

Chapter Eight (Newest) Decisions and Socialization

When you come to a fork in the
road, take it.

Yogi Berra

If we can rein in our desires and calm some of our emotions we can gain more control over our actions and our lives. When anger, fear, and greed no longer distort our perceptions, our choices will be more informed and we will almost certainly be happy with the results. But how do we make this happen? The first step, obviously, is to figure out what role those desires and emotions actually play in our decisions, and the second is to figure out what to do about it. Making a decision is a complicated and mysterious process in which many elements other than desires and emotions play a part. We do have the ability to change the ways we react to events, but we will be handicapped if we buy into some simplistic account of motivation like the claim that we are all completely selfish, or if we overestimate the role of conscious deliberation in our actual choices.

1. Making Decisions. We know from first hand experience that we sometimes act selfishly, satisfying our own desires and interests at some cost to others. Some of us are more selfish than others, and some of us are very selfish, but no one is completely and self-consciously selfish. This, however, is not the way Thomas Hobbes saw it when he declared that “no man giveth but with intention of good to himself, because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good.” (*Leviathan*, Chapter 15) Joseph Butler, who devised the classical argument against psychological egoism, the belief that we are always and only motivated by self-

interest, said that our problem is not that we think of our welfare too much, but that we don't think of it more often. Whether or not that is right, we certainly don't think of it *all of the time*. We all have desires and try to satisfy them, but even if we were clear about our ends (which we aren't), we rarely have enough time, information, or imagination to determine which of our options would best serve those ends. Introspection tells us that we don't always try to maximize the good for ourselves, and common sense tells us that it would be counter-productive (or insane) to make this the goal of each of our actions.

When Hobbes wrote of the "intention of good" to ourselves he may not have meant "conscious" intention. We can get a different kind of egoism by giving up the belief in all-out *conscious* deliberation. Perhaps we have an unconscious mechanism that is dedicated to maximizing our interests, a powerful program that overrides impulses to altruism and sacrifice, and that lies to us about our own motivations. If the pursuit of selfish ends is automatic and inevitable, then any belief in our own unselfishness must be dismissed as the result of self-deception and rationalization. So, of course, must our belief that we are free to choose what to do, not that Hobbes would have a problem with that.

Why are we tempted by this belief that whether we know it or not we are robotically selfish? Perhaps because it is fun to be cynical, and because it is easy to put a selfish spin on everything from taking the smaller piece of cake to throwing ourselves onto a grenade. But anecdotal accounts of imagined self interest prove nothing beyond the cleverness of their inventors. Common sense and research into brains and behavior tell us that our unconscious springs of action are as varied as our conscious ones, and that we have far more on our minds than our own welfare.

If we can abandon both deliberate and unconscious forms of psychological egoism, we can move on to a more adequate understanding of how decisions emerge. Of course we look after our own interests, but sometimes we factor in the interests of others, or we consult some moral principle, personal policy, or bit of friendly advice. Fans of rationality say that the way to make decisions is to use all these factors to construct arguments that can help us prove that the right thing is the right thing. But when we are on the brink of action, the only relevant “conclusion” would be a decision, and decisions do not show up as conclusions of arguments. The best that even the moralist can hope for from an argument is a (question-begging) conclusion of the form “I ought to do A,” and that is a long way from a decision to do A.

Not only are we not going to get decisions from syllogisms, any episode of argument-construction is but one of many factors and events that can have a bearing on what we decide to do. What is worse (at least for those who value their arguments) is that our reasoning itself is conditioned in more ways than we know. We tend to emphasize facts that support what we already believe and want, and we instinctively and skillfully avoid those that point in the other direction. In Chapter One we saw how this works when the arguments are about morality, but the same tricks and moves show up whatever the subject

2. Our Decider. When we come to a fork in the road, our desires, goals, impulses, reservations, prejudices, and beliefs are fed, like various tracks of music, into a device, the output of which is a decision. This device, our “decider,” has an input for selfish advice, another for moral principles, and one that monitors chains of reasoning and accepts some conclusions as beliefs. Selfish impulses, beliefs about the world, and

conventional moral platitudes can all have an influence what we do, but their contributions are shaped by, and blended with, elements of radically different kinds—chemical and hormonal pressures, the genetic contribution, fears, desires, slogans, biases, unconscious habits, depression, a sore back, hunger, and fatigue. We can discover how some of these elements push us around, but there may well be others that are not only beyond our control, but beyond our capacity to detect or understand.

Does this mean that we must resign ourselves to having no real control over what we do? Well, if the sufficient causes for an outburst of anger are present, it will happen, and there is nothing we can do but ride it out. But after the storm we can, *if we wish*, get busy and try to prevent or minimize future outbursts. If our “decider” is like a mixing device then there will be (metaphorical) knobs and levers that control the input. We can learn how to turn down some of our desires, mute our dangerous emotions, turn off some of our foolish beliefs, dampen our impatience, delay our responses, and open the listening channel to allow some sounds (the words of others) to come in more clearly. We can’t observe the actual process of resolving all those forces, but we can discover what happens when we fiddle with some of the knobs, and especially when we finally learn how to deliver some simple instructions to our decider. We *can* take control of our lives and change the way we do things, but only by participating in the causal matrix, not by going outside it.

