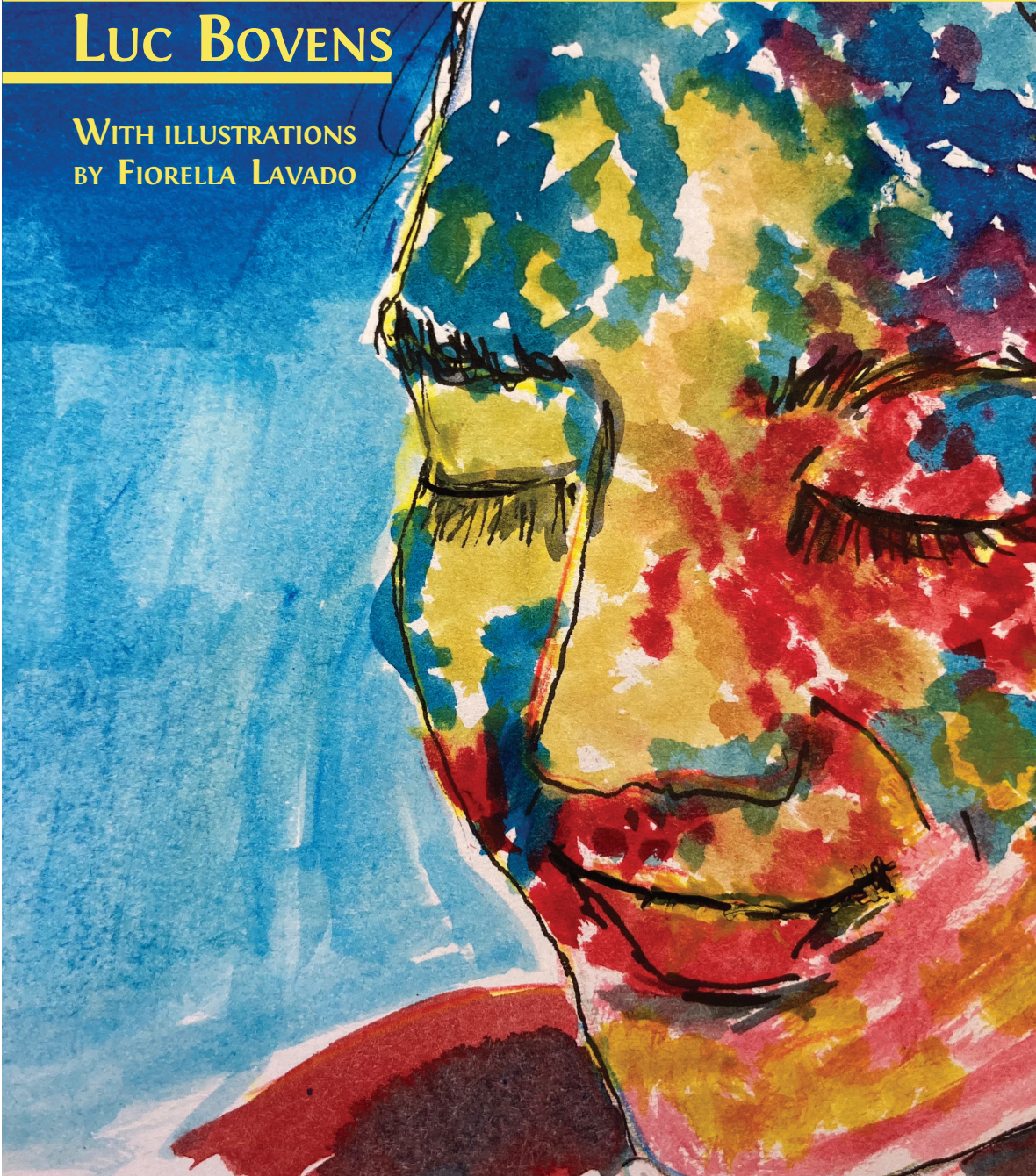


# COPING

## A PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDE

LUC BOVENS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY FIORELLA LAVADO



# COPING



# Coping

A Philosophical Guide

*Luc Bovens*

*with illustrations by Fiorella Lavado*

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# Author and Illustrator Biographies

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**Luc Bovens** is a Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he teaches in the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics program. He is a joint author with Stephan Hartmann of *Bayesian Epistemology* (Oxford University Press 2003) and has collaborated with Fiorella Lavado on the TESS (Teaching Ethics with Short Stories) website (2018). His current interests are in moral psychology and philosophy & public policy. He has held previous appointments in the University of Colorado at Boulder (1990–2003) and in the London School of Economics and Political Science (2004–2017).

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# Why This Book?

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You have probably heard Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer in some version or other: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.' It's clever and touching, but there is a bit of a false dichotomy. There is often very little we can do to make changes to the world, and yet we do not just simply sit back and accept. There is something in the space between courage and serenity. We try to cope and there are a range of strategies to make the world around us easier to bear and, dare I say, even enjoyable.

I cover six themes: *hope*, *death*, *love*, *reconciliation*, *self-management*, and *counsel*. Clinging to *hope* is one way to cope. Hoping for better times keeps us in the game. And even in the face of *death*, hope does not dissipate and comes in many hues. From the end of life, we move to the springs of life, and give some thought to *love* in its many variants and with all its trials and tribulations. When there are breakdowns in the social fabric, we need rituals of *reconciliation*—offering and accepting apologies and asking for and granting forgiveness. To make life more palatable, we can also focus on making changes within ourselves. These are strategies of *self-management*. And to conclude, there are all kinds of *counsel* on offer, aiming to boost our spirits and make life more joyful. Let us look at each of these themes in turn.

*Hope*. What is it to hope for something? A core feature of hope is that the prospect engages our imagination. Should we give free rein to hope? Emily Dickinson, in her poems 'Hope is the thing with feathers' and 'Hope is a subtle glutton,' was of two minds. When is it a thing with feathers—or, in other words, when is it wise to hope? When is it foolish to hope—when should we banish that subtle glutton? Can we only hope for things that we truly want? Or might we sometimes find ourselves

with shameful and petty hopes that do not match our genuine desires? There are many attitudes in hope's neighborhood: How is hoping different from, say, being hopeful? And finally, what's with the audacity of hope in the title of Barack Obama's book? What is so audacious about hoping?

*Death.* What is there to hope for when the grim reaper knocks, and there is no telling him to come back later? Some religious people hope that with the closing of our earthly life, a door opens for a new life to come. But there are also distinctly secular hopes in the face of death. One might hope that one's life was worthwhile. But what makes life worthwhile—is it a mode of living, is it about having made a mark and, if so, what kind of mark? One might hope to die well, but what makes for a good death? One might hope to be missed by loved ones. But why would one wish the pain of loss and grief upon them? And we may have hopes for a posthumous future, but why would we care about a future in which we are no more?

*Love.* 'What is this thing called love?' the Cole Porter song asks. There is the curious feature of love's constancy—its unwillingness to trade up for new partners, and its endurance in the face of change. There are three grand old models of love: Socrates' *eros* model, St. Paul's *agape* model, and Aristophanes' *fusion* model. How do these models account for love's constancy? These are all models of love that portray it as the kind of thing that is worth having. In contrast, there are cynical models of love, which are the mirror images of their venerable cousins. What can this array of models of love tell us about the flipside of constancy—about the heartache when love fades? How do we cope with love lost on the *eros*, the *agape*, and the *fusion* models, and what kind of cure do cynical models have in store?

*Reconciliation.* Social life can drag us down. It carries the yoke of the past, and what is done cannot be undone. This leads to the curious practices of apologizing and forgiving. A genuine apology requires acknowledging our wrongdoing, feeling remorse and empathy, resolving to change our ways, and doing all this in a humble manner. Each of these components raises a gamut of questions. What distinguishes apologies

from saying that we are sorry about what happened? Can we apologize while standing by what we did, as Zidane did in an interview after he head-butted Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final? Is there too much apologizing going on in today's world? Can we accept apologies without forgiving? Can we forgive without accepting apologies? And finally, what determines the proper measure of amends that should accompany an apology?

*Self-Management.* Sometimes it is no use trying to change the world since, try as we may, the world won't change. It is the wrong place to engage the will. So why not engage the will where there is less resistance? Can we set out to desire what we can get rather than what we cannot get? Can we set out to frame things so that they seem more palatable? Pretense is a tried and proven recipe: Fake it until you make it! But there are certain attitudes, such as self-forgetfulness and spontaneity, that are hard to cultivate. Can we set out to believe what we would like to be true? This seems more problematic. Isn't that wishful thinking or self-deception? But what could be wrong with talking ourselves into believing that we will succeed, even against the odds?

*Counsel.* I confess: This chapter is a bit of a cheat. By the time we get there, we will have discussed many types of counsels that help us cope. But there are a few additional ones that intrigue me. Here we go. First: Be grateful! This counsel is much broader than just being grateful to someone who did you a special favor. What should we be grateful for in life, and how does gratitude compare in a religious and a secular worldview? Second: Help your neighbor! What is so uplifting about helping in a local soup kitchen? Why is helping others a recipe to forget about our own troubles? Third: Don't cry over spilled milk! What is the difference between regret and disappointment? What can be said to dispel regret, and to dispel disappointment? Fourth: Express yourself! How can doing art offer clarity and relief? Why might keeping a diary help us with our troubles? And finally: Eat judiciously! That somber mood is doubtlessly due to too much gluten! But why might attention to diet be therapeutic? What is the causal route from dietary constraints to a better life?

When young adults leave home to go to college, life throws a host of new challenges at them. Philosophy curricula try to include courses that reflect on life's challenges and on how to cope with them. There is a recent move toward courses with titles like 'Resilience,' 'Philosophy of Life,' or 'The Big Questions.' Also, moral philosophy and moral psychology courses have come to include such reflection. There are many ways to use the material in this book in such courses.

The chapters are self-contained which makes it easy to integrate them in a broader syllabus. Or one could build a whole course around the book. A slower-paced way of doing this is to split up each chapter over two weeks. I have included discussion questions for each chapter. In a faster-paced course, one could read a chapter one week and then complement it with the suggested additional materials the next week. I selected materials that are accessible and invite philosophical reflection and discussion. With these materials, the book could also function as a textbook for philosophy and literature or philosophy and film courses.

Each topic is addressed in a series of short essays that are written with an eye to classroom discussion. My focus is on philosophical puzzles. These puzzles are found in ordinary life, in poetry and literature, and in current social problems. I draw on the complexity of our lives and muddle through various considerations that pull in different directions when dealing with the puzzles in question. So, if coping is a bit of muddling through, then this book is a philosophical muddling through how we muddle through life's challenges.

This is not a self-help book. Coping strategies tend to work best in the dark. Thinking too hard about them makes them less effective. It's like doing high-fives. You should focus not on the other person's hand but on their elbow. The philosopher describes the hands meeting in mid-air and creating vibrations—there is your clap. But don't think about philosophy when you are trying to get a nice, clean clap. Look at the elbows instead. Only listen to the philosopher if you are curious to know what is really happening. Philosophers are not therapists. Therapists heal. Philosophers edify. Granted, the two are not mutually exclusive: They may cross-fertilize—healing may bring edification in its wake and vice versa. But their primary purpose is different.

I have tried to shun philosophical jargon and make the writing accessible to students who are new to philosophy. This is not an academic

book with footnotes and references documenting that so-and-so said this-and-that. Many of the ideas in this book can be found in a more academic format in my earlier published work.

Chapter 1 draws on 'The Value of Hope' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59(3), 1999). Chapter 2 can be traced to 'Secular Hopes in the Face of Death' (in Rochelle Green (ed.), *Theories of Hope: Exploring Alternative Affective Dimensions of Human Experience*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). A shorter version of Chapter 3 can be found in 'What Is This Thing Called Love?' (in Adrienne Martin (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2019). Chapter 4 is based on ideas from 'Apologies' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 108(1), 2008) and 'Must I Be Forgiven?' (*Analysis*, 69(2), 2009). Chapter 5 combines ideas from 'Sour Grapes and Character Planning' (*Journal of Philosophy*, 89(2), 1992) and 'The Intentional Acquisition of Mental States' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 55(4), 1995). 'Don't Cry over Spilled Milk' in Chapter 6 is a popular rendering of 'The meaning of "darn it!"' written jointly with Wlodek Rabinowicz (in Iwao Hirose and Andrew Reisner (eds.), *Weighing and Reasoning: Themes from the Philosophy of John Broome*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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# 1. Hope

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## What Is Hope?

Leonardo Da Vinci had the habit of buying captive birds just to set them free. In the *Codex Atlanticus*, there are multiple drawings of a caged bird with an inscription in Da Vinci's trademark mirror writing: '*I pensieri si voltano alla speranza*' [The thoughts turn toward hope.] For Da Vinci, setting a bird free was a symbol of hope.

So let our thoughts turn toward hope. We start with the nature of hope: What is it to hope for something? Here is my proposal. Hoping for something is *wanting it to be so, believing that it might or might not be so, and engaging in mental imagery* about what it would be like if it were so. You need all three—that is, the desire, the belief, and the mental imagery—to be hoping, and if you have all three in place, then you are indeed hoping. Let us look at each in turn.

*We hope for what we desire.* We can't hope for something and at the same time have no desire for it. Sometimes hopes don't follow what, all in all, we want. Part of me wants to have an ice cream, and part of me doesn't. In as much as the ice cream is yummy, I want it, and in as much as it has a gazillion calories, I want to stay away from it. Now, all in all, I want to hold off. But I must admit, I do secretly hope that the ice cream van will come by and that I will succumb to temptation.

Hopes may even be divided and follow conflicting desires. I want my child to get an MBA and continue the family business. But I also want them to be happy, and I know that their true aspiration is to become an artist. We can hope to eat our cake and, at the same time, hope to continue having it. We can't have it both ways, but there is no harm in cherishing conflicting hopes. Such hopes only become problematic

when they compel us to act in inconsistent ways. However, so long as our actions are in line with what, all in all, we want, there is nothing untoward about conflicting hopes.

*We hope for what we believe might or might not be so.* I can hope for what I think is likely—for example, that I will make it home safely tonight—as well as for what I think is unlikely—for example, that I will win the lottery this week. But there is no hope in the face of certainty. If I am certain that my friend will come for a visit, I can look forward to it, but I can't hope for it. If I am certain that my friend will not come, then I can regret it, but I can't hope for it.

Hope need not be about the future. If a fellow soldier was killed behind enemy lines, I may hope that they were not tortured. So long as I believe that they might or might not have been tortured, my hopes can be engaged. If I'm uncertain about the past, I can just as much hope for some past event as for some future event.

*When we hope for something, we entertain mental imagery about what it would be like.* You are a Lana Del Rey fan, and you have never seen her perform live. You would like it if she were to come to a venue near you and you would certainly go. You haven't checked her touring schedule but considering that you live in a reasonably sized town, it may happen. However, the whole thing hardly crosses your mind. Are you hoping that she will come? I don't think so. It's not enough to want her to come and to believe that it might happen. In addition, you need to devote some mental energy to it. You have to spend some time cherishing the idea of what it would be like if it were to happen. What songs would she sing? With whom would you go to the concert? What would the stage look like? What would the audience be like? For short, I'll call it '*mental imaging*'—the mental act of letting the prospect roll (or bounce, depending on one's personality) around in one's head.

There are other terms that capture this third component of hope, but they all fall somewhat short. 'Fancying' is too close to desiring. 'Fantasizing' has too much of a ring of the unreal. 'Daydreaming' comes close, but it is too spacey. 'Envisioning what something would be like' is a bit too intellectual. But if you like these terms better, that's fine with me.

The mental imaging of hope has a vague association with Aristotle. There are greetings cards and even tattoos with the saying "Hope is a waking dream." Aristotle' But admittedly, the reference to Aristotle is only second-hand and goes back to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, written over five centuries after Aristotle's death. In his biography of Aristotle, he writes: '[Aristotle] was asked to define hope, and he replied, "It is a waking dream."'

It is easiest to motivate mental imaging when it comes to hoping for wonderful things. But we also hope that bad things won't come to pass. A soldier captured behind enemy line hopes that they will not be tortured. A parent hopes that there is no blow-up between siblings at a family reunion. What kind of mental imaging is there in such cases? Think of something that you fear and how you might dream that all will go well. In your dreams you lay out a path on which the dreaded event does not happen. Someone who hopes that all will go well does something akin to this while being awake. What goes around in their head are ways that the story might unfold smoothly without their fears coming to pass.

## The Thing with Feathers

'Hope is the thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul,' writes Emily Dickinson. But what is so good about hope? Might one not equally say that if good things are to come our way, let them come as they may, and let's enjoy them then and there. What additional benefit is gained from hoping for those good things to come, a skeptic might ask.

Many of the benefits of hoping hinge on mental imaging. Mental imagery provides *respite* in trying times, adds to our *resolve*, uncovers new *pathways*, and makes room for *reflection*. Below, I will also show how hoping provides the courage to take on responsible risks and how it fosters inner strength.

*Respite*. There is a simple answer to why hoping is a good thing a few lines down in Dickinson's poem. She likens hope to a bird that keeps us warm and is not fazed by the gale winds of the storm around us. When we close the doors to the outside world, we can enjoy the pleasures of how sweet it would be to have what we want. Mental imagery is shelter

from the storm. There is joy in indulging our senses in the theatre of the mind. It may not be the real thing—it is ‘the tune without the words,’ says Dickinson—but even without the words, the tune offers the strength to carry on.

When Pooh Bear is asked what he likes best in this world, he is stumped for an answer: ‘Because although Eating Honey was a very good thing to do,’ A. A. Milne writes in *The House at Pooh Corner*, ‘there was a moment just before you began to eat it which was better than when you were, but he didn’t know what it was called.’ And though Pooh Bear (a bear of very little brain) lacks in vocabulary, he does not lack in wisdom. Indeed, the pleasures of anticipation may exceed the pleasures of experience.

Hoping differs from anticipation, though. We anticipate when we are confident that good things are to come, whereas in hoping we ‘dwell in Possibility’—another Dickinson line. But the pleasure of hoping is somewhat like the pleasure of anticipation in that both involve mental imaging. The only difference is this: In anticipation, we imagine how wonderful things will be *when* we get what we want. In hoping, we imagine how wonderful things would be *if* we were to get what we want. And while enjoying this moment of respite, batteries recharge for the challenges ahead.

*Resolve.* Mental imaging of what is hoped for is keeping one’s eyes on the prize. It is this focus that provides resolve, the motivation to persist. Admittedly, there is not only the carrot—there is also the stick. The carrot is the prize of success, while the stick is the cost of failure. Hope’s companion is fear, and fear involves mental imagery of the stick. Fear also has motivational force. Some people do better with carrots; some people do better with sticks.

Most of us need some balance between hope and fear. Too much hope can make us drunk—we may wallow in the thought of how wonderful it all will be and forget that there are some necessary hurdles to overcome. Too much fear can make us despair. Despair is paralyzing and prevents us from taking the required steps. But the proper balance of hope and fear, adapted to the case at hand and sensitive to what works for each of us, is what offers the best chances of success.

*Pathways.* Mental imaging tends to spill over into exploring the pathways that could get us to where we want to be. Where might there be a feasible route? And what are the steps to be taken? Hoping is an antidote to resigning oneself to the status quo, and it engages us to creatively explore better ways forward. This is the hope of the civil rights movement and, more recently, of the Obama campaign. It is the hope that, in the words of Martin Luther King, ‘transforms [a] liability into an asset’ (‘Shattered Dreams’).

*Reflection.* Mental imaging not only explores pathways toward the destination but also focuses on the destination itself. We cherish daydreaming about what it would be like if we were to have what we want. But wants are fluid. If I want ice cream and I realize that there is none, I may just shift to cherry pie. I wanted ice cream because I wanted something sweet, and cherry pie would do just as well. Mental imaging coaxes us to explore the space of possibilities. If what was initially hoped for is not accessible, then are there any substitutes that would do just as well considering my larger aims?

Here is an example with a bit more substance. A journalist may hope to receive a Pulitzer Prize because they take it to be a mark of recognition, and they may hope for recognition because they take it to be constitutive of a rewarding professional life. Now hoping can be illuminating in that it invites one to reflect on and rearrange one’s values. Our journalist examines what it is they want in life and why it is that they want it. They may come to realize that a Pulitzer is not so necessary after all. There are other and better ways to gain recognition than by winning a Pulitzer. Or, more deeply, there are other and better ways to improve their professional life than by striving for recognition. They may become more service-oriented and intend for their journalistic contributions to make a difference. It is through mental imaging they come to see what they really want out of life, what is attainable, and what they are capable of. The mental imaging of hope stirs up reflection and recalibrates desires, leading to a richer life and greater want satisfaction.

Hoping is unlikely to bring all these benefits at the same time. If I hope for past events, then there is no need to strengthen resolve or figure out a pathway since there is nothing I can do about the past. Respite and

reflection may be absent from our hopes as well. It is not guaranteed that we will find respite in hope—there are shameful hopes that reveal the darker side of ourselves, as we will discuss later. Nor can we always count on shifting our values through reflection—wants may be both specific and rigid so that mulling over them has little effect.

Hope's 'feathers' are all contingent on circumstances. They are sufficiently prevalent that they are worth mentioning as *typical* benefits of hoping. And given that they are typical benefits, they are good reasons to try to foster hope in ourselves and the loved ones in our care. But they are not essential to hope. Hoping remains hoping, even if it comes without the benefits that it typically provides.

## A Winning Strategy

In Matthew's 'Parable of the Talents' (Matt 25:14–30), a master gives five coins to one servant, two coins to the second, and one coin to the third. The first two servants invest and double their coins, whereas the third plays it safe and buries the one coin and returns it on the day of his master's return. The master praises the first two but scolds the third servant.

This is a curious parable since it seems to encourage risk-taking. One feels for the servant who dutifully returns the one coin. Should he not be rewarded for playing it safe? Was it not the prudent thing to do to avoid risk and to make sure that he could return the one coin?

There are good and bad gambles in life. A good gamble is a good deal—considering the chances and what there is to lose or win. We should embrace it. Sure, there is a chance of losing, but it is the hope for gain that provides the courage to take up a good gamble. I am not making any claims to Bible exegesis, but here is one way to read the parable: Investing the master's coins is like taking up a good gamble, whereas burying them is like turning it down. There is nothing imprudent about taking up such gambles. Though one may lose sometimes, in the long run a disposition of taking up good gambles pays off.

Real life is full of risks, and risks can take many forms. There is choosing a career, committing to a relationship, engaging in friendships, buying a house, saving for retirement. If you are reasonably confident that you can identify the good gambles, then you should embrace them,

one after another. You may lose a few, but you can be confident that, in the long run you will do much better than if you are too scared to play.

Why are people scared to embrace risk when they are facing a single good gamble? Because they take a short-term perspective. They succumb to myopia and become fixated on the possible losses of each gamble separately. This fixation has a high opportunity cost: It leaves us in a worse place than we would have been if we had persistently taken one good gamble after another.

Here is where hope comes in. It makes us focus on the possible gains in good gambles and helps overcome our myopic fixation on the possible losses. And hence one will adopt the winning strategy of accepting good gambles in the game of life at large.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Samuelson relates an intriguing story (*Scientia*, 1963) that illustrates this idea. Samuelson is out with a few colleagues for dinner and proposes the following gamble with a fair coin. If heads, he commits to paying the gambler \$200, whereas if tails, the gambler commits to paying him \$100. One colleague, whom he calls 'a distinguished scholar,' says that he is willing to take up the gamble, but only if he can play the game one hundred times.

The motivation behind this response is clear. By accepting the single gamble, one has a fifty-fifty chance of losing money. By accepting a series of one hundred gambles, one has a negligible chance of losing money and a big chance of winning money, even a substantial amount of money, by the end of the evening. (To lose money, one would have to lose 67 times or more, and the chance of such a losing streak is less than 1 in 2000.)

We might think that gambling with colleagues might strain friendships. We might have a dislike of gambling. But let us abstract from all that and focus on the risks and the payoffs. I think that most of us would agree to playing a series of one hundred gambles, just as Samuelson's colleague did. But many of us would be hesitant to accept a single such gamble. Is it rational to accept the series, but not the single gamble?

If the colleague is acutely short of money, we can well understand why he would not want to agree to the single gamble. In this case, the gamble is a bad gamble. What can be won is \$200, but what can be lost is not just \$100, but, say, \$100 and the humiliation of washing dishes all night.



If he is not acutely short of money, then it is a good gamble. There is a 50 percent chance of gaining \$200 and a 50 percent chance of losing \$100. So, on average, one might expect a net gain of \$50, that is, 0.50 times \$200 minus 0.50 times \$100. Good gambles are gambles with positive expectations. We should embrace good gambles, even in the one-off case. And hoping that things will go well can help us do this.

If Samuelson's story did not convince you of this, here is another way to put it— without the numbers. Hope is what helps with smart risk-taking, and smart risk-takers tend to do well in life. An evolutionary biologist might put it as follows: Nature selects in favor of those who have hope written in their genes.

But then what about fear? What fear is good for is that it makes us focus on the possible losses. It helps us overcome a myopic fixation on the potential gains in bad gambles. A resolution to decline bad gambles is also a winning strategy in the game of life at large. You may win an occasional one, but in the long run embracing gambles with negative expectations will make you a loser. Many problem gamblers have had to learn this lesson the hard way.

While hope is an antidote to risk aversion that keeps us from taking up good gambles, fear is an antidote to risk proneness that makes us all too eager to take up bad gambles. The proper balance of hope and fear is instrumental in regulating risk-taking behavior in life.

In Matthew's parable, the master not only blames the servant for cowardice but also for sloth in refusing to take up a good gamble. Cowardice is what keeps the servant from taking up the risky opportunity. And by not taking up the opportunity, he need not take any initiative, catering to his sloth. Hope offers a mirror image. It gives us the courage to take up the risky opportunity. This is what we learned from Samuelson's gamble. In addition, it provides the drive to make the investment pay off.

