging. The content is always concrete, and therefore unpredictable; it has always to be invented. The one thing that counts, is to know whether the invention is made in the name of freedom...

### **[Existential Humanism]**

The third objection, stated by saying, "You take with one hand what you give with the other," means, at bottom, "Your values are not serious, since you choose them yourselves." To that I can only say that I am very sorry that it should be so; but if I have excluded God the Father, there must be somebody to invent values. We have to take things as they are. And moreover, to say that we invent values means neither more nor less than this; that there is no sense in life *à priori*. Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose. Therefore, you can see that there is a possibility of

creating a human community...

But there is another sense of the word [humanism], of which the fundamental meaning is this: Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of self-surpassing) with subjectivity (in such a sense that man is not shut up in himself but forever present in a human universe)—it is this that we call existential humanism. This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human.

You can see from these few reflections that nothing could be more unjust than the objections people raise against us. Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position. Its intention is not in the least that of plunging men into despair. And if by despair one means as the Christians do—any attitude of unbelief, the despair of the existentialists is something different. Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confining their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope.

**From the reading...**

"The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion."

## Related Ideas

*The Cry* (<http://www.thecry.com/existentialism/sartre/existen.html>). *Existentialism - John-Paul Sartre - On-line Works*. This award winning site makes available biography, links, quotes, images, discussion, and online works. Especially noteworthy are the works *The Wall* and *Existentialism and Human Emotions*.

*Jean-Paul Sartre* (<http://members.aol.com/DonJohnR/Philosophy/Sartre.html>). *Philosophy and Existentialism*. Many links, on-line works, bibliography, and related topics compose this site.

*The Personality Project* (<http://www.personality-project.org/>). William Revelle's comprehensive and authoritative site on personality theory and related research, including readings, abstracts, and further links.

**From the reading...**

"There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity."



*Seven Bridges, Paris, Library of Congress*

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Discuss the following analysis by Søren Kierkegaard: "Doubt is thought's despair; despair is personality's doubt... Doubt and despair... belong to completely different spheres; different sides of the soul are set in motion... Despair is an expression of the total personality, doubt only of thought."<sup>2</sup>
2. Explain how it can be true on Sartre's view that whatever the conditions under which a person lives, that person is just as free as anyone else.
3. What is meant by the statement "Man is the future of man"? Compare this statement with the Greek sophist Protagoras's doctrine:

Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not.<sup>3</sup>

2. Søren Kierkegaard. "Balance Between Aesthetic and Ethical," in *Either/Or*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

3. John Burnet. *Early Greek Philosophy* (2nd ed.). London: Ada and Charles Black, 1908, 136.



Chapter 25. "Man Makes Himself" by Jean-Paul Sartre

Be sure to take note whether these ideas are subjective or relativistic.

4. What is the relation between human nature and the essence of man? In what ways does the success of the Human Genome Project (the DNA sequencing of the entire human genome) presuppose that "essence precedes existence"? Take due account of the ethical, legal, and sociological consequences of knowing beforehand the heritable characteristics of each individual and the claim that many personality traits are now known to be heritable.
5. Phenomenologically compare the notion of authenticity and self-deception with these pejorative labels: wuss, wimp, and nerd.
6. Compare Sartre's concept of "despair" with Albert Camus's discussion of this concept. (For convenience, check the index to this text for relevant references.) How is despair different from "absence of hope"?

**From Jean-Paul Sartre's *Search For A Method...***

"Philosophy appears to some people as a homogeneous milieu: there thoughts are born and die, there systems are built, and there, in turn, they collapse. Others take Philosophy for a specific attitude which we can freely adopt at will. Still others see it as a determined segment of culture. In our view Philosophy does not exist."

# Part IV. Epistemology and Metaphysics



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

In this part of our study of philosophy we look at the question as to whether we can know anything about anything at all. If knowledge can be had, then how does one get it? And what kinds of things can be known? Does skepticism rule? Topics are briefly introduced here in a somewhat non-standard manner.

Rather than taking a traditional approach in epistemology and metaphysics, we will use a variety of studies to illustrate how these two divisions of philosophy are interrelated. Modern science and its implications for everyday life are seen as good examples of the integration of epistemology and metaphysics.

In our first reading, August Comte argues that our knowledge in the sciences has features unique to each science. Just as in social processes, Comte believes our knowledge passes through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the positive or scientific. On this view, knowledge can only be obtained by observation and reason in the discovery of lawful succession. John Stuart Mill, who admired Comte's work, argues

that the science of human nature can become an exact science just like the sciences of physics and astronomy. The reason, he thinks, we do not have comparable knowledge about human nature and behavior is that the antecedent conditions of human beings are far too many and complex to be measured with sufficient accuracy.

The vision of a unified scientific understanding of reality is provided in the first glimpse of “a theory of everything” suggested by the scientific materialism of Frederick Engels. Engels argues that discoveries in the sciences provide the basis by which *all* aspects of the universe can be understood and unified in terms of the philosophy of materialism.

An understanding of knowledge and reality is based on the nature and tests of truth. A pragmatic theory of truth is urged by William James. He thinks what is true is essentially what is useful. Since we discover the true and the useful in the same manner, he believes false beliefs are those beliefs which are not useful and do not allow us to accomplish our goals. One problem with the pragmatic theory of truth is, of course, that sometimes a useful idea turns out to be false.

The coherence theory of truth sees truth as a property of a system of inter-related statements—much as that exemplified in discipline of geometry. On this theory, we can find out if a statement is true when it can be derived from some other statement or statements known to be true. Knowledge, then, is represented by the system of logically consistent statements known through their logical relations with each other. Harold H. Joachim provides a particularly interesting version of this theory of truth.

The correspondence theory of truth, however, is different. The correspondence theory, as explained by Bertrand Russell, holds that facts in the world are distinguishable from our thoughts about those facts. When a statement expressing an idea is directly related to, or is in accord with, a fact, then that statement is said to be true. A false statement is one that does not “correspond” to the facts. A major problem with the correspondence theory of truth is the question of what counts as being a fact. In the first chapter of this text, we pointed out that facts, strictly speaking, are not “in the world” since they do not have size, shape, or weight as do other things in the world. Facts are not colored, heavy, or large.

The problem of future truths illustrates a straightforward example of an interface between a philosophical theory and a number of a real-world applications. In Aristotle’s “The Sea-Fight Tomorrow,” a knotty problem

involving language, truth, and reality is described. Aristotle suggests two ways of resolution; other solutions are left to the reader.

The final reading in this section brings together a number of philosophical issues as related to what makes a life significant. William James reminds us that the function of our study of ideas is not for knowledge for its own sake but for the purpose of human aspiration, endurance, and effort.

**Where to go for help...**

Notes, quizzes, tests, and related materials for this section of readings, "Epistemology and Metaphysics," can be found at *Epistemology* (<http://philosophy.lander.edu/intro/epistemology.html>) and *Metaphysics* (<http://philosophy.lander.edu/intro/metaphysics.html>).

# Chapter 26

## “Positive Philosophy” by August Comte



*August Comte, Thoemmes*

### **About the author...**

August Comte (1798-1857), a founder of sociology, believes 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, pass 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 facts. His development of posi-

tivism 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*,<sup>1</sup> 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"?

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

## The Reading Selection *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



Chapter 26. “Positive Philosophy” by August Comte

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.<sup>2</sup>
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 26. "Positive Philosophy" by August Comte

2. Consider some of the concepts used in some of our reading selections: the "Idea of the Good" of Plato, the monism of Spinoza, and the "science" of Mill. 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"?
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, for example, sought a religion of humanity for his own time.

# Chapter 27

## “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, superseding capitalism. In collaboration with Karl Marx, Engels produced a number of works in social philoso-

Chapter 27. “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*,<sup>1</sup> 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’ 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 the 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.<sup>2</sup> In Engels' 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 a 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' argument that when Friedrich Wöhler accidentally created the organic compound urea by heating the inorganic compound ammonium cyanate, vitalism<sup>3</sup> 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]

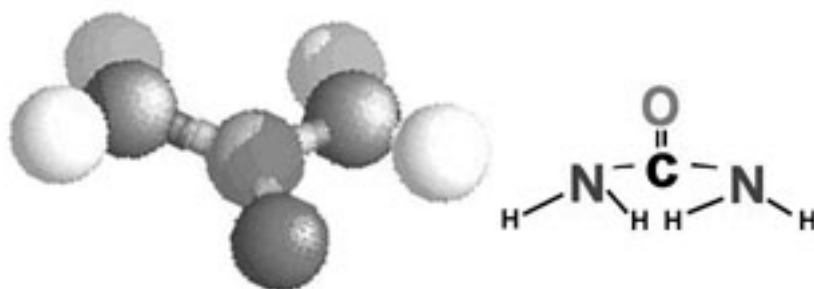
... empirical natural science made such an advance and achieved such bril-

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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]**

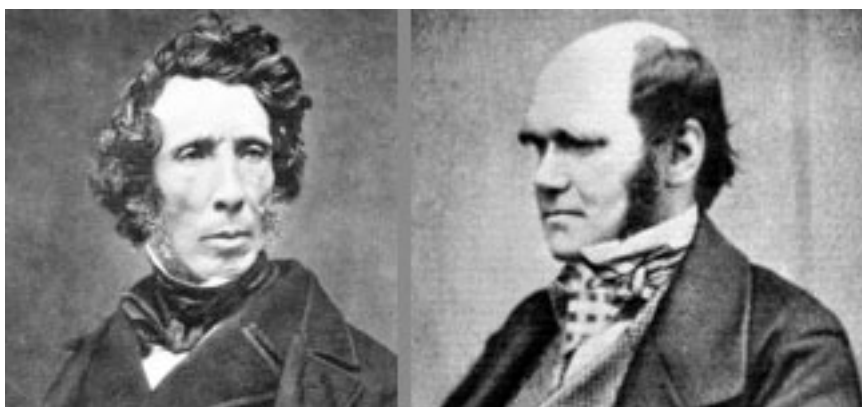
The second—chronologically earlier—discovery was that of the organic cell by Schwann and Schleiden—of the cell as the unity, out of the multiplication and differentiation of which all organisms, except the very lowest, arise and develop. With this discovery, the investigation of the organic, living products 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 27. "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



Chapter 27. “Science of Natural Processes” by Frederick Engels

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’ *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"

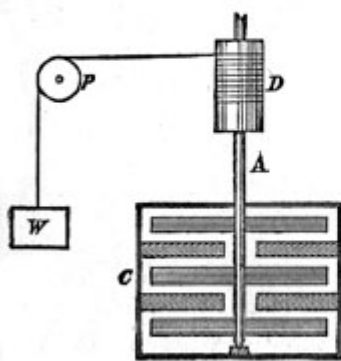
### From the reading...

