

Thinking About Value

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January, 2004

. . . the world into which I am flung—or rather into which, when I come to any kind of awareness, I have always already been flung—is, nevertheless, a world only through my projection of what I mean to make it. And some resolution to make of it one thing rather than another, to make of myself one person or another, is inescapable for me. Sheer facts exist only for “scum, offal, or a cabbage.” For me they are always my facts, which I must transcend in some direction, if only in the direction of flight, of madness, or of self-destruction.

Marjorie Grene

Immersed in an environment which he does not and cannot understand, the individual is forced to create a substitute world which he can understand, and in which he puts his faith. He acts in consistency with that conception, *derives his standards of value from it* (italics mine), and undertakes to alter it only when convinced by further experience that it fails to serve the goal of unity. Since this self-made scheme of life is his only guarantee of security, its preservation soon becomes a goal in itself. He seeks the type of experience which confirms and supports the unified attitude, and rejects experiences which seem to promise a disturbance of this attitude.

Prescott Lecky, *Self-consistency: A theory of personality*, 1945, p. 84

You should always succumb to temptation. The secret is to learn not to be tempted by things that are bad for you.

George Bernard Shaw

On the highest throne of the world, a man sits only on his own ass.

Montaigne

It's a truism of post-modern thought that people's perceptions of reality are influenced by their values – and by their desires, interests, ethical feelings and concerns. We do not take in the world as it is; rather, we construe a world to render it amenable to our purposes. In doing so, we also flatter ourselves a bit: to represent ourselves as the people we would want to be. “There are no facts, only interpretations,” as the saying goes. What we see depends closely on what we expect, desire and intend.

The role of interests and values as determinants of cognition has drawn no end of attention. The converse problem, technically known as the *cognitivity* of values, gets rather less. To what extent and in what ways are a person's values to be thought of as aspects of his knowledge – his understanding of the way things are? Reflecting on this question, we find that tastes, interests and values are much less capricious or idiosyncratic than is commonly supposed. Elaborated as they may be both by culture and by the happenstance of personal biography, our desires and values are nonetheless grounded both in the physiology of the species, and in our grasp of reality. We may construe our worlds according to personal interests and purposes as Nietzsche taught, but we also formulate projects, purposes, values and interests according to some

understanding of the world.

Considered in this light, the whole of post-modern thought seems to chase itself around a vicious circle: What we call values cannot be detached from beliefs any more than beliefs can be detached from values. Our “facts” are value-laden interpretations; our values are beliefs about what is good and bad. The upshot, really, is that each of us constructs an intelligible world for himself as a sort of cognitive fabric, woven from innumerable habitually-drawn judgments about what is real on one hand, and what is desirable on the other. Each such world is essentially private and personal, because each individual must weave the fabric for himself – based partly on his own experiences, desires and purposes, partly on the suggestions of others. It turns out that “beliefs,” “values” and “intentions” are not to be thought of as logically separable categories, but as three aspects of a person’s over-all understanding of the world and his position in it. We see the world as we do because we hope to make use of it in certain ways. We hope and intend to use the world in certain ways because we believe that we can so use it, and can improve our state by doing so. Thus, “it is so,” “it ought to be so,” and “it shall be so” are not really intelligible as separate statements. Formulaically, we might say that *is*, *ought* and *shall* are seamlessly interwoven.

Together, a person’s beliefs, values and intentions comprise what might be called his or her *mind-set* – an integrated view of things-in-relation-to-oneself. To value something means first of all to be able to recognize it, and then to believe it desirable in itself, and/or conducive to one’s purposes. My values are simply ideas about what the world is like in relation to me. To believe something is to set value on interpreting a situation in one way rather than another. To intend or purpose something is, first of all, to imagine a state in some way preferable to one’s present state, and secondly to imagine some path or course of action leading thither. It is to set higher value on doing the thing than on leaving it undone, and also to believe that the thing is – or at least may be – within one’s powers. I cannot meaningfully intend to do something that I do not believe to be a feasible option, and my least bad option. Our values, beliefs and purposes are mutually interdependent. The willfulness of perceptions and the cognitivity of values are two sides of the same coin.

Mostly, the unity of the mind-set needs no discussion, but is simply present unless we allow ourselves to be confused by words: When I spear a piece of meat with my fork and put it in my mouth, there is not the thickness of a hair (as the Zen master would say) between my desire for that bit of tasty food, my belief that I can satisfy the desire through this familiar physical act, and my intention to take another bite. The valuing, relevant beliefs and purpose are implicit in the act itself. We are not aware of them as separate from one another.

Accepting that beliefs and values are inseparable aspects of a personal web of sense-making, we are led to approach the problems of knowledge and value by a different route altogether. For the question that I (and each of us) must now ask is not “What is

true?” but “What is true for me?” And what we find is that beliefs and values, and the intentions that follow, are not arbitrary or capricious just because they are deeply personal. It made sense for a Luther to declare “Here stand I; I cannot do otherwise,” and for the pope of that time, Leo X, to excommunicate Luther as a heretic – and feel he had no choice in doing so. Thus we come not only to an *ethic* of authenticity, but to a problem of *epistemology* also: Truths are none the less *my* truths because they are not everyone’s. But how am I to recognize which of the truths on offer are truly mine? In that question we find a new approach to philosophy.

Let us suppose that personal beliefs and personal values are equally “cognitive” and “non-cognitive” in nature. Equally, that is to say, they are matters of hard-won knowledge and of willful interpretation; they are also equally subject to criticism and argument, on one hand, but equally immune to them, on the other. We thus reject, once and for all, the classical view that values are idiosyncratic and incorrigible, while beliefs are universally true or false for everyone. We ask instead a scientific question and a philosophical one: First, a question for the sciences of anthropology, psychology and social psychology: How do people, in fact, construct the world-views they live by – world-views now taken to include not only beliefs but values also. Second, some questions for theologians and philosophers: How *should* we construct, mature and sometimes modify our world-views? Which beliefs and values behoove us, and which do not? And on what basis should we decide?