## A Subtle Glutton

'Hope is a subtle glutton; He feeds upon the fair,' Dickinson writes at a later age and in a more somber mood. So far, we have sung the praises of hope. However, there are some distinctly darker sides to hope. Hope can lead to *complacency*, may leave us *frustrated*, needlessly *raises expectations*,

ruins the prospect of *surprise*, can carry *wishful thinking* in its wake, and may spawn *obsession*.

*Complacency.* Granted, hope may provide respite, but respite can be dangerous. In Dickinson's poem, hope is seated at 'the halcyon table'—an idyllic place—but there is abstinence and solitude. While we are enjoying the respite, we suppress the need to make changes. Hope makes the abstinence and solitude bearable, and yet life passes us by. Without the comfort of hope, we would have rebelled and maybe made the changes that needed making. '[Religion] is the opium of the people,' Marx famously writes in the introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. One could make the same claim about hope. Hope makes the ache of yearning bearable, and so long as it is bearable, we do not seek change. So long as the peasants continue hoping that next year's harvest will be better, they won't revolt.

Hoping can be plain foolishness. Hoping that your partner will quit drinking keeps you from leaving them. Hoping that an estranged lover will come back stops you from searching for new love. Hoping that a skin abnormality is just an innocent blotch keeps you from getting checked for skin cancer. And the list goes on. When the situation calls for asking scary questions or taking radical steps, the hope that there is a simple way out stops us from doing what needs doing.

*Frustration.* There is the frustration of unfulfilled hopes. What we fear is the hangover from hoping. We do not dare to hope—better to let things be, let life unfold, and enjoy it as it comes. Granted, without hoping, there can also be frustration—simply because we did not get what we wanted. But it is hope's imagery of how wonderful things would be that makes not getting what we want more painful. With unfulfilled hopes, there are broken dreams.

Hume, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Bk III, Part III, Sect. II) writes: 'Men generally fix their affections more on what they are possessed of, than on what they never enjoyed.' This is what behavioral scientists call the 'endowment effect': It is worse to have something taken from us than for it never to have been given at all. In the case of hope, what we want has not been given yet. But we did have something that resembled it—the mental imagery that we once cherished. And having that taken

away from us registers as a loss. A kind of shadow endowment effect explains why hoping increases our sense of frustration. One might say: 'People fix their affections more on that of which they have formed a mental image, than on that of which they have never formed such a mental image.'

*Raised Expectations.* Hoping involves forming a picture of how wonderful things will be. We fill in the details like a prospective bride or groom fill in the fine details of their wedding day. And then, when the time comes, things may just not be quite the way we had hoped them to be. They were nice alright, but not quite what we had hoped for. Had we not hoped, then we would have enjoyed every bit of it. But after all the hoping we did, reality let us down. The actual experience did not live up to our hopes; it was blander, less verdant, just a bit more ordinary than the fairy tale we had pictured it to be.

*Loss of Surprise.* If hoping is such a good thing, then what is so great about surprises? Why would we ever want to surprise someone if we could tell them beforehand of the wonderful things that might happen? Then they could have the pleasure of hoping for it and, on top of that, the pleasure of experiencing it. But this is not how the calculus of joy works. If you have been hoping for that birthday party, then you can still enjoy it when it comes, but you won't have that burst of joy that comes when you see the surprise guests gathered in your living room. And we want some of this in life as well—a burst rather than a slow build-up.

*Wishful Thinking.* What is the chance that I will win the lottery? That my love will be requited? Or that my cancer is curable? We should not kid ourselves and think that the chances are higher than the evidence dictates. To do so is wishful thinking. The danger of hoping is that the lure of wishful thinking becomes much more difficult to resist. This is not to say that it is impossible to hope while remaining sober-minded about the evidence. But just as it is harder to exercise self-control when the peanuts are within reach, it is harder to stick to the evidence and nothing but the evidence while hoping. But why would this be so? I have two suggestions.

Too much mental imagery may obscure the line between reality and fantasy. Consider how difficult it is to determine whether our images of early childhood events are real memories or false memories based on stories told to us at an older age. Similarly, the distinction between reality and the mental images we form in hoping is easily obfuscated. And in the absence of this distinction, our capacity to form beliefs based on the available evidence vanishes.

Hoping also affects our resolve, and, in many cases, this raises the chance that what we hope will come about. We mistakenly generalize this feature to hoping at large. Indeed, sometimes hoping makes things so—or, at least, it helps make things so. Hoping that I can jump the creek indeed increases my chances of success. But hoping that the sun will shine on next Sunday's picnic does nothing to increase the chance of sunshine. Our mistake is to transfer the boost in the chance of success in cases when hope makes a difference to cases in which the most fervent hopes cannot make one jot of difference.

*Obsession.* Hope, writes Dickinson, is 'A Patent of the Heart.' As such, it is scarcely under the control of the will. Our hopes often do not make much sense. The chances are too small. We may be fully cognizant that what we hope for would not make our lives any better. And, hoping may come to feel like thousands of little ping-pong balls ricocheting off the walls of our cranial cavity. Hope may wear us out. It may make demands on our mental life that make it impossible to attend to our affairs. And we may catch ourselves obsessively hoping for trifles at the expense of being properly affected by what is genuinely important in life.

Hope and fear can be instrumental in helping us plot the route ahead. But fear can become a phobia that barely tracks harm, and it can turn into paralyzing despair. Similarly, hope can become a *philia*, in the sense of an unhealthy attraction, that fails to track benefits and can become so overwhelming that it blocks normal functioning.

Mind you, hope does not *need* to be costly. Some people manage to hope scot-free. Much depends on one's character and situation. If there are no radical changes to be made, then the concern that hope induces complacency is misplaced. Some people have a strong frustration tolerance and shrug off their losses. They say: 'At least, I had something

to hope for.' Throughout hoping, one may retain a keen sense of reality and accurately assess chances. And many people can hope without any risk of hope slipping into obsession. Like the benefits, the costs of hoping are contingent—they do not define hoping.

We often don't know whether hoping will pay off or cost us dearly. Hoping itself is a gamble—much may be gained, yet much may be lost. Doing a risk analysis is murky, and we are in for the unexpected. But no matter, since hope is patented by the heart, we often have little control over it anyway. Our mode and measure of hoping is deeply engrained in our psychology. We find ourselves hoping for some things or failing to hope for others. We can try to hope or not to hope. We can encourage or discourage it in the young or in loved ones. But we are, at least to some extent, at hope's mercy.

### Shameful Hopes

A few years ago, I was doing a rough stint of administration with an agenda chockful of appointments. My responsibilities were going to come to an end soon, and I was looking forward to a period of uninterrupted writing during a sabbatical. I had envisioned renting a cabin in the Montana wilderness with the change of seasons as a backdrop for my routine. I heard Greta Garbo's voice in my head saying 'I want to be alone.' Then, as luck would have it, one of my colleagues suggested that I apply for a fellowship at a prestigious university—there would be interesting seminars, discussions, a social context. It made a lot of sense—a lot more sense than the hare-brained Montana idea. Montana would be fun for a few hours, possibly days, and then the intellectual solitude would drive me crazy. The fellowship would be both fun, interesting, and productive. The choice was easy—I applied for the fellowship.

However, whenever I thought about the time ahead, all I could do was envision myself writing by a woodstove snowed in, in my Montana cabin. A fit-to-purpose office on a university campus in a large city, the philosophical discussions in seminar rooms, or any of the pleasures and privileges that the fellowship would provide had no draw on my imagination whatsoever. When I was awarded the fellowship, my heart sank just a tiny little bit. And yet, there was no choice. I accepted the

offer the day I received it and un-bookmarked the website of Montana cabin rentals. Certainly, I did the right thing and had a wonderful and productive time.

I write these words with a sense of shame, especially to the institution that hosted my fellowship. But I trust they will forgive me since I am trying to make a philosophical point. Part of me wanted to go to Montana. Part of me wanted to take up a fellowship. Both were distinct possibilities. On balance, there was no question—the Montana desire was ill-considered, especially given the alternative. And this was so, not just for professional reasons, but also considering what would be conducive to my happiness, however conceived. And yet, only the Montana desire gained entrance to my mental imagery.

What was I hoping for? To rent a cabin in Montana or to take up a fellowship? After I had applied for the fellowship but before being awarded it, I would have said that I hoped to rent a cabin in Montana, but I knew that it made little sense. Hope may track what part of us wants and it is not necessarily the part that puts the most weight on the scale. Hoping does not require that we endorse or validate what part of us wants. I, for one, certainly find myself hoping for things that hardly make any sense. I may not scream it from the rooftops, but there is no denying it: I was hoping to spend my sabbatical in a cabin in Montana.

Things can get much more tragic. It's not just hare-brained desires that spill over into full-fledged hoping, but also desires that are blocked by morality and social taboos. The Japanese author Minae Mizumura recently published a serial novel, *The Inheritance of Mother*, in which she talks about the hardships of a daughter caring for an aging and ailing mother. This is a duty that is very much part of Japanese mores. And yet, the seemingly unending day-to-day demands impose such a strain on the caregiver's life that it becomes undeniable that at least part of her wants the end to be near.

The novel is partly autobiographical, and Mizumura documents sitting at the bedside of her ailing mother while writing the book as a serial novel for a Japanese newspaper. The words 'Mom, when are you ever going to die?' became a subtitle for the original publication of the novel. 'These blunt words [...] echoed my thoughts at the time,' she writes in a *New York Times* (9 May 2014) opinion piece entitled 'Please, Mother, Enough.' Is she hoping for her mother to die earlier rather than

later? Clearly, she takes this to be a possibility yet not a certainty, part of her wants it, and she engages in the mental imagery of a life free from the burdens of taking care of her ailing mother.

One might object that she hopes for a life free of care giving earlier rather than later, but she does not hope for her mother to die. But a life free of care giving is so close to a life in which her mother has passed away, that it would seem disingenuous to say that she hopes for one thing without hoping for the other. The image of her being free from care giving is an image of a world in which her mother is no more. All in all, it may not be what she wants—it may only be what part of her wants. But it is the part that occupies her imagination. And as such it is like my mental imagery of a cabin in Montana. Hence, it's reasonable to say that the daughter is hoping for her mother to die, much like I was hoping to spend my sabbatical in a cabin in Montana.

Shameful hopes can also be a kind of anticipatory *Schadenfreude*. We secretly hope that others, even loved ones, will fail in their endeavors or that bad luck will befall them. Those dark desires are fed by various springs. The failure or bad luck would make us look better in comparison. It would give us a role as a confidant. It would feed our sense of self-importance. It would give us a story to tell in company. It would provide us with an opportunity for caretaking, offering meaning to our lives. The springs of darkness are all around us.

This is the reason why people sometimes reject expressions of support or alleged sympathy. They distrust the offer. They feel that they are being used to satisfy others' secret hopes, however well-intentioned the support may seem, even to the person who is lending a hand.

There is a Jewish story about a farmer who comes to the rabbi asking for advice about what to do with his sick goat. The rabbi admonishes him to take the goat in the house, have the goat eat at the dinner table and sleep in his bed. When the goat finally dies, the rabbi says: 'That is so unfortunate because I still had so much good advice to give to you.'

The rabbi is taking the farmer for a ride. But even if the advice had been useful, there is something suspect about the rabbi's interventions. The rabbi wants the goat to remain sick so that he can continue dispensing good advice. And this can become a shameful hope. It is the hope of a support person who wants, or at least part of them wants, their role to persist. This desire may not outweigh the concurrent desire

that the problem be resolved. But it may nonetheless take a front-row seat in mental imagery.

Most of the time, we succeed in keeping our shameful hopes secret. But they may come out in an unguarded moment. This is what happens to the rabbi: Condolences are in order, but in speaking of what he deems to be unfortunate, he mentions the loss of his advisory role rather than the goat's death. But what if we keep a close eye on our secret hopes and can lock them carefully within? Should we feel guilty about them? Are they not, after all, a mirror to the soul, and do they not bode ill of what lies within?

Religions offer us a tool in the form of the supernatural to keep the responsibility for secret hopes at bay through the practice of prayer and the prohibition on curses. Praying and cursing are much more under the control of the will than hoping. If I find myself secretly hoping for my mother to die, for bad luck to befall loved ones, or for the goat to remain ill, then I can find at least some peace of mind in saying that I prayed for a good outcome or that I never cursed to steer fate toward dark turns. We declare praying and cursing to be the expression of what is in our souls, thereby keeping our secret hopes beyond reproach.

In a secular context, there is a similar question about the permissibility of verbalizing secret hopes. There is a taboo against verbalizing a wish or a hope for one's mother to die. It is one thing to harbor such a secret hope. But it seems heartless to freely verbalize it. And yet, Mizumura's readers found catharsis in reading her novel and thanked her in a flood of letters. Her novel allowed them to accept their secret hopes, knowing that they were not alone.

## Neighborhood

There are many phenomena in the neighborhood of hoping. Earlier, we said that hoping is a bit of thinking possible; a bit of wanting, even though it may just be what part of us wants; and a bit of mentally tossing things around in one's head. As we deviate from this model, we end up in the suburbs of hoping, and this is where we find many of hope's cousins. Let us explore what happens when we wander away from hoping proper.



*Could I hope for what I do not want?* It is difficult to think of cases in which one hopes yet does not desire. Certainly, there are many cases in which we hope but it's not for what, all in all, we want—as in when I was hoping for the solitude of a Montana cabin. But this is just to say that hopes may follow what part of us wants.

There is the Christian injunction to pray for those who persecute us (Matt 5:44.) But we can pray while having no desire for the well-being of our tormentors. There is a space between praying and hoping. We can pray for what we hope for, but we need not hope for what we pray for. Prayer is in the neighborhood of hope, but it is distinct from hope.

*Could I hope for what I consider to be impossible?* I can wish for what is impossible, but I cannot hope for it. And even if I consider something near impossible, I might say that I am not really hoping for it—it's just a pipe dream.

In love, the heart may still hope for what the mind already knows to be impossible. But in this case, I think that the mind is divided. One part of us continues to believe what we know to be impossible, even against all the evidence. Hope rides on the belief—running counter to all evidence—that love still might take a turn for the better. The other part of us sees the writing on the wall and knows that love has reached a dead end. We hope against hope: The love-struck part of us hopes, whereas the sober part knows that there is nothing to base this hope on.

In politics, there are utopian hopes, such as the hope for world peace, though we know world peace to be virtually impossible. But world peace functions as a guiding ideal here. What we genuinely hope for is that there will be progress towards the ideal of world peace—and progress is, of course, something that might well happen.

*Could I hope for what I am certain will be the case?* How about: I have such great hopes for the upcoming Olympics. Can't I say this, even though I am fully confident that the Olympics will take place?

Sure, but having great hopes for something is not the same thing as hoping for something to be the case. Having great hopes for the Olympics this year is not the same as hoping that the Olympics will take place this year. If I have great hopes for the Olympics, then I hope that some good things will happen in the Olympics, say, that my country will

win some medals. And I am neither certain that will happen, nor that it won't happen.

*Could I continue to hope after suppressing my mental imagery?* Sometimes we catch ourselves daydreaming, and we try to stop ourselves in our tracks. We tell ourselves that it's not worth wasting our waking hours and will only lead to frustration. If we can't stop the mental imagery, then we continue to hope, against our better judgment. If we can stop it, then what is left are stifled hopes. But stifled hopes are no longer hopes, just as stifled screams are no longer screams.

*Could I want something to be the case; think it possible, yet not certain; engage in mental imagery; and yet not be hoping?* One might object that there is more to hoping than desiring, believing, and mental imagery—one should also have a positive frame and assume that things will turn out well.

There is the maxim that an optimist says the glass is half full, whereas a pessimist says that it is half empty. Similarly, a person who is hopeful considers what is hoped for to be a genuine possibility. They say: 'It's unlikely, but, hey, it's possible!' They do not say: 'Yeah, sure, it's possible, but it's so unlikely!' Seeing the glass as half full rather than half empty is *framing* the situation in a rosy manner.

Imagine that I am preparing for a garden party this weekend. Someone asks me what we will do if it rains. I respond that I am just going to *assume* that the weather will be fine. I have decided to go about my business on the supposition of blue skies. A hopeful person assumes that all shall be well, and this attitude is expressed in how they conduct themselves.

So, the objection goes: Shouldn't we build 'framing things in a positive light' and 'assuming that all shall be well' into our definition of hope?

I don't think so. Framing and assuming is what a hopeful person does. But there is a difference between hoping and being hopeful. Think about being by the bedside of a loved one who is seriously ill. At first, I may be hopeful—I entertain a positive frame of mind and assume that they will recover. But as worrisome test results come in, I may say: 'I continue hoping, but I am no longer hopeful.' I believe that recovery

is still possible, desire for it to happen, and let my mind drift to how wonderful it would be. However, I can no longer see things in a positive light or assume that things will be OK. And then, as death draws nearer and it becomes clear to me that recovery is just not possible anymore, I have to let go of hope as well. Hence, 'framing' and 'assuming' are part and parcel of being hopeful, not of hoping as such.

Summing up, hoping has many cousins—praying, wishing, dreaming, being hopeful—but none are hope proper.

## Inner Strength

Frank Darabont's movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, based on Stephen King's novella 'Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption: Hope Springs Eternal' in *Different Seasons*, features a prison friendship between two inmates, Andy and Red. Andy and Red disagree on whether hope has any place in the dire circumstances they find themselves in. For Andy, hope is all there is to hang onto inside the prison walls—it is 'something that they can't get from you.' For Red, it makes no sense at all—it 'is a dangerous thing, hope can drive a man insane, has got no use on the inside.' Red marvels at Andy's capacity to continue hoping. 'Andy,' Red says, wore 'his freedom like an invisible coat,' which Red couldn't do. What Andy brought from the outside was a 'sense of his own worth,' and he had 'a kind of an inner light he carried around with him.'

One could just say that we know that there are pros and cons to hoping, and while Andy aims for the pros, Red heeds the cons. But what should we make of Red's claim that something about Andy makes it possible for him to hope well? Or of Andy's claim that hope itself is what fosters this something—the something that they can't get from you?

What is this something? For now, let us simply call it 'inner strength.' Suppose that Andy is right: Hope fosters inner strength. But Red is right as well: We should only give in to hope if we already have this inner strength. But then one might ask: What is the good of hoping, if, to hope well, we already need to have the inner strength that it fosters? Let us think more carefully about this curious cycle that hope is caught in.

What are the *inputs* to hoping well? What aspects of inner strength do we need to hope well? Hoping well requires *self-confidence*: It requires the confidence that all will turn out well for oneself. This is what keeps our mental imagery sunny and bright, what stops our hopes from turning into despair. Hoping well requires *self-control* to stop our mental imagery from becoming obsessive. And it requires the ability to stay realistic and not give into self-deception. We respect others by not deceiving them and we respect ourselves by not deceiving ourselves. Hence, hoping well requires a form of *self-respect*.

What are the *outputs* of hoping well? What kind of inner strength does it foster? Hoping helps us in exploring new pathways to reach our goals. This reinforces our *self-confidence*—the confidence that we will find a way and succeed. Hope brings respite. This permits us to take a deep breath, find our bearings, and not get carried away by the urgency or the madness of a situation. And with a cool head comes the capacity for *self-control*. And, in hoping that good things will come to our loved ones, we consider them to be worth hoping for. In hoping that good things will come to us, we consider ourselves to be worth hoping for, worthy of respect. So, hope strengthens our sense of *self-respect*.

Frank Darabont cast the African American actor Morgan Freeman in the role of Red. In Stephen King's novella Red is of Irish origin and from a poor part of town. In the movie Red's Irishness only comes in as a joke. When Andy asks him why they call him Red, he responds: 'Maybe it's because I am Irish.' Both in the novella and the movie, Red is from an underprivileged background with few opportunities. It is this lack of opportunities that makes hoping more of a mad endeavor, whereas Andy's social background is an environment in which setbacks could be overcome and in which there is ample reason to hope.

*Self-confidence*, *self-control*, and *self-respect* enter both as inputs and outputs of hoping well. But each of these aspects of inner strength gets a bit of a different spin when we spell them out as inputs or outputs of hope. Yet, they are all aspects of the same construct of inner strength. It is possible to have some aspects and lack others, yet they are intricately connected and correlated. If you have some aspects of inner strength, you are likely to have other aspects as well.

Hence, inner strength through hoping seems to be subject to the Matthew Principle: 'For whosoever has, to him shall be given.' (Matt

13:12) And it sounds like the have-nots are doomed. They shouldn't even try to hope, lest what little they have be taken from them.

In this respect, hope keeps company with many other good things in life. Think of meditation: I trust that meditating well can bring many good things to life such as stress reduction, concentration, self-awareness, happiness, and acceptance, but if you lack those things to begin with, good luck with meditating well. The same cyclical model holds for many life-enhancing activities, such as reasoning, showing sympathy, or being a good friend or lover. What is gained by doing them well often corresponds to what is needed to do them well in the first place.

But things are not so dire. There are ways for the have-nots to break into these cycles. However anxious you may be, there are ways to get into meditation. Granted, we should take small steps and not expect to meditate like the Dalai Lama from day one. We can expect to spiral up: As we take these steps, we build up our strengths, which in turn enables us to meditate better, which in turn will further build up our strengths, and so on.

And ditto with hope. We may lack the courage to hope. Hoping is not for us, we may think. Things will go wrong anyway. We will lose our bearings. It will drive us crazy. We don't have the strength to hope. And yet, we should take that bold step of hoping no matter what. And once we are in the business of hoping, we can work up the strength that helps us carry on and attain what we never thought possible before.

This move is at the core of Obama's book title *The Audacity of Hope*. Doing something audacious is doing something one has no business doing—because it's imprudent or because it's not one's place. So how could we be called upon to be so audacious as to hope? Well, at first, we may be like Red. Being from an impoverished Irish or Black background did not offer Red much reason for hope. His social world put too many roadblocks in place. Our situation in life may also be such that we lack the strength to hope well, fearing that hope will drag us into a downward spiral. We do not dare to hope. But then, it is through taking this audacious step toward hope that we come to find inner strength. And it is this inner strength that makes it possible for us to hope well—and, if life is kind enough, to make our hopes come true.





## 2. Death

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### Eternal Life?

Kant poses three perennial questions in *The Critique of Pure Reason*: '1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope?' The last question is mainly a question of religion for Kant: Do I have any basis to hope for eternal life?

Many people do not hold out any hope for eternal life. Why don't they? After all, even if eternal life strikes them as unlikely, they could still hope for it, as one hopes to win the lottery. There is an obvious answer: they just attach no credibility to any talk about the supernatural. The prospect of eternal life is no more likely than the existence of wood nymphs and leprechauns for them. And one cannot hope for what one deems to be impossible.

But this is not the only ground why one might not hope for eternal life. When Einstein was asked whether he believed in immortality, he answered: 'No. And one life is enough for me.' (Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, Ch. 17.) The 'no' part of Einstein's answer is a statement of disbelief. But the 'one life is enough' part is different. Compare this with a more mundane exchange: 'Do you think that there is more cake?' 'No. And one piece of cake is enough for me.' The response signals that one simply has no desire for another piece of cake. And that's how Einstein felt about eternal life.

Why might one not desire eternal life? One may have preferred not to have lived at all. So why would one want to live more, let alone into eternity? There is also a less morose attitude that could underlie not desiring eternal life. One may find beauty in the ephemeral, as one finds beauty in spring flowers. Life is good as it is, and making it last longer, let alone forever, would not make it any better.



Furthermore, some people also refrain from hoping for eternal life because they feel that they have nothing to latch onto, and hoping requires, as we saw earlier, a kind of mental imaging—that is, our imagination should somehow be involved in hoping.

Alexa's parents take her to the seaside every summer. She is hoping for summer to come—the prospect of building sand castles, going for a swim... One year they tell her that they are planning to go on a vacation to Switzerland the coming summer. She is confident that this will be fun, but she does not do much in the way of hoping that year. She has no idea what a vacation in the mountains will be like and hence it does not engage her imagination. Similarly, immortality is 'so huge, so hopeless to conceive,' writes Emily Dickinson. If visions of angelic choirs don't do it for you, then there is no place for the imagination to go to.

So then, what is there to hope for at the end of life, if not eternal life? There are broadly four secular hopes to explore: We hope that our life was worthwhile, we hope to die well, we hope that the future will be good, and we hope that people will hold certain attitudes toward us when we are no more. All these hopes raise a host of philosophical questions. Those who do hope for eternal life should find these hopes of interest as well, since the hope for eternal life may coexist and be interwoven with secular hopes.

## A Worthwhile Life

I was talking to a friend who is a retired medical doctor and now spends his days in archives doing genealogy. The only thing in life that he was genuinely proud of, he told me, was having uncovered his family tree. Having this to his name gives him a sense of satisfaction. Genealogy never engaged me much, but I have always felt envious of the medical profession when it comes to giving meaning to one's life. If healing the sick and alleviating the pain of our fellow human beings does not give meaning to life, then what does? So, I responded: 'What about your patients?' He shrugged his shoulders and replied: 'Nothing of that work will remain—most of them are dead by now, all of them will die someday.'

In old age, it is common to look back and ask: 'Was my life worthwhile?' But what sort of things do we invoke to determine whether our lives were worthwhile? My friend has a particular answer in mind.

It is the very same answer that Horace gives when reflecting on having written the *Odes*. He writes 'And now 'tis done: more durable than brass/ My monument shall be, and raise its head/ O'er royal pyramids.' This will bestow a kind of immortality on him: 'I shall not wholly die: large residue/ Shall 'scape the queen of funerals.' A family tree may not be quite in the same league as the *Odes*, but the aspiration is similar. What we have to say for ourselves at the end of life is that we have made a mark, that we have achieved something sizeable and grand that we can pass on to posterity.