"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

FIG. 311.



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.

If one pound of water at  $60^{\circ}$  F. be put into the cylinder  $C$ , it will require the expenditure of 772 foot-pounds of energy on the part of the falling weight  $W$  to raise its temperature by agitation to  $61^{\circ}$  F.

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

**Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 1850**

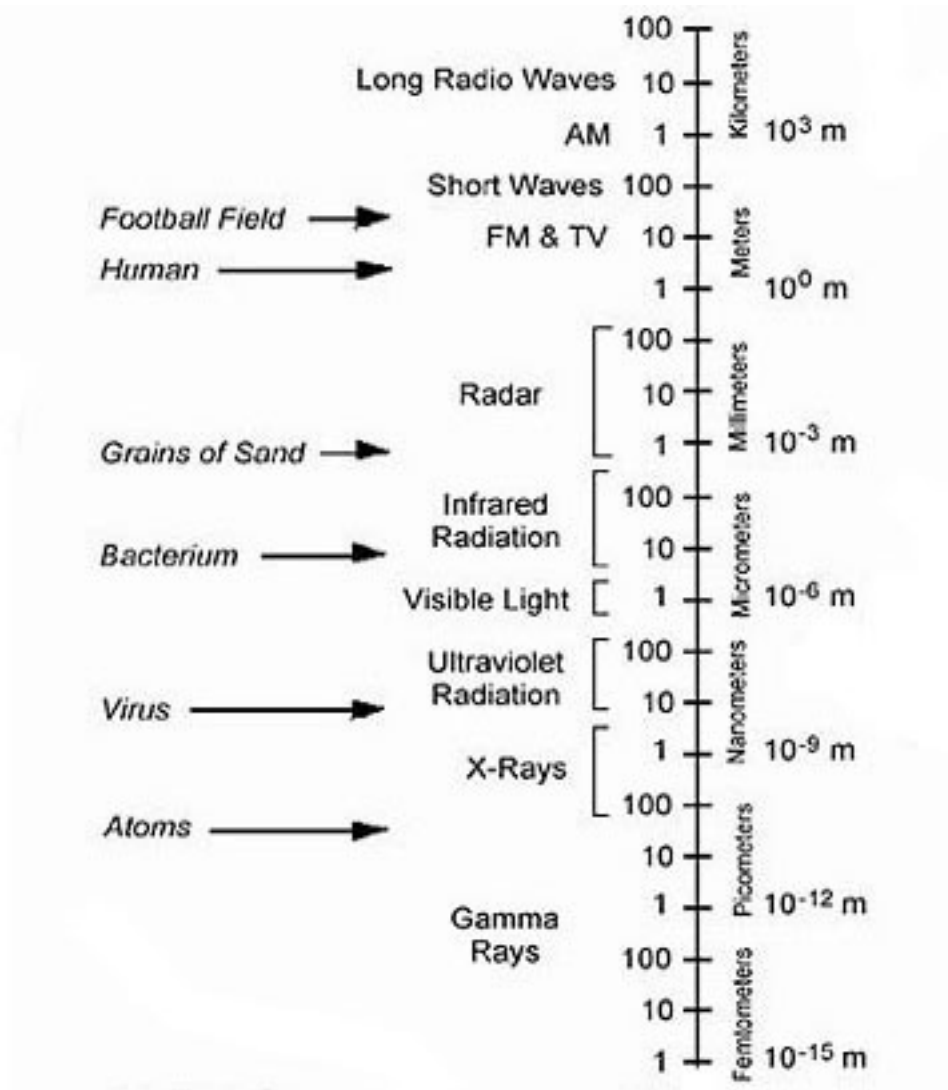
"It is clear enough that 'this generation' tends to put natural science in the place of religion."

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. What are some of the advantages of a philosophy of mechanistic materialism?<sup>4</sup> 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.

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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 28

## “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 generally considered the foundational statement on the nature of happi-

Chapter 28. “A Science of Human Nature” by John Stuart Mill

ness 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*,<sup>1</sup> 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...**

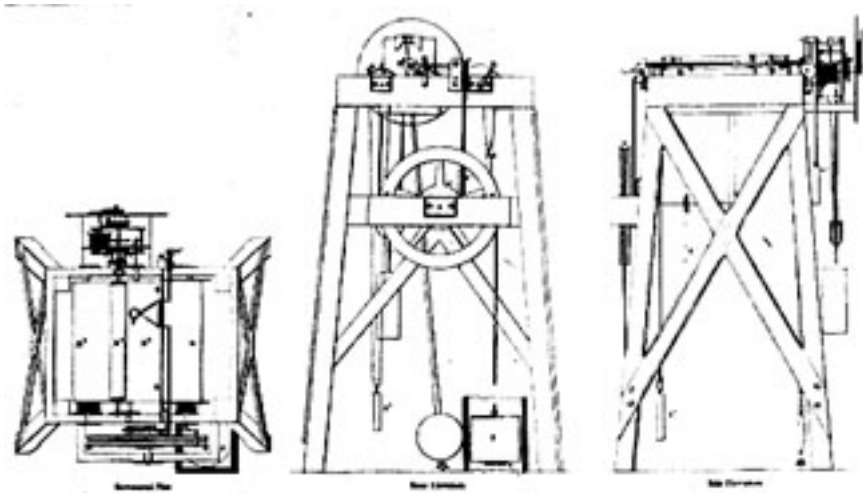
"... we even now know enough of the ultimate laws by which mental phenomena are determined to enable us in many cases to predict, with tolerable certainty..."

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

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

Mill, John Stuart ([http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/M/MI/MILL\\_JOHN\\_\STUART.htm](http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/M/MI/MILL_JOHN_\STUART.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)?
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 29

## “Coherence Theory of Truth” by Harold H. Joachim



*Merton College, Oxford, Library of Congress*

### **About the author...**

The Idealist Harold H. Joachim (1868-1938), a professor of logic at Merton College, Oxford, is one of several philosophers who formulated an idealist conception of truth. His theory articulated the concept of “truth-or-knowledge.” Joachim’s teaching influence helped maintain British Idealism as a viable philosophy until the outbreak of World War II. His notion of truth as a “living and moving whole” as stated below in our reading se-

lection from “The Coherence-Notion of Truth” in *The Nature of Truth; An Essay* resembles the dialectic in Hegelian idealism.

### About the work...

In his *The Nature of Truth; An Essay*,<sup>1</sup> Harold H. Joachim gives one of the classic statements of the coherence theory of truth. On his view, human truth is incomplete, for there can be no absolute truth unless the whole system of knowledge could be completed. Whatever is true not only is consistent with a system of other propositions but also is true to the extent that it is a necessary constituent of a systematic whole. Joachim emphasizes that since the truth is a property of the whole, individual propositions are only true in a derivative sense—literally they are partly true and partly false. Only the system of an extensive body of propositions as a whole can be rightly said to be true.

#### From the reading...

“Truth, we have said, *is* in its essence conceivability or systematic coherence...”

### Ideas of Interest from *The Nature of Truth*

1. Explain Joachim’s characterization of what is conceivable. How does his use of the term differ from a good lexical definition of “conceivable”?
2. Summarize Descartes’ theory of knowledge as recounted by Joachim. How does Joachim’s theory of the systematization of knowledge differ from Descartes’ theory?

1. Harold H. Joachim. *The Nature of Truth; An Essay*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1906.

3. Summarize the difference between truth and validity as expressed in formal logic. According to Joachim, why cannot formal logic guarantee truth? How does Joachim's "systematic coherence" differ from the "consistency" or the "validity" of formal logic?
4. Summarize Joachim's description of the coherence theory of truth.

## The Reading Selection from *The Nature of Truth*

### [Coherence as Conceivability]

We may start with the following as a provisional and rough formulation of the coherence-notion. "Anything is true which can be conceived. It is true because, and in so far as, it can be conceived. Conceivability is the essential nature of truth." And we may proceed at once to remove a possible misunderstanding of the term "conceive." We do not mean by "conceive" to form a mental picture; and we shall not be dismayed when we hear that the Antipodes were once "inconceivable," or that a Centaur can be "conceived." For it may be difficult—or even, if you like, impossible—to "image" people walking head downwards; and to "picture" a horse with the head and shoulders of a man may be as easy as you please. All this is quite irrelevant, and does not touch our position. To "conceive" means for us to think out clearly and logically, to hold many elements together in a connection necessitated by their several contents. And to be "conceivable" means to be a "significant whole," or a whole possessed of meaning for thought. A "significant whole" is such that all its constituent elements reciprocally involve one another, or reciprocally determine one another's being as contributory features in a single concrete meaning. The elements thus cohering constitute a whole which may be said to control the reciprocal adjustment of its elements, as an end controls its constituent means. And in this sense a Centaur is "inconceivable," whilst the Antipodes are clearly "conceivable." For the elements constitutive of the Centaur refuse to enter into reciprocal adjustment. They collide amongst themselves, or they clash with some of the constitutive elements in that wider sphere of experience, that larger significant whole, in which the Centaur must strive for a place. The horse-man might pass externally as a convenient shape for rapid movement; but how about his internal economy, the structure,

adjustment and functioning of his inner organs? If he is to be "actual," the animal kingdom is his natural home. But if we persisted in our attempt to locate the creature there, we should inevitably bring confusion and contradiction into that sphere of significant being— so far at least as it is manifest to us in our anatomical and physiological knowledge. And, on the other hand, the being of the Antipodes is a necessary interconnected piece in that puzzle of which our astronomical science is the coherent exposition. The Antipodes are "conceivable" in the sense that they are *forced* upon any thinker for whom the earth and the solar system are to possess significance; *i.e.*, the Antipodes are a necessary constituent of a significant whole, as that whole must be conceived.<sup>2</sup>



*Centaur from the Parthenon, (detail) William Smith, A History of Greece.*

2. I have not referred to the negative formulation, which finds the criterion of a necessary truth in the inconceivability of its opposite... the distinction between "necessary" and "contingent" truths is not one which I should be prepared to accept; and even apart from that the negative formulation is unsuitable for our present purpose. A *criterion* of truth—*i.e.*, something other than the truth itself, but which we are to recognize the truth—is not what we require. We want to know what truth in its nature is, not by what characteristics in its opposing falsehood we may infer its presence...



### [Coherence as Science]

Thus "conceivability" means for us *systematic coherence*, and is the determining characteristic of a "significant whole." The systematic coherence of such a whole is expressed most adequately and explicitly in the system of reasoned knowledge which we call a science or a branch of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Any element of such a whole shares in this characteristic to a greater or less degree—*i.e.* is more or less "conceivable"—in proportion as the whole, with its determinate inner articulation, shines more or less clearly through that element; or in proportion as the element, in manifesting itself, manifests also with more or less clearness and fullness the remaining elements in their reciprocal adjustment.