Our starting point must be that the classical independence of facts from values, and *vice versa* will not hold water today. Beliefs can no longer be seen as absolutely true or false; values can no longer be seen as merely idiosyncratic and personal. Both dogmas have outlived their usefulness, and today make for more confusion than clarity. It turns out that beliefs, values and purposes are so closely inter-woven that no one of the three can be given meaning except with reference to the other two.

Since we cannot reason sanely about competing interpretations without putting our values on the table along with them, it follows that we must learn to reason about value as well as fact if we hope to reason at all. It is true that you cannot change someone’s tastes and values against their will by arguing with them; but, then, you will have no greater success in changing tenaciously held beliefs of “fact.” As a matter of experience, we argue all the time about values as well as beliefs, and usually about both together. This should not be futile or frustrating if we recognize that the proper purpose in arguing is not to convince but to *clarify* and share our understandings.¹ The upshot of value-argument will probably not be consensus, but rather a structure of competing values that must become the starting point for any negotiation or democratic political process, and the basis for public policy..

¹ In fact, the word *argue* seems to be cognate with the French *argent* or the Latin *argentum*. To *argue* originally meant “to make something clear as silver.”

In what follows, I discuss some aspects of sensible value-thinking² by individual persons, without which it could scarcely be possible for groups or whole societies. In the first part, I point out certain misconceptions or pitfalls that make such thinking more difficult and painful than it need be. In the second, I take up certain issues relating to the development of value-thinking over the course of a life-time. In the third, I defend and praise a sophisticated version of self-interest as a basis for value-thinking. The piece concludes with a few thoughts on the actual process of value-thinking: the distinction between reflection and deliberation, and the common experience of double-mindedness.

I take it for granted that there is no one right way to live, but think it possible to suggest how we can think can sensibly about values and value differences. I also think philosophers have over-emphasized the issues of moral obligation and communal solidarity without sufficiently considering the problem of designing and leading a good life. Up to a point, we're all in this together. People do sometimes try to help each other, and the life experience of one may be instructive for others. After that, it's *sauve qui peut*. Individuals construe and live their own lives, as best they can, from the possibilities on offer. The focus of ethical philosophy should be on our patterns of thought in doing so.

Pitfalls in Value-Thinking

A first misconception has already been mentioned, but needs some further discussion. It's the notion that "facts" and "values" are separate categories – that they belong to logically different domains of thought. Classically, values as much as facts were considered as much a matter for absolute knowledge. Scientifically minded people, following Hume, have insisted on distinguishing them – facts being ineluctably true for everyone, while values are personal and mostly idiosyncratic. "Of tastes there is no disputing," as the saying goes.

We've seen that this sharp distinction cannot work as drawn. Failing to recognize that values, intentions and beliefs of fact are thoroughly inter-dependent – we tend to see the former as aspects of our essential being. We overlook the extent to which our values are learned, and therefore susceptible to criticism, rethinking and improvement. This shields us from unwelcome preaching by self-interested authorities who claim to have our best interests at heart, but it also renders value issues unnecessarily difficult to think about.

By contrast, the notion of cognitive schema as components of an over-all mind-set encourages us to think about and question our values, as a key aspect of understanding in general. The mind-set, with its beliefs, values and intentions all intertwined, is best thought of as a personal orientation toward things – toward the world-in-relation-to-

² What I mean by "sensible value-thinking" corresponds roughly to Aristotle's concept of *sophronesis*, as discussed in Book VI of the Nichomachean Ethics. ??

one's self. Mind-sets may be more or less coherent, more or less "in touch with reality," more or less positive and life-enhancing. In a word, they may be more or less *valuable* to us: they are themselves subject to just the sort of value judgments we are discussing.

With values as with other ideas, there is no absolute Truth, but there are many ways to be wrong. There is no absolute Truth, but some ideas are better than others. Values tend to confirm themselves, and lead to experiences which confirm them. Our values lead us to approve of ourselves, and to approve of the values we profess to hold. This circularity is a chief reason why value is difficult to think about.

For all that they are deeply personal, it is clear that desires and values have to be learned.³ Even the desire (as such) for mother's breast is not yet present at birth. The new-born infant has a reflex to suck and swallow when something is put in its mouth. It has a reflex to cry when it feels pain or emptiness. It can feel satisfied and full, and can reward its caregivers by showing it. But the specific desire to get fed already represents a considerable achievement, as do our other specific desires. In every case, before we can desire a thing we must learn to associate its attainment with some form of pleasure or satisfaction. Until we can do this, we might speak of unfocussed emptiness, anxiety or longing, but not yet of desire, much less of any sense or judgment of value. To value anything at all, we must learn to desire it and also to approve of that desire – to desire to desire it, so to speak. At least two stages of learning are thus involved: We learn to focus our yearnings on some specific object or category; and then we measure that desire against experience, the opinions of others, and a general understanding of things, to conclude whether we desire the desire itself.

Values are not only learned, but are often deliberately taught – or the word *trained* might be more precise. One does not become a competent doctor, lawyer or engineer without internalizing the key values of one's professional teachers and colleagues, to some very considerable extent. One does not become a master potter, or musician or dancer. One does not even survive as a pilot, soldier or cop. Every art, craft and profession is not just a skill or a branch of knowledge, but a culture unto itself, with its characteristic values and attitudes. Its schools and instructors invariably make it their business to teach the values they consider important, or to arrange instruction in such a way that its values get tacitly passed along.

As values can be learned and taught, they can also be resisted. As with all modes of understanding, they are passed along by suggestion; and as some work better than others, they can be argued. As we consult a compass to decide which way is *North*, so we consult a value system to decide which way is *Up*. Just as a faulty compass might point the wrong direction, so may defective values.