The sages discussed in the last chapter understood that they needed to find some way to deal with the disturbances triggered by out-of-control desires and emotions. Stoics and Epicureans found ways to modify their reactions to difficulties that usually trouble people, and they had many useful things to say about tyrannical

emotions and despotic desires. The Epicureans realized how easily happiness can be lost, so they simplified their external circumstances and diminished their desires in order to make happiness easier to attain and to maintain. Their maxims and pleasant surroundings helped them maintain their tranquility, but the Epicureans and Stoics were amateurs compared to the Buddhists, who went through years of discipline, study, and training in meditation in order to attain astonishing levels of awareness, calmness, and self-control.

However, the lesson that all of the sages we have mentioned learned and taught was how to calm their minds, pay attention, and distance themselves from harmful desires and emotions. We can learn this too, and then, with resolution and attention, we can head off some of the feelings, thoughts, and responses that are proven sources of suffering. Unless we manage to follow their teachings at least to some degree, our “decider” is likely to be a fearful, ignorant, and dangerous ally.

3. Snap Decisions. Some of our best moves are spontaneous ones—unrehearsed, unplanned, and free of deliberation. When we find ourselves acting with unconscious grace, or when we feel that our creativity has surpassed our ability, we may look for the source of our success outside ourselves, in our muse, or in some other supernatural coach or backer. But there are other explanations. The ability to make instinctive, rapid, and healthy decisions is a valuable one for a predator in a world of predators. We have been rewarded for trusting our sense of danger and opportunity and for acting without reflection or deliberation; and the rewards are even greater for those who know when not to trust that sense. The predators are mostly gone, but our physical and social environments have become so complex and challenging that if we

did not outsource some work to our automatic systems, we would be drowned in details. So, like our ancestors, we make snap judgments and jump to conclusions, and sometimes (but not always) that saves us.

In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell explores our ability to act without reflection, and argues that the success of “snap” judgments has a perfectly natural explanation. He says that we have developed an unconscious skill called “thin slicing,” which occurs when the unconscious finds and reacts to patterns we have not consciously noticed. The deliverances of our “decider,” behind what Gladwell refers to as the “locked door” of our mind, are the products of this process, which is beyond our conscious ability to monitor, but not to appreciate.

Gladwell describes our “unconscious” as a kind of “mental valet” that “keeps tabs” on what is going on, and on what needs attention. The “ventromedial area” of the brain, he says, “works out contingencies and relationships and sorts through the mountain of information we get from the outside world, prioritizing it and putting flags on things that demand our immediate attention” (p. 59). When this area is damaged, we are forced to work things out consciously, and our decision making is impaired beyond belief. We pile up useless information and displace natural common sense with pointless calculations.

Snap decisions are not just useful, they are indispensable. But there are many ways they can lead us astray. In a section called “The Dark Side of Thin-slicing,” Gladwell refers to what he calls the “Warren Harding Error.” Warren G. Harding was the picture of a great leader, tall, dignified, and commanding, but he apparently lacked both the intellect and the character to match his looks. Voters, misled by appearances,

elected him, which was a bad mistake because he may have been one of the worst president in the history of his country. Those who commit the Warren Harding Error form an impression on the basis of one item (physical appearance, race, gender, pedigree, etc.), and they let that “first impression drown out every other piece of information they manage to gather in that first instant.” (p. 91) Gladwell’s point is that there is much information to be gained from even a very brief encounter, but not if we glom onto one item and ignore everything else. This blunder can unleash a cascade of projections and misapprehensions. Many things that the victim of the error subsequently says and does will be interpreted in the light of that first mistaken impression, and, so interpreted, will appear as evidence for the erroneous assessment.

Gladwell calls the ability to figure out what others are up to from their expressions and body language “mind-reading.” Everyone does it, and some people are very good at it, but it is an ability that abandons us when we are incapacitated by fear or stress, or are seriously pressed for time. Under those circumstances we can become “mind-blind,” which is a state of “temporary autism” in which we are incapable of understanding even the obvious things about others that we usually pick up just from looking and listening. Gladwell suggests that mind blindness may explain how, in 1999, four officers of the “Street Crime Unit” of the NYPD shot the unarmed Amadou Diallo in the hall of his apartment in the Bronx. The police were looking for criminal activity and so were primed to interpret what they saw in that way. They saw a black man, and when they approached him he ran into a building. Perhaps he realized they were police, for he reached for his wallet. They thought he was reaching for a gun and shot him 41 times. The whole incident took seven seconds.

We may sometimes need to act quickly, but never before spending a few microseconds taking in the situation. “Our powers of thin-slicing and snap judgments are extraordinary,” Gladwell says, but “even the giant computer in our unconscious needs a moment to do its work.” When it is working well we can only back off in amazement at what it, what *we*, can do. Gladwell tells of art historians who can recognize fakes at a glance, psychologists who are adept at predicting marital difficulties after a few seconds of observation, and skillful food tasters, warriors, athletes, salesmen, and ornithologists. Similar, if less spectacular, feats of thin slicing are performed countless times every day in our own lives.

4. Mindfulness. There can be no doubt that undistorted information and dedicated practice can work miracles on our snap judgments. More information is usually better, but with practice we learn which information matters, and we learn when to forget about information and just jump. But we won’t be very good at this if we fail to learn how to minimize distractions and pay close attention to the here and now. Buddhists call this ability “mindfulness,” and it is a skill they have been practicing for 2500 years. They not only pay attention to what is going on in the world outside, they pay attention to what is going on inside, and they learn how to do this by spending hours just watching the movements of their minds.