... Truth, we have said, *is* in its essence conceivability or systematic coherence...

We spoke of science as an explicit analysis and reasoned reconstruction of the systematic coherence of a significant whole; but this sounds uncommonly like a reversion to the correspondence-notion. Science would be "true," so far as its system of demonstrations reconstructs—*i.e.*, *repeats or corresponds to*—the systematic coherence which *is* the truth as a character of the Real.

Moreover, we have admitted degrees of conceivability, and therefore also degrees of truth. But we have not explained, and perhaps could not explain, the ideal of perfect conceivability and perfect truth by reference to which these degrees are to be estimated.

...let me endeavour to throw further light on the theory just sketched, by contrasting it with two very different views to which it bears some superficial resemblance.

#### (i) [Descartes' Clear and Distinct Ideas]

When Descartes laid it down as a principle for the seeker after truth "to

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3. I am not denying that a "significant whole" may find expression in other forms and at other levels than that of discursive thinking [such as moral, artistic, and religious ideals]. But [the] significant whole *in its character as truth* is most adequately expressed at the level of reflective thinking, and in the form of the science or philosophy of [the form]; for such a science is the explicit analysis and the reasoned reconstruction of the inner organization (the systematic coherence)...

affirm nothing as true except that which he could clearly and distinctly perceive," he was in reality presupposing a very definite theory of knowledge... The content of such an "intuition," viz. that which we apprehend intuitively as self-evident, is a "simple idea" or rather (as Descartes sometimes<sup>4</sup> more clearly expresses it) a "simple proposition." Its "simplicity" does not exclude inner distinction; for it is the immediate, but necessary, cohesion of two elements or two constituent ideas. In other words, the self-evident *datum*, which Descartes calls a "simple idea" or a "simple proposition," is a hypothetical judgment so formulated that the antecedent immediately necessitates the consequent, though the consequent need not reciprocally involve the antecedent.<sup>5</sup>



René Descartes and *La Geometrie*, Thoemmes

The elements in the content of an "intuition" cohere by the immediate necessity which binds consequent to antecedent in a hypothetical judgement of the kind explained. But the content *as a whole* is grasped intuitively, or immediately, as an indubitable self-evident *datum*. Such self-evident indubitable truths constitute the foundation on which the structure of scientific and philosophical knowledge is built. There are the principles, from

4. Particularly in the *Regulæ*; cf. e.g. *Reg.* iii, xi, xii.

5. Cf. Descartes' own instances: "*cogito ergo sum*," i.e. "if self-consciousness, then existence," but not necessarily also "if existence, then self-consciousness." So "2+2=4," i.e. "if 2 be added to 2, there must be 4"; but there may be 4 without this mode of addition, as is evident from "3+1=4"...

which the whole system of demonstrated and demonstrable truth must be derived.<sup>6</sup> And this system is, so to say, a network of chains of propositions. The links in each chain form an uninterrupted sequence from its first link. They follow with unbroken logical coherence from a self-evident *datum*, a "simple proposition" apprehended intuitively. Each derivative link is grasped by the intellect as the necessary consequent of a link or links intuited as indubitable truths, and *as thus grasped* itself is manifest as an indubitable truth.

Thus the ideal of knowledge for Descartes is a coherent system of truths, where each truth is apprehended in its logical position: the immediate as the basis, and the mediate truths in their necessary dependence on the immediate. Each truth in this ideal system is a cohesion of different elements united by a logical nexus; and every truth is true *per se* absolutely and unalterably.

**From the reading...**

"... ideally certain knowledge (indubitable truth) is typified in the intuitive grasp of the immediately cohering elements of a 'simple proposition,' such a content is for me so remote from the ideal as hardly to deserve the name of 'truth' at all."

**[Coherence Is the Organized Whole]**

But the theory which I am trying to expound is committed, for good or for evil, to a radically different view of the systematization of knowledge. The image of a chain, admirably suited to illustrate the theory of Descartes, is a sheer distortion of the conception of "coherence" or "conceivability," which, on my view, characterizes truth. The ideal of knowledge for me is a system, not of *truths* but of *truth*. "Coherence" cannot be attached to propositions from the outside: it is not a property which they can acquire by colligation, whilst retaining unaltered the truth they possessed in isolation. And whereas for Descartes ideally certain knowledge (indubitable

6. The mediate truths are reached from the immediate self-evidents by a process which Descartes calls "deduction."...

truth) is typified in the intuitive grasp of the immediately cohering elements of a "simple proposition," such a content is for me so remote from the ideal as hardly to deserve the name of "truth" at all. For it is the smallest and most abstracted fragment of knowledge, a mere mutilated shred torn from the living whole in which alone it possessed its significance. The typical embodiments of the ideal must be sought, not in such isolated intuitions, but rather in the organized whole of a science: for that possesses at least *relatively* immanent and self-contained.

**From the reading...**

"The 'systematic coherence,' in which we are looking for the nature of truth, must not be confused with the 'consistency' of formal logic."

**(ii) [Consistency of Formal Logic]**

The second view with which I propose to contrast the coherence-theory may be regarded as a corollary of the first.<sup>7</sup> For, if there are certain judgments indubitably true, then these are the *materials* of knowledge. And, in the progress of thought, a *form* is imposed upon these materials which arranges without altering them. Truth is linked to truth until the arrangement constitutes that network of chains of truths which is the system of ideally complete knowledge. The form under which the infinitely various materials are ordered, is the universal form of all thinking. It is the characteristic grey of formal consistency, which any and every thinking monotonously paints over all its materials to stamp them as its own. For false materials, as well as true, may be painted with the royal colour. but the result cannot be true *without* this arrangement, which is thus a *sine qua non* of a "negative condition" of truth. We may christen the observance of this condition "validity"; and we may then draw the conclusion that the completely true must also be valid, though the valid may be false. Or if we prefer the term "consistency" we shall point out that consistent lying and consistent error are occasionally achieved, and that a man may be a consistent scoundrel; but that the truth requires for its apprehension and utterance the same consistency of thought and purpose, which must also be expressed in the action

7. I do not suggest that the two views were *historically* so related.

of the morally good man. The consistent, in short, need be neither true nor good; but the good and the true must be consistent.

... And the formal logician has followed a sound instinct in emphasizing the necessity of analysing and grasping this unity, if thinking is to understand itself. But he has erred in looking for the unity as an abstract common feature, to be found in the actual processes of thinking by stripping them of their concrete differences. And it is the same error which has led him to conceive thinking as a dead and finished product instead of a living and moving process. In the end and in principle his error is the failure to conceive a universal except as one element along with others in particular: a failure which is tantamount to the negation of all universals. Or it is the failure to conceive a whole except as the sum of its parts: a failure which is the denial of unity and individual character to that which develops and lives. Hence formal logic assumes that the essential nature of thought is to be found in an abstractly self-identical form; in a tautologous self-consistency, where the "self" has no diversity of content in which a genuine consistency could be manifested, or where diversity of content is cast aside as mere irrelevant material. But the essential nature of thought is a concrete unity, a living individuality. Thought is a form, which moves and expands, and exhibits its consistent character precisely in those ordered articulations of its structure which formal logic impotently dismisses as "mere" materials.

The "systematic coherence," in which we are looking for the nature of truth, must not be confused with the "consistency" of formal logic. A piece of thinking might be free from self-contradiction, might be "consistent" and "valid" as the formal logician understands those terms, and yet it might fail to exhibit that systematic coherence which is truth.

### **[Coherence Theory of Truth]**

We may now proceed to formulate the coherence-theory afresh in the following terms. Truth in its essential nature is that systematic coherence which is the character of a significant whole. A "significant whole" is an organized individual experience, self-fulfilling and self-fulfilled. Its organization *is* the process of its self-fulfilment, and the concrete manifestation of its individuality. But this process is no mere surface-play between static parts within the whole; nor *is* the individuality of the whole, except in the movement which is its manifestation. The whole *is* not, if "is" implies that

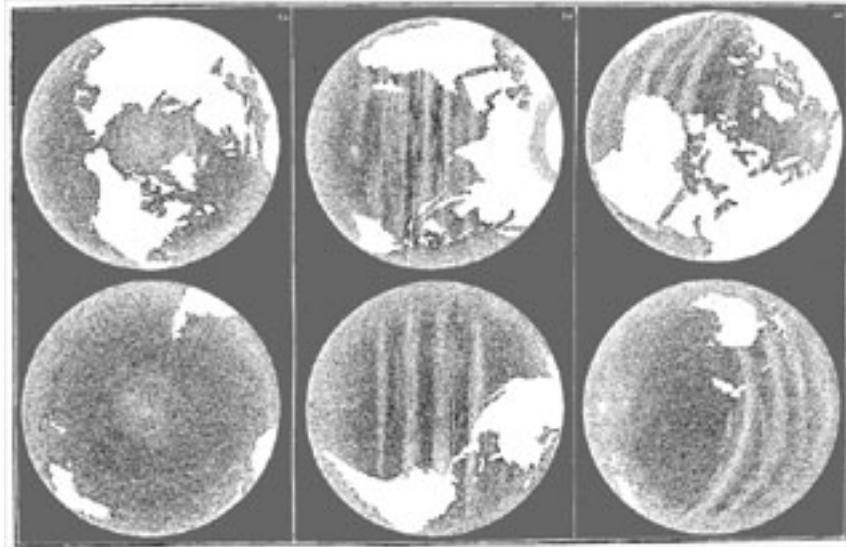
its nature is a finished product prior or posterior to the process, or in any sense apart from it. And the whole *has* no parts, if "to have parts" means to consist of fixed and determinate constituents, from and to which the actions and interactions of its organic life proceed, much as a train may travel backwards and forwards between the terminal stations. Its "parts" are through and through in the process and constituted by it. They are "moments" in the self-fulfilling process which is the individuality of the whole. And the individuality of the whole is *both* the pre-supposition of the distinctive being of its "moments" or parts *and* the resultant which emerges as their co-operation, or which they make and continuously sustain.

**From the reading...**

"Truth in its essential nature is that systematic coherence which is the character of a significant whole."

It is this process of self-fulfilment which is truth, and it is *this* which the theory means by "systematic coherence." The process is not a movement playing between static elements, but the very substance of the moving elements. And the coherence is no abstract form imposed upon the surface of materials, which retain in their depths a nature untouched by the imposition. The coherence—if we call it a "form"—is a form which through and through inter-penetrates its materials; and they—if we call them "materials"—are materials, which retain no inner privacy for themselves in independence of the form. They hold their distinctive being in and through, and not in sheer defiance of, their identical form; and its identity is the concrete sameness of different materials. The materials *are* only as moments in the process which is the continuous emergence of the coherence. And the form *is* only as the sustained process of self-fulfilment, wherein just these materials reveal themselves as constitutive moments of the coherence.