What makes an achievement sizeable or grand? What is the measure for this? Think of being successful at raising a family. Some people may shrug their shoulders and say: 'What's so big about that? Families have been raised since the dawn of humankind.' But that is certainly setting the bar too high. If what it requires to have a worthwhile life is to do something out of the ordinary, few worthwhile lives would have been lived. We cannot all be special and stand out. Rather, we should be looking for achievements that make a sizeable difference for the better, carried forward into a future in which we are no more. Successfully raising a family certainly fits the bill.

Must our achievement leave a trace into a future when we are no more? Horace might want to put the tomes he wrote on a shelf next to his death bed, but this certainly cannot be the only way to make a case for having lived a worthwhile life. In talking to my friend, I pointed to the sizeable achievement of a lifetime of healing and alleviating pain. What does it matter that one outlives one's patients and that nothing remains? There was much goodness at the time that the service was performed.

The same holds for the arts. Works of architecture, music, and literature may stretch beyond one's death. This is less so for the performing arts, but still, one contributes to the development of a style. There are no proper recordings of Nijinsky's ballets, but they remain a defining moment in the history of dance. But what about a more mundane art form such as DJ'ing? There is pride in throwing the greatest party, making the dance floor burn until the early hours. Nothing remains, but what does it matter? There is beauty in the ephemeral. And in old age, our DJ may look back and reminisce about all the joy and rapture they brought to so many dance venues. They may say that this made it

all worthwhile, just as my friend could, in the same way, look back on a lifetime of healing, even though all his patients are long dead and gone.

Must achievements be sizeable, must they be grand, however conceived, for a life to be worthwhile? Dickinson writes: 'If I can [...] help one fainting robin/ Unto his nest again,/ I shall not live in vain.' The persona that Dickinson assumes in her poetry did not strive to do grand things. What made her life worthwhile was to make small and simple differences. Helping the proverbial robin makes life no less worthwhile than performing, say, the first heart transplant.

On one conception of assessing whether our lives were worthwhile, we ask how much of a difference we have made and to how many people. The grander the achievement, the more worthwhile we take our lives to be. But on another conception, this is a mistake. The difference that we can make lies in small and simple contributions, and that is what makes our lives fully worthwhile. There is no calculus. There is no stacking of good deeds to shore up the edifice of a worthwhile life. Just like there is beauty in the ephemeral, there is beauty in what is small and simple.

We have seen examples of the grand and enduring (Horace), the grand and ephemeral (the DJ), and the small and ephemeral (the fainting robin). What about the small and the enduring? There is a Chinese story of an old man who wanted to move a mountain that was blocking the sun. (Giddens and Giddens, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 39.) When he was mocked for hauling wheelbarrow loads of stones, the old man responded that his descendants would carry on his work and that the mountain would eventually be moved. Scientists may see their professional life in this light—their contributions may have been small, but they are worthwhile because they are part of a larger endeavor, and this larger endeavor is what is enduring.

So, we broadened the ideal in Horace's *Odes*: Achievements need not be enduring, they may be ephemeral; and they need not be grand, they may be small. But some people may still find this wrong-headed. What is it, they object, with this focus on achievements and contributions, on making a mark, on making a difference?

John Keats contracted tuberculosis in his mid-twenties and realized that an early death was awaiting him. In one of the letters to his beloved Fannie Brawne, he reports an internal dialogue: "If I should die," said I to myself, "I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make

my friends proud of my memory—but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered.” Keats thought that he had achieved too little to leave a mark in the literary landscape due to his young age. But he found consolation in having lived his life in a particular mode—in accordance with an aesthetic principle.

Indeed, some find contentment not in achievements or contributions, but in having lived their lives in a particular way. They have lived their lives guided by an ideal of integrity, honesty, love, or service. They consider their lives worthwhile precisely because they lived in accordance with ideals that they subscribe to or identify with. Life was lived as it ought to be lived.

So, what makes life worthwhile retrospectively? Here is the landscape: There are modes of living, and there are achievements, both enduring and ephemeral, both grand and simple. People have different conceptions of what would make their lives worthwhile. There may be a match between their conception and the way they view their own lives. If so, then this will be a source of contentment. Or there may be a mismatch. They may have a bookshelf of influential tomes and yet feel that life was not lived well because they sense a lack of integrity. They may have a life of caring and service behind them and yet feel that nothing meant much because there is nothing of them that projects into the future.

What place is there for hope when it comes to our concern with life being worthwhile?

If one aims for enduring achievements, it is good to remember that the future is fickle and will be even more fickle in one’s absence. Poets come and poets go as literary canons are rewritten. Family trees are unfolded with great interest only to end up in dusty attics (or archived websites), never to see the light of day again. There is always much room for doubt that our contribution will stand the test of time. And with doubt comes hope. We can at best hope that our lives were worthwhile; time shall be our judge.

When we are focused on the here and now, there is less room for doubt. The party our DJ threw was dope, and only a bore could deny it. Dickinson’s robin was saved from the claws of the cat. But with any achievement, questions remain about our contribution as well as

about consequences. I remember a psychiatrist telling me a story about a patient, in his care, who overcame schizophrenia. At the end of the story, he looked at me and said: 'Did I do that? I don't know.' And, with each success, there are typically unforeseen consequences. For instance, the Gates Foundation reduced the incidence of malaria by dispensing malaria nets, but the nets are being used for fishing, polluting lakes, and depleting their fish. (The *Guardian*, 31 Jan. 2018)

Insofar as we strive to live life in a particular mode, we may have doubts because we are not fully transparent to ourselves. An artist may hope that they lived a life of aesthetic creation, but fear that they were a phony at heart. A philanthropist may hope that they were motivated by empathy, but fear that they were after fame and recognition. A politician may hope that they have lived a life of integrity, but fear that self-interest was often no less of a driving force.

No matter what we think a worthwhile life is all about, there is room for doubt. In the face of this doubt, modesty requires that we say, 'I hope that my life was worthwhile,' rather than, 'I know that my life was worthwhile.'

## Dying well

The hope that one's life was worthwhile, that one has lived well, is mirrored in the hope that one will die well. What is it to die well? We all hope not to die a painful and agonizing death, but that's a problem for palliative care and pain management experts rather than philosophers. Aristotle has some views on dying well in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Book 3, Ch. 6) For him, dying on the battlefield is the noblest death—it is a proper ending to a happy life. But death caused by disease or death as a passenger on a sinking ship are unenviable deaths. Why does Aristotle think this?

On the battlefield one can courageously practice one's skills. This is desirable because we like to die in a way that reflects the ideals that we hold dear and the skills that we have honed over our lifetime. One can do no such thing when one battles disease or is a passenger on a sinking ship. Aristotle even makes an exception for a sailor—for a sailor, death at sea is a worthy death since a sailor can practice their skills trying to save the boat. Furthermore, we do not die in vain on the battlefield—our

death serves some greater cause. Considering modern warfare, dying on the battlefield is not what it used to be. But the message still stands. But the message still stands. We appreciate it if we can die in a way that reflects the way we lived, showing the ideals that have defined us. And we appreciate our deaths not to be in vain—we like them to serve some greater good.

When there is a fatal accident in sports, loved ones find consolation in assuring themselves that the athlete died doing what they liked doing best. A Muslim relative of mine faced protests from her family because she wanted to go on another Hajj—the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca—at an advanced age and in poor health. She responded: ‘Could there be any sweeter way to leave this earth?’ John Updike rested his head on the typewriter to gather the strength to type up his final poems on dying. (The *Guardian*, 11 March 2016) In all these cases, people died or faced death doing what they were good at, what they enjoyed, or what defined them throughout their lives. Loved ones find consolation in this.

People also hope to die in circumstances or at a time that reflects what they value in life or is symbolic of something they stand for or identify with. This can take many forms. They may hope to die surrounded by their families or in the comfort of their homes. They may hope to die, say, on Independence Day or a particular saint’s day.

Mark Twain was born in the year of Halley’s Comet and wrote that he hoped to die in the year of its return. He writes in 1909, the year before Halley’s return, that it would be: ‘the greatest disappointment of my life if I don’t go out with Halley’s Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: “Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.” Oh! I am looking forward to that.’ (p. 1511) His hopes were met when he died in 1910 due to heart failure. Mark Twain was a great storyteller and dying in the year of the return of Halley’s Comet was a way to give the world another story.

The comedian Tony Hancock joked: ‘Does *Magna Carta* mean nothing to you? Did she die in vain?’ Humor aside, revolutionaries indeed hope that their untimely deaths will advance the cause. Relatives of deceased soldiers find it very hard to accept that the war shouldn’t have been fought. ‘A woman protested, saying: “Of course it was a righteous war. My son fell in it,”’ Kahlil Gibran writes in *Sand and Foam*.

Terminally ill patients participate in randomized controlled trials for experimental drugs and hope that their participation will contribute to the advancement of science. In all these cases, people would like their deaths to be good for something.

Aristotle's interest in dying well is also relevant to the contemporary debate on euthanasia. Proponents of euthanasia argue that patients should have the opportunity to die in a way that reflects what they stand for in life. If what they stand for are independence, control, and autonomy, they may consider euthanasia the most fitting death when they are afflicted by a debilitating disease. They do not want to see their bodies helplessly deteriorate further. They do not want to be dependent on a regimen of painkillers for pain control. They do not want to see themselves as being dependent on caregivers. They want to have control over their deaths as they have had control over their lives. Others live a life believing that some things should be left in the hands of God or should be determined by natural processes. They should have proper access to palliative care and be able to live through the natural dying process without having to endure excruciating pain.

Euthanasia is legal in many jurisdictions. Some people have asked for euthanasia wanting to be organ donors. They hope that their deaths will lead to some good by giving other people a new lease on life. They make substantial sacrifices. Cancer patients can only be organ donors if they opt for euthanasia early on during the progression of the disease, lest their organs be affected. And even for other patients, being an organ donor precludes choosing to die at home since organs can only be harvested in hospital surgery rooms.

And yet there is much resistance, and it is not easy to be an organ donor upon opting for euthanasia. There is the worry that unscrupulous medical providers will push patients to volunteer for euthanasia and organ donation. On the other hand, can we deny the terminally ill their last wish for their deaths to gain meaning through a life-affirming gift? Patients have one last hope—the hope that their sacrifices will make their deaths beneficial to others. Can one take this hope away from them?

Aristotle's enchantment with death on the battlefield seems quaint—a curiosity harking back to times when heroic values reigned. But his reasons are still instructive today. No less than the ancient Greek

warrior, we also hope to die well and meet our end through a death that reflects our lives or that is not in vain.

## A Good Future

*'Après moi le déluge'* [After me the downfall]. These were the prescient words of Louis XV, which he uttered a few decades before his grandson, who was heir to the throne, was executed in the French Revolution. The phrase signals disinterest in a better future after one is dead and gone.

There is something disturbing about this. But what is meant by these four words? If we can figure this out, then we will gain a clearer sense of what is troubling about this phrase. And this will give us an insight into how it is that people really can have hopes for a future without them.

The phrase has a history. The earliest occurrence of a similar phrase is in an anonymous Greek fragment from a lost tragedy: 'When I die, let earth and fire mix: It matters not to me, for my affairs will be unaffected.' The line is echoed in Lucretius: 'Certainly then, when we do not exist, nothing at all will be able to affect us nor excite our senses, not even if the earth mixes with the sea, and the sea with the heavens.' Now it is true that events after our death won't affect our senses. But some events don't affect our senses, yet they do matter to us. If we judge our lives to be worthwhile based on enduring achievements, then the future does matter. And even if we don't, there are still other reasons to have hopes for things that won't affect our senses.

Here is an analogy. Suppose you are heading some top-secret unit in the military and are about to retire. Due to the nature of the unit, all contact will be broken off. This does not stop you from saying: 'I hope that the projects that I started come to fruition, I hope that the unit will succeed in its long-term mission, and I hope that my co-workers will do well, both professionally and in their personal lives.' That you will never know any of this does not stop you from hoping.

The same holds for death. We are invested in our families, our communities, and our projects. Suppose that a loved one is shortlisted for a prize, and the prizes will be awarded next year. I very much hope that they will win. I then receive a diagnosis of a terminal illness, and



it is certain that I will not be there to witness it. That does not stop me from hoping.

Seneca despises an attitude of indifference towards what happens after one's death and puts it in the same box as Nero's saying: 'Let them hate me, so long as they fear me.' The attitude signals a lack of concern for things that are outside the narrow circle of one's interests. What is objectionable is prioritizing one's interests at the expense of distant people or future people. Even though distant and future people may not pertain to one's interests, this is no reason not to care for them. And it is this hope for a world with less poverty or a future minimally affected by climate change that should guide our actions here and now.

The phrase can also be taken as a hope for posthumous calamities to occur rather than an expression of indifference about the future. Suppose that I am very much enjoying a party, but I must leave early. That hurts—and it is easier to take if I tell myself that the party is winding down. This may be mere wishful thinking. But it can also spill over in a kind of petty and shameful hope. I just can't stand the idea that the DJ will pick up the pace and that I will be missing out. What I hope to hear tomorrow is that the party was all but over, and that the venue closed a few minutes after I had left.

Toward the end of life, some people selectively focus their attention on unwelcome developments in society and the world at large. They become enamored by religious or secular doomsday scenarios. It is easier to go if the future is not worth living for, or if we all must go together anyway. This may be just a way to find consolation, but there is a fine line between consolation through selective focus and petty and shameful hopes.

We used the phrase '*Après moi le déluge*' and its history as a guide to uncover how it is that we have hopes for the future. First, some posthumous events do pertain to us, and hence we can hope for them. Second, minimally decent people do not restrict their cares to what pertains to them, but they also have hopes for distant and future people, and hence they can have hopes for them. And finally, reading the phrase as a wish for calamities to happen uncovers a shameful hope—the hope that the world will be a dismal place when it is our time to go.

## Attitudes of Others

People hope that others will hold certain attitudes toward them when they are gone. They hope to be *missed*, *remembered*, and *respected*. There is some overlap between these categories. If one is missed, then one is remembered. The fallen in a war are not respected unless they are remembered. Nonetheless, these attitudes are different—for instance, one may be remembered without being either respected or missed. Each of these attitudes is in tension with some of the hopes that we have discussed earlier. We will take up each in turn.

*Being missed.* The hope to be missed by loved ones is a curious hope. Grief is a powerful emotion that can deeply mar one's life. 'Parting is all we know of heaven/ And all we need of hell,' writes Dickinson. Why would we hope for anything like this from our loved ones, especially considering that our hopes for the future typically include that they will do well?

Why would we want to be missed at all? When you leave a job, you may hope that the company will fall apart without you. This may play into your sense of self-importance. It may be a kind of revenge: You feel that you were not respected, and now they get what they deserve. But these are sad hopes, if not shameful hopes. Some such hopes may enter in at the end of life as well. I remember an obituary stating that it was the wish of the deceased that there be no meal after the funeral, since 'people have had plenty of time to come and have a meal with me; I would have been more than happy to oblige, but nobody ever came.' People feel slighted in life and hope that they will be missed in death—and preferably missed with guilt-laden grief.

But is there not a healthy way of hoping to be missed when one is no longer?

Being missed, one might say, is a sign of being loved. And we hope that we were loved. This is a good explanation when we are uncertain of being loved. But what if we are confident that we are being loved? Why hope for the smoke when we know that there is fire anyway?

Being missed, one might say, is part and parcel of being loved. And so, in hoping to be missed, we are not hoping for a sign of being loved—we are simply hoping to be loved. But we don't need to hope for everything

that is part and parcel of the things we hope for. World travelers hope for pristine beaches, breath-taking sights, and novel experiences, but not for the long plane rides to get to them.

But this, one might object, is an unfair comparison. Being missed is essential to being loved, but long plane rides are not essential to world travel: Elon Musk's Big Falcon Rocket could get us anywhere on earth in less than an hour. Fair enough. But then think of parenting. Hardships are essential to parenting: There is no parenting without hardships. Prospective parents hope for the joys of parenting, but not for the hardships that are part of it. So why then, in hoping to be loved, would we need to hope to be missed?

Furthermore, being missed need not even be a sure-proof sign of being loved or part and parcel of being loved. People love in different ways, and they love different people in different ways. Grief after loss need not be a measure of the love that once was. There is love that can let go and that barely grieves. There is intense grief, not because of love for the deceased, but because it is intermingled with many other more and less healthy emotions.

So, then what should we hope for? There is much wisdom in Christina Rossetti's poem 'Song': 'When I am dead, my dearest,/ Sing no sad songs for me;/ Plant thou no roses at my head,/ Nor shady cypress tree;/ Be the green grass above me/ With showers and dewdrops wet;/ And if thou wilt, remember,/ And if thou wilt, forget.' Rossetti asks that there be no expressions of grief from a loved one upon her death. But she hopes that a loved one will be like the grass on her grave—keeping a connection but standing strong and directed toward the world. Whether this is enhanced by missing her or not is of no import. The most we should hope for is that some connection remains, which can find expression in a feeling of absence, but this feeling should be a feeling that enriches life.

*Being remembered.* The hope to be remembered is close to the hope to make an enduring contribution. But it's not the same thing. Here are a few questions to ponder.

Both Alfred Russell Wallace and Charles Darwin came up with the core ideas of the theory of evolution at roughly the same time. Now suppose Wallace's work did more for the theory of evolution than

Darwin's work. However, Darwin is certainly remembered more than Wallace. Would you prefer to be Wallace or Darwin?

Suppose that you are William Shakespeare on his death bed. A genie in a bottle gives you a choice. Either all your work will remain preserved for posterity, but the identity of the author will be forgotten, and each of the plays will be signed with 'Anonymous.' Call this Shakespeare Anonymized. Or, half of your works will be preserved with your name properly attached to them, while the others will be lost forever. Or, to make it harder, suppose that 90 percent will be so preserved. Call this Shakespeare Redux. What would you choose?

If you only hope that your life is worthwhile on grounds of having made enduring contributions, then you should choose to be Wallace, and you should choose to be Shakespeare Anonymized. If you choose to be Darwin or Shakespeare Redux, you also hope that *you* will be remembered, over and above the hope of having made an enduring contribution.

Why would one want to be remembered? We may think of ourselves as getting a kind of lease on life when our names live on in people's minds and continue to be mentioned in conversations and written work. There is something very odd about this sentiment though. Woody Allen appropriately mocks it: 'I do not want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality by not dying. I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen; I want to live on in my apartment.' (Woody Allen and Linda Sunshine, *Illustrated Woody Allen Reader*.)

Presumably, we don't just want to be remembered, we want to be remembered well, just as we want people to think well of us during our lives. What good does being thought well of do? It matters during one's life because people will trust you and this provides for opportunities. But being remembered after one's death does not offer any such benefits. It matters to be thought of well because it provides some limited evidence that one's contributions are worthwhile. Sure, but why not just hope that one's contributions are worthwhile? There is no point in hoping for smoke when you can hope for fire.

So, we need to give a different answer. Many people value being thought of well in itself. It is not of value because it provides opportunities or because it provides evidence. It is of value for what it is and that's

that. It is reasonable to think that being remembered posthumously has the same appeal.

And so, a desire to be thought of well posthumously might make one hope to be Darwin rather than Wallace, and Shakespeare Redux rather than Shakespeare Anonymized. It wouldn't be my choice, but it is not a crazy choice.

*Being respected.* Diogenes asked that his corpse be set out to be devoured by wild animals. Jeremy Bentham's dressed-up skeleton with a wax head is put on display in the UCL (University College London) student center. King's College students stole the actual head in 1975 (and returned it), and there is a legend that it was used for an impromptu game of football (or, for American readers, soccer.)

Most people are not like Diogenes. Neither would they like to see their heads used as footballs. They hope that their bodies, bones, or gravesites will be treated with respect after being gone. We are horrified when we hear reports of the corpses of US soldiers being dragged through Mogadishu, severed heads being displayed by ISIS, people urinating on graves, or Jewish graveyards being desecrated with swastikas.

There is an interesting tension at the heart of photojournalism that flares up regularly. It is an unwritten rule that there should be no frontal shots of corpses out of respect for the deceased and their loved ones. But the picture showing a frontal shot is often so powerful that it has the potential to bring about social change. Larry Burrows, a photojournalist who was killed in Vietnam, agonized about publishing shocking war images. He worried that he would be 'simply capitalizing on other men's grief.' But he gave himself permission because his images 'would penetrate the hearts at home of those who are simply too indifferent.'

Emmett Till, a Black fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago, was visiting relatives in Mississippi in the summer of 1955. He allegedly wolf-whistled a white woman in a store and was tortured and brutally killed by the woman's husband and half-brother. His mother asked for an open casket and called *Jet* magazine to run pictures of the boy's disfigured body to show the world what had been done to her son. These pictures shocked the world and galvanized the civil rights movement.

More recently, the picture of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler whose corpse was washed ashore on 2 September 2015 in Turkey, was a case

in point. There were two pictures—one in which he is washed up on the beach with his face toward the camera and one in which he is being carried away by an aid worker with his face hidden. (The *Guardian*, 2 Sep. 2015) Newspapers were split on which picture they should publish. Some refused to publish the frontal shot out of respect for the little boy and his family. Still, it was precisely this picture that affected public opinion and made a difference to worldwide refugee policy.

Alan Kurdi was just a toddler, which complicates the moral calculus. But if the image is an image of adults who lost their lives in tragic ways, there is a tension between the presumed hope of the deceased that one will be respected in death and the hope that one's death will not be in vain, that is, that one's death will raise awareness and effect positive change. How this tension is resolved will be different dependent on the wishes, presumed or actual, of the deceased and on the particulars of the case.

Summing up, we have hopes that others will bear certain attitudes toward us when we are no more. Hoping to be missed stands in tension with the hopes that our loved ones' lives will not be marred by grief. Hoping to be remembered is subtly distinct from hoping for a worthwhile life on grounds of having made enduring achievements. And there is an interesting tension between meeting the deceased's hope to be respected in death and the hope that one's death may lead to some good.



# 3. Love

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## Constancy

We want all kinds of things in life—an interesting job, a cruise to exotic lands, a night on the town, a sports car... And then there is our love life. Again, there are all kinds of things that we want in the way of love. We want a happy love life, we want to be with our beloved, or, one might say, we want our beloved. But love-related wants are curiously different from more mundane wants.

Let's start with something that so many of us want—chocolate. Like love, most ordinary mortals don't just want chocolate; they crave it. Suppose that you grew up on Cadbury, but now you think that you have made the discovery of your life—you have tasted these nicely wrapped Ghirardelli squares from the Bay Area, and you swear that they are the best thing under the sun.

Being a choosy Belgian when it comes to chocolate, I ask what you like about it. You immediately start raving about the velvety texture, the robust bitterness, the aroma of hazelnuts, and so on. I understand your passion. But if that's what you like about chocolates, then I have news for you. Try these pralines from Daskalidès, manufactured in Ghent, Belgium—they score higher than Ghirardelli on all the factors you mention.

You are somewhat incredulous, but you are willing to give it a go. And indeed, you fall head over heels for Daskalidès on first bite. It is to die for! Ghirardelli pales in comparison. And so, you trade up. Ghirardelli is a thing of the past—the future with Daskalidès is bright.

And there are simpler ways to wean you off Ghirardelli. I might suggest you put on your reading glasses and read the ingredients of that Ghirardelli square. You notice the soy lecithin among the additives. For



some reason or other, you have some misgivings about soy additives, and you turn your back on Ghirardelli.

Or Ghirardelli may decide to source its cocoa from a different supplier. It just doesn't taste the same anymore to your discerning palate, and, again, you say farewell to Ghirardelli.

In all these cases, we wouldn't bat an eyelid. You liked Ghirardelli yesterday. But you traded up for Daskalidès, you learned something new about Ghirardelli, or Ghirardelli changed. You don't like Ghirardelli today. But there is no reason to say that you didn't truly like Ghirardelli yesterday.

Compare this to love. Suppose that you tell me that you have found a new beloved. You are besotted and beguiled—you hear the angels singing. I ask you what is so great about them? You are more than happy to tell me all about how beautiful, handsome, witty, charming, and intelligent your new beloved is.

As with Ghirardelli, I am happy to dispense good advice. If that's what you find so attractive in your newfound Mr. or Ms. Right, I invite you to come along and meet Mr. or Ms. So-Much-More-Right—someone who has all those nice character traits to an even greater extent. We set up a date, you agree with my excellent judgment as a matchmaker, swiftly trade up, and live happily ever after.

Trading up from Ghirardelli to Daskalidès did not stand in the way of saying that you *truly* liked Ghirardelli yesterday. But trading up from Right to So-Much-More-Right makes one less confident about your love for Right yesterday. If you were so beguiled and besotted, why did you even take me up on arranging a date? And how is it that you were so easily convinced? You have to admit that, maybe, you did not *truly* love Right after all. To quote a well-worn line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 116: 'Love is not love/ Which alters when it alteration finds.'

Love should also be resilient to learning—at least more resilient than your fancy for Ghirardelli. As we become more acquainted with our beloved, we may learn things about them that would have stopped us from falling in love with them. But now that we are where we are, it shouldn't matter. If this new knowledge can undo our love, one may question how true it was.

This is a favorite ingredient in tragic love stories. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*, Angel learns on his wedding

night that Tess had a child out of wedlock and leaves her. One questions whether Angel truly loved Tess. As a contrast, take the young love that blossoms between Jimmy and Dil in Neil Jordan's movie *The Crying Game*. Jimmy learns that Dil is transgender and anatomically male, and Dil learns that Jimmy was the cause of her former lover's death. Though they would never have fallen in love with each other had they known these things at the outset, they cannot let go of their love.

Wendy Cope has a two-line poem, entitled 'Two Cures for Love,' in her poetry book *Serious Concerns*: '1. Don't see him. Don't phone or write a letter. / 2. The easy way: get to know him better.' The poem is tongue-in-cheek. Indeed, it sounds fully reasonable that as we learn unwelcome information about our beloved—which is due to come—love will wither. But true love is less than fully reasonable and is meant to be resilient in the face of unwelcome information.