Some say that the teachings of the Buddha can be boiled down to his views about causality. (See David Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*.) To understand causality is not to have looked into the hidden depths of the universe and found the cause of it all, but simply to comprehend, in more detail than people normally do, the causes and effects of the mental and physical events that make

up our world and that part of the world we call our mind. It is to understand how events unfold. In the words of the Buddha, it is to know:

When this is present, that comes to be;

From the arising of this, that arises.

When this is absent, that does not come to be;

On the cessation of this, that ceases. (Kalupahana [1], 90)

If, for example, we want to diminish our anger, we need first to admit to ourselves (and inform our decider) that that is what we want to do. Then we need to start watching the times when anger buds, blooms, and flowers. Are there specific thoughts that herald a storm? What beliefs come into play? How do different episodes of anger feel? How does our anger affect those at whom it is directed? How much is our anger really under our control? What makes it go away?

After we have learned to observe our anger coming and going, we can turn our attention to its growth from a tiny seed. Was it nourished by a misunderstanding, an old grudge, or just a bad day? When we have learned to spot the situations and events that summon episodes of anger, and learned to detect early warnings of impending episodes, we are ready to do something about them. We can tell ourselves to oppose our impending annoyance or anger with thoughts of compassion for its potential target, memories of past woes caused by giving in to anger, and repetitions of our favorite insights, slogans, and resolutions. In this way we may actually manage to prevent some outbursts and to keep a lid on some others.

When we have learned to notice anger starting to arise, and have developed some methods to defuse it before it takes us over, we can pat ourselves on the back.

But we are not home free because the anger, under control as it may be, is still there. So there remains a final stage when the uncomfortable physical feelings and negative thoughts and impulses that make up anger just don't show up. But can we, can *anybody*, really reach that stage? Maybe not perfectly, but that is no excuse for doing nothing. We can *move away* from anger, but it will take a conscious commitment to do so, an appreciation of causality in the Buddhist sense, and enough calmness and emotional distance to make the conscientious monitoring of our mental and physical states possible.

Suppose that, having observed that we tend to be impatient with some of our friends and co-workers, we decide to soften our attitude. How might we do this? We keep reminding ourselves that this is one of our projects and then when we walk through the office door in the morning we can repeat to ourselves words like "Give John a break—he's having a bad year." This private reminder may be ineffective, but sometimes it will help because changes in behavioral happen when the causes of different behavior are present. Our words to ourselves will join with all the other causes flowing into our decider. Sometimes they will make a difference, but, as we are about to see, they have a lot of competition.

3. Socialization. Life is complicated, and the antecedents of our actions are everywhere. If we ignore the complexity by subscribing to stripped down images of what we are—selfish computers, altruistic hominids, rational paragons, or lumbering gene machines—we will miss far more than we will see. It would be better to say that we are all four, and more, if only to indicate that selfishness, altruism, reasoning, genetic factors, and who knows what else, contribute to who we are and to what we do.

We may never learn all that goes into any of our decisions, but we can identify some of the factors that came together to result in what we did. What follows are some remarks about some of the elements we ourselves introduce into the causal stream—ways we have of influencing both our own decisions and the decisions of others. Some influences are benign and others are harmful, but in either case it is useful to know what is influencing us, how we are being influenced, and why.

Punishment and Reward. The word ‘punishment’ is one of those words that refuses to hold still. Not every deliberate hurt or slight is a punishment, but paranoia or guilt can make us see things as punishments which were never intended in that way. What makes something a punishment is not the quantity of hurt inflicted, for punishments can be mild, but some combination of intention and convention. What is important is that the punishment be a response to some act that, according to some rule, custom, policy or decree, merits it. Like most concepts, *punishment* has both clear cases, metaphoric extensions, and fuzzy boundaries.

When the Chinese philosopher Han Fei Zi told his emperor to grasp the “two handles of control,” he was talking about punishment and reward, but primarily punishment. Threats of punishment are used by parents, friends, enemies, bullies, nations, and the legal systems of all societies. We do many things because we believe we will be made to suffer if we fail to comply with the wishes of those who can harm us. Physical punishment is an effective thing to threaten because almost nobody wants to be hurt, but there are as many possible threats as there are desires and aversions. We can take property or liberty away from people (if they have it), or eject them from our house, club, or country. At the personal level and less formal level, when people fail to

conform to our requirements, we can withdraw our attention, support, or affection. This is no small thing because many would rather be punished physically than ignored.

Plenty of threats are backed by implausible mythical stories, but many are genuine. Threats of punishment for breaking laws are real, and no one can deny that they do deter potential criminals. But it may be time to reconsider our faith in the necessity and value of our “justice system.” Apparently one out of every one-hundred Americans is incarcerated—a larger proportion than in any other country on earth, and between one and two hundred thousand of them are innocent.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/us/23prison.html?scp=1&sq=incarceration&st=nyt>

This is an embarrassing set of numbers for a country that preaches to the world about freedom, equality, and justice. No one would deny that serious changes are needed.

The error theorist will be anxious to suggest that we rethink the idea that the point of incarceration is punishment. The practice of punishing “wrongdoers” is based on the moralistic idea that “justice requires” a hurt that is appropriate to (that “fits”) the offence. That is reasonable and very neat, but when we try to go beyond “an eye for an eye” or “a life for a life,” the math gets difficult. Justice understood in this way sounds like some grumpy accountant’s revenge fantasy. There is, of course, no objective measure of how much or what kind of pain a person deserves for annoying another, or damaging them or their interests, but we can be sure that few people ever think that their punishment was just, or the reparation fair.