Thus Hume's dictum that "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the

³ See Nathanson ??

passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” cannot be correct unless we agree that teaching and learning ought to be carried out in a wholly uncritical spirit, or unless we construe the word *reason* so narrowly as to give it no role in motivation by definition.⁴ Certainly, if by *reasoning* we mean only sensible thinking and not logical proof, then it is clear that reasoning does and must play some role not only in our ideas about value, but in our desires themselves. Though I might dream of doing so, I cannot in any useful sense be said to *desire* to leap from my roof and fly. Values and desires are (and ought to be) cognitive at least in the sense that they are informed by some sense of how the world works, and by attempts at prudent judgment of their consequences.

Our finding, then, is that desires and values are ideas, as “cognitive” as ideas of fact. They represent a kind of knowledge, acquired more or less consciously and critically with whatever else we learn, and they are subject to epistemological criteria of a sort. We pick up values chiefly from people whom we admire and wish to emulate. Therefore, we need to be careful whom we admire. As with other ideas, there are two types of error: to reject good values, or to accept bad ones. Which is more dangerous depends on the situation, and is itself an object for value judgment.

A second misconception is that values are somehow embedded in the natural order of things, and that they are ultimately consistent, so that conflict becomes some kind of aberration. Very many people believe that values have their origin in God’s will and/or the infallible traditions of their tribe, so that all conflict results from human disobedience and wickedness. Human experience refutes this myth – which is actually pernicious, insofar as it encourages individuals and factions to identify their own desires and values with the will of God, and to think of their opponents (who may, in fact, be mirror images of themselves, coveting the same scarce resources) as willing agents of Satan. To the contrary, for serious thought about values it is crucial to admit that our ideas of what is desirable – are not drawn from a single source, are scarcely commensurable, and are potentially in conflict.

Actually, human values derive from a number of different sources, known to all of us, and easily enumerated:

Their most basic source is just the physiology of our nervous systems. Capabilities for pleasure/pain and some basic *affects*⁵ are innately present in infants; and it is on these that all our values ultimately depend. As Nathanson states, things matter to us to

⁴ This seems to have been the line that Hume was taking in the *Treatise On Human Nature* where this statement appears. ??

⁵ The affects might be defined as physiologically based proto-emotions that can be observed in very young infants and in certain mammals, and therefore cannot have been learned. Nine affects have been identified: ?? See ?? By Dr. Donald Nathanson, and my essay ??.

the extent, and in the ways that affect makes them matter. Without the affect system, nothing could feel better, worse, more interesting or more attractive than any other thing; and we could not desire or value anything at all. This system is part of the biology of our species; in its respect, all human beings are alike. On the other hand, the precise balance and triggering of the affect system is highly individual. There are differences of temperament – either innate or acquired so early in life that they might as well be – that make each individual unique. In the last analysis, we like and dislike according to the hormonal tides of a sensuous, irritable and highly individualized nervous system.

Feelings and ideas about values also derive from our participation in various cultures and sub-cultures, including the micro-culture of the family. From earliest infancy we receive messages from caregivers, teachers and other authorities who approve or disapprove of what we are doing. Some of these we internalize; others we simply fear and learn to avoid. Either way, our innate likes and dislikes are modified by experience of the responses of others, and distilled somehow into what is called a *personality*. As Freud recognized,⁶ such judgments **must** to some extent come into conflict with and influence our own desire. In doing so, they comprise a second source for any person's values.

The games, contests and conflicts we get into are worth distinguishing as a separate source of values, because the strategic calculations we make to further our purposes in these games may be at odds with the more generalized promptings of physiology and cultural education. We do what we feel we have to do. Wanting to win, we lose our scruples. But we also acquire values and standards from the games we play. Every human pursuit puts certain qualities at a premium. Every human profession or craft guild sets its standards for membership. Culture's trick of organizing every human pursuit into a stylized, regulated game is surely its most powerful influence on our values – stronger than any religious precepts, for example.

But aesthetic feelings and human needs for meaning and justice are yet another source of value, potentially at odds with those already mentioned. These needs, admittedly, are much stronger in some persons than in others. We might surmise that in a fully evolved human species, they would be much stronger than we find them at present in ourselves.

Finally, the awareness and denial of mortality are uncanny sources of value: Of course, we perform labour to continue living, and take precautions to postpone dying. But we also flirt with death, undertake our various immortality projects in the face of death, surround death with all sorts of fantasies and rituals to channel the imaginative energy that surrounds it. In literature, at the movies, on TV, a vast

⁶ See, for example, *Civilization and Its Discontents* by Sigmund Freud. But Freud's discussion of the conflict between *id* and *superego* is heavily indebted to the charioteer myth in Plato's *Republic*.

pornography of death is readily available. How ideas of death affect our values is a question that abler writers have treated, and is far beyond my scope. The only remark to make here is that obsessions with death are often allowed to get in the way of life.

One conclusion to draw from this multiplicity of sources is that conflict should not be seen as an abnormal condition. Since not all goods are mutually compatible, value conflicts are the rule and not the exception; and the existence of conflict does not mean that one or both of its parties is in the wrong. More likely, both are right – from their respective points of view. Accordingly, we must learn to contain and manage conflict, so that warfare over relatively small value differences does not consume much larger, often common values – in peace and survival, for example. We must expect value conflicts in all close relationships – including the individual’s relationship with himself. Violence should be a very last resort, but conflict is inevitable. The problem for cultures and governments is to contain and channel conflicts so that they do as little damage as possible.

A second conclusion is that values and desires are not necessarily in opposition to one another. If reason is not the slave of the passions, neither is it automatically their enemy. The relationship is altogether more complex: Reason sometimes thwarts desire, but also channels it to allow for its richer and safer expression. In general, we develop values to help in picking our way amongst conflicting desires. Broadly speaking their real purpose is to help us get as much of what we want as possible.

A third misconception behind our values-thinking stems from defective ideas of human autonomy and freedom. The philosophical conundrum of determinism vs. free will is something of a red herring. We are neither so free to choose between good and evil as the traditional religions have supposed, nor as determined in our choices as some behaviourists have supposed. There is some scope for real creativity in human affairs, and much wider scope for what I’d call combinatorial creativity – the re-combination of familiar elements into novel patterns. We are not controlled by culture, desire, or even habit in any simple way.