Love should also be resilient to change. There is no problem with turning our back on Ghirardelli when they change their cocoa supplier. Nothing stays the same—Ghirardelli is just not what it used to be. But no person stays the same either—lovers tend to change on us as well. But here, again, is where love differs from our passion for chocolates. We expect love to be able to weather change—at least to some extent. Of course, it's not all sunshine and rainbows—change brings new challenges and requires new coping strategies to keep the relationship afloat.

I was intrigued by some autobiographical comments of Janine di Giovanni, a prize-winning war journalist. She talks about her divorce after her husband turned away from alcoholism:

It was the saddest birthday, the day of his last drink. Not because I grieved for the passing of his alcoholism, but because I knew, instinctively, that he would change and never again be the man I married. Because, in fact, part of that love was based on the passion, the drink, the fury, the rage, the anger, the drive, that made him so intense. Without it, there was a smaller person who looked sad and hardened by life. (*The Guardian*, 25 Jun 2011)

One wonders about a love that does not survive the process of recovery from alcoholism. Her husband had become a different man, and the spark was gone. Might this not say something about the love that came before? None of this is ours to judge, but di Giovanni's story strikes a

familiar chord. One may remember occasions when love was lost in one's own life over something that shouldn't have mattered, leaving one to conclude that the love was never genuinely there to begin with.

This is what is called the *constancy* of love. If alleged love is subject to trading up or is brittle in the face of learning unwelcome news or unexpected changes, then we conclude that the alleged love was not quite true love. It's a mark that something was absent. It is this constancy that sets love apart from other desires, longings, and passions—even from cravings for chocolate.

Granted, there are limits to the constancy of love. Relationships can become abusive over time, and it would be heartless to tell the party leaving that they never truly loved their partner. You may find out that, haplessly, the person you were dating was a perpetrator in the Rwandan genocide. Or as one of my students objected, tongue in cheek: 'I truly love my boyfriend, but what is there to do if Ryan Gosling were to show up on my doorstep?'

But even though there are limits to constancy, love is different in this respect from other things we want in life, be it a nice job, a cruise, a sports car, or what have you. Such longings, intense as they may be, typically do not display constancy. Admittedly, they do occasionally, but there is something pathological about that. For instance, I may not be able to let go of an old beater car, even though there is plenty of room to trade up, I am aware that it's a dreadful polluter, and repairs are endless. But that is a kind of misplaced constancy—one should not come to love a piece of metal with a love that ought to be reserved for persons.

## Models

There are three grand and ancient models of romantic love. They go back to Socrates' and Aristophanes' speeches in the *Symposium* and to chapter thirteen of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. There is surprisingly little to be found in the original texts, but there is a kind of lore that has formed around a few lines of rather obscure musings.

*Eros*. Love is born in response to finding attractive features in a person. This can take many forms—beauty, riches, fame... In an interview, Diane Keaton says that there was chemistry between her and Woody Allen

'because it was Woody Allen and because he was funny.' Or one may find someone sensitive, charming, attentive, willing to listen to us, or what have you.

This is the model that we find in Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*. Socrates says that all he knows about love he learned from Diotima, the woman from Mantinea, 'a woman wise in this and in many other kinds of knowledge.' In keeping with the tradition, we will call this the *eros* model of love. There is a bit of mission creep in Socrates' speech. It starts with an appreciation of what is beautiful and good in one's beloved, but a minute later, we move onto the beauty and the good in the laws and institutions of the city, in the practice of philosophy, and finally, to what it means for something to be beautiful and good. Let Socrates and Diotima go down this metaphysical alleyway on their own, all we need is the idea that romantic love is comprised of an appreciation of the wonderful features of the beloved. The motto for this model might be—to love is to find one's beloved great.

*Agape*. This is the love that wants to take care of the other, to bring out the best in them. This love is not a response to great things in the other. Rather, it aims to bring about great things. It does not seek value, but rather it confers value.

Here is some Theology 101. When we say that God loves us, clearly the *eros* model would not be fitting: God is not gently looking down, impressed and beguiled by all the greatness to be seen in mortals roaming around on earth. Rather, God despairs at seeing all this sinfulness in motion. However, it is through loving us that God aims to lift us up and make us into better people, provided we are receptive to that love.

St. Paul sings the praises of this kind of love in 1 Corinthians 13:1–7. He uses the Greek word *agape*, which is translated in Latin as *caritas*. It is a self-forgetful love that sacrifices its own interests for the well-being of the beloved. It is a love of commitment, no matter what comes. Let the motto be—to love is to make one's beloved great.

One might object that St. Paul was interested here in the love that one should have for one's fellow human beings—the love of Christian fellowship—not the love of romantic engagement. What St. Paul had in mind I do not know. But clearly, people do find some romantic ideal

in St. Paul's words, considering how often they are the core reading in Christian wedding ceremonies. Conjugal love shares in this ideal of loving as bringing out the best in one's beloved.

*Fusion.* Before Socrates takes his turn in the *Symposium*, the playwright Aristophanes tells a myth about how humans in times long gone were like spheres and had two pairs of legs and arms, two heads and two genitals—some were double male, some were double female, and some were male-female. They revolted against Zeus, and as a punishment, Zeus split them in two. And that is the human form as we know it. But these humans have an irresistible longing to find their original other halves and to unite with them. Depending on our original form, this longing is for our gay, lesbian, or straight other halves.

The myth underscores that we have a need to find someone in life who complements us. Falling in love is like linking up two segments that perfectly match and thereby become one. Lovers create a shared self or a joint identity. They go through the world not as two separate people, but as one in body and soul. They think of themselves as such, and they want to be seen by the world as such. Let us call this the *fusion* model of love with the motto—to love is to become one with one's beloved.

These three models are not mutually exclusive. In Sonnet 43, Elizabeth Barrett Browning ponders how to 'count the ways' in which she loves her beloved. Relationships tend to display a bit more or less of an *eros* focus, an *agape* focus, or a *fusion* focus. Single-model relationships tend to be pathological. With too much *eros* comes infatuation. With too much *agape* comes a loss of self. And with too much *fusion* comes clinginess. One needs a mix for a healthy relationship.

All these models have, in their own way, a deep reverence for love. They portray love as the kind of thing that is worth pursuing in life. I call them 'reflectively endorsable' models because embracing the model in no way detracts from seeing love in its full glory. But, as we will see, each of these models also has a *cynical* counterpart. The Cartesian model maps onto *eros*, the love-for-love's-sake model maps onto *agape*, and the neurobiological model maps onto the *fusion* model. These cynical models may not be a good fit for Valentine's Day, yet they are edifying in their own way.

Let us look in more detail at each of these six models and see how they fare in the face of the constancy of love. And then there is the flipside—when constancy fails, there are heartaches. These models tell us different stories about the pangs of love lost and how one might cope with them.

### *Eros*

Let us start with the *eros* model. Loving people for their features causes trouble for the constancy of love. Features may change. We may realize that we misjudged our beloved due to the infatuation of young love. Or someone may cross our path who displays the features that attracted us to a greater extent. If the *eros* model describes all there is to love, then what is there that could keep us from saying that we have reached the end of the line?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet 14 in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* puts the worry very aptly:

Do not say,  
 "I love her for her smile—her look—her way  
 Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought  
 That falls in well with mine, and certes brought  
 A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—  
 For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may  
 Be changed, or change for thee—and love, so wrought,  
 May be unwrought so.

Browning exhorts her beloved not to love her on the *eros* model of love. All the features he may love her for may change in her. Or her beloved may come to see them differently. And that, she fears, would mean the end of love which she wishes to avoid at all costs.

But the *eros* model may have its own defense mechanisms against short horizons built into it. Maybe true love is rooted in the appreciation of valuable features—as the *eros* model stipulates—but certain features just cannot play this role. If we fall for someone because of their beauty, riches, or fame, one would be hard-pressed to call it true love.

This is fair enough, but then, what sort of features *can* play this role? What sort of features are such that their appreciation could be a ground for true love? There are many candidates, but none of them are unproblematic.

In 'He that Loves a Rosy Cheek,' the seventeenth-century English poet Thomas Carew warns that love should not be based on 'a rosy cheek [...] a coral lip [...] star-like eyes,' because these are bound to fade. Rather, it is 'a smooth and steadfast mind, gentle thoughts, and calm desires' that can 'kindle never-dying fires.' This matches Socrates' argument in the *Symposium*: First, the novice in the art of love finds beauty in the body of the beloved, and at a later stage, 'he will consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form.'

The suggestion is that one should love a person for their character traits. Character traits may be somewhat less ephemeral than looks, but they provide far less constancy than one would expect from love. Browning does not want to be loved for 'speaking gently' either, because she may not speak gently tomorrow, or her beloved may not think of her as speaking gently tomorrow.

People change, for better or for worse. Those who have nurtured a loved one through depression know all too well how little can be there of the person we fell in love with. If love is not to fade, character traits may be as fragile as beauty or money. But it may be wiser to focus on character traits because desirable character traits are typically a better predictor of long-term marital satisfaction. Similarly, it may be wiser to choose a place to live on grounds of its social scene or the opportunity for satisfying work, rather than on grounds of its natural beauty or the opportunity to make lots of money. But if natural beauty or riches really matter to *you*, then why not? And if the beauty of the outward form in a partner or the posh lifestyle that they promise really matters to *you*, then why not? You may come to realize that you were mistaken in your assessment of the relative importance of these features. But whether it's 'a rosy cheek' or 'a smooth and steadfast mind' that kindles your love does not make that love any more or less true.

But maybe we love people not for having certain features—bodily, monetary, character, or what have you—but for the *mode* in which they display those features. I adore my beloved not for, say, being a great skier, but for the way in which they ski. Nobody takes those turns quite the way they do. It's not how good a skier they are; it's the mode in which they are a great skier that stirs those butterflies inside.

This may guard against trading up. My beloved may not measure up to the Olympic skier I just met in the lounge, but the Olympic skier's

mode of skiing does not catch my fancy the way my beloved's mode of skiing does. But it is less clear that it will guard against change. After a few ligament ruptures, little may be left of their oh-so-special way of taking those turns. Maybe this mode of skiing may live on in the other things they do in life, and this is what guards against change. But if we go this route, it all becomes a bit mysterious—the ground for love becomes a kind of *je ne sais quoi*.

There is another clue in William Butler Yeats' 'For Anne Gregory.' The poem has Anne Gregory saying that she wants to be loved, not for her yellow hair, but for herself alone. But what is it to love a person for themselves alone? There is a mystical and not so mystical reading.

Let's start with the not so mystical. There are certain features of ourselves that we identify with, that we think of as defining us, and typically these are also the features that we are proud of. The real Anne Gregory, the granddaughter of the Irish playwright Lady Gregory, was a young child with flaxen hair when Yeats wrote his poem about her. But let's think of an imaginary Anne Gregory. She may not have cared much for her yellow hair. So, to be loved for it is not very satisfying. Maybe our imaginary Anne Gregory may have thought of herself as an intellectual or an artist. She would not mind being loved for being just that. When she says that she wants to be loved for herself, she means for something that she stands for, something that she takes herself to be about.

It is true that people like to be loved for what they take pride in. But it is one thing to be loved by the world and another thing to be loved romantically. It seems to me that there is, at least for most people, a separation of spheres. I want to be admired, appreciated, and loved for one set of features at work, for another set of features in my community, and yet another set of features by my beloved. Venus Williams may yearn to be loved by the world for her tennis prowess. Adele may be desperate to be adored by her fans for her vocal talent. But I doubt that they want to be so loved by romantic lovers.

Here is a more mystical reading of being loved for oneself alone, which needs a bit of a metaphysical warmup.

Think of the universe as a big bag. Grab something out of the bag. Put it back. Grab one more time. If both objects you grabbed have precisely the same features, then you grabbed the very same thing twice. This principle goes back to the seventeenth-century German philosopher Leibniz and is called the Identity of Indiscernibles.



The twentieth-century English American philosopher Max Black did not like the principle much. He asks us to suppose that there is a universe that is void except for two spheres of the same size and composition, circling around each other. Then both objects have precisely the same features, but they are not identical—they are clearly distinct objects. There seems to be something wrong with Leibniz's Identity of Indiscernibles.

To defend Leibniz, we step back a few centuries to the thirteenth-century Scottish philosopher Duns Scotus. Aside from all its run-of-the-mill features such as being blue, weighing twenty pounds, etc., each of Max Black's spheres also has the property of being this very sphere. One sphere has the property of being this very sphere, and the other sphere has the property of being that very sphere. Each sphere has its own 'primitive this-ness' or, following Duns Scotus, its own '*haecceity*.' (*Haec* is a Latin form for 'this.')

It is in virtue of their respective *haecceities* that the spheres in Max Black's universe are discernible, and hence we can comfortably say, on Leibniz's principle, that they are distinct.

Let's return to Anne Gregory now. In matters of love, Anne Gregory does not want to be loved for her yellow hair, her smarts, her gentle demeanor, or whatever run-of-the-mill property you might want to add. She wants to be loved for being her, for being the unique person that she is. She wants to be loved for her *haecceity*, in Duns Scotus style.

This is a common theme in science fiction (such as in the episode 'Be Right Back' in the TV series *Black Mirror*). We may be able to create a replica of your beloved, who is just as good-looking, sensitive, smart, witty, with the same memories and dreams, but it wouldn't do: What they are lacking is being the very person whom you loved before.

The more sober-minded will think it stark raving mad to bring in such bizarre features as *haecceities* to account for the fact that people do not wish to be loved for any other feature than being the unique person that they are. It's also not clear what would be valuable about such a feature. But, when love is the prize, maybe a bit of metaphysical fairyland is just what we need.

In short, the quest for a special set of features that can ground true love and provide a basis for constancy is quite elusive. We tried character features, modes, identity-constituting features, and *haecceities*. They all have some attraction, but none of them are entirely convincing.

## *Agape*

We now turn to St. Paul's *agape* model—a love of unconditional commitment that is self-forgetful and self-sacrificing. After Anne Gregory kicks up a fuss in Yeats' poem about wanting to be loved for herself alone, her interlocutor responds: "'I heard an old religious man/ But yesternight declare/ That he had found a text to prove/ That only God, my dear,/ Could love you for yourself alone/ And not your yellow hair.'"

There are two ways to understand this. One reading understands 'for yourself' as indicating the *ground* of God's love: God loves us because we are the unique individuals that we are. But there is also another reading. Think of the expression: 'Buy something nice for yourself.' Here you are meant to be the beneficiary. So, if God loves us for ourselves, we are the beneficiaries—God loves us with the aim of lifting us up.

Is it true that *only* God can love in this manner? *Agape* is an ideal of love, and maybe only God can live up to it. Nonetheless, it is held up as an ideal to strive for in interpersonal relationships as well as in romantic love.

In *Love and Responsibility*, Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) holds *agape* up as a model of romantic love in marriage:

We love the person complete with all his or her virtues and faults, and up to a point independently of those virtues and in spite of those faults. The strength of such a love emerges most clearly when the beloved stumbles, when his or her weaknesses or even his sins come into the open. One who truly loves does not then withdraw his love, but loves all the more, loves in full consciousness of the other's shortcomings and faults.

This *agape* model of love also finds expression in popular culture. Think of the lyrics of Tammy Wynette's 'Stand by your Man,' in which she urges to forgive a lover who has gone astray. There is clearly constancy on this model, but what supports this constancy?

*Agape* is a love that is not drawn out by attractive features of the beloved. Hence there is no problem with features changing, with learning about the darker sides of one's beloved, or with any threat from someone crossing one's path who exemplifies the features you fancy to a greater degree. Features simply don't matter from the get-go.

Rather, it is a love that involves commitment. I once attended a wedding sermon in which the minister said: 'You fell in love, you were in love, and now you are saying to each other, I will love.' One takes on the commitment of taking care of one's beloved and living up to this commitment is a matter of the will. It is a love that is not contingent on the good fortune that passions won't fade.

And love is unconditional on this model. Love won't fade when one's beloved errs, shows weakness, or in whatever way does not live up to expectations. It is a love that aims to build up the beloved. Hence the lower the beloved falls, the greater the call. It is like an ardent sports fan who is not let down when the team goes through a losing streak. *Agape* is not fair-weather love.

But the constancy of *agape* comes at a cost. Here are some trouble spots for *agape*. A model of love that exhorts us to bear it all can become self-destructive. To protect our mental health, its proponents tend to throw in a qualifier that functions as an exit clause. Note how John Paul II throws in 'up to a point'—love persists in spite of the beloved's faults, *up to a point*. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, love 'bears it out even to the edge of doom'—but it doesn't follow the beloved beyond this edge. Nonetheless, *agape* may have its boundaries, but it can come dangerously close to the pitfalls of co-dependency and abusive relationships.

Here is another weakness. How can an *agape*-model lover respond to the simple question from their beloved: 'Why do you love me?' They might say: 'Because I want to take care of you.' 'But why,' the beloved may persist, 'do you want to take care of me, rather than of somebody else?' What might our *agape*-model lover respond? 'Because our paths crossed?' That just seems a bit too *whatever*. 'Because I saw that you needed me?' That seems a bit patronizing, or even worse, it sounds like a handyman who is keen to buy a fixer upper. What would bring a spark to the beloved's eye is if the lover would tell them what makes them so special. But if they are genuine about this, if it's more than some sweet nothing, then we are back with the *eros* model.

## Fusion

Finally, there is the *fusion* model. Aristophanes' myth tells of how humans try to find their other halves to reunite with them and go through life

in the form they were before Zeus punished them. Unlike on the *agape* model, features do matter: People find their other halves by identifying complementary features, like the white and the black shape in a *yin-yang* symbol. But unlike on the *eros* model, what elicits our love is not how wonderful these features are. Rather, we recognize a complementarity between ourselves and the beloved, and it is this complementarity that grounds our love.

Philosophers talk about the *phenomenology* of love. What they mean by this is that there is something that it is like to be in love, that love strikes us in particular ways, that love appears to us to be one way or another. The myth of Aristophanes ticks many boxes in this respect.

Love is about forming *an extended self* or *a shared identity* with the beloved. ‘One is both and both are one in love’ is a line in Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘I Loved You First.’ Or think of Catherine’s speech in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* in which she proclaims: ‘I AM Heathcliff! He’s always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.’

The extended self can take various forms. It can be a kind of merging—the individual selves are permeable, and they fuse as two cells become one. The old selves are no more. There is one new self that has absorbed the selves that once were. The singletons are gone; only the dyad remains. Aristophanes in the *Symposium* seems to favor this idea of merging. He imagines Hephaestus, the god of blacksmiths, proposing to weld the two lovers together. And the lovers wholeheartedly agree to this—they wish to ‘be melted into one and remain one here and hereafter.’ And this is what grounds love’s constancy: Dissolving the union would be like a death—a death of the extended self.

If we wish to preserve the individual self, then we can envision love in one of two ways. Draw an outer circle representing the individual self and place a smaller circle of the shared self within it. Or draw an outer circle representing the shared self and place a smaller circle of the individual self within it. These pictures are suggestive. In ‘Love’s Bond,’ (*The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, 1989), the philosopher Robert Nozick writes that there is a gender difference, with men typically identifying with the former model and women with the latter model. That is, men typically make some space for the *we* within the *I*,

whereas women let the *I* be absorbed within the *we*. I leave it as an open question whether this is still a feature of love today.

Love strikes us as fated. Think of the 20s jazz tune 'It Had to Be You' by Isham Jones. It's not that we got to know one another, and we found out that we were a good match. Rather, as soon as we met, we knew right away that this was the match that was waiting for us all along. There is no room for maybe. There are 7.9 billion people on the globe, and the only right match is between you and your beloved—nothing else will do, it just had to be you. Lovers may even tell stories about how it seemed as if someone was pulling the strings, providing a little tug left and right to bring back the two halves that were once united.

This also squares with Aristophanes' explanation of sexual preference. We do not choose our sexual preference. They are simply given to us because they are contingent on whether we came from a unisex or mixed-sex original unit.

We feel that we have always known our beloved. 'I knew I loved you before I met you' is a line in the chorus of the late 90s hit 'I Knew I Loved You' by Savage Garden. Lovers sense that they were already present in each other's dreams before their paths crossed. They did not just find someone who matched their dreams—rather, they already knew this very person from their dreams.

Gabriel García Márquez plays on this theme in the short story 'Eyes of a Blue Dog.' It is a conversation between two lovers who repeatedly meet in their dreams. Since they hit it off so well, they agree to find each other in the real world, with the phrase 'Eyes of a Blue Dog' as a kind of code. But tragically, nothing comes of it because the man cannot remember his dreams, and the woman goes mad in her pursuit to find the lover of her dreams in real life.

This feeling of prescience or *déjà vu* is also present in Aristophanes' myth. We feel that we already knew each other before we met because our beloved is our long-lost love from the time before time began when we were still one.

This model also has some trouble spots. It combines two aspects. First, there is love as merging, and second, there is uniqueness, the notion that we are destined to love the one and only person that is *the* one for us.

As to merging, Kahlil Gibran warns against this loss of the individual self in 'On Marriage.' One should drink together, but not from the same cup. One should eat together, but not from the same loaf. And then he suggests various images in which greatness is reached by joint action that involves individuality—such as the pillars that make a temple or the strings of a lute that stand by themselves yet jointly create music. A respectful distance helps the cause of love—the cypress and the oak do not grow in each other's shadow.

We find a similar warning in Shel Silverstein's children's books *The Missing Piece* and *The Missing Piece meets the Big O*. A rock is trying to find its missing piece, and a missing piece is trying to find its rock so that the two of them can merge and roll, but the mission ultimately fails, and they find happiness without merging.

As to uniqueness, granted, there is something magical about love being fated and about prescience. At the same time, in a more sober hour, who could believe this to be the case? It is a fitting thing to say at moments of a distinctly romantic nature. But really, 7.9 billion people, and we each should find our very own Waldo in that multitude? We might as well give up from the start. This feature of the model also makes it into the cruelest model for the pangs of love lost—to which we will turn below.

Finally, there is a tension between merging and uniqueness. Merging suggests a slow process. The shared self is formed over time, and it draws on a shared history between the lovers. We have gone through so much together, they say. Uniqueness is based on your beloved being the one and only person whom you were once connected with. When you meet your other half, you will recognize it as such, as if meeting with an old friend, and you will wish to reconnect pronto. Hence uniqueness suggests that love should be love at first sight and that it should be head over heels. Now maybe love is a little bit of both and then the co-presence of merging and uniqueness is to the credit of the model.

## Love Lost

So, what about when love is lost? What about when constancy fails? Each of these models has its own story to tell on why the pangs of love lost hurt so much.

On the *eros* model, loving one's beloved is like loving an awesome Lamborghini for a car lover. And losing one's beloved is like losing that Lamborghini—maybe different in magnitude, but not in kind. Something great—that is, something with the greatest features—just slipped through my fingers. Maybe the car was even tailor-made, a kind of *pièce unique*. And that is what is lost, never to return. I may find a new sports car, just as I may find a new love. But it may take a while. And there is the fear that I may never find one as wonderful as the one I had before.

On the *agape* model, the pangs of love lost are less about loss but rather about failure. It is not that someone drove off with my Lamborghini. Rather, it is as if I was trying single-mindedly to save the family firm, working night and day, but I finally had to admit defeat and declare bankruptcy. There is this nagging doubt that if I had just tried a bit harder, I could have succeeded, and maybe I just did not quite love enough. And now the whole endeavor was for naught, a kind of Sisyphus labor.

The *fusion* model is the cruelest of them all when it comes to the loss of love. The loss of love is like a death—it is the death of the shared self. It is Dickinson's 'all we need of hell.' And this death of the shared self affects the individual self in the deepest way, though how it affects us depends on whether we see the shared self as a merged self, as having a place within the individual self, or as encompassing the individual self.

On the model of merged selves, the individual selves are ripped apart and are left wounded. On the model of the shared self within the individual self, what is left is a hole, a gap, an emptiness. On the model of the individual self within the shared self, the individual self is left without a compass or a mooring place—it is adrift in a world that makes no sense because the shared self that gave it meaning is gone.

What adds to the trauma is the image that love is fated. If it had to be you, then it is not just *a* death—it is *the* death of the one and only shared self that there can ever be. It is the sense that there is only one missing piece that provided the right fit that makes the loss irreparable.

It is not a loss of something of great value, as in the *eros* model. The relationship may even have been arduous from the get-go. It is not a loss of a project as in the *agape* model—a doomed love may never even have

reached the stage of being a project to bring to fruition. Rather, it is the sense that there is something deeply amiss with the world, because, for whatever reason, what had to be so cannot be so—the world below does not live up to what is written in the stars.

‘Love like you’ll never be hurt’ is a line in a quote that has many attributions on the web. The pangs of love lost have their distinct bitter tastes on the *eros*, the *agape*, and the *fusion* models. The prospect of being hurt may make us wary of entering amorous relationships. That is one way of coping. It may not be to everyone’s taste. And even if we choose this route, Cupid may just relentlessly knock again—‘comes love, nothing can be done,’ as the jazz standard ‘Comes Love’ goes.

Another way of coping is to give into love but to conceive of it in some more cynical fashion or other, to shield oneself from the pangs of love lost. There are three variants of this, and they curiously map onto the *eros*, *agape*, and *fusion* models. This is what we will turn to next.

## Cynical Models

After directing *The Piano*, Jane Campion volunteered some interesting reflections on love in an interview:

I think the romantic impulse is in all of us and that sometimes we live it for a short time, but it’s not part of a sensible way of living. It’s a heroic path and it generally ends dangerously. I treasure it in the sense that I believe it’s a path of great courage. It can also be the path of the foolhardy and the compulsive.

Note how Campion is both respectful and dismissive of romantic love.