In the above formulation I have endeavoured to express the coherence-notion so as to emphasize the *concreteness* of the coherence which is truth, as against the view which found truth in formal consistency; and I have insisted upon the conception of truth as a living and moving whole, as against the Cartesian view of fixed truths on which the structure of knowledge is built.



*Earth's Antipodes from Space*, Amédée Guillemin, *The Heavens: An Illustrated Handbook of Popular Astronomy*, 1871

## Related Ideas

*The Coherence Theory of Truth* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-coherence/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Excellent summary analysis of the versions, arguments, and criticisms, together with other resources, of the coherence theory of truth.

*Coherence Theory* (<http://www.philosophyonline.co.uk/tok/knowledge8.htm>). *Philosophy Online*. A concise but accurate module on the nature and criticisms of the coherence theory and Idealism.

**From the reading...**

"...I have insisted upon the conception of truth as a living and moving whole, as against the Cartesian view of fixed truths on which the structure of knowledge is built."

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. William James in his essay on the pragmatic theory of truth writes about the Idealists' conception of truth:

But the great assumption of the intellectualists is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you've got your true idea of anything, there's an end of the matter. You're in possession; you *know*; you have fulfilled your thinking destiny. You are where you ought to be mentally; you have obeyed your categorical imperative; and nothing more need follow on that climax of your rational destiny.

Discuss how much James' observation of the Idealist's notion of truth applies to Joachim's statement of the coherence theory of truth.

2. On the one hand, William James' states the relationship between "truth" and "good" in his essay on pragmatism:

Let me now say only this, that truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.*

On the other hand Joachim assumes the relationship in this passage:

... the truth requires for its apprehension and utterance the same consistency of thought and purpose, which must also be expressed in the



Chapter 29. "Coherence Theory of Truth" by Harold H. Joachim

action of the morally good man. The consistent, in short, need be neither true nor good; but the good and the true must be consistent.

Explicate the difference between James' and Joachim's use of the relationship between the concepts of "truth" and "good."

3. Bertrand Russell writes in his essay on the correspondence theory of truth that the coherence theory fails "...because there is no proof that there can be only one coherent system." And, in his essay on the pragmatic theory of truth, William James alludes to his apparent agreement with the coherence theory in this respect:

I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true *unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit*. Now in real life what vital benefits is any particular belief of ours most liable to clash with? What indeed except the vital benefits yielded by *other beliefs* when these *prove* incompatible with the first ones? In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths. Truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them.

Can you clarify the difference between truth and consistency of truths? Does truth lead a kind of "double-life"?

4. Does Joachim's criticism of the consistency of formal logic and his subsequent explanation of coherence avoid Russell's second criticism of the coherence theory? Russell writes:

The other objection to this definition of truth is that it assumes the meaning of "coherence" known, whereas, in fact, "coherence" presupposes the truth of the laws of logic. Two propositions are coherent when both may be true, and are incoherent when one at least must be false. Now in order to know whether two propositions can both be true, we must know such truths as the law of contradiction. For example, the two propositions, "this tree is a beech" and "this tree is not a beech," are not coherent, because of the law of contradiction. But if the law of contradiction itself were subjected to the test of coherence, we should find that, if we choose to suppose it false, nothing will any longer be incoherent with

*Chapter 29. "Coherence Theory of Truth" by Harold H. Joachim*

anything else. Thus the laws of logic supply the skeleton or framework within which the test of coherence applies, and they themselves cannot be established by this test.

Can Joachim clearly explain coherence without the rules of inference of formal logic? Can you explicate Joachim's notion of "coherence"?

# Chapter 30

## “Pragmatic Theory of Truth” by William James



*William James, NIH*

### **About the author...**

William James (1842-1910) is perhaps the most widely known of the founders of pragmatism. Historically, his *Principles of Psychology* was the first unification of psychology as a philosophical science. As a teacher of philosophy, he was a colleague of both Josiah Royce and George Santayana. Once Royce was asked to substitute teach for James in James' Harvard philosophy class which, at the time, happened to be studying Royce's text. Supposedly, as Royce picked up James' copy of his text in the lecture hall, he hesitated briefly, and then noted to the class that James had written in the margin of the day's reading, "Damn fool!"

### About the work...

In his *Pragmatism*,<sup>1</sup> William James characterizes truth in terms of usefulness and acceptance. In general, on his view, truth is found by attending to the practical consequences of ideas. To say that truth is mere agreement of ideas with matters of fact, according to James, is incomplete, and to say that truth is captured by coherence is not to distinguish it from a consistent falsity. In a genuine sense, James believes we construct truth in the process of successful living in the world: truth is in no sense absolute. Beliefs are considered to be true if and only if they are useful and can be practically applied. At one point in his works, James states, “. . . the ultimate test for us of what a truth means is the conduct it dictates or inspires.” Certainly, one difficulty in understanding James lies in the interpretation of his rhetorical flourishes.

### From the reading...

“What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?”

## Ideas of Interest from *Pragmatism*

1. In James’ view, what are three stages in the normal development of a theory? Can you think of examples of theory-development in accordance with this paradigm?
2. Explain James’ critique of the correspondence theory of truth. Is his characterization of the correspondence theory an oversimplification?
3. How does James define a true idea? Does his characterization clearly distinguish a true idea from a false idea?

1. William James. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longman Green and Co., 1907.

4. Explain James' thesis concerning the pragmatic theory of truth. What do the words "verification" and "validation" themselves pragmatically mean?
5. James writes that "our ideas 'agree' with reality." How does this description differ from the suggestion that true ideas correspond with facts?
6. Discuss whether or not there is any difference between the true and the useful for James. How is the verification process related to this interpretation of truth?
7. According to James, what are the main objections of rationalism to pragmatism? How does James answer these objections?
8. Compare the notions of the true, the right, and the good as described by James at the end of this reading selection.

## The Reading Selection from *Pragmatism*

### [Ideas as Copies of Reality]

I fully expect to see the pragmatist view of truth run through the classic stages of a theory's career. First, you know, a new theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it. Our doctrine of truth is at present in the first of these three stages, with symptoms of the second stage having begun in certain quarters. I wish that this lecture might help it beyond the first stage in the eyes of many of you.

Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their "agreement," as falsity means their disagreement, with "reality." Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course. They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term "agreement," and what by the term "reality," when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with.

In answering these questions the pragmatists are more analytic and painstaking, the intellectualists more offhand and irreflective. The

popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality. Like other popular views, this one follows the analogy of the most usual experience. Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them. Shut your eyes and think of yonder clock on the wall, and you get just such a true picture or copy of its dial. But your idea of its "works" (unless you are a clock-maker) is much less of a copy, yet it passes muster, for it in no way clashes with the reality. Even tho it should shrink to the mere word "works," that word still serves you truly; and when you speak of the "time-keeping function" of the clock, or of its spring's "elasticity," it is hard to see exactly what your ideas can copy.

**From the reading...**

"... when you speak of the 'time-keeping function' of the clock, or of its spring's 'elasticity,' it is hard to see exactly what your ideas can copy."

You perceive that there is a problem here. Where our ideas cannot copy definitely their object, what does agreement with that object mean? Some idealists seem to say that they are true whenever they are what God means that we ought to think about that object. Others hold the copy-view all through, and speak as if our ideas possessed truth just in proportion as they approach to being copies of the Absolute's eternal way of thinking.

These views, you see, invite pragmatistic discussion. But the great assumption of the intellectualists is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you've got your true idea of anything, there's an end of the matter. You're in possession; you *know*; you have fulfilled your thinking destiny. You are where you ought to be mentally; you have obeyed your categorical imperative; and nothing more need follow on that climax of your rational destiny. Epistemologically you are in stable equilibrium.

**[Truth as Verification]**

Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What expe-

riences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"

The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.* That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as.

This thesis is what I have to defend. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *veri-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *validation*.

But what do the words verification and validation themselves pragmatically mean? They again signify certain practical consequences of the verified and validated idea. It is hard to find any one phrase that characterizes these consequences better than the ordinary agreementformula—just such consequences being what we have in mind whenever we say that our ideas "agree" with reality. They lead us, namely, through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards, other parts of experience with which we feel all the while—such feeling being among our potentialities—that the original ideas remain in agreement. The connexions and transitions come to us from point to point as being progressive, harmonious, satisfactory. This function of agreeable leading is what we mean by an idea's verification. Such an account is vague and it sounds at first quite trivial, but it has results which it will take the rest of my hour to explain.

Let me begin by reminding you of the fact that the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action; and that our duty to gain truth, so far from being a blank command from out of the blue, or a "stunt" self-imposed by our intellect, can account for itself by excellent practical reasons.

### **[Truth as the Useful]**

The importance to human life of having true beliefs about matters of fact is a thing too notorious. We live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful. Ideas that tell us which of them to expect count as the true ideas in all this primary sphere of verification, and the

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pursuit of such ideas is a primary human duty. The possession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions. If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful. The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us. Their objects are, indeed, not important at all times. I may on another occasion have no use for the house; and then my idea of it, however verifiable, will be practically irrelevant, and had better remain latent. Yet since almost any object may some day become temporarily important, the advantage of having a general stock of *extra* truths, of ideas that shall be true of merely possible situations, is obvious. We store such extra truths away in our memories, and with the overflow we fill our books of reference. Whenever such an extra truth becomes practically relevant to one of our emergencies, it passes from cold-storage to do work in the world, and our belief in it grows active. You can say of it then either that "it is useful because it is true" or that "it is true because it is useful." Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified. True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience. True ideas would never have been singled out as such, would never have acquired a class-name, least of all a name suggesting value, unless they had been useful from the outset in this way.

From this simple cue pragmatism gets her general notion of truth as something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to. Primarily, and on the common-sense level, the truth of a state of mind means this function of *a leading that is worthwhile*. When a moment in our experience, of any kind whatever, inspires us with a thought that is true, that means that sooner or later we dip by that thought's guidance into the particulars of experience again and make advantageous connexion with them. This is a vague enough statement, but I beg you to retain it, for it is essential.

Our experience meanwhile is all shot through with regularities. One bit of it can warn us to get ready for another bit, can "Intend" or be significant of that remoter object. The object's advent is the significance's verification.



Truth, in these cases, meaning nothing but eventual verification, is manifestly incompatible with waywardness on our part. Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience: they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions.

By "realities" or "object" here, we mean either things of common sense, sensibly present, or else common-sense relations, such as dates, places, distances, kinds, activities. Following our mental image of a house along the cow-path, we actually come to see the house; we get the image's full verification. *Such simply and fully verified leadings are certainly the originals and prototypes of the truth-process.* Experience offers indeed other forms of truth-process, but they are all conceivable as being primary verifications arrested, multiplied or substituted one for another.