Because we are a society of punishers, our first impulse is often to lash out with some negative word, frown, or blow at those who displease or disobey us. We habitually use various forms of negative reinforcement to discipline and control animals,

children, co-workers, spouses, and even strangers on the street. Feeling anger when things do not go our way is natural but, if we become more aware of how anger works, we will see that there are gentler and more enlightened ways to deal with those who have hurt or disappointed us than by punishing them. Perhaps we need to employ more positive and less negative reinforcement. But this is not a popular idea and its critics argue that it is cheaper to punish the few who go astray than to reward the many who do not. The critics of punishment then observe that this is not obvious, but while we are counting up we should not forget to add in the damage a policy of punishment can do to a society or to a person who relies on it.

The real question, however, is not whether rewards or punishments are more expensive, or even more effective, it is whether we really want to promote a system in which people are routinely motivated by the fear of punishment and the hope of reward. Wouldn't we prefer our friends and neighbors to be motivated by something other than the fear of what we might do to them or the hope of what we might do for them? Even if our society needs punishment to control some of its citizens, we do not have to carry this over to our personal lives, where there are many more alternatives.

Alleged Natural Consequences. Since our decisions often depend on our beliefs about the future, an efficient way to influence people is to convince them that if they do things *our* way the result will be something *they* want. The discovery of the power of prognostication was a milestone in the history of behavior modification. If I give you a physical threat, I have to be able to supply the force. If I threaten you with disapproval, I will fail utterly if you don't care what I think. But if I tell you that certain actions will kill you, result in great sorrow for those you love, or make your hair fall out,

then, if you believe me, you will have a strong reason to avoid those actions. Leaders always emphasize the glorious results to be expected from the wars they have decided to launch. The anticipated results have to be glorious to outweigh the sacrifices, which the same leaders always minimize.

Over the millennia we have developed techniques for figuring out what is likely to happen and what is not, but we sometimes trick ourselves into not bringing our A-game to the inquiry. We can make good decisions without knowing what is going to happen in the future, but not without knowing what is happening in the present, and not without recalling and reflecting on what has happened in the past.

Supernatural Encouragement. We have to admire those “doomsayers” who sit up with their flocks waiting for God to put an end to the world at the moment they have predicted. So far they have all been disappointed, but at least they were not afraid to go out on a limb. If we threaten or promise the end of the world, or fire from the sky at midnight, we had better have some trick up our sleeve, or we will be discredited when nothing happens at the appointed time. It makes more sense to promise rewards and punishments at unexpected times or, better yet, after death.

We have already discussed this sort of motivation in Chapter Three, where we saw how widespread and varied the belief in divine reward and punishment has been, and apparently still is. And yet it is hard to say how much credit these threats and promises of supernatural justice should get for the peace and order we enjoy. Is it really only a fear of divine punishment that keeps our fundamentalist friends from stealing our spare change? We hope not. But even if the threat of divine retribution keeps some people under control, we might wonder why it doesn't do a better job than it does. How

can people bring themselves to do things they sincerely believe will earn them an eternity of torture that is worse than anything experienced on earth?

The idea that punishment is provided by supernatural beings and in other mysterious ways taps into so many beliefs and fears it is difficult for any reformer to neglect it. Plato eventually encouraged the use of it in the *Republic*, after proving to his own satisfaction that justice is its own reward.

[T]he gods . . . favor the just and hate the unjust. And the favorite of Heaven may expect, in the fullest measure, all the blessings that heaven can give, save perhaps for some suffering entailed by offences in a former life. (Plato [4], 347)

In Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague*, the town priest delivers a sermon early in the book, before experiencing the full horror of the disaster. At this stage, like contemporary fundamentalists reacting to 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, he is content to see the plague as God's punishment.

Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it. . . . If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world his threshing floor, and implacably he will thresh out his harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff." (Camus [1], 81-82)

Later, after months of suffering racked the people of his city, he developed doubts about this sort of punishment, and about the kind of being willing to administer it. And so

should we. Those who try to control us by warning us about Satan's torture chambers or the delights of Heaven rarely balance any security that results from this method of control against the ignorance, superstition, and fear its use requires and promotes.

A less drastic approach than treating God as lawgiver, judge, and punisher is suggested by some Christians, who, when confronting temptation or difficulty, ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?" Other faiths might replace Jesus with the Buddha or some other respected and extraordinary being like Gandhi or Oprah. Two things are wrong with this. First, we don't really know what any of these beings would do in our circumstances. It would be absurd to ask yourself what Jesus, or Gandhi, or the Buddha would do in a traffic jam on a freeway at rush hour when the temperature was over 95 degrees and nobody would let him in the exit lane. To know the answer we would need to be divine or enlightened, in which case we wouldn't need to ask the question (and we probably wouldn't be driving under those conditions).

The second thing wrong with asking what some honored being might do in our circumstances is that, as we all know, gods (and human big shots) have done some pretty strange and horrible things that we would not urge anyone to imitate. The god of the Old Testament is a singularly inappropriate model, and while Jesus is closer to what we want, his behavior (leaving home, attacking usury, starting a cult, and being friendly to thieves and prostitutes) is usually not what Christians encourage their children to do. The question is not what some other being did or might do, but what shall I do? Perhaps our holy figures do exhibit what we call virtues, but if we know this, then we can just embrace those virtues.