The *eros*, *agape*, and *fusion* models are reflectively endorsable models of love: They are respectful of love, make love worth having, and its loss worth mourning. Coping with the loss of love requires different dynamics within each of these models. An altogether different way of coping with the loss of love is to be dismissive of love, to construe love as something rather foolish, something that is not worth shedding a tear over. Let us call these *cynical* models. If *that* is what love is all about, then it is not much worth having. And if it’s not much worth having, then its loss is not much worth mourning. And so, a cynical model is itself a coping device. We tell ourselves that love is something strangely banal,



and we should not let something so banal get to us. The *Cartesian* model, the *love for love's sake* model, and the *neurobiological* model are three such cynical models.

*The Cartesian model.* In René Descartes' *Letter to Chanut* on the sixth of June 1647 (p. 201), he addresses the question of why we are attracted to people without having any ideas about their merits. He tells how he was fond of a young girl who had a slight strabismus (that is, a particular eye affliction) when he was a child. He finds himself at a later age attracted to women who have a strabismus. Once he becomes aware that his attraction is caused by what he calls a 'defect,' he manages to correct for it and withdraws his love.

Descartes backs up this observation with the science of the time. Impressions form creases in the brain. Once the creases are in, the brain is disposed to fold in the same way when an impression occurs that is similar in certain respects. I take it that the girl with the strabismus was lots of fun as a playmate and so elicited a love crease in Descartes' brain. And once the outline of the crease had formed, eyes with a strabismus by themselves sufficed to reproduce that very same love crease.

Descartes' insight is surprisingly modern. His observation anticipates the experiments on Pavlovian conditioning in the early twentieth century. Ivan Pavlov rang a bell each time his dog was about to be fed. After a while, the dog started salivating whenever the bell rang, no matter whether there was food or not. The unconditioned stimulus is the food, and the unconditioned response is salivation. The conditioned stimulus is the bell. After a while, the conditioned stimulus suffices to set off the conditioned response of salivation, as psychologists say.

Similarly, the *enfant* René is confronted with a playmate who is both fun and has a strabismus. For *Monsieur* Descartes, his love is triggered upon meeting a woman who has a strabismus, even if he knows nothing else about her. The unconditioned stimulus is the fun his playmate offers, and the unconditioned response is the affection. The conditioned stimulus, in Descartes' case, is the strabismus and the conditioned response is that very same affection.

Mixed with this Pavlovian conditioning is also a Freudian theme—that this conditioning happens at an early age. Reading Descartes' story today, one would think that many of the stimuli that condition

our affection are imprinted at an age that goes even further back than where our memory can reach. The neural creases of love are set in early infancy. Even though Descartes can identify the origin of this strange predilection, for most of us the secrets of the human heart are deeply hidden.

Why do we love the people we do? We fall head over heels in love knowing full well that trouble is around the corner—with ‘eyes wide shut,’ to quote the title of Stanley Kubrick’s last film. And this explains why such dismal relationships are formed. Imagine shopping for a car in a used-car lot and what subconsciously compels your choices is attending to something that does not matter in the least—say, whether the door handles are nice and shiny or not. You would come home with one lemon after another—and no wonder.

If there is so little rhyme or reason to our heart’s desires, then that does at least give us some reason to treat them with a bit less reverence, if not be outright distrustful of them. But love is resilient—we can’t just turn off the dial of our affections. As Pascal writes in *Pensées*, ‘the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.’ (§277) But if reason comes to realize that some of the heart’s reasons have a dubious history, then it may at least be worth reminding oneself of this to soften the pangs of love lost.

*The love for love’s sake model.* In the area of romantic love, some people see themselves in a line of great romantics—to surrender to love’s vicissitudes is all that makes life worth living for them. They are the Tristans and Isoldes, the Abelards and Eloises, the Romeos and Juliets among us—either desperately looking for love, too much in love, or tragically falling out of love. For them life is worth living only on a rollercoaster of love gone mad. They render themselves vulnerable to these emotions or even encourage them since they are, after all, the most uncompromising romantics who ever roamed this earth.

This model has its champions. After Elizabeth Barrett Browning asks her beloved in Sonnet 14 not to love for any feature of hers that may perish, she asks him to love ‘for love’s sake’ instead. What is it to love for love’s sake? Think of making art for art’s sake. People who make art for art’s sake are uncompromising—all that matters is aesthetics. People who love for love’s sake are equally uncompromising—all that matters

is romantic sentiment. Following Browning, let us call this the love-for-love's-sake model—or to give it some erudition, the *amor-amoris-gratia* model. We come to love because we want our lives to be guided by romantic sentiment.

If willing to live the life of a great romantic brings a bit of spice to life, there is little harm in it. But if we cherish romantic sentiments too much, they may come to drag us down, and they are known to take their champions well beyond the edge of doom. There is a feedback loop. In one direction, the sentiments that surge within us inform our sense of self—our sense of who we are and what we are like. In the other direction, our sense of self discourages some sentiments and encourages others. Cultivating a sense of self as a great romantic operates as a catalyst in this cycle—it encourages us to indulge in the sentiments of romantic love, for better or worse—and I am afraid, mostly for worse. In so far as it is for worse, coping with the pangs of love lost requires removing the catalyst or correcting a sense of self that is too much defined by tragic love. And this is especially so if it is a willed sense of self influenced by social fads.

There can be solace in admitting that one's love is merely the love of the great romantic. When we are in the throes of a heartache, we ask ourselves to what extent our agony might not be fed more by being in love with love and all its accouterments, rather than by having lost the love of the actual person. We acknowledge that being in love with love is a love that is not worth cherishing, we try to self-correct, and this self-correction will soften the heartache that is *de rigueur* on this model.

*The neurobiological model.* Biologists studying pair-bonding have found that among mammals, monogamy is relatively rare—we find it in only five percent of species. It is particularly interesting to compare closely related species that differ in this respect, with one being monogamous and the other not. What causes this kind of behavior in the animal world?

Prairie voles mate for life. They form attachments after short periods of exposure to each other. It helps if they can mate during this period, but even without mating, they can form a bond for life. Their bond even transcends death—if the female dies, the male does not search for a new partner. (I have not been able to ascertain whether the female is equally committed.) Their close cousin, the montane vole, is more of

a libertine—always in search of new sexual partners—or in biological parlance, it does not display any pair-bonding behavior.

Why does one species pair-bond while the other does not? The species have evolved under different environmental pressures. First, in low-density environments much time is lost finding another suitable mate, so it pays off to stick with the same partner. Second, with low dispersal opportunities across the terrain for the offspring, a species is better off creating low numbers of high-quality offspring, and this is helped by the presence of both parents. The prairie vole lives in lower-density and lower-dispersal-opportunity environments than the montane vole, which explains the difference.

Is there something in the neurobiology of the prairie vole that explains how they manage to pair-bond? During cohabitation and mating, hormones (oxytocin and vasopressin) are released. In prairie voles, the placement of the receptors for these hormones is in brain centers rich in dopamine, and dopamine is known to play a role in addiction. This physiology does not hold for montane voles.

When prairie voles are separated from their mates, they react with listlessness. They don't paddle when thrown in water, and they don't flail when they are suspended from their tails. And again, the neurobiology that underlies this listlessness is well-documented.

Does it transfer to the human animal? There are similarities in behavior and the underlying neurobiology. Yet less is known since we may be just a tad more complex than the prairie voles and getting permission to run experiments on human love lives is not so easy. But it is safe to assume that, with time, scientists will fill out the neurobiological stories of humans falling in love, being in love, and falling out of love.

How would knowledge of this neurobiological model of love affect our experience of the pangs of love lost? Knowledge of the physiology of what happens when you slam your knee into a coffee table does not help much when coping with physical pain. But when it comes to psychological pain, the case is slightly different. Knowledge of the physiology that underlies our emotions can help us cope, at least to some extent. Some people are sensitive to time-zone changes due to intercontinental travel or darkness during the winter and react with mood swings and depression. Knowing one's sensitivities allows one to brace oneself and exercise at least some control.

Think of yourself as a member of a species that has evolved with a qualified preference for life-long mating due to pressures from its environment. This preference rests on a neurophysiological mechanism that discourages break-ups. Separation deregulates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis in the human brain, causing stress and mood swings. The mechanism resembles the mechanism underlying addiction. There may even be a genetic basis for the effectiveness of this mechanism, in the same way that there may be a genetic basis for being an addictive personality.

This may not be the most romantic story to tell on your first Valentine's Day with a newfound love. It's better to stick to Aristophanes on such an occasion. But when love has gone sour, this objectifying stance may bring more consolation than what we can say on any reflectively endorsable model.

What the Cartesian model, the love-for-love's-sake model, and the neurobiological model have in common is that they bring some irreverence to our understanding of love. If love is just latching on to some features that we became fixated on in early childhood, if it is contingent on a faddish sense of self, if it is brought on by a neurophysiological mechanism that played a role in the evolution of our species, then is it worth losing much sleep over?

For Descartes, knowledge translated into control. He gave up on his attraction to women with strabismus. But of course, with knowledge does not come foolproof emotional control. We may continue having a thing for eyes affected by strabismus, cherish the drama in ill-fated loves as great romantics do, or shed tears while studying how much the regulation of the HPA-axis is sensitive to separation. Nonetheless, irreverence may have some healing power, when administered in the right dosages.

The reflectively endorsable models and the cynical models are curious mirror images. Within each pair, the reflectively endorsable model offers the brighter image, while the cynical model offers the darker image. The *eros* model and the Cartesian model are both focused on the beloved's features. The *agape* model and the love-for-love's-sake model are both placed in negative space—they define themselves as a love that is *not* based on features. And the bond of love is what draws together the *fusion* model and the neurobiological model.

Is there a right model? I don't think so. The revelers in Plato's Symposium all have something to add to the mixture. At different times in life, depending on where we come from, whom we are with, and where we want to go, it's good to hold up some models and downplay others. Neither is there a right model to deal with unrequited love or love lost. There is no telling what may work when, for whom, and with whom. Loving, after all, is an art, not a science. And so is coping with the pangs of love lost.



# 4. Reconciliation

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## A Genuine Apology

‘Man is a wolf to other men,’ a Latin proverb goes. Social life can be a source of conflict. There is a curious tool for coping with tensions, namely the social practice of apologizing and accepting apologies. It is a restorative practice that is meant to heal what went astray, a kind of lubricant that keeps social life rolling. But at the same time, it is a curious tool that renders endless philosophical conundrums.

In the private sphere, we expect our friends or loved ones to apologize for the harm or hurt they have done to us. In the public sphere, we welcome apologies from institutions for morally questionable policies. But there are also voices saying that there is too much apologizing, both in private and public life. In the short story ‘The Man Upstairs’ P.G. Wodehouse writes, ‘It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them.’ Wodehouse’s quote is tongue-in-cheek, but it does point to the fact that there are constraints on dispensing the social lubricant of apologizing—that more is not necessarily better.

One might retort that there are not too many apologies, but rather too few *genuine* apologies. Gilbert K. Chesterton writes in *The Common Man*: ‘a stiff apology is a second insult.’ But what makes an apology a genuine apology? There is a *cognitive, emotional, motivational, and attitudinal* component to a genuine apology.

As to the *cognitive* component, the offending party may fail to properly recognize their wrongdoing. Japan offered formal apologies in 2005 for their actions in World War II, but China and South Korea continue to see these apologies as disingenuous. The issue is that history textbooks used in Japanese high schools present a slanted perspective on the war, and



Japanese public officials continue to visit the Yasukuni shrine honoring Japan's war-time dead, including war criminals. ('Koizumi Apologizes for War; Embraces China and South Korea.' *The New York Times*, 16 Aug. 2005)

As to the *emotional* component, an apology may signal a lack of remorse or sympathy for the suffering caused and may be motivated by opportunism. The compensation offered by Volkswagen and other German companies for slave labor during World War II in the late 90s was criticized for being ridiculously low and motivated by political expediency. ('Volkswagen to Create \$12 Million Fund for Nazi-Era Laborers.' *The New York Times*, 11 Sep. 1998)

As to the *motivational* component, the offending party may not display a willingness to change its ways. Apologies for the treatment of Native Americans in the US carry little weight if land rights are not being restored and sacred places are still not being recognized as such.

As to the *attitudinal* component, we expect an apology to be accompanied by an attitude of humility. After the first Gulf War, a Kuwaiti public official rejected Saddam Hussein's apology for the Iraqi invasion of his country as an apology disguised in arrogance because of the provocative nature of his speech and his military uniform.

Each of these components seem both obvious and innocent enough, but they raise many issues. I will discuss each of them in turn, raising more questions than answers, I am afraid. What is even more mysterious than offering and accepting apologies is bidding for and offering forgiveness. I will say a few words about the difference between these practices. Finally, I will address P.G. Wodehouse's dictum that there is too much apologizing—even genuine apologizing—in this world.

## Mea Culpa

A genuine apology typically expresses the recognition that what one did or failed to do was wrong. It is not due for actions that are merely wrong *in hindsight*. Suppose that all the medical evidence points in favor of one treatment, the treatment is pursued, and yet the patient dies because of the treatment, say, due to an unforeseeable allergic reaction. In this case, no apologies are due. The doctor might say that they are sorry for what happened, for how things turned out, but they do not need to apologize for what they did.

Expressions of regret over the consequences of one's actions are often substituted for apologies. They are often coined as apologies, but they fall short of genuine apologies. For a genuine apology, it does not suffice that the offender admits that their action turned out badly—they must also recognize their culpability. This issue is at the forefront of two controversies that were in the news in the 2000s.

The newspaper *Jylland Aftenposten* published satirical cartoons targeting Islam and the person of Muhammed. Many Muslims considered these cartoons to be highly offensive. Carsten Juste, the editor of *Jylland Aftenposten*, offered apologies for the feelings of Muslims that were hurt but did not apologize for publishing the cartoons since the actual publication, he said, is protected by freedom of the press. Many Muslims did not accept these apologies, presumably because Juste merely apologized for the fact that his actions turned out badly, while denying culpability for the action itself.

There was a similar reaction to a public lecture by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg in September 2006. Pope Benedict discussed the incompatibility of faith and violence. He quoted the fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus: 'Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.' In response to the outrage in the Muslim world about the use of this quotation, the Vatican made the following statement: 'The Holy Father [...] sincerely regrets that certain passages of his address could have sounded offensive to the sensitivities of the Muslim faithful, and should have been interpreted in a manner that in no way corresponds to his intentions.' But once again, to say that one regrets having caused offense and having been misunderstood is not the same as admitting culpability for one's actions.

These kinds of apologies are an inch away from a Hans Schwadron cartoon featuring a news anchorman saying: 'As station manager, I'd like to apologize to any morons our TV editorial may have offended.'

There is a range of moral choices in which the connection between apologies and culpability is complex. These are choices that fall under the broad umbrella of moral dilemmas. I will distinguish between *hard*, *tragic*, and *authentic choices*.

Let a *hard choice* be a choice in which there are good reasons on both sides of the fence, but there is a right answer. For instance, my professional integrity may leave me with no choice but to fire a befriended colleague. Do I owe my friend an apology?

Let a *tragic choice* be a choice in a situation in which there simply is no right moral answer. Reasons on both sides of the fence are individually compelling, and one does not outweigh the other. No choice constitutes the right choice—whatever one does is wrong. Think of Alan J. Pakula's movie *Sophie's Choice* after William Styron's novel by the same name. A concentration camp guard forces a mother to choose between her two children or to lose both. Arguably, there is no right course of action here—not choosing and choosing are both wrong. Does Sophie owe an apology to her daughter because she chose her son?

Let an *authentic choice* be a choice in which moral considerations unequivocally point to one course of action, but these moral considerations conflict with what the agent stands for in life. One can construe Gauguin's choice to leave his family and to pursue his painting career in Tahiti as an authentic choice. Or think of the injunction to refrain from performing radiocarbon and DNA tests on the Kennewick Man—a 9,000-year-old skeleton dug up in the shallows of the Columbia River—to respect Native American sensitivities. Considering what one stands for in life, say, living as a committed and uncompromising artist or scientist, it may be the case that what one ought to do conflicts with the demands of morality. Arguably, morality may not always provide overriding reasons. Let us assume that there are indeed such authentic choices. Should Gauguin apologize to his family? Should a dedicated scientist who surreptitiously conducts testing on the Kennewick man apologize to Native Americans?

One might say that apologies are due in moral dilemmas only in cases where there is culpability. In hard choices there is a right answer, and, arguably, pursuing this course of action releases one from culpability. In tragic choices, there is no right answer, and, arguably, no matter what one does, there is culpability. In authentic choices, one turns one's back on moral demands, and again, arguably, there is culpability. So, one might say, apologies are due for tragic and authentic choices, but not for hard choices provided I made the right choice. But maybe this is too simplistic.

Maybe, in hard choices, apologies are due even in the absence of culpability. There may be no culpability, but moral conflicts are not 'soluble without remainder,' as Bernard Williams wrote. If I miss an appointment with you because my child suddenly became ill, I certainly chose to do the right thing by attending to them, but I owe it to you to inform you, to offer you apologies, and to make reparations if my failure to honor our appointment was costly to you in some way or other.

But do we really need to apologize? Is the demand for apologies not misplaced here? What I owe you might not be an apology, but rather an expression of regret for having been placed in this choice situation and for the consequences of my actions. This would take care of the remainder, and a genuine apology for what I did is misplaced considering that there is no culpability.

As to tragic and authentic choices, maybe an apology would not be genuine even in the presence of culpability. The reason is that there is a motivational component to a genuine apology—a willingness to act differently. Tragic and authentic choosers may admit that they are culpable for transgressing a moral boundary. Still, they typically do not say that they would have acted differently or will act differently in relevantly similar situations. Sophie may stand by what she did while admitting that she is culpable. And the same holds for Gauguin and our dedicated scientist. But if this is the case, could they be said to be offering a genuine apology? How could one accept an apology if one were to know full well that the person offering the apology stands by their actions and would do the same in relevantly similar situations? What might be more fitting is not an apology for what one did, but an expression of regret for having been placed in a tragic or authentic choice situation, or an expression of sympathy for the suffering caused by one's choice.

Recall Zidane's infamous head-butt on Materazzi after a provocation in the World Cup final of 2006. In a TV interview, Zidane states: 'I reacted, and it, of course, is not an action that one should do. I must say that strongly.' He apologizes, not to Materazzi but to fans and educators, saying that 'it was an inexcusable action.' But at the same time, he claims that he has no regrets for what he did since to have regrets 'would be like admitting that [Materazzi] was right to say all that.'

Zidane's action can be seen as an authentic choice in which the moral demand not to engage in un-sportsmanlike actions is outweighed by what his honor demands of him. 'Above all, I am a man,' he says. He recognizes that what he did was *morally* wrong, and that provides sufficient reason for an apology to the world, although not to the offending party. Nonetheless, his saying that he does not have regrets can be interpreted as affirming that he would not act differently if he could do it over again. But it remains questionable whether an apology that is not accompanied by regret for what one did is indeed a genuine apology.

## Sympathy and Remorse

A genuine apology typically expresses remorse for one's actions, and there is sympathy for the harm or hurt one's wrongdoing may have caused. An apology's sincerity can be measured by one's willingness to make amends or, more concretely in some cases, reparations. This willingness is a proxy for the presence of sympathy. If one really cares about the harm or hurt that one has caused, one ought to be willing to take steps to alleviate this suffering. It is also a proxy for remorse. A remorseful person wishes that they could do things over again. But the past cannot be undone, and the next best thing is to make amends. In making amends, we pay respect to the victim, and we distance ourselves from our offense. Of course, the converse does not hold. The willingness to make amends is not conclusive evidence for the presence of remorse or sympathy. One could make amends begrudgingly because one is under pressure or make amends because restoring social interaction opens up new business opportunities.

Sometimes there is just no room for making amends. The victim may be unreachable or dead. Or they may simply not accept apologies or any overtures from the offender to make amends. It may matter very much to the offender that they have the opportunity to make amends. In a religious context, the wrongdoer can appeal to the practice of penance. The wrongdoing is construed as an offense against God, and the wrongdoer can make amends to God through acts of penance. In a secular context, a proxy for the victim is often sought—think of Germany's support for Israel, which extends well beyond reparations to Holocaust survivors.

The willingness to make amends hinges on remorse and sympathy. How much is required in the way of making amends? Two factors are relevant. There is the turpitude of the wrongdoing—that is, how vile or wicked was the thing you did. And then there is the size of the harm and hurt that was caused by what you did. Typically, the turpitude and the extent of harm and hurt go hand in hand. Genocide is deeply vile, and the scale of suffering is massive. A single micro-aggression is merely insensitive, and the hurt is often fleeting. But sometimes, the turpitude of the wrongdoing does not match the size of the harm or hurt. The former may be either greater or smaller than the latter, and this makes for interesting cases.

Here is a case where the turpitude of the crime is greater than the harm or hurt caused. Suppose that a doctor maliciously administers what they take to be an overdose of a medicine to make space on their ward, but that the dosage unexpectedly cures the patient. Is it meaningful to ask that amends be made in such cases? One solution is that the offender is asked to make amends by supporting causes that support victims of medical malpractice in general.

What if the size of the hurt or harm is greater than the turpitude of the crime? These are cases of *moral bad luck* and are extensively discussed in jurisprudence. For instance, there is the *eggshell skull rule*. An offender inflicts a minor injury on a victim, but due to the victim's frailty—their proverbial eggshell skull—the injury causes major harm. The rule states that the offender is liable for all the harm caused. Similar issues arise for strict liability and felony murder.

The legal question is what the proper measure of punishment should be in such cases. In the context of apologies, the question is whether a genuine apology requires that the willingness to make amends be proportional to the limited turpitude of the crime or the extensive harm or hurt that was thereby caused. This is a complicated issue. One would certainly expect some sympathy from the offender for the damage caused, and it is hard to believe that this sympathy is genuine if it does not translate into a willingness to make amends that provide relief. But then again, it does seem excessive to impose substantial reparations for offenses of limited turpitude as a requirement on a genuine apology.

A solution to this problem might be that there are two kinds of amends—amends that address the wrongdoing and amends that address the harm or hurt caused. Through the former, I make it clear

to you that, unlike how I treated you in the past, I consider you to be a person who is worthy of respect. For example, doing something for you that is costly to me may convey this message. Through the latter, I compensate you for the harm or the hurt that I inflicted on you. What is due are different kinds of amends, *viz.* *respect-conveying* amends, such as a public admission of wrongdoing, and *harm-repairing* amends, such as reparation payments. The turpitude of the crime and the size of the harm caused determine what kind of amends are fitting.

### Striving to Do Better

A genuine apology typically expresses counterfactual and conditional *commitments*. Counterfactual commitments are about whether I would be motivated to act differently if the clock were turned back. Conditional commitments are about whether I am motivated to act differently if I encounter a future situation similar in morally relevant respects.

However, there are cases in which counterfactual or conditional commitments are absent, and yet apologies may be fitting. We already discussed the controversial cases of tragic and authentic choices. Furthermore, consider cases of incorrigible weakness of the will. I genuinely recognize my culpability for a past weak-willed action. But I also know my weakness of will in the matter at hand to be incorrigible. I know that being the weak-willed person that I am, I would act in precisely the same way if I were placed in the same situation, and I will act in precisely the same way if I am placed in a similar position. Would an apology then be disingenuous? I do not think so—people in loving relationships continually apologize to one another for recurrent wrongdoings, knowing full well that they are likely to reoffend in similar ways.

These considerations prompt the following response. One might say that I need not be confident that I will act differently—it suffices that I *intend* to act differently. However, can I intend something when I know full well that I will fall victim to weakness of the will and that I will not be able to do so?

This brings us to the *Toxin Puzzle*, which was coined by the philosopher Gregory Kavka in 1983. I can instantaneously get one million dollars merely by intending today to drink a toxin tomorrow

that will make me painfully ill for one day. I do not need to actually drink the toxin; it suffices that I intend to do so. This seems like easy money, but the problem is, as Kavka points out, that by tomorrow, I will have no reason whatsoever to drink the toxin—after all, the money will be in the bank by the time I am supposed to drink the toxin. And since I know this to be the case, how can I intend today to drink it tomorrow?

Similarly, an incorrigibly weak-willed person who has self-knowledge would be unable to form an intention to change their ways. If they know that they will be weak-willed tomorrow, they cannot form an intention today to be strong-willed tomorrow. Does this block them from apologizing? Is it the case that an incorrigibly weak-willed person who has the epistemic virtue of self-knowledge is not capable of offering a genuine apology, but their counterpart who lacks this virtue would be capable thereof? Is ignorance bliss in the practice of apologizing? This seems to follow once we endorse conditional commitments as a requirement on genuine apologies. I do not quite know what to respond, but I find it difficult to swallow: It seems to me that even incorrigibly weak-willed people who have self-knowledge can offer genuine apologies.

There is the curious biblical passage (Luke 17:4) in which Jesus enjoins the disciples to forgive their brother even ‘if he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you seven times, saying, “I repent.”’ But what does this injunction amount to? Does Jesus enjoin us to forgive the incorrigibly weak-willed after a genuine apology, or does he enjoin us to forgive unconditionally, even if there is no genuine apology on the table?

There is a further issue about the scope of conditional commitments. Suppose that I swindle an elderly woman out of her savings. I offer my apologies. What kind of commitments does a genuine apology impose on my future actions? Clearly, I cannot be plotting to swindle another elderly person out of their savings while making a genuine apology. Nor can I be plotting another crooked money-making scheme. So, a necessary condition is that I commit myself to improving my actions in the types of choices similar in morally relevant respects. At the same time, it would not commit me, say, to stop boozing. So, in general, it does not commit me to refrain from unrelated vices. A genuine



apology requires a moral renewal in relevantly similar areas but not a full-fledged moral renewal.