In the other direction, the concept of “existential freedom” has sometimes been pushed to absurdity. Our autonomy is circumscribed by at least three constraining structures – of physiology, culture and biography. We do indeed create ourselves through choices of value, but certainly not in a vacuum. The choices we make are prepared by our personal histories and then by cultural and biological histories. The infant’s mind is not like a blank slate, and cultural arrangements are not infinitely malleable. Different as they are, it is now known that human languages and cultures also resemble each other in fundamental ways – solving basically the same problems, and subject to the predilections and constraints of human biology. The present is always building on the past or tearing it down, and we advance (when we do) by lifting ourselves by our own bootstraps, much more than by “leaps of faith” into the void. The whole motivation and meaning of choice comes from the past and the imagined future,

and without their constraints there is no significant choice at all.

The extent and nature of human autonomy has been something of a political football. The party of the *ancien regime* – of clergy and aristocracy – could justify authority and privilege by emphasizing Man’s moral freedom and his sinful nature. Classical liberals, the party of business and the middle class, also liked the idea of freedom, but preferred to think of themselves as basically good. The party of the poor and down-trodden advanced demands for social reform behind an ideology of social determinism. With these various agendas driving the argument, a balanced perspective has been hard to find. And it is clear enough that the exaggerations on each side get in the way of serious value-thinking – each with its bias on what men and women should expect from each other, from society as a whole, and from themselves above all.

It is possible to imagine value-learning, thinking and change as a kind of logarithmic spiral, rather like a sea shell, with each gyre serving as a template on which the next is built. We enlist in a game – for, example, a course of training leading to some career – because we desire its prizes, or because we love the game for its own sake. Its daily routine we experience largely as constraint; but because there are challenges and choices that are not pre-programmed, and because we already value some outcomes more than others, the game can teach new value-lessons as it winds along: what we must do to win, and whether the prizes are worth the risks and costs. In this way, desires and values create the personal world that we inhabit and, eventually, the public world that everyone inhabits. In turn, that world re-shapes our personal values.

Exaggerating the elements either of freedom or of constraint in our affairs, diminishes such freedom as we actually have.

A further source of confusion in our value-thinking is the tendency to identify with our values and to regard them as commitments to one’s self or to others. People tell me – and I believe them – that I am a good person, because I want such good things, or a bad person because I want such bad ones. We learn that other people expect consistency of us; internalizing this demand, we come to expect it of ourselves. For this reason, a change in values is readily seen as a form of betrayal or self-betrayal.⁷

In sorting out this tangle, the first thing is to have the courage of your own desires. I like what I like, love what I love, whether I can have it or not, whether it is good for me or not, whether others – and I myself – approve of it or not. This is easier if we remember that values, both our own and other people’s, are only ideas or suggestions

⁷ This is a common issue in therapy, when a client cannot bring himself to alter some dysfunctional pattern from his childhood. A key assumption of interpersonal psychology is that such patterns once served, and somehow still serve, to maintain a needed relationship. As Lorna Smith Benjamin puts it, “Every psychopathology is a gift of love.” *Interpersonal Diagnosis and Treatment of Personality Disorders*, 1993, p.101

on what is good. They are not rules unless someone enforces them. They are not commitments unless I accept them, and make them my own.

In general, straight value-thinking requires us to see through various forms of *cognitive lock-in* (as it has been called) – the construction of an idea in such a way as to resist critical examination and change. One powerful form of lock-in is the notion of faith, which discourages any questioning of received doctrine. When we *define* ourselves as good persons just because we refuse to question certain values and beliefs, we buy self-esteem at a price in cognitive rigidity.

One pre-requisite for sensible value-thinking is to become aware of and cast off such locks. We should at least acknowledge our desires, whether or not we decide to indulge them. We should be able to question our values, whether or not we decide to revise them. Above all, we should feel free to hold contradictory values – in full knowledge that they cannot all be realized.

A fifth misconception, endemic in this competitive and “meritocratic” society and the last I will discuss, is that all values are best thought of in quantitative or comparative terms. In fact, the measurement of value is often meaningless, and even direct comparisons may be problematic or worse. We do better to appreciate people, books, and even computer programs on their merits.

The chief danger in quantitative and comparative value-thinking is that values which do not lend themselves to such thinking may be slighted or over-looked entirely. We then forget how to love a thing for what it is in itself – not for its instrumental or competitive potential. Thus, it may be appropriate to value an athlete because he can jump higher than another, but it would be wrong to value a dancer in those terms; and it is far from clear that arts like figures skating or gymnastics are well served in treating them as competitive sports. In fact, over-emphasis on the quantitative and comparative in athletics undercuts even the athletic values, as only those few who will be winners can see much point in playing at all.

This kind of value-thinking makes us lose sight of the understanding that “enough is enough,” and that “too much of anything is toxic.” In this way we become trapped by our desires, and by our measures for their satisfaction. Here the modern Olympic Games are an example of the addiction that is wrecking our whole society: What should be sport, or athletic training, or religious festival has become political theatre and big business. In general, when we want more of something; we devise systems to produce it; competition makes these systems more efficient, and we congratulate ourselves on our prosperity. But the problem now is that there is no way to turn these systems off until they use up their supply of raw materials, or drown in their own wastes, or until they overheat and explode. When you build a system, it tends to run by itself. When you organize to pursue a certain good, your organization wants to expand. It wants more staff and revenue to pursue its goals. It wants more power to control anything that might hinder it in achieving them. It extends its goals to justify its power.

As in the tale of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, your desire takes on demonic life of its own.

Thinking Value

If you don't know what you are, it's hard to know what's good for you – as Socrates (and the Delphic oracle) anciently insisted. Where the ancients went wrong, I believe, was in their attempt to pin ethics – the philosophy of values and the good life – to a local, and overly optimistic view of Man. But modern thinkers go wrong too – either in reducing Man to a creature of culture and society, or else in their insistence on absolute freedom. I see these teachings and others as so many competing **interpretations** of the human condition: To argue them as true or false is a category error, because interpretations are cognitive strategies, ways of seeing, rather than factual claims. Whether or not some really convincing meta-psychology of Self-in-Society can be constructed, I think people must be allowed to understand themselves as best they can, and in their own way.