Lies and Deception. Many who appeal to the commands of a divine being actually believe in such a being; others do not. In matters of religion, as in the affairs of everyday life, a simple and cost-effective way to control people is to deceive them about the facts. Often our deception will not be discovered, and even when it is, we can try to justify it by pointing out the good we expected it to do. This is, by the way, one of the justifications the moral fictionalist gives for pretending to believe in moral objectivity.

Deception can be involved in any of the forms of control we have already mentioned or are about to mention, but it need not be. We may intend to carry out our threats and to dole out the rewards we have promised, we may believe in divine justice, and accept the world-views, slogans, and moral principles we promote—or we may not. When we do not believe the story we are telling we join those who try to control people with noble (and ignoble) lies and convenient fictions. This reaches its nadir in China, Myanmar, North Korea, and other totalitarian countries (you know who you are), where only “information” sanctioned by the government is allowed to be heard.

Controlling others by manipulating their picture of the world is not uniquely human—many animals have their own forms of camouflage and deception—but we have raised the practice to an art, and to consciousness. Our systems of linguistic and non-linguistic conventions give us an almost unlimited capacity to improve our situation by managing the beliefs of others.

As effective as straightforward lies may be, we have many other ways to generate false beliefs. We can speak the truth with omissions, or with a certain tone that misleads. Or we can act in ways that deceive others, a procedure Kant called

“pretence,” and declared morally unproblematic. We can even mislead by telling the truth to someone we know will not believe us. We are very clever.

But even if everyone lies, and even if social life would be impossible without a variety of duplicitous habits and techniques, the norm is to say things that are true, and duplicity is the exception. Perhaps deception is (like many other things) healthy in small doses but toxic as the dosage is increased. To pursue the metaphor, one problem with deception is that everyone’s a doctor, and prescribes (for themselves) one or another form of duplicity at the first sign of discomfort. Another problem is that those who deceive are usually forced to come up with more duplicity to cover up their original deception. Deception may on occasion be necessary, but it is not a healthy general policy, and even those who emphasize the importance of the well-chosen lie warn us that an overuse of deception undermines trust, upon which the ability to deceive, and to believe, is based.

Most of us want as much truth as we can get, or at least as much as we can take, but to get the truth we have to be willing to hear it without punishing the teller. It also helps to reward honesty with honesty. Finding a solution to the problem of communicating with others is one of our most important ongoing projects. We start life with an unquestioning credulity, and later, if we are healthy, we outgrow our naivety and set out on the project of making sense of the world for ourselves. This growth requires us to develop an ability to detect liars and con-artists, and we are reasonably skilled at this, as long as some desperate hope, foolish fear, or smooth-talking charlatan has not caused us to forget what we know.

World-views. When Marcus Aurelius told himself that the world was designed, or when he thought of himself as a scattered fragment of a great mind that pervades the universe, he was pushing himself into a fundamental gestalt that promotes cooperation, acceptance, and self-effacing responsibility. (“O world, I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony!”) Stoic and Hindu pantheists, Christians who believe in innumerable souls, and atomists who believe only in matter and the void, see things with very different eyes. Even when their actions are similar, and this is more often than one might expect, their justifications, rationalizations, and explanations differ predictably. They all live in the same world, but tell wildly different stories about it, or at least about that part of it that no one can check.

Thanks to a world-view that includes reincarnation, Hindus and Buddhists have an almost air-tight explanation of human misery and an impressive reason to behave in this cycle on earth. I doubt that many Christians always act with one eye on their Eternal Reward, and it seems equally unlikely that Buddhists and Hindus are compulsive karma counters. Belief in reincarnation or in heavens and hells probably plays a smaller role in our decisions that it gets credit for. Witness the many gentle and well-behaved skeptics and atheists.

One of the most difficult world-views for a moral error theorist to take seriously is Zoroastrianism, according to which the battle between good and evil is the only game in town. This narrative, with variations by Millennial Christians and Muslims, tells us that there will be a final struggle between good and evil, and that the forces of good will win. Zarathustra preached that the world will be “transfigured” by this victory and that the fire that ends civilization as we know it will consume the wicked and purify the earth.

It may be that only a plain world-view that combines naturalism in science, atheism in religion, and moral abolitionism is free of the need to distort itself to make room for one or another revered bit of ancient folly. To the extent that these ancient delusions are necessary for our survival or even our happiness, then there may be a case for preserving them. We can have an opinion about this, but it is an empirical issue that will probably never be resolved. But here are two questions we *can* ask, and answer. (1) Do I have any reason (or inclination) to believe in anything beyond the plain world-view just mentioned? (2) If not, how open shall I be about my (lack of) belief? That is, do I still want to come across as a theist or a moralist?

Because no moral error theorist will be tempted by any world-view built on an opposition between good and evil, the error theory emerges as a relatively tolerant way of thinking about the beliefs and acts of others. No one is condemned to suffer hideously for holding the wrong set of beliefs. Moral error theorists might dislike you, dislike what you have done, or think that your opinions are naïve or even absurd, but they will not judge you to be evil for having fallen into error. This actually makes quite a difference because when we can brand a person, or all the members of some race, sect, or country as evil, it is easier to think that our exploitation and abuse of them is justified, or even called for.