## Humility

A genuine apology should be delivered in a humble manner. 'The manner of the *Baalei Teshuvah* [the penitent] is to be very humble and modest,' writes Maimonides. Why is such an attitude required in offering apologies?

Being humble is about metaphorically or literally bowing one's head. When I bow my head to you, acknowledging my offense, I attribute special respect to you. I do so for two reasons. First, I try to make up for the deficit of respect with which I treated you. Second, I offer you the authority to accept or not to accept my apology. If you do, you restore my moral stature, and we can treat each other again as moral equals. Let us look more carefully at this process.

'Bowing one's head in shame' is a common expression. But bowing one's head does not always require feeling shame. Outside of the moral sphere, we feel shame for egregious failings, but not for common failings. There is shame in failing a simple exam, but not an exam with very low success rates. Similarly, if the moral failing is an egregious failing, then shame is in order. When apologizing for rape or murder, we expect the offender to bow their head in shame. But we also apologize for losing our temper or forgetting to do our chores, and there is no shame in such common moral failings. Our apologies for such common offenses are not any less genuine. So, shame does not tell the complete story of why we bow our heads when apologizing.

So, what is bowing one's head all about then? Apologies are admissions that I did not treat you with the respect that is due to you. I bow my head to make up for the deficit of respect in my earlier treatment of you. Kant describes a case (p. 197) in which a wealthy offender must not only apologize but also kiss the hand of the victim who is of lower social status. This display of humility expresses an excess of respect, and this excess is meant to put the scales of respect back into balance.

In offering an apology, we run a risk. The victim has the authority to either accept or not to accept the wrongdoer's apologies. What is it to accept an apology? Let us think about why a person may not want to accept an apology. They may think that there is no reason to apologize

or that the apology is not genuine. That is fair enough. But could a person refuse to accept an apology that they consider both in order and genuine?

One suggestion might be that they do not accept the apology because they do not want to return to the way things were. But the acceptance of an apology does not commit one to do that. A date-rape victim might accept an apology from the offender who once was a trusted friend, but the last thing the victim might want to do is go back to the way things once were. So then why would I not accept an apology that I consider to be in order and genuine?

Within a religious context, there is humility in letting God be my judge. Similarly, there is humility in giving the victim of my wrongdoing the authority to restore my moral stature. In accepting an apology, the victim awards the offender the status of a moral equal again, that is, as a subject to whom respect is due on grounds of their personhood. To put this colorfully, if I accept an apology from you, then I can no longer proclaim that you are a scumbag, treat you as a scumbag, or even think of you as a scumbag. Certainly, I can continue to believe that what you did was a scumbag-like thing to do, but I no longer believe that what you did defines you as a scumbag. And if I am not willing or not able to do that, then I have no business accepting your apology. If I were to accept your apology and continue to think of you in this negative manner, I would not be *genuinely* accepting your apology.

## Forgiveness

How does accepting an apology relate to offering forgiveness? Forgiveness has a place in religion. We do not offer apologies to God, but rather, we ask for forgiveness. Nonetheless, humans do ask each other for forgiveness, especially for graver offenses in which offering apologies would feel too light. And forgiving also seems to require some emotional commitment that is less subject to the will and goes over and above accepting an apology.

Can one forgive without accepting an apology? In the forgiveness literature, there is a sharp distinction between the position that forgiveness can be granted unconditionally, and the position that forgiveness should always be conditional on repentance. If forgiveness

can be granted unconditionally, then it is possible to forgive an unrepentant offender who has no intention to apologize. If forgiveness is conditional on repentance, one may forgive a repentant offender who is unwilling or unable to apologize, maybe because they believe that what they did is so monstrous that it is beyond apologies.

But suppose that the offender has offered genuine apologies. It seems to be a conceptual confusion to respond that one is willing to forgive, but not to accept apologies. What could possibly justify such a stand? Maybe a (confused) Christian might say: 'I am following the commandments of my faith to forgive, but this does not mean that I accept your apologies.' But in this case, I think that they would merely be paying lip service to the commandment. They would not genuinely be forgiving.

The converse does strike me as meaningful though: One can accept apologies but not forgive. At least, one could say that one is not able to forgive yet. Forgiving requires something more than accepting an offender as a moral equal again, than committing oneself to no longer thinking of them as a scumbag. What is needed is an emotional change in the victim. Following Bishop Butler, forgiving requires that the victim let go of excessive resentment towards the offender.

The Reverend Julie Nicholson lost her daughter in the 7/7 bombings in London. She left her position because she was unable to forgive the perpetrators and takes this attitude to conflict with the teachings of Christianity. (*The Guardian*, 7 Mar 2006) Now if the offenders were still alive and truly repentant, then she might accept their apologies but not yet be able to find it in her heart to forgive. In accepting their apologies, she would restore the offenders' moral stature—she would commit herself to no longer thinking of them as moral monsters. But she may find it much harder to let go of intense feelings of resentment towards the offenders. Granting forgiveness is less under the control of the will than accepting apologies.

## Too Many Apologies

Now that we have tried hard to make sense of offering and accepting apologies, it is time to revisit P.G. Wodehouse's quote: 'The right sort of

people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them.' Who are the 'right sort of people' who do not need apologies?

Zidane does not offer apologies to Materazzi in a TV interview after the infamous head-butt. What Zidane might say is that Materazzi has foregone a claim to respect in virtue of his own offenses—his verbal insults, his 'words which were harder to take than actions.' And indeed, there would be something ludicrous about Materazzi insisting on an apology from Zidane. There may be stringent moral reasons for Zidane not to reciprocate Materazzi's insults. But be this as it may, these moral reasons are not grounded in claims to respect owed to Materazzi.

There is a more general point here. When one is deeply aware of one's own wrongdoings and shortcomings, one is much less inclined to insist on apologies. Rather, with this awareness comes a capacity to respect each other inclusive of shortcomings. We come to see offenses as expressions of a shared moral frailty rather than instances of disrespect. This level of self-knowledge of one's own imperfections makes one much less insistent on apologies.

Also, people with a strong sense of self-worth are less in need of apologies. They may recognize the offense, but they do not see themselves as being cast in the role of victim. The whole process of being offered apologies, and being expected to accept apologies, is just a distraction for them. Granted, at the extreme, this attitude could be seen as a fault. One may consider oneself too far above the fray, like a soaring hawk who can't be bothered by the little birds mobbing them. In this case, one fails to see others as moral equals in the first place. But I do think that there is a healthy version of this attitude that is worth aspiring to.

And what about the 'wrong sort' of people? The wrong sort of people are smug—they are unaware of their own shortcomings. They are all too prone to see moral deficits in others but not in themselves and hence overly eager to demand apologies. And insecurity makes people perceive minor offenses (or even alleged offenses) as major threats to their sense of self-worth. There is a Dutch saying that some people have 'long toes'—it's all too easy to step on their feet.

What about the wrong sort of people taking 'a mean advantage' of apologies? Power-crazed people will impose unreasonable conditions on accepting an apology, stipulating excessive demands for amends.

They cherish the authority they have over the acceptance of the apology offered and will extend this sense of power far beyond the actual exchange of apologies offered and accepted.

I do not wish to embrace P.G. Wodehouse's dictum wholeheartedly, but there is a kernel of truth to it. People who are smug, insecure, and eager to gain personal advantage are all too eager to insist on apologies. People who are aware of their own shortcomings and have a strong sense of self-worth are in minimal need of apologies.





# 5. Self-Management

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## Sour Grapes

The Fox in Aesop's fable stumbles on some grapes in the woods that look appetizing to him. He jumps for the vine but can't reach the grapes. He walks off and says something unappreciative about the grapes to cope with his frustration. Precisely what he says differs from one version of the fable to the next in subtle ways. Sometimes he changes tastes, sometimes he changes beliefs, and sometimes he changes frames. These are all different strategies for adapting to failure and hardship. Each of these strategies, as we will see, yields interesting conundrums.

There is no genuine original version of the fable—Aesop is thought to have lived in the seventh and sixth century BCE, but no actual writings by his hand survive. There is a Latin version by Phaedrus (p. 114–15) dating back to the first century CE. There is a seventeenth-century French version by de La Fontaine (p. 92). There is also an eighteenth-century English version by Samuel Croxall (p. 41) and there are nineteenth-century English versions by Joseph Benjamin Rundell (p. 100) and by Walter Crane and W.J. Lipton. These versions make for interesting comparisons.

In Crane and Lipton's version, the Fox 'to this hour,/ Declares that he has no taste for grapes.' Granted, the Fox may be kidding himself—he still likes grapes but just says that he doesn't. That is possible, but let's take the Fox's word for it—he no longer likes grapes. This is not an implausible reading: The Fox represents humankind, and it is a common human strategy to cope with frustration by tuning down or extinguishing one's desires.

Phaedrus has the Fox talking to the grapes: 'You are not ripe yet—I don't want to eat you while you are (still) sour.' Similarly, Croxall's Fox



proclaims: 'Let who will take them! They are but green and sour; so I'll even let them alone.' This is a different coping strategy. The Fox doesn't change his tastes. He still likes grapes—nice, sweet, and juicy grapes—as much as he did before. But the grapes on the vine in the woods—no, they are green, unripe, and hence nasty and sour, he says. This is a case of shifting beliefs. Before the Fox found out that he couldn't reach them, he had no doubt that these grapes were ripe and ready for eating. It's only after he finds out that he can't reach them that he comes to believe that the grapes are not ripe yet. The Fox is kidding himself about these grapes—he is a self-deceiving fox.

Then there are foxes for whom eating grapes suddenly becomes too vulgar. De La Fontaine's Fox says that these grapes are 'good for low-lives,' and Rundell's Fox declares that grapes are 'not at all fit for a gentleman's eating.' This is yet another way to cope. The Fox places eating grapes in a different frame. Grapes are grub for the plebs of the woods. A fox shouldn't be caught scarfing down grapes. He should dine like the nobler animals do—on field mice or what have you.

Compare this to finding the local convenience store closed when you have a sudden urge for a cigarette. You turn around and say: 'Oh well, smoking is bad for my health anyway.' This is not self-deception. What you say is true enough, and you knew it all along. It's just that the urge for that cigarette was so strong. There are some nice things about cigarettes and some not so nice things. Now that you can't have your smoke, you might as well focus on the not so nice things. You switch frames so that you can cope.

There are pure cases of taste, belief, and frame shifts, but often, they occur in combination. I run into a friend who regularly travels from New York to Boston for work. She says that she takes the plane—it's fast and typically takes about four hours door-to-door. When I tell her that I tend to take the train for that stretch, she makes a wry face and says that she is sure glad her company does not make her do that. A year later, we run into each other on the train from New York to Boston. She tells me that her company changed policies, and she now has to take the train. I ask how she likes it. She says that she finds it quite nice. Why might that be?

She may have changed beliefs: She may tell me that the plane typically takes a good *six* hours door-to-door and that it's actually faster by train. Or she may have changed tastes: She may tell me that she had no choice

but took to it easily and grew to like it fast enough—'Frankly, now that I am used to it,' she might say, 'I don't understand how I ever put up with air travel.' Or she may have changed frames: She may tell me about the carbon footprints of air travel versus train travel and that she is glad that she is not traveling by air anymore, considering climate change. Or, as is typically the case, she may have done a bit of each.

And there is often ambiguity—not all responses fit neatly in the boxes of taste, belief, and frame shifts. If my friend comes to believe that the *average* travel time by air is longer, that would be a belief shift. But it is more likely that previously she focused on trips when the travel times by air were markedly faster, but now focuses on trips when the travel times by train are markedly faster. This would be more of a frame shift. Maybe she was a skeptic about climate change before. In that case her frame shift comparing carbon footprints also involves a belief shift. Or perhaps her taste shift from plane to train travel involves a frame shift—she genuinely came to enjoy train travel by focusing on the fact that one can get work done on the train.

## Mind Control

An appeal to sour grapes deals with the frustration that comes with not being able to get what we want. That is one reason to self-manage by shifting beliefs, tastes, and frames. But it is not the only reason. We make *willful belief shifts*, *taste shifts*, and *frame shifts* not just to deal with frustration but to make our lives less painful, more bearable, or more pleasurable overall.

Such acts of self-management may not happen consciously. It may require a third party to see what we are up to. The will controls a good many things in life without our being conscious of it doing so. And even if a third party tells us that some sudden shift in beliefs, tastes, or frames looks like sour grapes, we may vehemently deny it.

Let's start with *willful belief shifts*. In Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*, Joe and Kate Keller's son is a fighter pilot reported as missing in action. Joe Keller is running a company that knowingly sells defective airplane parts to the military, causing many pilots' deaths. All the evidence points to the fact that their son is dead, but Kate refuses to believe

it—she continues polishing his shoes for the day of his return. This is a case of *wishful thinking*.

People try to forget painful episodes in their past. War traumas, unhappy childhoods, abandonment, or sexual abuse are erased from memory, are selectively remembered, or are substituted by more palatable but inaccurate accounts. These are cases of *willful forgetting* and *willful misremembering*.

Wishful thinking, willful forgetting, and willful misremembering are all cases of willful belief shifts. Some of the things we believe don't make us very happy. We try to cope with these beliefs by either deleting them, editing them, or overwriting them with more palatable versions.

As to *willful taste shifts*, the Fox could work up his tastes for other culinary delights that the woods have to offer. If the field mice are abundant and the blackberries are in season, he can try to appreciate this new menu. If he finds better food than grapes, then it's easy enough to extinguish his desire for the grapes on the vines that he can't reach.

Think of adapting to changing circumstances. You move to the city—you try to work up an appreciation for theater and live music. You move to the country—you do the same for hiking and the great outdoors. With the right social context to prod, you can make art critics out of philistines and nature lovers out of city slickers.

Young love tends to work very much like this. Your new soulmate may like all kinds of things—dog shows, country music, paragliding, or what have you—that were not high up on your list before they showed up. But you are having the time of your life, and you are willing to give anything a shot. As you are accompanying them on these new adventures, you come to enjoy all kinds of things. Young love could even make curling look a blast.

In *willful frame shifts*, we place what we can't have in a negative frame and what we do have in a positive frame. Or we contrast the present situation—dismal as it may be—with an even worse situation as in the proverbial, 'It could have been worse!'

The pre-Raphaelite painter Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema numbered all his paintings in the order that he painted them to fend off forgeries. When he died, there was one painting missing—painting 338. An

unknown forger, probably a London art dealer, took advantage of this by forging Alma-Tadema's name on unknown paintings and adding the number 338. Claiming to have uncovered the elusive painting, he sold the forgeries for high prices—mostly to art collectors from continental Europe who would be less likely to come back and challenge him. Many of these forgeries are still around. (The real 338 recently resurfaced at an antique roadshow in England.)

Now suppose that you have unwittingly paid decent money for one of these forgeries. You certainly wouldn't do it again, but you might come to reconcile yourself with the fact that you own one of the most famous forgeries of the Victorian age. You own a painting sold by 'The Master of 338' as he has come to be known. It is a good story. You creatively reframe your misfortune and make lemonade out of lemons.

As in the case of sour grapes, there are many hybrid cases. I restricted taste shifts to instances where the shift is purely in taste—as in, losing one's taste for coffee for no discernible reason. In my examples of taste change following a move or new love, such a pure taste change may be at work. But I may also come to see the activity in a different frame. Whereas I thought that curling was plain boring before, I now come to appreciate, say, the cooperative aspect of it.

There is a danger of compliance that comes with such coping mechanisms. One can be overly skillful in coping with one's present situation and this can take away the courage to fight for much-needed change. For example, you may adapt to being grossly underpaid by developing simple tastes, but maybe what you should do is gather the courage to knock on your boss's door and demand a raise. Or you may adapt to living with an abusive spouse by telling yourself that things will get better, whereas what you really should do is call a lawyer and file for divorce.

The situation may be genuinely unalterable, though. It may be such that no amount of courage can bring about change. In cases like this, tinkering with beliefs, tastes, and frames seems like the best way to cope with adversity and adapt to an irrevocable situation. We willfully steer our mental states to shore up strength, to safeguard our happiness, or at least to protect ourselves against a downward spiral of depression. There is a motivational quote that pops up on

many websites and is attributed to Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*: 'You have power over your mind, not over outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.' The quote is fitting and in the spirit of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, but the connection to any passage in the *Meditations* is tenuous at best.

Do we have power over our minds? Some people hold beliefs strictly informed by the evidence, stick to what they want, and don't fall for reframing. Others willfully manage their beliefs, tastes, or frames without flinching. They make up stories to make themselves feel better, have maximally elastic tastes, or always come up with an optimistic take on the situation. They have internal control over what they believe, what they want, and how they frame matters. And they are masters at working these controls to keep life maximally sweet.

There are fanciful techniques for self-management. Hypnotherapists claim to erase memories and extinguish the urge to smoke. Drugs can reduce or increase sexual desire, control addictions, or make you see things in a rosier way. Amnesiac drugs make you forget about your colonoscopy. Beer lowers inhibitions. And philosophers like to imagine a pill that will make you believe that two plus two is five.

A particular mode of self-management that is less fanciful but both common and curious is pretense—acting as if one already has brought about the projected mental shift with the aim of bringing it about. It's the old saying: Fake it till you make it. This is what we will turn to next.

## Pretense

Here is a classic case of a willful belief shift through pretense. Blaise Pascal gives us a recipe for acquiring religious belief in his *Pensées* (§233) where he first lays out his wager: Either God exists, or he doesn't. If he does, then you gain much by believing. If he does not, you don't have anything to lose by believing. So, you should believe.

The logic that governs this choice is the same as a mundane choice like this one: Should I throw an umbrella in the car? Why not? If it rains, you will be happy you have it along—and if not, then nothing is lost. So, take an umbrella.

Pascal then envisions someone who says that they just can't make themselves believe—they are just not the type to hold religious beliefs.

Pascal's advice: Just act as if you already believe. Bless yourself with holy water and attend Mass. Start with a bit of pretense, and your beliefs will follow suit soon enough.

The same strategy works for willfully shifting tastes. Your friends decide to have wine-tasting parties with dry white wines. You would like to join in, but you don't like dry white wines. But you just decide to sign up. You also decide not to be a killjoy—you won't be making wry faces and negative remarks. You will act as if you like them. In the right environment and with the right attitude, you figure, you will probably come to appreciate dry white wines.

It also helps when it comes to willfully shifting frames. As you agree to join your new love in their favorite pastime, you will come to discover frames in which activities that were in the same category as a visit to the dentist suddenly become exciting and rewarding. You wouldn't have been caught dead at a dog show, but things have changed since your dog-loving darling came on stage. So, you figure that something about it will strike your fancy—there will be some frame that will break the tedium of dog shows. Maybe you always liked biology, and you see the potential to strike up a conversation about canine genetics with the breeders.

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Mother Night*, he writes: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.' This isn't entirely true—there is some distance between pretense and reality: A conman is not a neurosurgeon. But what is true is that we tend to *become* what we pretend to be. By pretending to have a particular outlook, appreciation, and belief, we become a person with such an outlook, appreciation, and belief. So indeed, we need to be very careful about what we pretend to be.

Why does pretending set us on the path toward the real thing? What is the magic of these charades? There is no straight answer to this. The fact of the matter is that there are multiple paths and paths crisscross one another.

Frame switches happen on the most innocuous routes. Through pretending, you have a chance to discover and try out frames that permit you to appreciate what you loathed before. Pretense offers learning opportunities. It's not as simple as 'try it, you'll like it,' but rather 'try it, you'll find ways to come to like it.'

Taste switches can also be quite simple and innocent, as our tastes tend to shift with increased exposure. For instance, you figure that your tastes will just shift as you drink dry wines in pleasant surroundings. Perhaps you will even grow to like them. After all, familiarity breeds fondness. But it's not that you find reasons for liking them—rather, you will just come to appreciate the taste. It doesn't always work, but it's a strategy that is worth trying.

Belief switches are trickier. We like to think of ourselves as acting in line with what we believe. Suppose one acts as if one believes something that one does not actually believe. Then it's easy enough just to shift beliefs so that actions and beliefs are properly aligned again.

The psychologist Leon Festinger calls this *cognitive dissonance*. In the late 1950s, he and his colleague James Merrill Carlsmith conducted an experiment in which subjects were instructed to do a thoroughly boring task. They were then asked to brief a person who was a stooge but was introduced to them as the next subject who was about to start the task. They were instructed to tell this person that the task was enjoyable. Many of them complied. Some were paid little, while others were paid well for the briefing. Subsequently, the subjects were asked whether they thought that the task really was enjoyable. The curious thing is that those who were paid less were more likely to say that it was, more so than those who were paid well.

Why did they do so? The subjects asked themselves: Why did I brief the next subject in the way I did? Those who were paid well had an easy answer: The money made it worth it. But those who were paid poorly did not, and they had some explaining to do. So, they resorted to telling themselves: Well, I guess I must believe what I told them.

There is one difference between Pascal's advice and the cognitive dissonance experiments. Following Pascal, we ourselves decide to act as if we believe something to bring about changes in our beliefs. In the cognitive dissonance experiments, we are manipulated into acting as if we believe something within the context of the experiment. But from here on, the mechanism is the same. We witness ourselves acting counter to our beliefs, need to explain why we are doing this, and the strategy we come up with is to shift our beliefs.

The same strategy is present in wishful thinking. A person diagnosed with terminal cancer tells me that they are making grand plans to build

a new house, go on long trips, etc. Why are they doing this? They very much want to beat the cancer, so they start to act as if they can do so and have many more years to live and carry out their plans. They then ask: 'It wouldn't be reasonable for a person with terminal cancer to act like that, would it?' In a similar vein, Nina Riggs writes that buying an expensive couch while facing a terminal diagnosis is 'a lovely expression of hopefulness.' ('When a Couch is More than a Couch.' *The New York Times*, 23 Sep. 2016)

Willful frame and taste shifts seem much more innocent than willful belief shifts. In willful frame shifts, we are just creatively exploring how we might cast a positive light on something that didn't seem too appealing to begin with. In willful taste shifts, we rely on the psychological mechanism of prolonged exposure breeding fondness and bank on that doing the work for us. But in willful belief shifts, we seem to be kidding ourselves. It doesn't make much sense to infer from one's long-term planning that one can't possibly be dying if the only reason one engaged in this long-term planning is to convince oneself that one's prognosis is rosier than it really is. Similarly, it doesn't make much sense for Pascal to infer from his religious practices that there must be a God if the only reason he engaged in these practices is to convince himself that there is a God. It seems like an elaborate act of self-deception.

So, is it simply thumbs up for willful frame and taste shifts and thumbs down for willful belief shifts? So far, it certainly seems like that. But my goal in the remainder of this chapter is to be a bit subversive and turn things upside down. Some willful taste and frame shifts are problematic because they are *self-defeating*: They do not get off the ground because the projected taste or frame resists manipulation. And some willful belief shifts are quite innocent and may even be imperative because they are *self-verifying*. If you face a challenge, you should believe that you can do it, rather than setting yourself up for failure.

## Self-Defeat

Aristotle lays out the path to becoming a courageous person in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book 2, Ch. 1). Say that I find much cowardice within me—in my actions, choices, fears, and aspirations. But I set out to become more courageous by acting as if I am already courageous. I force



myself to go for walks in the woods at night, join a survival camp, or, in a different sphere of life, shift some of my assets to high-risk stocks. And it may work—I may learn to give up my fears and to face danger and uncertainty with a smile. I may learn to enjoy doing the courageous thing.

It may work nicely for courage, but there are obstacles for other types of values. In the wake of Peter Singer's work, the Effective Altruism movement has gained much momentum recently. The website, *Giving What We Can*, invites you to make a pledge to donate at least ten percent of your income and helps you pick the most effective charities. Effective charities are such that the next donation you make to them has the potential to save the most lives from premature death and reduce the most suffering.

I know that there is much suffering in the world and that there are various charitable organizations that provide effective relief. But suppose that I find myself completely unmotivated to donate to charity. Frankly, I'd rather spend the money on a night on the town. Writing that check to the Against Malaria Foundation simply hurts.

In *The Doctrine of Virtue* (p. 575–6), Kant tells us that if we find ourselves lacking in compassion and find it hard to be charitable, we should seek out 'sickrooms and debtors' prisons' and expose ourselves to the world's sufferings. If I am trying to become the kind of person who wants to give a bit more and wine-and-dine a bit less, I could try Kant's advice. Maybe giving will come a bit easier next time around.

Charity is driven by compassion, and a compassionate person is a person who is self-forgetful and other-directed. But there is something troubling about trying to become more compassionate by performing more self-forgetful and other-directed actions. Why are we setting out on this path? Well, we would like to become better people. But why do we want to become better people?

We may want to become better people because it will make it easier to do the right thing, and then it is reasonable to expect that we will come to do more of it. This is Kant's motivation, and there is nothing problematic about this. However, we may also want to become better people because of the sheer beauty of having a self-forgetful and other-directed character. But this is a terribly self-focused way to live: It is navel-gazing to build a less navel-gazing character. Good luck with that!

One may end up even more self-absorbed than when one started. On this path, you will create a Narcissus, not a Gandhi.

This is how the economist Paul Seabright (*Ethics*, 98(2), 1988) reads Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. The self-defeating project of trying to be other-oriented and self-forgetful is played out in Isabel Archer, the protagonist of the novel. Isabel is obsessed with the state of her character. Lord Warburton, who admires Isabel, warns her that this is no way to live: 'Don't try so much to form your character—it's like trying to pull open a tight, tender young rose. Live as you like best, and your character will form itself.' (Ch. XXI) One should not try to make a work of art of oneself. One should aim to do noble things, but not aim to become a person with a noble character—the latter is just a recipe for self-centeredness and unhappiness.

The problem of self-defeat is not restricted to trying to attain a more self-forgetful and other-directed character. Self-defeat is also an issue in other projects of sculpting the self.

