
On Truth

The Tyranny of Illusion

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Stefan Molyneux

For my beloved wife Christina, who teaches me all that is true, and shows me everything that is possible...

...and to the listeners of Freedomain Radio, whose passion, generosity and participation has made this book – and all the books to come – possible. Thank you for the gift of this time.

On Truth: The Tyranny of Illusion, by Stefan Molyneux.

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From a short-term, merely practical standpoint, you really do not want to read this book. This book will mess up your life, as you know it. This book will change every single one of your relationships – most importantly, your relationship with yourself. This book will change your life even if you never implement a single one of the proposals it contains. This book will change you even if you disagree with every single idea it puts forward. Even if you put it down right now, this book will have changed your life, because now you know that you are afraid of change.

This book is radioactive and painful – it is only incidentally the kind of radiation and pain that will cure you.

Relationships

There are really only three kinds of relationships in the world. The first kind is the one we all dream of – joyous, mutually beneficial, deep, meaningful, fun, a real pleasure to have and to hold.

This kind of relationship is extraordinarily rare. If this kind of relationship were an animal, it would not even be on the endangered list. It would be by many considered extinct.

The second kind of relationship is mutually beneficial, but not joyous, deep, or meaningful. This is the kind of relationship you have with your grocer, your banker, and perhaps your boss. It is voluntary, defined by an implicit or explicit contract, and can usually be broken or allowed to lapse without guilt, regret or remorse.

This kind of relationship is not uncommon, but also not very important. We do not lose our lives, our happiness or our very souls in the pits of these kinds of relationships. They are, as the saying goes, “dry calculations of mutual utility.” We are not obligated to go to the deathbeds of our bankers; our grocers do not force us to attend church when we do not believe; we rarely get into fights with our bosses about whether or not we should baptize our children.

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No, it is the third kind of relationship that we are most concerned with in our lives. It is the third kind of relationship that so often tortures us. It is the third kind of relationship that undermines our joy, integrity and independence.

The first kind of relationship does not involve obligation, but pleasure. There is no need for guilt or manipulation, bullying or control, demands, tears or passive-aggression. We do not need obligation to draw us to that which gives us pleasure, any more than a child needs to be cajoled into eating his candy.

The second kind of relationship does involve obligation, but it is voluntarily chosen, for mutual advantage. We pay our mortgage; the bank gives us a house. The relationship is contractual, and thus does not need guilt or manipulation.

It is the third kind of relationship that this book will focus on.

It is the third kind of relationship that is eating us alive.

The Third Kind

The third kind of relationship has three main components. The first is that it is not chosen; the second is that it involves obligations, and the third is that it is considered moral.

The first and most important aspect of these kinds of relationships is that they are not entered into voluntarily. You are born into them. You do not choose your parents. You do not choose your siblings. You do not choose your extended family. You do not choose your country. You do not choose your culture. You do not choose your government. You do not choose your religion. You do not choose your school. You do not choose your teachers.

Sadly, when you are a child, the list is nearly endless.

You are born into this world without choice, into a familial, social, educational, political and geographical environment that is merely

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accidental. And for the rest of your life, everyone will try to convince you that you are responsible for this accident.

Your parents decided to have a child – you were in no way involved in the choice, since you did not as yet exist when the decision was made. Even if you were conceived by accident, or adopted, your parents decided to keep you.

Thus your parents' relationship with you when you were a child was essentially *contractual*, in the same way that when you buy a dog, you're obligated to feed it. Naturally, it is preferable – and certainly possible – for your relationship with your parents to be loving, mutually enjoyable, respectful and great fun all around.

But as I said before, this kind of relationship is, sadly, all too rare.

Entire generations of children have grown up with the idea that the act of being born creates an obligation.

This is entirely false, and one of the most destructive myths of mankind.

First, I will tell you what is true. Then I will tell you why it is true. Then I will tell you how to change.

What Is True

It is true that your parents chose to have you. It is true that by making that choice, your parents assumed a voluntary obligation towards you. That obligation consisted of two main parts: the first was physical, the second was moral.

The physical part of that obligation was clothing, food, medical attention, shelter and so on – the base physical requirements. I am not going to spend much time on that in this book, since the vast majority of parents succeed in providing food and shelter for their children – and those who fail in this regard are so obviously deficient that a philosophical book is scarcely required to illuminate their shortcomings.