Since our most fundamental values are those of the body, sensible value-thinking should probably begin with the very personal and changing relationship that we have to our own bodies, and with the ways we inhabit and use them.

Attitudes toward the body are learned first in infancy and early childhood from immediate care-gives, and then in later childhood and adolescence from the peer group. Different cultures, we know, construe and relate to the body in very different ways – but we will get to culture in a moment. Just now, we want to look at certain values that stem almost directly from the body itself. Woven into scripts as they are, influenced by culture as those scripts will be, a handful of values still must be considered body-values, insofar as versions of them can be expected amongst all humans everywhere, just by virtue of the fact that they are and have human bodies.⁸ The reader will be as familiar with these body-values as I am and can easily list them for himself. All we need remark here is that the body is that aspect of Self that acts in the world, presents the Self to others, and is acted upon in turn. The body's needs and desires, its capabilities and limitations, its attractiveness to others, its strength, vulnerability and ultimate mortality are a constant source of material for value-thinking. It keeps changing over the course of a lifetime, and the Self's relation to its body changes also.

The paradox of an infinitely imaginative symbol processor trapped in needy, finite, mortal flesh is brilliantly discussed in a book called *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker, written as Becker himself was dying of cancer at the age of 49.⁹ I don't

⁸ Stephen Pinker's recent book, *The Blank Slate*, clearly discusses the things that all human beings have in common, just by virtue of having human bodies. ??

⁹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* ??

propose to go into his argument here, except to remark that a prerequisite for sensible value thinking is that we deal with the scandal of the body in some relatively sane fashion. For I think Becker is correct in his central point – that the attempt to deny our creaturely finitude, with the foreknowledge of our mortality at its centre, is **the** fundamental preoccupation of human cultures – and the fundamental source of human craziness and human evil. If so, we must begin by recognizing that sensible value-thinking requires some clarity about the body and its inevitable death. We need to take our bodies seriously, on their terms, as the basis for a degree of healthy scepticism about our own cultures, and their not always benign or sensible dispensations.

In the first hours out of the womb, children begin to learn how to get along in their natal cultures. Partly by exhortation, much more by emulation, more again through the reward structures of the games they make available, these have a way of teaching values to their children – conveying to them a certain understanding of which way is **up**. As already suggested, this understanding is a seamless fabric of approved values, of concepts and beliefs supporting them, of purposes that they suggest, of knowledge and skills needed to pursue the purposes. The process of *enculturation*, now understood as the developmental wiring of a brain to cope with its environment, fully occupies all of infancy and much of childhood; and it continues throughout life.

Cultures are probably more ambivalent, more dialectical than the last paragraph suggests. They do not so much teach their members to live by certain ideals as polarize their characters along certain typical axes. In our own case, this axis seems to have an ideal of hard-driving “success” at one pole, and a contradictory pole of equality, loving concern for others, and social harmony at the other. For this reason, our value-thinking is often conflicted, and we are not always on good terms with ourselves. Sensible value-thinking requires some management of these conflicts. Another point is that for all the nominal individualism of this society, no very great depth of character – not much significant individuation – is encouraged at either pole. This fundamental shallowness is probably true of all cultures. For it seems that all have a formulaic character as a byproduct of their basic function: to facilitate human relationships, and to cloak human realities in mystification. To this end, everything not compulsory must be at least discouraged – if not strictly forbidden.

One aspect of any culture, of course, is a body of cultural wisdom – or ideology, as it is often called – providing ready made schema of concepts and value-laden information. Cultures also provide various games and roles which serve as templates – ready-made patterns – for intelligible relationship. Embedded as we are in cultural systems of this kind, we “go along to get along.” In our value-thinking, we seek to align ourselves to the extent possible with the approved values, enroll in such games as are available to us, take on the roles these games define and require. We learn to compete, as someone put it, for the culture’s conventional prizes by its conventional means. And we internalize the value systems that make these prizes desirable. That is what it means

to be a member of a culture.

Nor is there anything wrong with such a life – if one is getting a decent share of the prizes. If it is not as creative or conscious as some have advocated, it may at least be productive and useful. In any case, it is the best most people can have, since it is all that culture makes available for the asking. Anything further must be taken or fought for, against considerable resistance.

The rewards (so to speak) for unreserved buy-in to a given culture's values are cognitive security and higher status. It is as if one had made a kind of feudal bargain promising single-minded loyalty in exchange for protection and preferred treatment. The penalty for conspicuously refusing that bargain is a varying degree of isolation and persecution, depending mostly on the ambient culture's current level of insecurity. In good times, when the general mood is optimistic, and the establishment feels securely in power, dissent and mild deviance are tolerated. In less favourable times, these become increasingly uncomfortable and dangerous.

What can make the choice difficult for some people are personal values that they can only realize through some degree of **disloyalty**, even **rebellion** against the established culture. The awakening of these persons leads them outside of, or beyond the social order to some extent, or in some fashion. Their rebellion may be conspicuous and radical, or so well camouflaged that no one else is aware of it. By the neighbours it may be seen as amiable eccentricity or as damnable heresy. Whether it goes one way or the other is largely a matter of luck and tact. The basic reality, however, is that without a degree of scepticism and the courage to indulge it, you remain a vessel or instrument of your society and its culture. You never become a real individual at all.