When shopping for a world-view, simplicity is to be prized. The fewer answers to the big questions one embraces, the less likely one is to be mistaken. In fact, we are not required to come up with an answer to any of the “big questions,” which is well because even the most sensible answers incorporate elements of supernatural beliefs only a cave man (or someone with the scientific understanding of a cave man) would

take seriously. We don't exactly "buy into" a world-view. We are given a starter world-view and take it from there. Those who end up with some the above-mentioned plain world-view don't start their intellectual odyssey with the intention of arriving at that combination of beliefs. But something, perhaps a wise parent, a good teacher, an inquisitive nature or a suspicious mind, freed them from the prevailing dogmas and prevented them from taking seriously the fantastic world-views dreamed up by priests and story-tellers. For most people day to day problems are problems enough, which is well because what we need to get right are natural explanations for natural phenomena. We live in our common sense world, and it is better to have unanswered unanswerable questions than it is to have answered unanswerable questions.

Slogans and aphorisms. It takes a considerable investment of time and energy to promote a general view of reality. It is far easier, and sometimes just as effective, to produce a memorable slogan. Great changes have been brought about and countless people inspired by powerful maxims and slogans such as: "Love your neighbor," "No man is an island," "Sí, se puede," "You deserve a break today," "Where's the beef?" and "Just do it!" Wikipedia nicely defines a slogan as "a memorable motto or phrase used in political, commercial, religious, and other contexts as a repetitive expression of an idea or purpose." We are also treated to a list of hundreds of memorable slogans and the news that "the word 'slogan' comes from sluagh-ghairm (pronounced slogorm), which is Gaelic for 'battle-cry'." <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slogan>>

If short and apt maxims and slogans are repeated often enough they become part of our public and personal dogma, These memes influence our decisions by floating about in our semi-consciousness and rising at appropriate times to nudge our

decider in one direction or another. Some promote harmony and kindness, but others (“It’s a dog eat dog world” or “All’s fair in love and war”) encourage competition and strife. A political advisor in India once formulated “the law of the fishes,” which is this: “The big ones eat the little ones.” We have been told that “God helps those who help themselves,” advised to “Look out for number one,” and have heard a judgment that no moral abolitionist would make: “Greed is good.” If people repeat and applaud these sayings they will become more aggressive, and they will be more successful whenever ruthlessness brings success. Such sayings erase guilt and can be flung at scruples and critics to rationalize neglect and exploitation.

In Maoist China slogans could be found on every wall. Some promoted communist ideals and the joy of serving the people, and others, like “Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts,” promoted Chairman Mao. Today, no respectable rally in any country would lack slogan-sporting signs. Political campaigns with effective slogans thrive, and a good slogan is very likely to have more effect than a thoughtful editorial.

It is disturbing to realize how many slogans and jingles and spiels we are exposed to every day. Phrases like “good to the last drop,” “Yo quiero Taco Bell,” “do the Dew,” or “Got milk?” can be worth millions because they capture our attention and show up, unbidden, at the moment of decision.

In fact, the danger with slogans is that they work too well. They bypass reflection and deliberation, and sometimes almost single-handedly generate decisions. They have no place in arguments, nor even in calm discussions about what to do or support, but still we may be moved to vote primarily because our decider has been awed by an effective slogan like “No new taxes,” or “Its time for a change.” Slogans are indeed

battle cries, and it might be important and empowering to chant them with the throng in the public square, but when we are trying to make up our minds what to think, or to do, or to support, perhaps our slogan should be: “Down with slogans!”

Guilt and Shame. One kind of guilt is legal. To be guilty is to be judged guilty after an official hearing. More often, guilt is personal, a discomfort we feel when we believe we have hurt someone or failed to live up to what we believe to be their demands. *Moral* guilt, as it would be characterized by the moralist, is discomfort we ought to feel when we have done what we ought not to have done, or when we have neglected to do what we ought to have done. Error theorists can also feel guilty about what they have done, but when they do, it will be because they have violated their own *ethical* standards. They might say “I wish I had not done that,” or “I regret causing so much pain,” but we will not find them suffering from *moral* guilt, which would require them to think that something they did was morally wrong.

The desire to avoid the complex of feelings and thoughts we call guilt is a very powerful motivation. If I get tired enough of the way I feel when I look at my unanswered emails or uncompleted tasks, I may be moved to do something about them. One way to avoid feeling bad for letting someone down is not to let them down, so the capacity to feel guilt is not necessarily harmful, and neither is the tendency to act in order to avoid feeling it. There is nothing wrong with refraining from saying something cruel because you know *you* would feel guilty about hurting the target of your remark—but there are other motivations for the same restraint that might be more friendly and welcome. For example, we may refrain from a cruel remark because we

know it will hurt someone's feelings and we don't want to do that, or, best of all, because such remarks don't even occur to us.

Guilt is usually contrasted with shame, and one way to oversimplify the discussion is to say that we feel guilt for letting someone else down and shame for letting ourselves down. If we take our principles and standards seriously, then we don't have to be moralists to feel shame if we don't live up to them. But if we take them too seriously, we can drive ourselves insane by worrying about setbacks and lapses others would consider insignificant. Both guilt and shame are used as forms of control, and both cause psychological damage if used to excess, but of course the question is, as ever, how much is too much? We should know by now that there is no single or simple answer to this. Somewhere between blaming ourselves for everything that went wrong and refusing all responsibility there is a place where we can stand and reconstruct a relatively accurate version of the antecedents of some disaster, including a relatively accurate assessment of our own contribution.