**From the reading...**

"Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system."

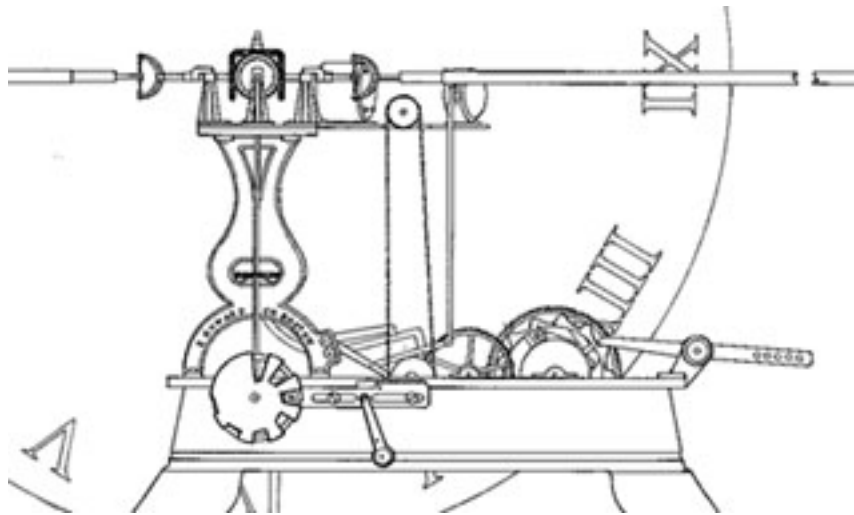
**[Unverified Truth]**

Take, for instance, yonder object on the wall. You and I consider it to be a "clock," altho no one of us has seen the hidden works that make it one. We let our notion pass for true without attempting to verify. If truths mean verification-process essentially, ought we then to call such unverified truths as this abortive? No, for they form the overwhelmingly large number of the truths we live by. Indirect as well as direct verifications pass muster. Where circumstantial evidence is sufficient, we can go without eye-witnessing. Just as we here assume Japan to exist without ever having been there, because it *works* to do so, everything we know conspiring with the belief, and nothing interfering, so we assume that thing to be a clock. We *use* it as a clock, regulating the length of our lecture by it. The verification of the assumption here means its leading to no frustration or contradiction. Verifi-ability of wheels and weights and pendulum is as good as verification. For one truth-process completed there are a million in our lives that function in this state of nascency. They turn us *towards* direct verification; lead us into the surroundings of the objects they envisage; and

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then, if everything runs on harmoniously, we are so sure that verification is possible that we omit it, and are usually justified by all that happens.

Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs "pass," so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other's truth. But beliefs verified concretely by *somebody* are the posts of the whole superstructure.



*Clock Mechanism*, (detail) National Park Service

Another great reason—beside economy of time—for waiving complete verification in the usual business of life is that all things exist in kinds and not singly. Our world is found once for all to have that peculiarity. So that when we have once directly verified our ideas about one specimen of a kind, we consider ourselves free to apply them to other specimens without verification. A mind that habitually discerns the kind of thing before it, and acts by the law of the kind immediately, without pausing to verify, will be a "true" mind in ninety-nine out of a hundred emergencies, proved so by its conduct fitting everything it meets, and getting no refutation.

*Indirectly or only potentially verifying processes may thus be true as well as full verification-processes. They work as true processes would work, give us the same advantages, and claim our recognition for the same reasons. All this on the common-sense level of matters of fact, which we are alone considering...*

### [Truth Is Made]

Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural, of processes of leading, realized *in rebus*, and having only this quality in common, that they *pay*. They pay by guiding us into or towards some part of a system that dips at numerous points into sense-percepts, which we may copy mentally or not, but with which at any rate we are now in the kind of commerce vaguely designated as verification. Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes, just as health, wealth, strength, *etc.*, are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is made, just as health, wealth and strength are *made*, in the course of experience.

#### **From the reading...**

"The 'absolutely' true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge."

Here rationalism is instantaneously up in arms against us. I can imagine a rationalist to talk as follows:

"Truth is not made," he will say; "it absolutely obtains, being a unique relation that does not wait upon any process, but shoots straight over the head of experience, and hits its reality every time. Our belief that yon thing on the wall is a clock is true already, altho no one in the whole history of the world should verify it. The bare quality of standing in that transcendent relation is what makes any thought true that possesses it, whether or not there be verification. You pragmatists put the cart before the horse in making truth's being reside in verification-processes. These are merely signs of its being, merely our lame ways of ascertaining after the fact, which of our ideas already has possessed the wondrous quality. The quality itself is timeless, like

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all essences and natures. Thoughts partake of it directly, as they partake of falsity or of irrelevancy. It can't be analyzed away into pragmatic consequences."

The whole plausibility of this rationalist tirade is due to the fact to which we have already paid so much attention. In our world, namely abounding as it does in things of similar kinds and similarly associated, one verification serves for others of its kind, and one great use of knowing things is to be led not so much to them as to their associates, especially to human talk about them. The quality of truth, obtaining *ante rem*, pragmatically means, then, the fact that in such a world innumerable ideas work better by their indirect or possible than by their direct and actual verification. Truth *ante rem* means only verifiability, then; or else it is a case of the stock rationalist trick of treating the *name* of a concrete phenomenal reality as an independent prior entity, and placing it behind the reality as its explanation. Professor Mach quotes somewhere an epigram of Lessing's:

Sagt Hänschen Schlau zu Vetter Fritz,  
"Wie kommt es, Vetter Fritzen,  
Dass grad' die Reichsten in der Welt,  
Das meiste Geld besitzen?"

Hänschen Schlau here treats the principle "wealth" as something distinct from the facts denoted by the man's being rich. It antedates them; the facts become only a sort of secondary coincidence with the rich man's essential nature.

In the case of "wealth" we all see the fallacy. We know that wealth is but a name for concrete processes that certain men's lives play a part in, and not a natural excellence found in Messrs. Rockefeller and Carnegie, but not in the rest of us.

Like wealth, health also lives *in rebus*. It is a name for processes, as digestion, circulation, sleep, *etc.*, that go on happily, tho in this instance we are more inclined to think of it as a principle and to say the man digests and sleeps so well *because* he is so healthy.

With "strength" we are, I think, more rationalistic still, and decidedly inclined to treat it as an excellence pre-existing in the man and explanatory

of the herculean performances of his muscles.

With "truth" most people go over the border entirely, and treat the rationalistic account as self-evident. But really all these words in *truth* are exactly similar. Truth exists *ante rem* just as much and as little as the other things do.

**From the reading...**

"'The true,' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving."

The scholastics, following Aristotle, made much of the distinction between habit and act. Health *in actu* means, among other things, good sleeping and digesting. But a healthy man need not always be sleeping, or always digesting, any more than a wealthy man need be always handling money or a strong man always lifting weights. All such qualities sink to the status of "habits" between their times of exercise; and similarly truth becomes a habit of certain of our ideas and beliefs in their intervals of rest from their verifying activities. But those activities are the root of the whole matter, and the condition of there being any habit to exist in the intervals.

**[Truth as Expedience]**

"*The true,*" to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as "*the right*" is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas.

The "absolutely" true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge. It runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and, if these ideals are ever realized, they will all be realized together. Meanwhile we have

to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood. Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. "Absolutely" they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers...

### [Truth as Good]

Let me now say only this, that truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.* Surely you must admit this, that if there were no good for life in true ideas, or if the knowledge of them were positively disadvantageous and false ideas the only useful ones, then the current notion that truth is divine and precious, and its pursuit a duty, could never have grown up or become a dogma. In a world like that, our duty would be to shun truth, rather. But in this world, just as certain foods are not only agreeable to our taste, but good for our teeth, our stomach and our tissues; so certain ideas are not only agreeable to think about, or agreeable as supporting other ideas that we are fond of, but they are also helpful in life's practical struggles. If there be any life that it is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really *better for us* to believe in that idea, *unless, indeed, belief in it incidentally clashed with other greater vital benefits.*

#### **From the reading...**

"True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot."

"What would be better for us to believe!" This sounds very like a definition of truth. It comes very near to saying "what we *ought* to believe"; and in *that* definition none of you would find any oddity. Ought we ever not to

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believe what it is *better for us* to believe? And can we then keep the notion of what is better for us, and what is true for us, permanently apart?

Pragmatism says no, and I fully agree with her. Probably you also agree, so far as the abstract statement goes, but with a suspicion that if we practically did believe everything that made for good in our own personal lives, we should be found indulging all kinds of fancies about this world’s affairs, and all kinds of sentimental superstitions about a world hereafter. Your suspicion here is undoubtedly well founded, and it is evident that something happens when you pass from the abstract to the concrete, that complicates the situation.

I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true *unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit*. Now in real life what vital benefits is any particular belief of ours most liable to clash with? What indeed except the vital benefits yielded by *other beliefs* when these *prove* incompatible with the first ones? In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths. Truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them.

## Related Ideas

William James (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Summary content of James’ biography, writings, and bibliography.

William James (<http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/james.html>). Professor Frank Pajares at Emory University includes letters, essays, reviews, texts, links, and other resources.



Harvard Medical School, (detail) NIH

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Can you identify any differences between James’ description of the pragmatic theory of truth as represented in this reading with C. S. Peirce’s oft-quoted statement of pragmatism? C. S. Peirce wrote:

Consider what effects which might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.<sup>2</sup>

2. Discuss whether or not you think James would concur with Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous statement on truth:

Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value for life is ultimately decisive.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Charles Sanders Peirce. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. J. Buchler. New York: Dover, 1955.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Will to Power* (1885). Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1967.



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3. Compare Emerson's epistemological pragmatism as shown in the following quotation with James' characterization of the "absolutely" true as "that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge":

We live in a system of approximations. Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere. We are encamped in nature, not domesticated.<sup>4</sup>

4. James writes:

I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true *unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit*. . . . In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths.

Discuss whether this concession to the coherence theory of truth requires that pragmatism is merely the free play inherent in the practical, circumstantial application of the coherence theory of truth.

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4. Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Nature" in *Essays: Second Series* Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1844.

# Chapter 31

## “What Is Truth?” by Bertrand Russell



*Bertrand Russell, India Post*

### **About the author...**

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) excelled in almost every field of learning: mathematics, science, history, religion, politics, education, and, of course, philosophy. During his life, he argued for pacifism, nuclear disarmament, and social justice. In fact he lost his teaching appointment at Trinity College, Cambridge because of his pacifism.

An early three-volume technical work written with A. N. Whitehead sought to prove that the fields of mathematics could be derived from

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logic. The anecdote is told by G. H. Hardy<sup>1</sup> where Russell reported he dreamed that *Principia Mathematica*, his three-volume massive study, was being weeded out by a student assistant from library shelves two centuries hence.