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The moral obligations that your parents assumed by having you were twofold. The first part is more or less understood in society, and consists of all the standard virtues such as educating you, keeping you safe, refraining from physical or emotional abuse and so on.

The second part of your parents' moral obligation towards you is much more subtle and corrosive. This is the realm of *integrity*, and it is a great challenge for societies throughout the world.

Integrity

Integrity can be defined as consistency between reality, ideas and behaviour. Consistency with reality is not telling a child that daddy is "sick" when he is in fact drunk. Consistency with behaviour is not slapping a child for hitting another child. The value of this kind of integrity is also well understood by many, even if imperfectly practiced, and we will not deal with it much here either.

It is consistency with *ideas* that causes the most problems for families – and the most long-term suffering for children throughout their lives.

When you were a child, you were told over and over that certain actions were either good or bad. Telling the truth was good; stealing was bad. Hitting your brother was bad; helping your grandmother was good. Being on time was good; failing to complete chores was bad.

Implicit in all these instructions – *moral* instructions – was the premise that your parents knew what was right and what was wrong; what was good, and what was bad.

Do you think that was really true? Do you think that your parents *knew* what was right and wrong when you were a child?

When we tell a child that something is wrong – not just incorrect, but *morally* wrong – there are really only two possibilities. The first is that we actually *know* what is right and wrong in general, and we are applying our universal knowledge of right and wrong to a specific action committed by the child.

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This is how it is always portrayed to the child. It is almost always the most dangerous lie in the world.

The second possibility is that we are telling our child that his actions are “wrong” for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with morality whatsoever.

For instance, we might tell a child that stealing is wrong because:

1. We are embarrassed at our child’s actions.
2. We are afraid of being judged a poor parent.
3. We are afraid that our child’s theft will be discovered.
4. We are simply repeating what was told to us.
5. We enjoy humiliating our child.
6. Correcting our child on “ethics” makes us feel morally superior.
7. We want our child to avoid behaviour that *we* were punished for as children.

... and so on

Assuming they are not terrified, most children, on first receiving moral instructions, will generally respond by asking “why?” Why is stealing wrong? Why is lying wrong? Why is bullying wrong? Why is hitting wrong?

These are all perfectly valid questions, akin to asking why the sky is blue. The problem arises in the fact that parents have no rational answers, but endlessly pretend that they do.

When a child asks us why something is wrong, we are put in a terrible bind. If we say that we do not know why lying is universally wrong, we believe we will lose our moral authority in the eyes of our children. If we say that we *do* know why lying is wrong, then we retain our moral authority, but only by lying to our children.

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Since the fall of religion, we have lost our way in terms of ethics. As an atheist, I do not mourn the loss of the illusions of gods and devils, but I am alarmed at the fact that we have not yet admitted that the fall of religion has not provided us an objective and rational moral compass. By failing to admit to the fact that we do not know what we are doing ethically, we are perpetrating a grave moral error on our children.

Basically, we are lying to them about being good.

We tell them that certain things they do are right or wrong – yet we do not tell them that we do not know *why* those things are right or wrong. If our child asks us why lying is wrong, we can say that it causes people pain – but so does dentistry – or we can say “you don’t like it when someone lies to you” – which would be an incentive to not get caught, not to refrain from lying – and so on. Every answer we come up with leads to more questions and inconsistencies. What do we do then?

Why, then, we must bully them.

This does not mean hitting them or yelling at them – though sadly all too often this is the case – because as parents we have a near-infinity of passive-aggressive tactics such as sighing, acting exasperated, changing the subject, offering them a cookie, taking them for a walk, claiming to be “too busy,” distracting or rejecting them in a million and one ways.

These kinds of innocent questions about morality represent a kind of horror for parents. As parents, we must retain our moral authority over our children – but as citizens of modernity, we have no rational basis for that moral authority. Thus we are forced to lie to our children about being good, and about our knowledge of goodness, which transforms virtue from a rational discipline into a fearful fairy tale.

In the past, when religious mythology was dominant, when children asked “Where does the world come from?” parents could reply that God made it. Despite the superstitious ignorance of those who even now make the same claim, most modern parents provide the scientific and rational explanation of where the world came from, or at least send their children to the Web, an encyclopaedia, or the library.