Think of *hipster* apathy—a resistance to take anything seriously, to embrace any conception of a good life. This commitment to apathy is even self-reflective: Hipsters fiercely deny the label of being a hipster. To do otherwise is to admit that they are serious about their hipster lifestyle with all the trappings of hipsterdom: the ukulele and the five-string banjo, piercings and pacers, vintage clothing, Pabst beer, fixie bikes, knitting circles, pickle bars, Indie Rock, and handlebar mustaches.

This attitude of apathy suffers the same fate as self-forgetfulness: Its pursuit is self-defeating. The more you *want* to cultivate an attitude of apathy, the more you believe that there is something worth striving for in this world. And the more you believe that there is something worth striving for, the less you are flirting with apathy. To stand for standing-for-nothing is like a Liar Paradox. If you truly stand for nothing, then you can't stand for standing-for-nothing. If you truly are a liar, then you can't truthfully say that you are a liar. Hipsters wear T-shirts, saying 'I am not a hipster,' just as paradox aficionados like to write 'This statement is false' on the blackboard.

Another feature in the cultural landscape is the New Sincerity vogue with iconic figures such as the author David Foster Wallace, the filmmaker Wes Anderson, or the musician Joanna Newsom. What is cherished is naiveté, directness, spontaneity—a beeline from feeling to

expression. But there is a tension between planning and spontaneity: You cannot carefully lay out the tracks for a beeline.

So, are we doomed? Is it hopeless? Is the self-forgetfulness of Isabel Archer, the apathy of the hipsters, and the naiveté of New Sincerity forever out of reach of wannabes? There is a special hurdle here that was absent in Aristotle's project of acquiring courage. Wanting to become self-forgetful as a motivation for doing self-forgetful actions is problematic in a way that wanting to become courageous as a motivation for doing courageous actions is not. But not all is lost. There is a way forward that takes its inspiration from Homer's Ulysses.

When Ulysses set out to sail past the Sirens, who lured sailors to shipwreck with their enchanting singing, he ordered his men to stuff their ears with wax so they would not hear them. He himself was eager to hear their song but understood that, like so many before him, he would not be able to resist. So, he had himself bound to the mast and gave orders to his crew that he was not to be unbound, however much he might implore them.

Similarly, we can bind ourselves to a routine with the motivation to become more caring, apathetic, or sincere. Once the routine is established, we don't need to motivate every single act anymore—we just do what needs doing within the constraints of the routine. Without the self-defeating motivations, our routine actions will mold our attitudes, and our characters will shift toward charity, spontaneity, and apathy.

What should we do to bind ourselves? We can join Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. If we decide today to do just that, then we will be called upon daily to do self-forgetful and other-directed actions without having to think all the time that what we are aiming for is to improve our precious selves. We can join social groups who live the hipster lifestyle or breathe New Sincerity. We can immerse ourselves in a wide range of cultural expressions that define a cultural movement—be it literature, film, or music—and just let it all happen. We absorb what is on offer while forgetting that we had a plan.

Does it work for some people? No doubt. But strategies of self-sculpting are fragile. One needs a divided mind with one part doing the planning and the other part doing the forgetting of why precisely we set out on this route. And failures abound. Think of the smug bankers

working in soup kitchens, even more full of self-importance than on Wall Street. New Sincerity art can become so contrived that it becomes unbearable—a sad product spawned by willful spontaneity. And the don't-give-a-damn hipsters who do care a great deal about exhibiting the right hipster paraphernalia have long become a household joke.

## Self-Verification

The American philosopher William James collected essays which he had delivered as public talks to student societies, and published them in 1897 under the title *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Four of the essays aim to defend the legitimacy of religious belief against skeptical voices from the scientific community at the time. There are some interesting insights to be gleaned about the circumstances under which it is permissible to adopt beliefs, not on grounds of the evidence, but simply because there is something to be gained from believing.

James writes that we can't just believe that the existence of Abraham Lincoln is a myth and that his portraits are all of someone else. We can't believe ourselves to be well when we are 'roaring with rheumatism in bed' or that the 2 one-dollar bills in our pocket add up to one hundred dollars, however much we may wish for this to be true or however strong our will is. There is no blanket endorsement for believing what we would like to believe, but James considers two special cases.

The first special case is, in James's words, when 'faith in a fact can help create the fact' or 'faith [...] creates its own verification.' James finds this logic at work in 'promotions, boons, appointments'—they go to the people who believe that these gains are somehow in the cards for them. There are limits to self-verifying beliefs, though. James is no Rhonda Byrne in her 2006 bestseller *The Secret* proclaiming that we can get anything we want so long as we wish hard enough for it and pretend that we already have it. This would lead to complacency: Sometimes, actions and not positive thinking are needed to realize our goals.

Nonetheless, there is a proper place for a can-do mentality. If you believe that you will make a good impression, can jump the creek, can pass the exam, then you are so much more likely to succeed. The opposite is to set yourself up for failure. Once you lose confidence that you can pull off the task ahead, then your determination falters, and you

are indeed likely to fail. That's why it's essential to keep up the morale on the battle-field—if the morale falters, the war is as good as lost.

There is nothing untoward if we make ourselves believe that we will pull off the task at hand. If believing indeed warrants that we will pull it off, then why shouldn't we be able to believe this? Part of the evidence is that I am setting myself up for success. The belief is self-verifying, but it does not go beyond the evidence.

But it is a different story when people overshoot. I am always struck by how confident people in an election campaign feel about victory. They seem to think that the world will somehow unfold in mysterious ways, and their candidate who is way behind in the polls will move forward with leaps and bounds. Part of it is just pretense to pull in the vote. But they often seem to believe it. Now, this confidence may raise the chance of their candidate winning from, say, a very small chance to a slightly greater but still small chance. And without the confidence that victory was at the doorstep, this slight raise might not have happened.

Similarly, it may well be the case that I need to banish from my mind any doubt that I may not make a good impression, won't be able to jump the creek, or won't pass the exam to have any chance to pull off these feats. But if I take a step away from the action and ask myself honestly what my chances are, I need to admit that I barely have a fighting chance.

Is there something untoward about banishing such doubts? Now we are believing against the evidence. It seems to me that nothing is lost, so long as we don't stake the farm on making a good impression, jumping the creek, or passing the exam. Part of us believes that we can pull it off, and that's the part that gives us confidence, keeps anxieties in check, and motivates us to be prepared. But another part of us keeps an eye on the evidence, refrains from staking too much on our success, and refrains from making rash decisions. This requires a bit of a divided mind. But what's so bad about a divided mind, a mind that is playing a bit of hide-and-seek with itself?

There is career advice in this. Suppose you are working a less than fully desirable job and you have a job interview for a highly desirable job lined up. It is good to harbor contradictory beliefs. One part of you should be confident that you will shine. That is the part that walks into the interview with a smile and a confident stride. The other part should heed the evidence and be much more cautious. That is the part that

does not burn bridges and stops you from handing in your resignation prematurely. Some people can't do it—their minds are single-track, leave no room for hide-and-seek. That's alright. But why be down on those who can? When managed carefully, a divided mind is a fine thing to cherish. Walt Whitman's line from the poem 'Song of Myself' (§51) comes to mind: 'Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)'

James concludes his essay 'Is Life Worth Living?' with a piece of advice: 'Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.' The advice requires willful belief change. One may find one's life marred by existential worries. We follow James's advice hoping that the worries will dissipate. And if they do, then life will indeed be worth living. James does not seem fully confident that it will work: The phrase 'your belief will help create the fact' displays less confidence than if he had written, 'your belief creates the fact.' But no matter. Even if adopting the full-blooded belief that life is worth living raises the *chance* of shedding existential worries or just *softens* them to some extent, it is good advice, nonetheless.

The second special case is designed to legitimate religious belief based on limited evidence. James's conditions are perfectly general and not restricted to religious belief. You may adopt a belief at will if doing so is a '*live*' option, and the choice is '*forced*' and '*momentous*.' What does James mean by that?

In Cambridge, Massachusetts of James's time, it was not a *live* option to become a 'Theosophist' or a 'Mohammedan,' but being an atheist, an agnostic, subscribing to various Christian faiths were live options for him and many of his contemporaries. James uses the metaphor of live electrical wires. Live options are options that are offered by one's life world and are not closed off by overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The choice is *forced* in that James thinks we can't proclaim indifference to the matter, as one could concerning whether it will rain on Sunday, whether Arsenal will win the next game, or whether string theory is true.

And the choice is *momentous* in that we only have this life to make the decision, and it radically affects how we live our lives.

James gives us a perfectly general scheme to determine whether one may reasonably embrace religious beliefs. But do these conditions

transfer to secular beliefs? I think so. Suppose that your child is accused of a crime. The evidence is far from conclusive. It is a live option for you to believe that they are innocent; it is a forced choice because you are called upon to take a stand; and it is a momentous choice because it makes a difference to one of the most valued relationships in your life. So, following James's advice, we can just embrace the belief that they are innocent. We may be in error, but fear of error should not hold us back in this case. We don't have to sit back and say, 'Well, I don't know what to believe.' Rather, we may stand by a belief in their innocence in the same way that we may stand by a religious belief.

There is something curious about the connection between James's discussion of self-verifying beliefs and religious belief. In 'The Will to Believe,' the argument seems to be an argument from analogy. Just as it is permissible to will to believe self-verifying beliefs, it is permissible to will to believe when it concerns a forced and momentous choice of a live option. But in 'Is Life Worth Living?' he draws a much tighter connection:

[W]ill our faith in the unseen world similarly verify itself? [...] I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.

For James, the belief in the supernatural is a belief that contributes its own truth. Just like believing that we can jump the creek makes it happen, believing in the supernatural brings it into existence. This position is not in line with the independence or self-existence of God in the Abrahamic faiths. In the Abrahamic faiths, God would continue to exist, even if the last person on earth embraced atheism. But enough said—the waters of theology have become too deep for us to wade into any further.







# 6. Counsel

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## Count your Blessings

Be grateful. Count your blessings. It's not so bad—there is much to be thankful for. This is what we tell people who feel down about their situation in life. How are we to understand this counsel?

Let's think about a standard case of being grateful. Your car breaks down, and you find yourself stranded in the middle of nowhere. Someone stops their car and gives you a ride to the next town. Naturally, you are grateful. You were in dire straits, and they didn't have to do that. Gratitude makes perfect sense in this case: We are grateful to other people for doing us a favor.

But if this is the model for being grateful, then why would it be good counsel to tell people who are down that they should be grateful? Gratitude is supposed to be a virtue that lifts us up. How does it do this? Cicero in *For Plancius* tells us that it is not only the greatest of all virtues but also the parent of all others. So, what virtues does gratitude spawn?

Thanksgiving originated as a harvest festival. Think of a farming family who are grateful for the harvest at Thanksgiving time. For a theist, this gratitude can be modeled on being grateful for getting a ride when one's car breaks down. Without God's loving care, we would be nothing. God looked down kindly on us and, even though nothing was owed to us, granted us an abundant harvest. So, our gratitude is due. And, for a religious person, to be reminded that one's life is in God's hand may indeed be a source of strength.

But the charm of Thanksgiving is that it is a holiday for the religious and secular alike. How is it that being grateful for the harvest makes sense in a secular context? Why would it be uplifting? What virtues does gratitude for the harvest carry in its wake?

First, when we are grateful, we are grateful for everyone's contribution to the success of the harvest. It corrects for the illusion of self-sufficiency. It is a reminder of the old line by John Donne: 'No man is an island, / Entire of itself.' Even if you did all the sowing and reaping yourself, there would have been no sowing without the seed house and no reaping without the dealership that sold you the combine. There would be no sowing and reaping without those who came before you and taught you how to sow and reap. One is not alone. This feeling of connectedness is uplifting and a source of empathy and caring.

Second, a good harvest requires not only a village of people playing their parts; the weather also has to cooperate. And this is also what my Thanksgiving table is thankful for. A theist is thankful to God for rain and shine happening—exactly when they needed them. But if there is no God to thank, is there room for this kind of gratitude? Is it fitting to be thankful for rain and shine when we do not believe that there exists a rain- and shine-maker to thank?

This kind of gratitude has a secular analog in the awareness that success in life is fragile. It is contingent not only on the cooperation of others but also on so many other factors falling into place. Things are very much outside of our control. It teaches us humility. It is an antidote to smugness—the self-righteous attitude that good things come to us because they are owed to us, and they are owed to us because of the excellent work that we have put in. The realization that there is little that we have in hand, that chance plays a large role in our lives, is liberating. We can do our part but need to take things as they come.

And finally, one may be grateful for witnessing the sheer beauty of the harvest and for being part of the cycle of life. As the combines come in, one whispers a quiet *thanks*, as one does upon seeing a sunrise or a breath-taking landscape. Again, if one believes that there is a God to offer us these joyful experiences, it makes sense to be grateful to this God. But what form is gratitude to take in the absence of anyone doing the offering? Is this a type of gratitude that is lost once we shift into secular gear?

I used to live in a mountain town. Some people get used to the scenery—it just gets old and hardly registers anymore. Others continue being appreciative of the majestic beauty. This appreciation hinges on an attitude of not taking things for granted, retaining a sense of wonder,

and taking the time to stop and smell the roses. And, of course, what holds for mountain towns also holds for downtown Manhattan. Just as one can count oneself lucky for living in nature, one can count oneself lucky for living in downtown Manhattan. This aspect of gratitude urges us to be mindful of what is around us here and now. In E.E. Cummings' 'i thank you God for most this amazing,' it is through gratitude that 'the ears of my ears awake [...] the eyes of my eyes are opened.'

Hence gratitude is a fine thing. It saves us from egotism. It saves us from smugness. And it saves us from letting life pass us by while we forget to listen and watch. It may be the finest of all virtues, and it carries empathy, humility, and mindfulness in its wake.

Can gratitude become too much of a good thing? Friedrich Nietzsche thought so in *Human, All Too Human* (§550): 'There are slavish souls who carry their appreciation for benefits received so far that they strangle themselves with the tie of gratitude.' Though we sing the praises of gratitude, can one be grateful to a fault? And, if so, how?

Our standard case of gratitude pictured a stranded motorist who was vulnerable, nothing was owed to them, and a kind passer-by went over and above the call of duty to offer help. The motorist wouldn't be strangling themselves with any rope of gratitude in this case.

What is problematic is when gratitude is expected from us, yet what we are supposed to be grateful for is *much less* than what is owed. When cars are stolen in Beirut, the thieves bring them to a central place. You can retrieve your car from there for a handsome sum. When you do so, you are expected to thank the person who is running the lot. Now, this is madness. The man who sells your car back to you is part of the racket. He is a crook who is in cahoots with the gang of car thieves. Nietzsche is right in this case: Gratitude has no place here and the expectation of gratitude indeed strangles one's pride.

There is a similar argument coming from voices from minority groups who suffer from structural injustice. There is no place for gratitude for government aid programs, reparation payment or policies that aim to rectify the injustice. What is offered is most often much less and certainly no more than what is owed. They may appreciate that some progress is being made toward greater equality, but they strongly resist any political request for gratitude.

## Help Your Neighbor

Wounded animals lash out. The human animal is no different. Homer's *Iliad* reports that Achilles went on a killing spree on the Trojan plains after Hector slew his friend Patrocles. Causing suffering seems to be a natural reaction to hardship and loss, but does it relieve one's suffering? Wisdom has it that we should try to do something meaningful with our lives in the face of adversity, rather than cause more hardship: Help your neighbor, visit a lonely elderly family member, volunteer in a local soup kitchen. Why would this be good counsel? Why is there consolation to be found in doing acts of kindness?

Many people search for solace by caring for those who are less fortunate. Soup kitchens in metropolitan areas tend to have a steady supply of volunteers, at least before COVID times. Why is this the case? I will present some explanations why there might be solace in volunteering, whether in a local soup kitchen or in any other capacity where one is directly helping the needy in a hands-on way.

*Warm Glow.* The simplest answer is that helping others generates a warm glow, at least in some people, and it's this warm glow that people are after. People say that it's intrinsically rewarding and the best thing they have ever done in their life.

*Channeling.* Loss embitters. It breeds negativity. It comes with the destructive energy of Achilles. We can let our anger get the upper hand. Or we can try to channel that very energy into something constructive. This is where the proverbial soup kitchen provides a positive outlet. It offers a mission that transforms what is eating the soul into something that lifts the soul.

*Focus.* Hardship may also be paralyzing. We can't get anything done. Our work piles up. When line managers know that an employee is battling depression, they often suggest a more structured task load—a set of hands-on jobs with clear results and boxes to tick off—rather than projects that require blue-sky thinking. Hands-on tasks provide focus and immediate reward. Soup kitchens provide the same kind of promise.

*Meaning.* Being down in the dumps feels like wasted time. Life passes us by, and we have nothing to show for it. One does not want to stand there empty-handed—better to put a ladle in those empty hands. If we have fed a few hungry people, then at least there was something that made those darker days worthwhile. And it may also chase the clouds away: Helping one's neighbor distracts and engages us and provides a sense of purpose in life.

*Empathy.* Hardship, it is said, will make one into a kinder and more caring person. And like often breeds like: Empathy tends to be directed toward people facing the same predicament that we found ourselves in. Recovering alcoholics will volunteer as mentors in Alcoholics Anonymous. Students who have struggled with anorexia will become active in the campus self-help group for eating disorders. And servers in soup kitchens have often known poverty firsthand.

*Shelter.* Soup kitchens are places where good will reigns. People come together to help their neighbor in need and form community. And this may be precisely what we need when we are seeking shelter from a dark and hostile world. There is consolation in surrounding oneself with a spirit of caring—a reminder that there is still some goodness in this world.

*Opportunity Cost.* The opportunity cost of volunteering is what makes it worthwhile. Instead of volunteering, we could join the country-club and enjoy a good game of tennis. Or we could work an evening shift and treat ourselves to that trip to Barbados we always wanted to take. There is a kind of magical thinking that enters in. Costlier medication has a greater placebo effect. The greater the opportunity cost, the better we feel about volunteering.

These are seven explanations of what could make sense of the counsel to go work in the proverbial soup kitchen and why so many people take this path. This is not an exhaustive set. And not every soup-kitchen volunteer will recognize themselves in every single one of these explanations. Different strokes for different folks, as they say. Also, one hardship is not like another, and one proverbial soup kitchen is not like

another either. But I hope that I have captured some aspects of what drives people to take up hands-on work with immediate and tangible benefits when life is not treating them kindly.

## Don't Cry over Spilled Milk

Don't cry over spilled milk! What's done is done! It's all water under the bridge! This is all perfectly reasonable counsel, but it is easier said than done. The pull towards reassessing the past—how things might have been much better than they are—can be persistent and crippling. 'Footfalls echo in the memory/ Down the passage which we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened/ Into the rose-garden,' T.S. Eliot writes in 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets*. Indeed, there is always the lure of looking back, saying, 'Darn it! Why didn't things work out? Should have, would have, could have ...!'

A crucial distinction in this backward-looking attitude is the distinction between *disappointment* and *regret*. Disappointment is about how things turned out. Regret is about the choices that you made. Let me explain. Suppose you are torn between going on a vacation to Xanadu or to Shangri-La. You decide for Xanadu. The service in your hotel turns out to be dismal. You are disappointed. The weather in Xanadu turned out to be much worse than in Shangri-La. You regret that you did not choose to go to Shangri-La.

How can we help people quit crying over spilled milk when their ailment is disappointment? We can try to show that there never was a genuine possibility. It's not that things turned out poorly. It just wasn't in the cards. The service in Xanadu hotels is notoriously terrible.

How can we help people quit crying over spilled milk when their ailment is regret? We can try to show that the chance of success on the unchosen alternative was not any better. We point out that the weather in Shangri-La tends to be worse than in Xanadu during that time of year. There is nothing to regret. The weather did not turn out right for you in Xanadu. But it would not have been any smarter to have chosen Shangri-La.

Counseling against disappointment and against regret are orthogonal. When counseling against disappointment, *we talk down the chance of*

*success on the chosen path.* Success was never a genuine possibility on the chosen path. When counseling against regret, *we talk up the comparative chance of success on the chosen path relative to the unchosen path.* You chose the better path.

If you cure my disappointment by showing me that the chosen path had low chances of success, you feed my regret: I should have chosen some other option that had better chances of success. If you cure my regret by telling me that the chosen path had greater chances of success than the unchosen path, you feed my disappointment: So why didn't success materialize then on the chosen path? It's not that easy to mop up spilled milk. Spilled milk covers disappointment and regret. The cure for disappointment feeds regret. The cure for regret feeds disappointment.

Here is an example. I was torn between marrying Frankie or Johnny. I married Frankie. Things did not work out. I am disappointed. You console me by telling me that Frankie was just not a good match for me, and it just couldn't have worked out. But now you are feeding my regret: I should have married Johnny! You then point to the comparative virtues of Frankie: Frankie really was the better bet of the two, and I made the right choice. But wait, if Frankie was the better bet, then success was genuinely possible, and so now I am disappointed again that things did not work out!

The late Cambridge philosopher D. Hugh Mellor once visited in Boulder, Colorado. It had been raining cats and dogs all day long, and I remarked that this was truly unusual. He responded by saying that when one is hosting a guest from out of town and there is inclement weather, then one is prone to say one of two things: Either one says that the weather is always like this at this time of year; or one says that this kind of weather is very unusual—it is never like this at this time of year. Why do hosts choose to say this? Most of the time, the stats would probably support a more nuanced answer.

Here is an attempt at a response. The host notices that the guest is unhappy and tries to offer consolation. They may try to dispel disappointment: It's always like this here—there is nothing to be disappointed about. Or they may try to counteract regret: Don't regret having come here rather than somewhere else. You made the right choice. The chance of rain here this time of year is very low relative to other places you might have considered visiting.



The host can't say just anything—meteorology poses constraints. In England's Lake District, you can only cure disappointment. It always rains, so you can hardly be disappointed when you meet with rainy weather. In Utah's Canyon Lands, you can only cure regret. Rain is truly unusual, and you really can't regret going there even if you are unlucky with the weather. Just about any other place on earth has higher average rainfall.

Here is a case in which disappointment and regret are improperly mixed. Sally undertook a two-day bike ride from Portland to Seattle. She had a bike accident three-quarters of the way through. Luckily, she was wearing a helmet and survived without serious injury. Here is an absurd thing for Sally to say: 'I regret having put on my helmet: If I had not taken the time to put on my helmet, I would have been at the intersection a few seconds earlier, and I would not have had an accident at all.' That's true, but it's no ground for regret. It's ground for being disappointed that things turned out the way they did. Sally could have made it to Seattle, and it was a bummer that a car just had to make an unexpected turn right in front of her. But she can't take this bad luck to be a reason for regretting her choice of putting on a helmet. The fact of the matter is that the chances of survival without serious injury on a bike per mile traveled are greater with than without a helmet. And so, there is no reason for regret. When she got onto that bike, she chose the safer option.

## Express Yourself

It's a good thing in life to dabble a bit in some art form or other. When the road is bumpy, you can sing your blues away, throw a pot on a pottery wheel, put some paint on canvas, or dance to 'Singing in the Rain.' I want to give some thought to the art of writing. 'I was raised by the cold that, to warm my palm,/ gathered my fingers around a pen,' writes the Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky in the poem 'A Part of Speech.' (*Collected Poems in English*, p. 102) People find solace in expressing themselves through writing, ranging from entries in a diary, posts on social media, emails to friends, columns in newspapers, or penning their very own *War and Peace*.

Writing is an art form that has an intriguing relationship with mental health. I was once chairing a session with migrant writers. They spoke

about the hardships of being uprooted from their native communities. An audience member asked them why they write. What was striking was how every single one of them wholeheartedly agreed that, in their own words, they write *out of pain*.

Agathon, in Plato's *Symposium*, tells us that romance is what inspires—at the touch of love, everyone becomes a poet. But seemingly, it is not only feelings of love but also plain suffering that makes writers clasp their pens. Why is it that pain compels us to write? What promises of solace does writing hold out? It is somewhat bizarre because writing itself can be agony. If you don't have to write, why would you? So how can agony shield from agony? Not everyone reaches for a pen when hardship strikes. But it is a curious response—sufficiently curious, well, to put a few words on paper about it.

Writing is a solitary activity. One can create a space of tranquillity far away from the troubled world outside. Everything is beautiful at the ballet. And so it is in our coffee-stained work corners—they are places to create, places to forget.

Writing can also be like talking to a friend. One comes to see things clearer. A jumble of feelings, memories, and conversations is clouding up one's head. Writing helps place things in pigeonholes so that one can remember without obsessing. And even if one's inner goings-on don't gain clarity, there is at least displacement. What ails cannot be both in our heads and on the paper—or so it seems.

'We read to know we are not alone,' says the character of C.S. Lewis in William Nicholson's play *Shadowlands* and Richard Attenborough's movie by the same name. This is also why people reach for a pen. Writing is rebellion against being singled out by misfortune. Why me? In reaching out to others, one learns that nobody is spared.

Writing helps break through a vicious cycle. Being focused on the futility of life feeds self-centeredness. Self-centeredness stands in the way of contributing. And being unable to contribute reinforces the belief that life is indeed futile. And so the wheel turns. But writing is contributing—it is letting other people know that they are not alone. In the song 'The Competition' the singer-songwriter Kimya Dawson sings of people being grateful to her for saying what they don't have the words to say and how there is an art to feeling down which is what keeps her on the stage.

'Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge,' writes Gauguin in *Avant et Après*, a collection of autobiographical notes, translated under the title *Gauguin's Intimate Journals* (p. 2) Was painting a form of revenge for him? Clearly, writing, being a narrative art, can be a form of revenge. Memoirs often take this form, and this is what gets their authors in trouble—as when Thomas Wolfe wrote about people in his native Asheville, North Carolina in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Or, more recently, Karl Ove Knausgård had to contend with the fallout from *My Struggle*, which depicted family members in unflattering ways.