**About the work...**

In the chapter "Truth and Falsehood" in his *Problems of Philosophy*,<sup>2</sup> Russell advances the "correspondence" theory of truth. On this theory, truth is understood in terms of the way reality is described by our beliefs. A belief is false when it does not reflect states-of-affairs, events, or things accurately. In order for our beliefs to be true, our beliefs must agree with what is real. Note that the correspondence theory is not concerned with the discovery of truth or a means for obtaining true belief because the theory, itself, cannot establish the nature of reality.

**From the reading...**

"Thus a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact."

**Ideas of Interest from "Truth and Falsehood"**

1. What are Russell's three specifications for the nature of truth?
2. Explain the coherence theory of truth. Explain two objections to the coherence theory of truth.

1. An American pure mathematician known for his toast, "Here's to pure mathematics, may it never find an application." (Most of Hardy's theoretical studies, as things turned out, found applications.)

2. Bertrand Russell. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912.

3. What is the law of contradiction? Can you think of any possible exceptions to it?
4. Why cannot the correspondence theory of truth be explained as involving the relation of one idea with one fact?
5. Explain what Russell means by a complex unity being formed when a belief is known to be true.
6. Describe the correspondence theory of truth and contrast it with the coherence theory.

## The Reading Selection from "Truth and Falsehood"

### [Requisites of a Theory of Truth]

OUR knowledge of truths, unlike our knowledge of things, has an opposite, namely error. So far as things are concerned, we may know them or not know them, but there is no positive state of mind which can be described as erroneous knowledge of things, so long, at any rate, as we confine ourselves to knowledge by acquaintance. Whatever we are acquainted with must be something; we may draw wrong inferences from our acquaintance, but the acquaintance itself cannot be deceptive. Thus there is no dualism as regards acquaintance. But as regards knowledge of truths, there is a dualism. We may believe what is false as well as what is true. We know that on very many subjects different people hold different and incompatible opinions: hence some beliefs must be erroneous. Since erroneous beliefs are often held just as strongly as true beliefs, it becomes a difficult question how they are to be distinguished from true beliefs. How are we to know, in a given case, that our belief is not erroneous? This is a question of the very greatest difficulty, to which no completely satisfactory answer is possible. There is, however, a preliminary question which is rather less difficult, and that is: What do we mean by truth and falsehood?...

[W]e are not asking how we can know whether a belief is true or false: we are asking what is meant by the question whether a belief is true or false.  
...

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There are three points to observe in the attempt to discover the nature of truth, three requisites which any theory must fulfil.

(1) Our theory of truth must be such as to admit of its opposite, falsehood. A good many philosophers have failed adequately to satisfy this condition: they have constructed theories according to which all our thinking ought to have been true, and have then had the greatest difficulty in finding a place for falsehood. In this respect our theory of belief must differ from our theory of acquaintance, since in the case of acquaintance it was not necessary to take account of any opposite.

(2) It seems fairly evident that if there were no beliefs there could be no falsehood, and no truth either, in the sense in which truth is correlative to falsehood. If we imagine a world of mere matter, there would be no room for falsehood in such a world, and although it would contain what may be called "facts," it would not contain any truths, in the sense in which truths are thins of the same kind as falsehoods. In fact, truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs and statements: hence a world of mere matter, since it would contain no beliefs or statements, would also contain no truth or falsehood.

(3) But, as against what we have just said, it is to be observed that the truth or falsehood of a belief always depends upon something which lies outside the belief itself. If I believe that Charles I died on the scaffold, I believe truly, not because of any intrinsic quality of my belief, which could be discovered by merely examining the belief, but because of an historical event which happened two and a half centuries ago. If I believe that Charles I died in his bed, I believe falsely: no degree of vividness in my belief, or of care in arriving at it, prevents it from being false, again because of what happened long ago, and not because of any intrinsic property of my belief. Hence, although truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs, they are properties dependent upon the relations of the beliefs to other things, not upon any internal quality of the beliefs.

The third of the above requisites leads us to adopt the view—which has on the whole been commonest among philosophers—that truth consists in some form of correspondence between belief and fact. It is, however, by no means an easy matter to discover a form of correspondence to which there are no irrefutable objections. By this partly—and partly by the feeling that, if truth consists in a correspondence of thought with something outside thought, thought can never know when truth has been attained—many philosophers have been led to try to find some definition of truth which

shall not consist in relation to something wholly outside belief. The most important attempt at a definition of this sort is the theory that truth consists in coherence. It is said that the mark of falsehood is failure to cohere in the body of our beliefs, and that it is the essence of a truth to form part of the completely rounded system which is The Truth.

### [Objection to the Coherence Theory of Truth]

There is, however, a great difficulty in this view, or rather two great difficulties. The first is that there is no reason to suppose that only one coherent body of beliefs is possible. It may be that, with sufficient imagination, a novelist might invent a past for the world that would perfectly fit on to what we know, and yet be quite different from the real past. In more scientific matters, it is certain that there are often two or more hypotheses which account for all the known facts on some subject, and although, in such cases, men of science endeavour to find facts which will rule out all the hypotheses except one, there is no reason why they should always succeed.

In philosophy, again, it seems not uncommon for two rival hypotheses to be both able to account for all the facts. Thus, for example, it is possible that life is one long dream, and that the outer world has only that degree of reality that the objects of dreams have; but although such a view does not seem inconsistent with known facts, there is no reason to prefer it to the common-sense view, according to which other people and things do really exist. Thus coherence as the definition of truth fails because there is no proof that there can be only one coherent system.<sup>3</sup>

The other objection to this definition of truth is that it assumes the meaning of "coherence" known, whereas, in fact, "coherence" presupposes the truth of the laws of logic. Two propositions are coherent when both may be true, and are incoherent when one at least must be false. Now in order to know whether two propositions can both be true, we must know such truths as the law of contradiction. For example, the two propositions, "this tree is a beech" and "this tree is not a beech," are not coherent, because of the law of contradiction. But if the law of contradiction itself were subjected to

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3. *E.g.*, the local theories of the Copernican system and the Ptolemaic system as discussed in the first chapter of this text both consistently account for the facts of the relative movement of the sun and planets. *Ed.*

*Chapter 31. "What Is Truth?" by Bertrand Russell*

the test of coherence, we should find that, if we choose to suppose it false, nothing will any longer be incoherent with anything else. Thus the laws of logic supply the skeleton or framework within which the test of coherence applies, and they themselves cannot be established by this test.

For the above two reasons, coherence cannot be accepted as giving the meaning of truth, though it is often a most important test of truth after a certain amount of truth has become known.

### **[The Correspondence Theory]**

Hence we are driven back to correspondence with fact as constituting the nature of truth. It remains to define precisely what we mean by "fact," and what is the nature of the correspondence which must subsist between belief and fact, in order that belief may be true.



*Scene from "Othello" with Paul Robeson and Margaret Webster, Library of Congress*

In accordance with our three requisites, we have to seek a theory of truth

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which (1) allows truth to have an opposite, namely falsehood, (2) makes truth a property of beliefs, but (3) makes it a property wholly dependent upon the relation of the beliefs to outside things.

The necessity of allowing for falsehood makes it impossible to regard belief as a relation of the mind to a single object, which could be said to be what is believed. If belief were so regarded, we should find that, like acquaintance, it would not admit of the opposition of truth and falsehood, but would have to be always true. This may be made clear by examples. Othello believes falsely that Desdemona loves Cassio. We cannot say that this belief consists in a relation to a single object, "Desdemona's love for Cassio," for if there were such an object, the belief would be true. There is in fact no such object, and therefore Othello cannot have any relation to such an object. Hence his belief cannot possibly consist in a relation to this object.

It might be said that his belief is a relation to a different object, namely "that Desdemona loves Cassio;" but it is almost as difficult to suppose that there is such an object as this, when Desdemona does not love Cassio, as it was to suppose that there is "Desdemona's love for Cassio" Hence it will be better to seek for a theory of belief which does not make it consist in a relation of the mind to a single object.

It is common to think of relations as though they always held between two terms, but in fact this is not always the case. Some relations demand three terms, some four, and so on. Take, for instance, the relation "between" So long as only two terms come in, the relation "between" is impossible: three terms are the smallest number that render it possible. York is between London and Edinburgh; but if London and Edinburgh were the only places in the world, there could be nothing which was between one place and another. Similarly jealousy requires three people: there can be no such relation that does not involve three at least. Such a proposition as "A wishes B to promote C's marriage with D" involves a relation of four terms; that is to say, A and B and C and D all come in, and the relation involved cannot be expressed otherwise than in a form involving all four. Instances might be multiplied indefinitely, but enough has been said to show that there are relations which require more than two terms before they can occur.

The relation involved in judging or believing must, if falsehood is to be duly allowed for, be taken to be a relation between several terms, not between two. When Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio, he must



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not have before his mind a single object, "Desdemona's love for Cassio." or "that Desdemona loves Cassio" for that would require that there should be objective falsehoods, which subsist independently of any minds; and this, though not logically refutable, is a theory to be avoided if possible. Thus it is easier to account for falsehood if we take judgement to be a relation in which the mind and the various objects concerned all occur severally; that is to say, Desdemona and loving and Cassio must all be terms in the relation which subsists when Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio. This relation, therefore, is a relation of four terms, since Othello also is one of the terms of the relation. When we say that it is a relation of four terms, we do not mean that Othello has a certain relation to Desdemona, and has the same relation to loving and also to Cassio. This may be true of some other relation than believing; but believing, plainly, is not a relation which Othello has to each of the three terms concerned, but to all of them together: there is only one example of the relation of believing involved, but this one example knits together four terms. Thus the actual occurrence, at the moment when Othello is entertaining his belief, is that the relation called "believing" is knitting together into one complex whole the four terms Othello, Desdemona, loving, and Cassio. What is called belief or judgement is nothing but this relation of believing or judging, which relates a mind to several things other than itself. An act of belief or of judgement is the occurrence between certain terms at some particular time, of the relation of believing or judging.

**From the reading...**

"Whenever a relation holds between two or more terms, it unites the terms into a complex whole."

We are now in a position to understand what it is that distinguishes a true judgement from a false one. For this purpose we will adopt certain definitions. In every act of judgement there is a mind which judges, and there are terms concerning which it judges. We will call the mind the subject in the judgement, and the remaining terms the objects. Thus, when Othello judges that Desdemona loves Cassio, Othello is the subject, while the objects are Desdemona and loving and Cassio. The subject and the objects together are called the constituents of the judgement. It will be observed that the relation of judging has what is called a "sense" or "direction." We

may say, metaphorically, that it puts its objects in a certain order, which we may indicate by means of the order of the words in the sentence. (In an inflected language, the same thing will be indicated by inflections, *e.g.* by the difference between nominative and accusative.) Othello's judgement that Cassio loves Desdemona differs from his judgement that Desdemona loves Cassio, in spite of the fact that it consists of the same constituents, because the relation of judging places the constituents in a different order in the two cases. Similarly, if Cassio judges that Desdemona loves Othello, the constituents of the judgement are still the same, but their order is different. This property of having a "sense" or "direction" is one which the relation of judging shares with all other relations. The "sense" of relations is the ultimate source of order and series and a host of mathematical concepts; but we need not concern ourselves further with this aspect.