Most people remain preoccupied with mastering and flourishing in the culture around them. Of course, in a society as complex as ours, this process is never complete for anyone. We never stop learning about and adapting to our cultures and sub-cultures, even as growing skepticism and ironic detachment supervene. For various reasons, some people begin to take the cultures around them with a grain of salt. *Irony* is the name for this state of mind. It is characterized by a recognition that there are many ways – not just one right way – of being human. As Kipling puts it, "There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right."¹⁰

The problem is that they can't all be right, if "right" means "true" in the classical sense. To the extent that you no longer take your culture and its pretences at face value, you are forced to some version of pluralism – which undermines the truth-claims of your culture even further. You understand its discourses as *myths*, metaphorical constructs, not as representations of what is literally so. You come to perceive how

¹⁰ *The Neolithic Age*, Rudyard Kipling, 1895

every culture exploits men and women for its own purposes;¹¹ and you feel justified in resenting – and then in effectively resisting – its attempts to exploit you.

The ironic mind-set carries its own values and becomes, to some extent, a culture in its own right – the culture of urbanity and ironic sophistication, which prizes “cool,” and is contemptuous of commitment. Members of this culture value cultural agility, and cultivate the chameleon’s knack of blending in with their surroundings. The ideal is to be at home everywhere and to give offence nowhere. The great fear is of being duped.

For the ironist, values are a sort of costume, put on for the occasion. Make believe is a way of life. True believers sense the ironist’s insincerity and secret contempt, and very naturally resent it, yet there is no way back. Once you notice the emperor is naked, there is no way not to notice. With the best of his courtiers you can make the right admiring noises about his splendid raiment, but you remain aware that his clothes are figments of a collective imagination.

Many people remain preoccupied by such conundrums of irony and belief throughout their lives; certainly, there has been enough in this quarrel to keep philosophers busy. Yet the ironic stance becomes tiresome finally. It cannot satisfy the need we feel to give our lives meaning and purpose.¹² For this reason irony points beyond itself, to the project that Jung called *individuation*: the search for wholeness and *personal truth*.

By definition, the nature and scope of this project remains an exercise for the individual.¹³ All I would suggest here is that individuation seems to involve a reaching out beyond the self, and a simultaneous turning inward, and that some courage and luck are needed to pull it off. The individuated person is a bit of a fetishist, a slave or a crank. Someone or something beyond himself catches his interest, kindles a passion, and becomes a focus of effort and study. He is drawn out of himself, into some form of deviance – more or less annoying to society because more or less departing from society’s norm. It draws him into some quest or practice that can never be completed in a single lifetime because each challenge leads on to the next. At the same time, the individuating person finds his attention turning inward to recognize and take account of his own mind’s workings. If he has a bent for introspection to start with, well and good. If not, the external practice will drive his attention inward, as it becomes increasingly clear that he himself sets the limits to what is possible.

Without courage and a degree of luck, the project is stillborn. Individuation is lonely, and somewhat dangerous as well. Impelled by his own values and mind-set, not

¹¹ For insight into culture as parasitic on life as well as conducive to it, see Jules Henry’s *Culture Against Man*. ??

¹² See Victor Frankl on the subject of *Man’s Search For Meaning*. ??

¹³ See Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, and other examples. ??

checking and readjusting his attitudes constantly to match the currently approved ones, the individuated person easily gets a reputation for eccentricity or worse, which may be detrimental to his career prospects or his life expectancy, depending on the political situation. It's a high-risk, high-return game.

It seems to me that any individuation project, whatever else it involves, poses the same perennial problem: On one hand, there is the project and the passion that drives it. On the other, there is the need for camouflage or compromise – whatever the time and place demand – to survive, to gain a living, to get along with the neighbours and the authorities. Nearly always, to some extent, these imperatives pull in opposite directions; and there is, accordingly, a painful tension between them.

Beyond the individuation process, or as one aspect of it, some people may experience a pull the other way, toward a deeper more passionate involvement with the world. Call this the phase of *re-connection*. I would define it as the effort to enter into a dialogue with society, influence it, re-shape it nearer to your heart's desire – and come to feel that you have done so. It's the resolve to live authentically and accept the risks of doing so. To others, the resulting abandonment of ordinary prudence may look like craziness, but this misses the point. What has happened, rather, is that the sense of Self has expanded to a point where the body's welfare and fate seem irrelevant. When people reach this state, the results are likely to be spectacular, and sometimes of world-historical importance. When people become careless of their lives, their values become contagious. Then there is no knowing what may happen.

Language compels us to describe enculturation, irony, individuation and re-connection as progressive stages of development, but it is misleading to think of them so. First, despite the logical dependency amongst them, no stage is necessarily "higher" than the ones before. One might spend a fulfilled life attempting to master aspects of one's own culture without ever feeling the need to step outside it, into the ironical cold. One might be fully individuated and make one's mark within a given culture, never having left it and feeling no need to re-connect. Yet one's approach to the ambient culture, and especially to its values, will likely evolve (if it does) in the order given.

Second, one stage does not necessarily end because another begins. You do not stop learning your culture(s) just because a degree of ironical scepticism is setting in. The process of individuation is likely to heighten your sense of irony, rather than diminish it, and may well turn you toward new aspects of your culture that had not much concerned you previously. A heavy re-connection project makes a man more not less of an individual.

At the stage of enculturation, culture is taken at face value, and completely seriously. It is just the way things are – or are supposed to be. Your fundamental values are just those of the culture you live in, and its value-conflicts are yours. You may wrestle with the demands they make on you. You may resist them. You may feel

they are impossible to meet. But you do not seriously question them. You feel no need to see your culture from the outside, from some external stance.

At the ironic stage, no human culture appears very much more plausible in its truth claims than any other. The fact that a given culture happens to be one's own is a good reason to go through the motions of observance, but not to take it seriously. In fact, the pomposity and self-righteousness of its institutions make them ridiculous. You play along with the game as you must and can, but find it hard to grasp how seriously other people are taking it.

At the stage of individuation, culture is a strait jacket, and sometimes a threat. While it can tolerate and use the ironists who see through the system and play it for their own purposes, it is deeply hostile to individuated persons who reject not just the authority of its paradigms, its games and prizes, as well.

At the stage of re-connection, society again becomes an object of concern. It no longer looks like a farce or a strait jacket, but more like a whole world of poor bastards making out as best they can. You come to recognize that all your journeying still leaves you pretty much in the same fix with everyone else. The human condition remains much the same no matter how many books you've read. What you come to understand, finally, is that anything that can happen to anyone might just as well happen to you.