The problem with both shame and guilt as motivators is that they work by engaging our desire to avoid experiencing a feeling. If you write me a friendly letter, I would rather your motivation not be the desire to avoid feeling guilt for not writing. If you deal fairly with me, I hope it is not just to avoid feeling bad for having defrauded me. If that is your motive, I'll take it, but I would worry about doing business with you. Someone who has been conditioned to act in order to avoid shame or guilt is working with a defective decider that has been taught to jump through one hoop and to ignore the many other places and ways to travel.

Ritual. Confucius (551 – 479 BC) lived in a society deranged by war, greed, and corruption, and he developed his ideas about government and society in the hope of setting things right. He saw the distant past as a Golden Age in which conduct was regulated by the “rules of propriety” (the *li*), so he urged contemporary rulers and their subjects to follow these rules. These “ways of the ancient Kings” determined who should obey whom, so this advice was far-reaching.

One of Confucius’s main ideas was that names should be “rectified.” This is explained by one of his slogans, which was “Let a father be a father, a son be a son, and a wife be a wife.” What he meant by this was that fathers, sons, and wives, should, without complaint or deviation, conform to the conventions of behavior, speech, and even dress established in antiquity. He believed that much trouble could be avoided if everyone would follow these rules in their daily interactions. He urged rulers to deal with their people as if they were officiating at a great religious ritual, and promoted deference and decorous behavior for everyone.

Fung Yu Lan, a famous historian of Chinese philosophy, characterized the *li* as “all the rules for everything pertaining to human conduct.” In the following centuries Confucian scholars codified the *li*, but the kind of rules they attributed to their ancient kings are in no way unusual:

A son, when he is going abroad, must inform (his parents
where he is going); when he returns, he must present
himself before them.

When two men are sitting or standing together, do not join
them as a third. When two are standing together,

another should not pass between them. (*The Book of Rites*, in Legge [2], Vol I, 67-68 and 77)

The prescriptions in the *Book of Rites* were not put forward as moral requirements, but as ancient practices that, if followed, would save society. Confucius always hoped to find a ruler with the authority and the will to promote the courteous but authoritarian system he favored. He never found one, but his students were more successful and his “way” has dominated the East for millennia.

But there are costs when we push the ritualization of life to extremes. First, there is the ever-present danger that some of the feelings repressed by very polite Confucians will explode with cataclysmic fury. And second, as behavior becomes ritualized there is a loss of spontaneity, and with it a loss of creativity and innovation.

We in the West underestimate the extent of rituals in our lives. We indulge in rituals when we shake hands, bow, wave, or do any of a thousand things that have become too automatic to notice. Whether it is a high mass or a high five, rituals bind individuals to groups and to one another and facilitate sharing and communication. It would be most inconvenient to have to think up new ways to say hello and goodbye, and rituals of passage have helped millions of people get through difficult times. But, as with all the other elements that play roles in our lives, it is well to use rituals with awareness so that we do not allow ourselves to displace authentic human performances with empty gestures.

“Moral” Fiction. “Moral fiction” is the name sometimes given to fiction intended to send a moral message by providing moving examples of virtues and vices in action. The category includes fables, stories, novels, plays, and films. Children’s books have

always been crafted to teach moral lessons and it would be hard to find a drama or a comedy on TV that doesn't have some discernable pro-moral slant.

It would be a mistake to presume that the great and influential writers have always been moralists. Their tales have "morals," as did Aesop's fables, but the morals are not always moral—sometimes they are just lessons about life. What we learn from "The Hare and the Tortoise" is that "slow and steady wins the race," and from "The Boy who cried Wolf" is that "even when liars tell the truth, they are never believed." Another meaning for 'moral fiction', then, is fiction with a moral.

Homer's *Iliad* is the story of how greed and insensitivity led Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, to deprive Achilles of a prize he had been given as his share of the spoils, and of how the anger or "wrath" of Achilles played out to no one's advantage. The war itself was set in motion when Paris, a Trojan, in another act of irresponsible passion, kidnapped Helen, the wife of the King of Sparta, and took her to Troy, an act that launched the thousand ships and led to the fall of that impregnable city. Aeschylus, in the three plays that make up the *Oresteia*, describes how Agamemnon, upon returning from Troy, was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, who could not forgive him for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to secure fair winds for the raid on Troy. The trilogy continues when Orestes murders Clytemnestra, his mother, for killing Agamemnon, his father. For this crime Orestes is pursued relentlessly by the furies of guilt, but the play ends hopefully, when Athena introduces the option of putting on a trial as an alternative to an endless chain of acts of retribution.

The epics, histories, and plays these Greeks wrote show us, again and again, how decisions made in the face of the conflicting forces of tradition and personal

passions are capable of destroying our lives, and the lives of those we love. These lessons are not necessarily *moral* lessons, and the message of the *Oresteia* is not that revenge killings are morally wrong, but that sometimes the demands that tradition and our own wishes place on us create agonizing difficulties and tragic outcomes.

Fiction shows us how events can unfold by helping us understand the inner lives of complicated individuals and the mysterious workings of cause and effect. It shows us how others might think, and it strengthens our imagination. Reading a novel can influence the rest of our lives, for better or worse. Truths gained from fiction can have an immense influence on how we live our lives, but fiction with a moral does not always promote behavior a moralist would call moral. Perhaps we should call fiction that tries to do that “moralistic fiction.”