**From the reading...**

"Thus, for example, it is possible that life is one long dream, and that the outer world has only that degree of reality that the objects of dreams have..."

We spoke of the relation called "judging" or "believing" as knitting together into one complex whole the subject and the objects. In this respect, judging is exactly like every other relation. Whenever a relation holds between two or more terms, it unites the terms into a complex whole. If Othello loves Desdemona, there is such a complex whole as "Othello's love for Desdemona." The terms united by the relation may be themselves complex, or may be simple, but the whole which results from their being united must be complex. Wherever there is a relation which relates certain terms, there is a complex object formed of the union of those terms; and conversely, wherever there is a complex object, there is a relation which relates its constituents. When an act of believing occurs, there is a complex, in which "believing" is the uniting relation, and subject and objects are arranged in a certain order by the "sense" of the relation of believing. Among the objects, as we saw in considering "Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio," one must be a relation—in this instance, the relation "loving." But this relation, as it occurs in the act of believing, is not the relation which creates the unity of the complex whole consisting of the subject and the objects. The relation "loving," as it occurs in the act

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of believing, is one of the objects—it is a brick in the structure, not the cement. The cement is the relation "believing." When the belief is true, there is another complex unity, in which the relation which was one of the objects of the belief relates the other objects. Thus, *e.g.*, if Othello believes truly that Desdemona loves Cassio, then there is a complex unity, "Desdemona's love for Cassio," which is composed exclusively of the objects of the belief, in the same order as they had in the belief, with the relation which was one of the objects occurring now as the cement that binds together the other objects of the belief. On the other hand, when a belief is false, there is no such complex unity composed only of the objects of the belief. If Othello believes falsely that Desdemona loves Cassio, then there is no such complex unity as "Desdemona's love for Cassio."

**From the reading...**

"Thus, for example, it is possible that life is one long dream, and that the outer world has only that degree of reality that the objects of dreams have..."

Thus a belief is true when it corresponds to a certain associated complex, and false when it does not. Assuming, for the sake of definiteness, that the objects of the belief are two terms and a relation, the terms being put in a certain order by the 'sense' of the believing, then if the two terms in that order are united by the relation into a complex, the belief is true; if not, it is false. This constitutes the definition of truth and falsehood that we were in search of. Judging or believing is a certain complex unity of which a mind is a constituent; if the remaining constituents, taken in the order which they have in the belief, form a complex unity, then the belief is true; if not, it is false.

Thus although truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs, yet they are in a sense extrinsic properties, for the condition of the truth of a belief is something not involving beliefs, or (in general) any mind at all, but only the objects of the belief. A mind, which believes, believes truly when there is a corresponding complex not involving the mind, but only its objects. This correspondence ensures truth, and its absence entails falsehood. Hence we account simultaneously for the two facts that beliefs (*a*) depend on minds for their existence, (*b*) do not depend on minds for their truth.

*Chapter 31. "What Is Truth?" by Bertrand Russell*

We may restate our theory as follows: If we take such a belief as "Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio." we will call Desdemona and Cassio the object-terms, and loving the object-relation. If there is a complex unity "Desdemona's love for Cassio," consisting of the object-terms related by the object-relation in the same order as they have in the belief, then this complex unity is called the fact corresponding to the belief. Thus a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact.

It will be seen that minds do not create truth or falsehood. They create beliefs, but when once the beliefs are created, the mind cannot make them true or false, except in the special case where they concern future things which are within the power of the person believing, such as catching trains. What makes a belief true is a fact, and this fact does not (except in exceptional cases) in any way involve the mind of the person who has the belief.



*College of the City of New York, Library of Congress.* In 1940, Russell's appointment at City College New York was revoked following public protests; a judge ruled he was a threat to "public health, safety and morals."

## Related Ideas

*Bertrand Russell* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/russell/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Chronology, work, writings, bibliography, sound clips of Russell speaking, and other resources by A. D. Irvine.

*The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/supplement2.html>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis: A Supplement to Relativism. History and versions of the hypothesis.

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. What is the difference, if any, between Aristotle's law of the excluded middle and Russell's law of contradiction? Why can't logical principles such as these support the coherence theory of truth?
2. Russell writes:

Thus, for example, it is possible that life is one long dream, and that the outer world has only that degree of reality that the objects of dreams have; but although such a view does not seem inconsistent with known facts, there is no reason to prefer it to the common-sense view, according to which other people and things do really exist.

How would a coherence theorist attempt to refute this objection?

3. If Russell is correct about the nature of truth, then why can't truth be dependent on the mind? Why would subjectivism be mistaken on his view?
4. Russell notes that truth and falsity are not mind-dependent except in this case:

They create beliefs, but when once the beliefs are created, the mind cannot make them true or false, except in the special case where they concern future things which are within the power of the person believing, such as catching trains.

*Chapter 31. "What Is Truth?" by Bertrand Russell*

Does Russell's view concerning intentional action contradict Aristotle's position on "future truths" as expressed in the reading selection, "The Sea-Fight Tomorrow"? How would you relate this view to William James' genuine option theory?

# Chapter 32

## “The Sea-Fight Tomorrow” by Aristotle



*Aristotle*, Antiquities Project

### **About the author...**

Aristotle (384-322) studied for twenty years at Plato's Academy in Athens. Following Plato's death, Aristotle left Athens, studied zoology and, for a while, was tutor to the young Alexander of Macedonia. Returning to Athens, he founded the *Lyceum* and the first great library of the ancient world. Here, it is said, he earned the name of the “peripatetic philosopher” from his propensity to think and lecture as he walked. His views on logic still shape the structure of the science.

### About the work...

In his *On Interpretation*,<sup>1</sup> Aristotle outlines the basis for what has been designated since the Middle Ages the “Square of Opposition” under the assumption that statements have existential import.<sup>2</sup> Statements involving future possibilities pose unique problems for logic, and there have been many attempts to develop a consistent and reasonably complete temporal logic. In this reading selection, Aristotle concludes that sentences about the future do not qualify as being statements at all since, strictly speaking they have no truth value—hence, the all-important law of the excluded middle is not in question. On this view, sentences concerning future contingencies involve possibility. Yet, there is more to the story when the question of future truths is related to the metaphysical presuppositions when “actuality” and “potentiality” used in a logic system.

### From the reading...

“... propositions whether positive or negative are either true or false, then any given predicate must either belong to the subject or not, so that if one man affirms that an event of a given character will take place and another denies it, it is plain that the statement of the one will correspond with reality and that of the other will not.”

### Ideas of Interest from *On Interpretation*

1. Clarify what a universal statement is. (You might have to use a reference work or a standard logic text.)

1. Aristotle. *On Interpretation*. Trans. E. M. Edghill, 350 BCE, Part 9.

2. More precisely, statements have existential import if the referents of its terms exist in some way or are not empty. Under this interpretation, the statement “The sea-fight is not an event occurring tomorrow” *seems* to imply somewhat cryptically that we are ontologically committed to the existence of at least one sea-fight that does not occur tomorrow.



2. What is the technical definition of "contradiction"? State one or two examples of contradictory statements.
3. Explain what it would mean for events to happen because of necessity? Try to clarify what "necessity" would mean on this view. Would a difference between logical and physical necessity help here? The sea-battle either takes place tomorrow or it does not take place tomorrow. If truth is not dependent on the time something happens, then it is true now (or false, as the case may be) from a metaphysical point of view that the sea-battle takes place tomorrow even though I cannot know this at the present time. Aren't there many other kinds of truths, that I either do not know now or cannot, in principle, know?
4. Does Aristotle's distinction between actuality and potentiality solve the problem of future truths? Explain his distinction with respect to statements about the future? Is the difficulty of understanding the nature of the referents of future truths being "passed off" to the difficulties inherent in the problem of existential import?

## The Reading Selection from *On Interpretation*

### [Truth Value of Statements]

In the case of that which is or which has taken place, propositions, whether positive or negative, must be true or false. Again, in the case of a pair of contradictories, either when the subject is universal and the propositions are of a universal character, or when it is individual, as has been said, one of the two must be true and the other false; whereas when the subject is universal, but the propositions are not of a universal character, there is no such necessity. We have discussed this type also in a previous chapter.

When the subject, however, is individual, and that which is predicated of it relates to the future, the case is altered. For if all propositions whether positive or negative are either true or false, then any given predicate must either belong to the subject or not, so that if one man affirms that an event of a given character will take place and another denies it, it is plain that the statement of the one will correspond with reality and that of the other will

*Chapter 32. "The Sea-Fight Tomorrow" by Aristotle*

not. For the predicate cannot both belong and not belong to the subject at one and the same time with regard to the future.

Thus, if it is true to say that a thing is white, it must necessarily be white; if the reverse proposition is true, it will of necessity not be white. Again, if it is white, the proposition stating that it is white was true; if it is not white, the proposition to the opposite effect was true. And if it is not white, the man who states that it is making a false statement; and if the man who states that it is white is making a false statement, it follows that it is not white. It may therefore be argued that it is necessary that affirmations or denials must be either true or false.



*Moonrise at Chatham Strait, NOAA, John Bortniak*

Now if this be so, nothing is or takes place fortuitously, either in the present or in the future, and there are no real alternatives; everything takes place of necessity and is fixed. For either he that affirms that it will take place or he that denies this is in correspondence with fact, whereas if things did not take place of necessity, an event might just as easily not happen as happen; for the meaning of the word "fortuitous" with regard to present or future events is that reality is so constituted that it may issue in either of two opposite directions. Again, if a thing is white now, it was true before to say that it would be white, so that of anything that has taken place it was

Chapter 32. "The Sea-Fight Tomorrow" by Aristotle

always true to say "it is" or "it will be." But if it was always true to say that a thing is or will be, it is not possible that it should not be or not be about to be, and when a thing cannot not come to be, it is impossible that it should not come to be, and when it is impossible that it should not come to be, it must come to be. All, then, that is about to be must of necessity take place. It results from this that nothing is uncertain or fortuitous, for if it were fortuitous it would not be necessary.