Measured Self-Interest

For some two thousand years the mainstream of our society's moral teaching has been a doctrine of brotherly love. This might be fine if it were not so hypocritical, and so badly out of touch with the realities of daily existence. For, as we've seen, conflict is not an aberration but a norm of human life. It is not possible to love your neighbour, nor even your wife or husband, without strong skills for conflict and conflict management, for which some realism about self-interest and balance of power is surely pre-requisite. Accordingly, one crucial aspect of sensible value-thinking is the overlooked distinction between mere selfishness and what I'd call a *measured* self-interest.

I speak of measured self interest, but what I have in mind is a Greek word, *sophrosyne*, for which English has no exact equivalent. Donovan Bessinger's website¹⁴ lists its properties as follows:

- temperance in desires – "nothing in excess"
- self awareness -- "know thyself"
- modesty (self confident humility, the opposite of arrogance)

¹⁴ Pronounce the word in four syllables, with the accent on the second. See <http://members.aol.com/donibess/sophros.htm#today> ??

- relatedness to the whole of self and society
- respect for excellence
- respect for human nature, its limits, its balance
- self-restrained freedom
- obedience to the laws of harmony and proportion
- love of truth-beauty-goodness
- wisdom (clear discernment based on broad knowledge, including self knowledge)
- the qualities giving rise to true charm and charisma

The same website quotes as follows from the Princeton edition of Plato's dialogues:¹⁵

Enough is said about [*sophrosyne*] in Greek literature for us to be able to

describe it in some fashion, but we cannot give it a name. It was the spirit behind the two great Delphic sayings, "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess." Arrogance, insolent self-assertion, was the quality most despised by the Greeks. *Sophrosyne* was the exact opposite. It meant accepting the bounds which excellence lays down for human nature, restraining impulses to unrestricted freedom, to all excess, obeying the inner laws of harmony and proportion.

I think the idea of measure – *sophrosyne* – is crucial, especially in the post-modern world where each one of us depends on the calculated self-interest of others for his very existence, and where collective survival depends on negotiated limits to economic and military competition. Indeed, I can see no other basis for sound value-thinking under any circumstances. We may or may not learn to set value on the well-being and growth of others, but there is no way to live except by one's own values. It would be like walking not with the moccasins of some other person, but with his feet. Thus, it seems to me that the ethic of altruism, of service to others, has been an almost unmitigated disaster, encouraging shame and guilt and hypocrisy with little moral benefit. I think we should encourage more selfishness, rather than less – but a more courageous, intelligent and magnanimous version of selfishness, with more forethought and prudence in its pursuit. The Greek ideal comes close to what I have in mind.

The Greeks understood very well that winning is better than losing, and that sharp practice was often needed if one hoped to win. Cunning Odysseus, the "man of many devices," was their culture-hero, and perhaps the greatest of these. At the same time, the Greeks had a healthy fear of *hubris*, the opposite of *sophrosyne*, referred to in the paragraph quoted above as "arrogant, insolent self-assertion." The most dangerous thing of all is not knowing when to stop. In their theatre, over and over again, the great individual destroys himself by over-reaching, as the result of his very greatness.

Today, there's a lot of this going around. As Oswald Spengler pointed out, for

¹⁵ *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* p. ?? Princeton University Press, 1989

better and worse, the refusal of limitations has been a defining characteristic of Western civilization and sensibilities.¹⁶ The quality called *sophrosyne* has yet to make it into the English dictionary. The whole idea is alien to our thinking. The society becomes more and more litigious, more and more cluttered with laws and regulations and precedents (judge-made law) because absolutely everything is pushed as far as possible. Appetites must be curbed from the outside because no one even thinks to curb his own.

Sensible values-thinking depends on some awareness that “the best is the enemy of the good,” that evils must be contained and managed because they can rarely be eliminated, that the idea “zero-tolerance” leads readily to cures much worse than the original disease, that a little corruption, making politics possible, makes it possible for people to live together. We don’t want too much slack in the system, but life is not possible without a little. In short, to say it once again, the most dangerous thing of all is not knowing when to stop.

And yet, apart from insisting that the pursuit of private happiness should be constrained by law, modern philosophy has paid little attention to the question of measured self-interest, as if there were no such thing as love, or as if integrity and generosity were always purely disinterested. Actually, most of the good we find in the world – including love itself – has a large component of self-interest. Even ignoring any material benefits, esteem, and influence purchased, we love and care for others, act magnanimously sometimes, and contribute to causes that interest us, simply because it feels good to do so. Nor is there anything wrong with this. Kant’s position to the effect that only what is performed from duty should count as ethical behaviour is hard to take seriously. How should we factor the pleasures of self-righteousness, if this were so?

I prefer to assume that an ethical life is more rather than less good if one derives happiness from behaving ethically, and that appropriately self-interested behaviour is what we normally expect of each other. Deeds of pure altruism, with no expectation of any *quid pro quo*, may be lovely and praiseworthy or may be neurotic, but are, in any case supererogatory – beyond what can be asked or expected. We thus agree with the thrust of Hillel’s first question, that every living creature – man, woman, child or chicken – has the right to be for itself. We will agree with his second implicit comment also: that every creature has the right to project itself into the world as it sees fit – to look for meaning in its life, to be for something beyond itself. The bare fact of doing so, and the way in which this is done will be one way in which enlightened and measured self-interest distinguishes itself from arrant selfishness.

The so-called Law of the Minimum,¹⁷ suggests another way of drawing this same distinction; and it has crucial implications for the value-thinking, of individuals,

¹⁶ See the discussion of “Faustian civilization” in *The Decline of the West*. ??

¹⁷ Formulated by Justus von Liebig in the 19th century, and first applied to plant growth.

organizations and whole societies. It states that growth – any sort of progress or development – is limited not by the total resources available, but by the availability of the scarcest resource. Accordingly, the desire for more food than you can eat, or for more wealth and power than could improve the happiness or quality of your life passes beyond measured self-interest into greed. When wealth and power attract more enemies than they are worth, you have too much.