Humor. Fiction with a moral may show us how greed, stupidity, or anger often bring disaster, or how “what goes around comes around.” We enjoy seeing the villains “get what they deserve,” and if we see it happen on TV enough, we might start to believe in it, and our decider might be inclined to factor in the possible “wages of sin.” This could keep us out of some trouble. On a lighter note, we are also deterred from various ill-advised ventures by the great comedians who have mocked and satirized our vices (and our virtues) since antiquity. Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, Voltaire, Swift, Mark Twain, and the social and political cartoonists Goya, Daumier, Nast, and Herblock illustrated our foolishness and made us better people. In early the 20th Century, humor on the radio was gentle, naïve, and formulaic, and the same was the case with early and even much current TV. Humor with some bite finally showed up on

late-night TV and the popularity of “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report” on Comedy Central argues that political humor on TV has come of age.

Some of the best comedies (on stage, screen, or TV) show us how absurd we might actually appear if we go just a little further along some path of misapprehension, anger, or greed that we are already traveling. Most of us do not identify with, or be identified, with Moliere’s miser or hypochondriac, Inspector Jacques Clouseau from the “The Pink Panther,” or the George Costanza character of “Seinfeld.” Seeing their antics and the results, we may be led to temper our greed, whining, avarice, duplicity, self-importance, or insensitivity. How can we watch these characters behaving so foolishly and not resolve not to imitate them?

of humor is still a puzzle and an amusing study.

Music. Music elicits, shapes, mirrors, and intensifies emotions, and it fortifies beliefs by enabling us to repeat them with emphasis, enthusiasm, rhythm, and resolve. Protest songs, fight songs, work songs, love songs, anthems, hymns, and jingles can be unforgettable and infectious. Music can get stuck in our heads, or played on our iPods, where it can function as an energizer or a relaxant, a teacher or a companion. But the influence of music is not, in itself, moral. It can be as abstract as a single black line on a canvass, or it can amplify and celebrate feelings of love and hate, courage and fear, joy and sorrow. Any subject can be sung about and any policy can be supported by a song. Both sides in a war have their “battle hymns.”

Music has evolved to illuminate our thoughts about life, death, love and loss, and to express the various modes of adoration, praise, and triumph found in religions. Even an atheist can be moved by the great choruses of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.

Secular music also deals with our deepest thoughts and feelings and great popular songs of the last 100 years have seen us through love and loss, war and strife, momentous social changes, and far too many dead heroes. Now that boom boxes have evolved into Walkmen and Walkmen into iPods and smart phones, we can expect the music to continue, but with far greater fidelity, variety, and convenience.

We can call on the power of music to influence ourselves or others. When feeling sad we can either change our mood by listening to upbeat music, or we can inhabit our sadness by listening to the right choruses or operas, or to the blues. Plato was convinced that the state should use music to control the behavior of its citizens, and we know of malls and stores that treat their customers to music calculated to stimulate their impulses to buy. Musicians are sometimes disturbed by the uses made of their songs, and adults have always been worried about the influence music seems to have on younger fans. But wouldn't it be far more disturbing if music suddenly lost its power to move us? It might be difficult to establish Shakespeare's thought that "the man that hath no music in himself, nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils," but it is not an implausible idea to someone who understands music can do for us. (*The Merchant of Venice, Act 5, Scene 1*)

It is true that music (like morality) can show up to support both sides of any conflict, but the overwhelming importance of music does not rest in its power to motivate us, to enhance our propaganda, or to "sooth the savage beast." The greatest contribution of music may be that teaches us to share, to listen, to cooperate, and to appreciate harmony. The music and drama programs are the last ones I would slash from any school's budget. This is not because music or drama is "intrinsically valuable,"

it is because they provides us a context in which we are forced to listen to each other and to work together for a common goal.

Morality and Language. Morality itself must be included in the list of devices we use to influence each other. In the world according to the moralist, some things are objectively good and some ways of acting are forbidden by whatever moral authority there might be. We now know that it is an open question how much sense moral objectivity makes. The emotivists thought it made none, and error theorists think it makes enough sense for us to be able to deny it. We also know that it is not clear how much effect the belief in objective values actually has on conduct. It does not literally compel us, because we are free to do what is “morally wrong,” but the motivational power it does have is open to being exploited by those who think (or pretend to think) that they know what is really valuable and what our true moral duties are.

Many of the methods of control we have been discussing would be impossible without language, and morality itself, false though it may be, is built into our very words and woven out of powerful systems of metaphor. As George Orwell impressed upon us, if we can control the language we can control the thoughts of its users. Scientists and technicians are at work around the clock figuring out how words can be found that will lead us to where they want us to be. What can we possibly do to protect ourselves? Silence is not a genuine option, even if some sages seem to be advising it. Nor is it reasonable to stop listening, even if that seems to be the policy of far too many speakers. Since we are stuck with language, we are just going to have to realize how easily words can be used to control us, and how difficult it can be to for us to see this as it is happening.

Language is a tool, and we don't like to think about our tools, we like to use them. But the time to think is upon us. By using language in less than straightforward ways, skillful manipulators have learned how to make us disapprove of harmless behavior, buy their products, applaud their errors, and vote against our own interests. The possibility of saving ourselves by attending carefully to the uses and abuses of our words is important enough to deserve its own chapter.