Again, to say that neither the affirmation nor the denial is true, maintaining, let us say, that an event neither will take place nor will not take place, is to take up a position impossible to defend. In the first place, though facts should prove the one proposition false, the opposite would still be untrue. Secondly, if it was true to say that a thing was both white and large, both these qualities must necessarily belong to it; and if they will belong to it the next day, they must necessarily belong to it the next day. But if an event is neither to take place nor not to take place the next day, the element of chance will be eliminated. For example, it would be necessary that a sea-fight should neither take place nor fail to take place on the next day.

These awkward results and others of the same kind follow, if it is an irrefragable law that of every pair of contradictory propositions, whether they have regard to universals and are stated as universally applicable, or whether they have regard to individuals, one must be true and the other false, and that there are no real alternatives, but that all that is or takes place is the outcome of necessity. There would be no need to deliberate or to take trouble, on the supposition that if we should adopt a certain course, a certain result would follow, while, if we did not, the result would not follow. For a man may predict an event ten thousand years beforehand, and another may predict the reverse; that which was truly predicted at the moment in the past will of necessity take place in the fullness of time.

**From the reading...**

"For a man may predict an event ten thousand years beforehand, and another may predict the reverse; that which was truly predicted at the moment in the past will of necessity take place in the fullness of time."

Further, it makes no difference whether people have or have not actu-

ally made the contradictory statements. For it is manifest that the circumstances are not influenced by the fact of an affirmation or denial on the part of anyone. For events will not take place or fail to take place because it was stated that they would or would not take place, nor is this any more the case if the prediction dates back ten thousand years or any other space of time. Wherefore, if through all time the nature of things was so constituted that a prediction about an event was true, then through all time it was necessary that that should find fulfillment; and with regard to all events, circumstances have always been such that their occurrence is a matter of necessity. For that of which someone has said truly that it will be, cannot fail to take place; and of that which takes place, it was always true to say that it would be.

### **[Potentiality and the Future]**

Yet this view leads to an impossible conclusion; for we see that both deliberation and action are causative with regard to the future, and that, to speak more generally, in those things which are not continuously actual there is potentiality in either direction. Such things may either be or not be; events also therefore may either take place or not take place. There are many obvious instances of this. It is possible that this coat may be cut in half, and yet it may not be cut in half, but wear out first. In the same way, it is possible that it should not be cut in half; unless this were so, it would not be possible that it should wear out first. So it is therefore with all other events which possess this kind of potentiality. It is therefore plain that it is not of necessity that everything is or takes place; but in some instances there are real alternatives, in which case the affirmation is no more true and no more false than the denial; while some exhibit a predisposition and general tendency in one direction or the other, and yet can issue in the opposite direction by exception.

Now that which is must needs be when it is, and that which is not must needs not be when it is not. Yet it cannot be said without qualification that all existence and non-existence is the outcome of necessity. For there is a difference between saying that that which is, when it is, must needs be, and simply saying that all that is must needs be, and similarly in the case of that which is not. In the case, also, of two contradictory propositions this holds good. Everything must either be or not be, whether in the present or in the future, but it is not always possible to distinguish and state determinately

Chapter 32. “The Sea-Fight Tomorrow” by Aristotle

which of these alternatives must necessarily come about.

**From the reading...**

“It is therefore plain that it is not necessary that of an affirmation and a denial one should be true and the other false.”

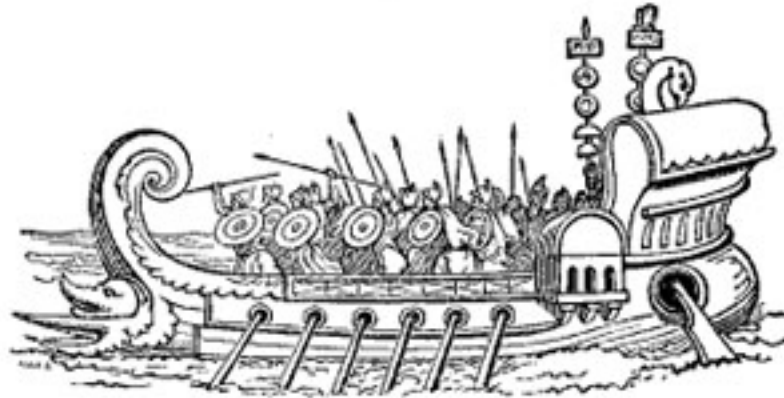
Let me illustrate. A sea-fight must either take place to-morrow or not, but it is not necessary that it should take place to-morrow, neither is it necessary that it should not take place, yet it is necessary that it either should or should not take place to-morrow. Since propositions correspond with facts, it is evident that when in future events there is a real alternative, and a potentiality in contrary directions, the corresponding affirmation and denial have the same character.

This is the case with regard to that which is not always existent or not always nonexistent. One of the two propositions in such instances must be true and the other false, but we cannot say determinately that this or that is false, but must leave the alternative undecided. One may indeed be more likely to be true than the other, but it cannot be either actually true or actually false. It is therefore plain that it is not necessary that of an affirmation and a denial one should be true and the other false. For in the case of that which exists potentially, but not actually, the rule which applies to that which exists actually does not hold good. The case is rather as we have indicated.

## Related Ideas

“*On Prophesying Dreams*” by Aristotle (<http://www.classics.mit.edu/\aristotle/prophesying.html>). *Internet Classics Archive*. Short reading on the Aristotle’s analysis of the logic of dreams and future truths from MIT.

*Aristotle’s Logic* (<http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. An introduction and overview of Aristotle’s contribution, including §12 Time and Necessity: Sea-Battle, by Robin Smith.



*A Greek Galley*, S. G. Goodrich, *A History of All Nations*, 1854

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Is the problem of "future truths" just another variation of the problem of existential import? Review Immanuel Kant's selection on "Existence Is Not a Predicate" and attempt to relate Kant's argument to Aristotle's statement: "For events will not take place or fail to take place because it was stated that they would or would not take place, nor is this any more the case if the prediction dates back ten thousand years or any other space of time." Are Kant's and Aristotle's views compatible?
2. When Aristotle writes, "propositions whether positive or negative are either true or false, then any given predicate must either belong to the subject or not. . .," he is stating the so-called law of the excluded middle: any proposition (*i.e.* a sentence with a truth value) is either true or false but not both. The law of the excluded middle is a founding principle of classical logic. Investigate whether or not fuzzy logics or multivalued logics reject this principle.
3. Study carefully the first sentence in the reading selection. Is Aristotle presupposing that meaningful statement must be a description of an existing subject? Explain.

*Chapter 32. "The Sea-Fight Tomorrow" by Aristotle*

4. How is the problem of statements about the future related to the philosophy of fatalism? Some people stoically say, "Whatever will be, will be. There's no sense in worrying about it." Show how Aristotle's view, if true, would disprove such a fatalistic doctrine.

# Chapter 33

## “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' 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.<sup>1</sup> 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*,<sup>2</sup> 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 Selection 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

1. See the short essay, “In the Laboratory With Agassiz,” by Samuel H. Scudder, in Chapter 1.
2. William James. *Talks to Students*. 1899.

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more than a mere interest of curious speculation in understanding this. It 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

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not its intensity, but its exclusions and its jealousies. Leave those out, and 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

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affords. You have kindergartens and model secondary schools. You have 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

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with them. Let me take my chances again in the big outside worldly wilderness 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.

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Such absence of human nature *in extremis* anywhere seemed, then, a sufficient 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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3. 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.

aching and with its powers of patient endurance racked to the utmost under the length of hours of the strain.

**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 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 Tolstoï—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 con-



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tent. 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 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.

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"The more," writes Tolstoi 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 possibility 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."<sup>4</sup>

In a similar way does Stevenson appeal to our piety toward the elemental virtue of mankind.

"What a wonderful thing," he writes,<sup>5</sup> "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

4. *My Confession*, X. (condensed).

5. *Across the Plains*: "*Pulvis et Umbra*" (abridged).

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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 be, for all that, simple, innocent, cheerful, kindly like a 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 believe 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:—

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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 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 insen-

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sibility? Our soldiers have to grow vastly more insensible, and we extol them to the skies. Is it the poverty? Poverty has been reckoned the crowning 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.

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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 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."<sup>6</sup>

The barrenness and ignobleness of the more usual laborer's life consist in

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6. *Sermons*, 5th Series, New York, 1893, pp. 166, 167.

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 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



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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.

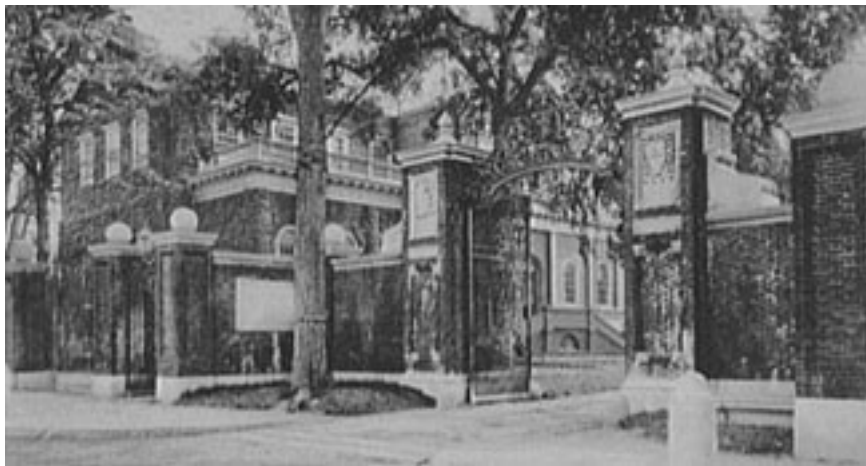
Now, taken nakedly, abstractly, and immediately, you see that mere ideals are the cheapest things in life. Everybody has them in some shape or other, personal or general, sound or mistaken, low or high; and the most worthless sentimentalists and dreamers, drunkards, shirks and verse-makers, who never 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

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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, 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.

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Of course, this is a somewhat vague conclusion. But in a question of significance, 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

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pocket-book, a bank-account. And a similar greediness, turned by disappointment 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

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view of their relations to them and to each other."<sup>7</sup>



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!

7. *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.

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Stylesheets, formatting, and help were made possible by *docbook-apps mailing list* and Norman Walsh's *DocBook: The Definitive Guide* published by O'Reilly. DocBook SGML is available at *OASIS—SGML* (<http://www.oasis-open.org/docbook/sgml/>). Norman Walsh's text is a bit outdated, so check the more recent version on the Web at *DocBook: The Definitive Guide* (<http://docbook.org/tdg/en/html/docbook.html>). When these resources proved insufficient, John Archie provided the necessary magic to remove the rust from the SGML tool-chain.

As additional features are developing, emphasis in DocBook is shifting to using the XSL-FO language to create PDF from XML, instead of the process used here. See Dave Pawson's *XSL-FO*, Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2002, and Bob Stayton's *DocBook XSL: The Complete Guide*, Santa Cruz, CA: Sagehill, 2003.

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