In general, whatever one is trying to do, there will always be a limiting factor (or a few factors) that set the limit to what is possible. For an evolving system, these will be the area of most intense selection pressure. For an intentional system – like a human person – they will be the factors of greatest “value,” on which its efforts should now be concentrated.

How fast I can write is limited not by my hunt-and-peck typing skills, and not even by the rate at which ideas come to me, but by the rate at which I can formulate well-wrought sentences and paragraphs. A typing course would therefore be of no particular benefit to the kind of work I do. Up to a certain point, how fast I can safely drive will depend on the road conditions. On a straight road with no entrances and exits, it would depend on the traffic. On a straight, empty road through the desert, with ideal traction and visibility, it would depend only on the mechanics of the car. I believe that for the world as a whole today, the factors limiting human population and quality of life is not the carrying capacity of the planet, and not our ability to produce material goods, but our ability to take and implement collective decisions, and our ability to share.

Well, what are the limiting factors of a human life? Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs”¹⁸ offers a first approach to an answer. The lowest levels of Maslow’s hierarchy, the physiological needs and those for physical safety and security in one’s attachment system are quite universal. The mid-range needs for love, esteem and self-esteem are more individual, though still recognizably similar from one individual – and even one human culture – to another. There is little consensus on the highest need, which Maslow calls self-actualization – “the desire to become more and more what one is. . . [what] one is capable of becoming.” I would refer you back to my discussion of individuation and re-connection in the last section.

Individuation and what I have called “re-connection” are by definition individual: Each person who encounters their demands must find his own way to satisfy them. For my own self-interest, just to have interesting people to talk to, I wish for a political and economic system that affords to as many as possible the wherewithal and leisure for individuation, while meeting the physiological and safety needs of all. How best to do this is a matter for future writing.

¹⁸ Maslow recognized physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. See <http://web.utk.edu/~gwynne/maslow.HTM> for a brief discussion.

How to Think About Values

Finally, as regards the value thought-process itself, I offer two suggestions. The first is that value-thinking is more a matter of reflection than of deliberation, but that each has its role to play. Many people are poor deliberators, and many slight the reflective process altogether. As a result, we tend either to jump to our decisions or to dither over them when the use of reflection and deliberation by turns would give much better results. In general, finding yourself in a decision situation – that is to say, a situation of confusion and uncertainty – you use deliberation to map the situation, reflection to discover what you want to do about it, then deliberation again to check this tentative decision against available information. At the end you have a decision that you can live with, and that can stand up against criticism by all the values in play using available knowledge to marshal the best arguments at their disposal. It may not be the “best” decision, if the notion of a “best” is even meaningful in this context; but it will be a “sound” decision, furthering a measured self-interest in a responsible way.

In deliberative thinking you construct arguments for and against the alternatives before you, and decide which one has the weightiest arguments in its favour. Reflective thinking, by contrast, is essentially a negative effort. The idea is to sit down in the middle of the situation and see what comes to mind. You make room for stray associations and feelings, and you pay attention to them. You allow the subconscious (also known as intuition) to speak to you. You do not follow it blindly, but you take it very seriously. You begin from an assumption that important elements of the situation may not be available in language, through the conscious paradigms. (Exactly how do you keep your balance when you are standing? Exactly how do you adjust your gait for the terrain on which you are walking?) You assume instead that there is a sub-conscious mind with an important contribution to make if you are willing to take it seriously.

We tend to slight the reflective process in our value-thinking and decision-making, perhaps because it feels as if we were doing nothing at all. Since reflection is a consultation with the unconscious, we cannot tell what we are doing while we are doing it. Since most decisions are made under at least some time pressure, taking the time for reflection may seem wasteful or lazy. On the contrary, as the Zen-trained swordsmen knew, the subconscious is what you must rely on when there is no time for deliberation at all.

The second suggestion I would make is that argument about values (including deliberative *thought* itself, conceived as internal argument) may be useful and informative even when it does not produce consensus. Even if no agreement is reached, a well-conducted dispute may still generate much useful information and insight. In general, its outcome is not a body of static truths as might be expressed in flat declarative statements, but a kind of intellectual structure – a structure of argument –

that I've described elsewhere.¹⁹ Especially when the dispute concerns desires and values, some mutual understanding of the competing viewpoints and values, and an agreement to disagree about these is the best we can expect. But this is already a great deal! Whether the stakeholders are two individuals, or just two competing sides of a single individual, the structure of argument amongst them is a sufficient basis for fruitful negotiation and compromise. Conversely, where such a structure is lacking, the basis for negotiation and compromise does not exist. In an individual, the typical result is a rigid, authoritarian personality, with severe inner conflicts just barely held in check. In a whole society, the result is much the same on a larger scale.

As applied to value-thinking, the notion of truth as a structure of argument amounts simply to the recognition that human good is necessarily manifold and conflicted. Willing just one thing, being single-minded in one's own proper vocation or calling, may be purity of heart, as Kierkegaard suggested, but it is more than a little simple-minded, and does not make for a rounded and balanced life. Purity is admirable after a fashion, and I am duly willing to admire it in persons who are genuinely called to it, but it is not what would wish for a child of mine, or for a friend, or for myself. *Sophrosyne* again. I am more impressed by the people who can prize and be moved by the full range of goods that men and women value, but can make coherent lives for themselves withal. The poet Lovelace memorably claimed that his feelings for Lucretia, his mistress, were augmented and not diminished by his greater love for honour. I would have it the other way – that courage is all the nobler in the person whose preference over heroism would be for a warm bed and a long life. Similarly with other values and virtues. Single-minded dedication is admirable only with some appreciation of what one is giving up.

¹⁹ See my essay, *Truth as a Structure of Argument*, and also *Sharing Realities: Toward a Philosophy of Conversation*, elsewhere on this site.

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