And finally, there is writing as social activism. Journalists and non-fiction writers bear witness to how political conditions are ruining lives. Each story may just be a drop of cold water on a hot plate—but enough drops may lead to much desired social change. And once we start writing, the anger is enlisted in a cause and is transformed. It is good for something, and, as such, no longer drags us down.

There are many forms of pain, many kinds of writings, and many therapeutic routes. Some of these benefits also come with other art forms—there is a sense of seclusion in the pottery studio as well. Some of them are specific to the narrative arts—one finds solace in sharing one's story, but of course, music and painting also have narrative elements. For some people it is sufficient to write—their diary is a private matter, not to be shared. For others, being read, being heard, being seen is crucial—it is the sharing itself that is healing.

## Eat Well

Approaching food in some way or other is often recommended as an answer to life's problems or a route to happiness—but the recommendations could not be any less varied. There is one group that recommends eating whatever you darn well please. Let's call them gourmands. The other group swears by regimenting food consumption in one way or another. Let's call them abstinents. Both the gourmands and the abstinents see their relationship with food as a route toward happiness.

Virginia Woolf is with the gourmands. 'One cannot think well, love well, sleep well unless one has dined well,' she writes in *A Room of One's Own*, and she is a master at describing tables decked with luscious food.

There are lots of tongue-in-cheek cards in praise of eating to your heart's delight. You can eat your way to happiness: 'You can't buy happiness, but you can buy ice cream, and that's kind of the same thing.' Sweets relieve stress: 'Stressed spelled backward is desserts.' And there is the Italian delicacy *Tiramisu*—meaning 'Pick me up'—with its power inscribed in its very name.

There is little surprise in this recommendation. It is no secret that getting what you want can contribute to happiness. So why shouldn't eating to your heart's delight not help in the pursuit of happiness, provided that the heart delights in the right measure? Certainly, the desire for luscious food can become obsessive and turn into gluttony. But any desire can turn into a desire for excess. Remember William Blake's poem '*Eternity*': 'He who binds to himself a joy/ Does the winged life destroy/ But he who kisses the joy as it flies/ Lives in eternity's sunrise.' So long as we keep a healthy appreciation for chateaubriand, cheese soufflé, and crème brûlée, we can indulge and be merry.

The abstinents pose more of a challenge. What is curious is that, rather than consuming less fattening or unhealthy food, there is a tendency to ax complete food categories. Meat is off the menu for vegetarians, animal products for vegans, and all but nuts and fruits for the fruitarians. Atkins dieters cut out just about all carbohydrates. Paleo dieters stick to all and only those food items that our cave-dwelling ancestors gnawed on. Allergies to cow's milk, eggs, peanuts, soy, and so on are a reason to carefully check ingredient lists. And supermarkets stack just about anything in gluten-free format for the gluten sensitive.

Now people have various reasons for adjusting their diets. There are moral reasons, cultural reasons, and health reasons. As for health reasons, there is physical and mental health. If you have celiac disease, strict gluten avoidance is essential for physical survival. But axing food categories is also a means of addressing mental health issues. Psychiatrists, therapists, and life coaches recommend that we cut out food categories that might affect moods. And there is no shortage of dietary fads trending on social networks.

Axing food categories is a coping strategy. But how could it possibly make us feel better not to eat this or that? It's easy to understand that chocolate can be a mood enhancer, but how can abstention from food categories be a mood enhancer?

There can be a strictly physiological explanation. Coffee may make you jittery. Milk may make you feel blue. If you are drinking coffee and consuming milk products from morning until night, you may not know that the coffee and the milk are the culprits. Cut the coffee, and you will relax. Cut the milk, and you will cross over to the sunny side of the street. Abstinence can lead to mood enhancement via a strictly physiological route.

But how the physiology works is for others to figure out. We are interested here in psychological explanations. There are multiple paths from food to mood. Without trying to be exhaustive, I will distinguish between six such paths: *focus*, *displacement*, *control*, *pretense*, *belonging*, and *purity*.

*Focus.* Working around dietary constraints requires research and dedication. As the mind is engaged in checking ingredient lists for traces of allergens or working out how to increase calcium intake after cutting out dairy products, it is not obsessing or in the grip of its sorrows. A busy mind is a happy mind.

*Displacement.* If you cannot solve the issues that underlie your sorrows, why not designate a dietary problem as its cause and then solve the dietary problem instead? Diagnose what ails you as something that you have control over and then undertake to correct it. If you can convince yourself that there is a causal link between some food item and mood, then your mood will clear as you ax the food item. It may sound a bit like the drunk who is looking for their wallet under the streetlight, not because they lost it there, but because that's where the light is. But the drunk is sure not to find their wallet, whereas displacement may just work.

*Control.* You may find yourself powerless in life. In response, you import a set of dietary rules into your life that you can autonomously accept and live by. You answer the lack of control by constructing a world that you do control. Control differs from displacement in that you do not presume that following some diet will solve your problems. Instead, what you crave is control—and you welcome a set of dietary rules because they are something you can control.

*Pretense.* Mental health messes with dietary habits. There is compulsive eating, addictions, loss of appetite, and more. Remember Pascal: If you find yourself unable to have religious belief, then bless yourself with holy water and attend Mass—that is, act as if you already have faith, and faith will follow. Similarly, if you force yourself to mimic healthy eating habits, then this may improve your mental health issue.

*Belonging.* It is good not to be alone. There are a host of support groups for various allergies, gluten sensitivity, and lactose intolerance. There are coffee shops and restaurants that cater to fruitarians, vegans, and Atkins dieters. Community has multiple purposes. It fosters a social context that combats loneliness. There are people to talk to about something of common interest, be it in support groups or online communities. It provides an identity. You don't just have this annoying sensitivity to gluten—you have joined the ranks of the gluten insensitive. This, in turn, reinforces the belief that the axed food category is what caused lethargy, lack of focus, depression, or what have you. It's not just you who are affected—others report the very same symptoms. And it provides a sense of common purpose. As a vegan, you want to put an end to animal suffering and mitigate climate change. The gluten insensitive are battling a food industry that has been increasing the gluten content of food for commercial purposes, leaving many to pay the price. You are fighting for proper labeling of allergens, and so on.

*Purity.* There is a good deal of analogical reasoning in health food recommendations. Walnuts look like brains, so they must be good for brain function. Smiley bananas improve mood. Grapes aid lung function. Celery increases potency. This kind of analogical reasoning has a bad rap, and we are supposed to have outgrown it in this age of science and enlightenment.

But there is something to all this when it comes to mental health. Think of decluttering. If you declutter your attic, it may do some good for decluttering your head. 'Declutter, Organize, Live Joyfully' is the epigraph of a minimalist-living website.

Something similar is going on with food. We are what we eat. Look at the ingredient list on a candy bar and count the number of food additives and preservatives it contains. There is a messiness to it—food

should be food, not some processed amalgamation of substances that do not belong. The quality of our food reflects the quality of our lives. Modulate what you eat, and you will modulate how you live. Eat messy food, live a messy life. Choose to eat food that is simple and pure, and thereby force your life to become simple and pure.

There are critics. The Intuitive Eating movement sees axing food categories as a route to failed diets, leading to overeating and eating disorders. Instead, we should make peace with food and not let the food police dictate what foods to eat and not to eat. Without rules, there is nothing to fret about, and there are no rules to be broken. Eating should be a source of joy. Worrying about what you eat is stressful, and all the frustration and guilt induced by self-imposed dietary rules are counterproductive.

There are cynics. A *New Yorker* cartoon makes fun of the craze for gluten-free diets with a woman in a restaurant saying to a friend: 'She thinks she's so great 'cause she has real celiac disease.' There are indeed many unsympathetic voices dissing health foods, dieting, and food allergies. They say that it's all just a fad, that most followers do not have a problem with gluten, lactose, or any other allergens and that what is driving all this is the desire for attention. Food restrictions can place us on the social map. Do people remember my allergy? Do they make accommodations? Self-imposed food restrictions are an easy tool to test for respect.

So, what is the bottom line: To ax or not to ax? It's complicated. I trust the experts telling us that eating disorders often start with self-imposed dietary restrictions. But I have also known people who have successfully built dietary restrictions into their lives to provide focus, a sense of community, and the illusion of control. It is like rhyme and meter in poetry. For some people such constraints kindle creativity. For others, they kill the joy of self-expression. The path of abstinence is interesting, but it may lead to peril, and one should be careful where one treads.

# Final Words

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In an earlier draft, I wanted to title this book 'On What Abides.' Friends and colleagues did not think much of this title. And, of course, they were right. Would you have bothered reaching for it or clicking on a link with a title like that? Books with archaic titles attract dust rather than elicit curiosity. And yet, there are many ways in which this book is on what abides.

The very word 'abides' has not been doing much abiding over the last century and a half. When you enter it into Google n-grams, you will notice a steady decline in its occurrence in the written word from around 1865. However, in the late 1990s there is a curious upswing with a return to 1907 levels by 2019 (the last year for which n-grams has data).

Why this upswing in late 90s? I do not know whether it is just a coincidence, but 1998 is the year that the Coen Brothers brought out the movie *The Big Lebowski*, with the famous line 'The Dude abides.' The internet has lots of discussion of what could be meant by the phrase 'The Dude abides.' Indeed, what does 'abide' even mean?

There is the meaning that follows Ecclesiastes 1:4: 'One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever.' Here abiding is simply not vanishing, simply retaining a presence.

But there is more to abiding than merely being present. The Dude abides not just in the sense that he will always be a fixture in the bowling alley—instead, he will remain a presence in the way that, say, a memory abides—authentic and unaffected by what besieges it. The most-cited phrase containing 'abides' is St. Paul's line in 1 Corinthians 13:13: 'And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' Faith, hope, and love endure because they are the stronger forces in human life.

This book is about questioning those things that abide, and those questions are taken up across the ages in philosophical traditions, in



literature, as well as in today's popular culture. Hope, love, and faith are among the things that abide.

And there is even more to 'abide'—meanings abound. Abiding can mean *trusting* in a nurturing source as in 'the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine' (John 15:4) It can mean *tolerating* as in 'I cannot abide rudeness,' or, more positively, *respecting* or *holding dear*, as in 'law-abiding citizens.'

This book is also about trusting in various ways of coping, tolerating adversity, and holding life dear. It would be nice to conclude: May you abide as you abide in its counsel. But my aspirations have been much less grand. If some snippets here and there made you wonder, offered a moment of recognition, or simply brought a smile to your face, then I will not have written for naught.

# Additional Teaching Materials

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**Chapter 1. Hope.** Frank Darabont's movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), after Stephen King's novella 'Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption: Hope Springs Eternal' in *Different Seasons* (1982), focuses on the value of hope. As to poetry, Emily Dickinson's poems 'Hope is a subtle glutton' (Part 1. *Life*. 86) and 'Hope is the thing with feathers' (Part 1. *Life*. 32) are good conversation starters. Martin Luther King's 'Shattered Dreams' adds a political dimension to the discussion.

**Chapter 2. Death.** Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) will come as no surprise. Akira Kurosawa's movie *Ikiru* (1952) addresses the search for meaning in the face of death. David Velleman's 'Dying: Some People Hope to Die in their Sleep. Not me.' (*OpenBooks*, 2012; *Think*, 2012) is a short read discussing what the subtitle says. Nina Riggs *The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying* (2017), with an excerpt entitled 'When a Couch is More than a Couch' in the *New York Times*, 23 Sep. 2016, is a touching memoir about living with the prospect of imminent death.

**Chapter 3. Love.** Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) hints at many aspects of our models of love. Ann Beattie's 'Snow' (1986) is a hauntingly beautiful short story about the loss of love. You may also find inspiration for short stories and related newspaper and magazine articles on my website 'TESS: Teaching Ethics with Short Stories,' following the links 'Stories by Theme' and 'Gender and Relationships.'

**Chapter 4. Reconciliation.** Act 3 ('Two Words You Never Want to Hear from Your Doctor') of *This American Life*, 277: 'Apology' (2004) discusses apologies offered by medical doctors for making incorrect decisions. Joe Wright's movie *Atonement* (2007) after Ian McEwan's novel (2001) by the same name will provoke discussion about responsibility for childhood transgressions and the impossibility of forgiveness. Off

the beaten path, I have had some of my best student discussions with Milcho Manchevski's movie *Before the Rain* (1994). It mixes topics on the ethics of war, moral luck, and the search for redemption in a non-linear temporal structure.

**Chapter 5. Self-Management.** This might be an opportunity to read William James's lectures 'The Will to Believe' and 'Is Life Worth Living?' I recommend Arthur Miller's play *All my Sons* (1946) (Act 1 and Acts 2 and 3) or Akira Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon* (1950) for the construction of self-serving and exonerating frames. Act 5 ('The All-Too-Real Housewives of Argentina') of *This American Life*, 724 : 'Personal Recount' tells the story of a right-wing TV show host in Argentina who comes to embrace feminism.

**Chapter 6. Counsel.** E.E. Cummings' 'i thank you God for most this amazing' brings in a religious dimension for 'Count your Blessings.' For 'Help your Neighbor,' I recommend Isabel Allende's 'And of Clay Are We Created' in *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1991). As to 'Don't Cry over Spilled Milk,' the NPR interview with Toni Morrison, entitled "'I Regret Everything": Toni Morrison Looks Back On Her Personal Life' (2015), touches on regret and loss, race relations in the US, the joy of writing, and Morrison's journey to becoming an author. 'Express yourself' can be matched with some observations on writing by T. Kira Madden in 'Against Catharsis: Writing is not' (*Literary Hub*, 2019) and by Julie Bunting in 'On Making Things up: Some True Stories about Writing my Novel' (*Catapult Magazine* 2017). To complement 'Eat well,' I am proposing a piece on the physiological pathways between diet and mental health: Joseph Forth and colleagues 'Food and Mood: How Do Diet and Nutrition Affect Mental Wellbeing' (*British Medical Journal*, 2020), either as a short and accessible scientific article or as a podcast. Tamar Adler's 'All You Can Eat? Inside the Intuitive Eating Craze' (*Vogue*, 2020) is an interesting read as well.

# Discussion Questions

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## Chapter 1. Hope

1. I draw a distinction between 'being hopeful' and 'hoping' when it comes to the health situation of a loved one. Explain this distinction. Do you think it is a plausible distinction? Can you think of other examples in which this distinction holds?
2. George Frederic Watts was a nineteenth-century British symbolist painter. 'I paint ideas, not things,' he said. Here is a version of his painting, 'Hope.' What ideas does this painting convey about hope?
3. How is the 'audacity of hope' explained in the text? Do you think that this is a reasonable interpretation of this phrase?
4. I laid out various pros and cons of hoping. What pros do you find most and least convincing? What cons do you find most and least convincing?
5. Comment on Emily Dickinson's poems 'Hope is the thing with feathers' and 'Hope is a subtle glutton.'
6. One might object, as a counter to my analysis of hope, that we only genuinely hope for things that, all in all, we want. Dark and shameful desires may preoccupy us and engage our imagination, but unless we affirm and embrace them, they do not really underlie our hopes. We can only hope for things that we want upon due consideration and in a cool hour. Do you agree with this objection?
7. One might object, as a counter to my analysis of hope, that a person who despairs engages just as much in mental imaging of what they would like to have, but under the guise of there

being this wonderful thing that they cannot have. Hence, my analysis does not distinguish between hope and despair. Do you think that this is a reasonable objection?

8. The hope for salvation is central to the Christian faith. Some (though by no means all) Christians consider faith to be a matter of certainty. But given that we can only hope for things that are less than certain, how can it be meaningful to say that one hopes for salvation and is certain of salvation? How can we make both attitudes consistent?

## Chapter 2. Death

1. Would you prefer to die suddenly without forewarning or to see your death coming from far ahead (assuming the absence of pain in both cases)? What do you think makes for the difference between people who prefer the former and people who prefer the latter?
2. Imagine that you are Shakespeare on his death bed, and you could have (i) all your manuscripts preserved anonymously or (ii) half (or ninety percent or ten percent) preserved with your name attached to it. What would you choose?
3. Can you think of anyone (whether famous or not) who lived in such a way that you would say: If I were to have lived like that, then I would die easy (as in the gospel blues song 'In my Time of Dying'). What kind of life would you look back upon in a contented manner? And what makes such a life a meaningful or a good life?
4. Some countries have legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide. Should people who opt for euthanasia or assisted suicide be able to choose to be organ donors?
5. Suppose that humans were no longer fertile and you were the last generation on earth, as in P.D. James's novel *Children of Men* (1992). How would this affect how you live your life? Would you still be able to find meaning in the things you do? Or suppose that scientists predicted with certainty that an asteroid were to hit the earth one year from now, wiping out

all of humanity. Compare this predicament to learning that you have a terminal illness and have one more year to live. Does it make a difference to how you would live the remaining year of your life? (Samuel Scheffler takes up this issue in *Death and the Afterlife* (2013).)

6. Look at the pictures of Alan Kurdi's lifeless body in the *Guardian* (2 Sep. 2015). If you were on the editorial team of a newspaper, which of the two pictures would you defend for publication? If you were Alan Kurdi's surviving parent, would you consent to have either picture published? Why or why not?
7. In the poems 'Remember' and 'Song' Christina Rossetti tells a beloved how she wishes to be remembered after death. What is her wish? Can you identify with this sentiment? Would you wish for more? Or would you wish for less?

### Chapter 3. Love

1. Which of the models of love discussed in this chapter are you most drawn to? Which one are you least drawn to? Explain. What model of love would you like a beloved of yours to see you through? What model would you want them to not see you through? Explain.
2. As Yeats' poem 'For Anne Gregory' suggests, people want to be loved for themselves. What does this mean? What is it not to be loved for oneself?
3. Comment on the three components of the *agape* view of love: (i) It is through love that one elevates one's beloved, (ii) love is unconditional, and (iii) love is subject to the will and hence a matter of commitment. How intertwined are these components?
4. In 'Love's Bond,' (Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, 1989; reprinted in Solomon and Higgins, *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, 1991), Nozick writes: 'Although both see the *we* as extremely important for the self, most men might draw the circle of themselves containing the circle of

the *we* as an aspect within it, while most women might draw the circle of themselves within the circle of the *we*.' (pp. 74–5 in Nozick; p. 421 in Solomon and Higgins) Do you think that this claim still holds today?

5. Kahlil Gibran's 'On Marriage' (1923) is a commonly read text at wedding ceremonies. In a blog post, 'Please Don't Read This Poem at Your Wedding' on the *National Catholic Register* website, Jennifer Fulwiler argues that this is a recipe for disaster. Do you agree? Is it possible to form a joint identity through love and still retain one's own identity? What models of love underlie Gibran and Fulwiler's views?
6. Do you have any sympathy for any of the cynical models of love? Do they provide a more truthful and accurate analysis of love than the rosier *eros*, *agape*, and *fusion* models? What is their place in life? Can they coexist with these models?
7. How have dating apps changed the nature of courtship? Have they changed our conception of romantic love?

## Chapter 4. Reconciliation

1. One cannot accept apologies unless apologies are offered. But can one forgive, even if no forgiveness is asked for? Can one forgive an unrepentant offender? Can one forgive an offender who asks for forgiveness but is clearly not intent on changing their ways?
2. Are accepting apologies and forgiving always discretionary? Or do we sometimes have an obligation to accept apologies and to forgive?
3. Why might it matter to a repentant offender that a victim accepts their apologies or forgives them when they have sincerely offered their apologies and have sincerely asked for forgiveness? Should it matter? What difference does it make?
4. Is there any truth to P.G. Wodehouse's lines: 'It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them'?

5. There is much discussion recently about reparation payments to African Americans for slavery. Are reparation payments an appropriate tool to atone for historical wrongdoings? For some arguments for and against, read Andre M. Perry and Rashawn Ray 'Why we Need Reparations for Black Americans' (Brookings, 2020) and Jeff Jacoby 'Reparations for Slavery are Unworkable—and Unjust' (Boston Globe, 2019).
6. Does Zidane's apology to his fans in his TV interview, after the 2008 head-butt against Materazzi constitute a meaningful apology?

## Chapter 5. Self-Management

1. Can you think of any cases in which you adapted your tastes, beliefs, or attitudes in response to your circumstances? Do you look back on this as a positive move in your life?
2. What is the difference between hopefulness, wishful thinking and self-deception?
3. If a bit of self-deception makes you happy, then what, if anything, might be wrong with it? Why should we believe based on the evidence? You might say that we want to have true beliefs, but what is so good about true beliefs if they make us unhappy?
4. You may have misgivings about deceiving yourself and trying to believe something that you know deep down to be false. But would you also object to not wanting to know certain things by refusing to consider the evidence? Why would this be less objectionable? Can you think of plausible cases? Do you think that consciously not wanting to know something can sometimes be a good way to proceed in life?
5. Pascal lays out two routes to religious faith. There is Pascal's wager, and there is the advice to acquire religious beliefs by acting as if you already believe, that is, by blessing yourself with holy water and going to Mass. Do you find the wager a reasonable argument for adopting religious beliefs? Might



Pascal's advice for acquiring religious beliefs work? Would it be an acceptable route to religious belief?

6. What is hipster irony? Is it just a fad? Or might it be a worthwhile ideal to strive for?
7. 'Being Sexually Submissive Doesn't Make You A "Bad Feminist"' (HuffPost, 2018) argues that feminism should not stop women from embracing submissive sexual desires. Do you agree? Are there certain desires that one should try to extinguish or cultivate for moral or political reasons?

## Chapter 6. Counsel

1. The Cicero quote '[Gratitude] is not only the greatest virtue, but it is also the parent of all the other virtues' can be found in *For Plancius*, chapter 33. Cicero offers five virtues that are spawned by gratitude: (i) filial affection; (ii) good citizenry; (iii) piety; (iv) friendship; and (v) kindness. Explain how he supports these connections. Do you think that friendship and loving relationships require mutual gratitude?
2. Gratitude is thought to procure joy. We find this idea in E.E. Cummings' poem 'i thank you God for most this amazing.' We find it in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*: 'Gratitude is a divine emotion: it fills the heart, but not to bursting; it warms it, but not to fever.' Willie Nelson thought of it as transformative: 'Once I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.' How is it that gratitude can have a positive effect on our emotional well-being?
3. Gratitude is about not taking favors for granted after the fact. Saying 'please' is about not taking favors for granted *before* the fact. *The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying* (pp. 75–6) is a memoir by Nina Riggs about her last year of life struggling with breast cancer. She writes a list to her children's future selves—a list they won't possibly understand for twenty to thirty years—trying to make them see why it's good to say 'please' in this world. The presentation is quite lyrical, but can you state in plain language what reasons she offers?

4. Here is an argument that we might hear from an Effective Altruist. If we have a well-paying job, we should not be volunteering in a soup kitchen. We could work overtime instead of working in the soup kitchen and send the money to charities that are recommended by Effective Altruist websites, such as GiveWell and Giving What We Can. If we have a choice between saving one person and saving five people, we should clearly do the latter. Similarly, more lives could be saved by working overtime and donating to the Anti-Malaria Foundation than by working in a local soup kitchen. So, we ought to do the former. Is this argument convincing? (A similar argument for career choice can be found in William MacAskill's 'Replaceability, Career Choice, and Making a Difference.')
5. There is some wisdom in the advice that one regrets not trying, more so than one regrets trying and failing. In Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Fermina Daza is considering a marriage proposal, and her aunt counsels her: 'Tell him yes. [...] Even if you are dying of fear, even if you are sorry later, because whatever you do, you will be sorry all the rest of your life if you say no.' Can you think of real-life cases in which the same reasoning might apply? How does this advice square with our discussion of disappointment versus regret?
6. Throughout history, artists have used their art to express their pain, ranging from Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' to Demi Lovato's four-part YouTube documentary 'Dancing with the Devil' about their struggle with addiction. Pick your favorite work of art in this vein as an example. What is driving this self-expression? How does the public react? What does the artist hope to gain?
7. In 'Against Catharsis: Writing is not' (*Literary Hub*, 2019), T. Kira Madden argues that writing is not catharsis. How does she conceive of her art?
8. The African American author and social activist Toni Cade Bambara conceives of religion as 'a technology of living.' Religion incorporates various coping mechanisms that aim to

make life manageable and joyful. Now many religions impose dietary constraints on their followers. What is the purpose of these constraints? Do they serve similar purposes as dietary constraints in secular movements? Or are there different motivations at work?

9. What does Tamar Adler find out about Intuitive Eating in 'All You Can Eat? Inside the Intuitive Eating Craze.' (*Vogue*, 2020) What is driving these ideas? Do you agree?

# Links

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## Why This Book?

Hope is the thing with feathers

“32. ‘Hope Is the Thing with Feathers.’ Part One: Life. Dickinson, Emily. 1924. Complete Poems.” *Bartleby.Com*,  
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## Chapter 1. Hope

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### Hope is the thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul

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### relates an intriguing story

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[https://www.casact.org/sites/default/files/database/forum\\_94sf/forum\\_94sf049.pdf](https://www.casact.org/sites/default/files/database/forum_94sf/forum_94sf049.pdf)

Hope is a subtle glutton; He feeds upon the fair

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A Patent of the Heart

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so huge, so hopeless to conceive

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If I can [...] help one fainting robin/  
Unto his nest again,/ I shall not live  
in vain.

“6. ‘If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking.’ Part One: Life.

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wrote that he hoped to die in the year of its return

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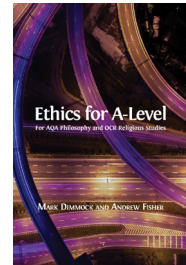
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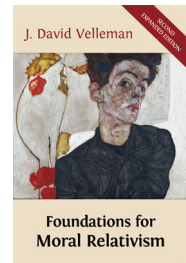
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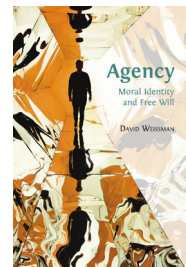


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