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There was a time, though, when the question of where the world came from was very difficult to answer. When religious explanations were becoming less and less credible, but scientific explanations had not become completely established, parents had to say – if they wanted to speak with integrity – “I don’t know where the world came from.”

By openly expressing their lack of certainty, parents not only acted with honesty and integrity, but also stimulated their children to pursue a truth that was admittedly absent from their world.

Alas, we suffer similar difficulties today, but about a far more important topic. The religious basis for ethics has fallen away from us, and we lack any credible or accepted theory to replace it. For a time, patriotism and allegiance to culture had some power to convince children that their elders knew something objective about ethics, but as government and military corruption have become increasingly evident, allegiance to a country, a state or a military ethos has become an increasingly fragile basis for ethical absolutes. Even our cherished theories about the virtues of democracy have come under increasing pressure, as gargantuan governments continue to separate themselves from the wishes of their citizens and act in a virtual “state of nature.”

Religious explanations of virtue have failed not just because we no longer believe in God, but also because it is now completely self-evident that when most people refer to “truth,” they are really referring to *culture*.

Culture

Think about a father in a Muslim country. When his child asks him: “Daddy, what is goodness?” he will generally answer: “To obey Allah, and obey His Prophet.” Why is that his answer? Is it because he has had direct experience with the Prophet, wrote the holy books himself, and has a deep understanding of morality direct from the original creator? If he had grown up alone on a desert island, would his answer be the same?

Of course not. He is merely repeating what was told to him as a child.

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However, there is much more to it than that.

This Muslim father knows that his child is going to have to survive – and hopefully flourish – in a Muslim society. If he tells his child that he does not know what is right and wrong, not only will he lose his moral authority in the eyes of his child, but he will also be setting his child up for endless conflicts with everyone else in his society.

In other words, if everyone else lies to their children, what are the costs – social, romantic, economic and so on – of telling your children the truth?

My neighbour has four lovely children – the other day, his son came and showed me a drawing he'd made, a decent representation of Jesus Christ sitting on a rock and praying to the heavens. In all innocence, he asked me what I thought of the picture. Naturally, I knew that his father had told him that Jesus Christ was a real and living man-god who came back from the dead, floated up to heaven, and will free him of sin if he telepathically communicates his love to this ghost. This is no more or less horrifying than any other cult of guilt and control.

But – what could I say to this child? Could I say that this was a very good drawing of a fictional character? Could I tell him that it was an excellent representation of a fairy tale? Could I see the pain and surprise in his eyes? Could I imagine the conversation that he would later have with his father, asking why the nice man next door told him that Jesus Christ was a fictional character? Could I imagine the coldness that would then descend upon the cordial relations between our two houses? Could I imagine his father telling all of his children to stay away from the nice man next door, who wants to take God away from them? Could I stomach the chilled looks that I would receive every time I saw his family for the next few decades..?

I did take the path of least resistance, but did not lie to the child. I told him that I thought the picture was well drawn, and asked him what he thought about it.

Telling the truth is not an easy thing.

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We can very easily see how parents in other cultures simply repeat cultural norms to their children as if those cultural norms were objective truth. Japanese parents teach their children obedience and filial piety; Catholic parents teach their children to drink the blood of their god; Muslim parents teach their children that a man who married a six-year-old girl – and consummated that marriage when she was nine – is the paragon of moral virtue; Western parents teach their children that democracy is the highest ideal; North Korean parents teach their children that the dictator who rules their lives is a sort of secular deity who loves them.

The list goes on and on. Virtually every parent in the world believes that she is teaching her child the truth, when she is merely inflicting what may be politely called cultural mythologies on her child.

We lie to our children, all the while telling them that lying is wrong.

We command our children to think for themselves, all the while repeating the most prejudicial absurdities as if they were objective facts.

We tell our children to be good, but we have no idea what goodness really is.

We tell our children that conformity is wrong (“If everyone jumped off the Empire State building, would you jump too?”) but at the same time we are complete slaves to the historical inertia of prior prejudices.

Too Harsh?

I have often been accused of being too harsh on parents. “Parents do the best they can under difficult circumstances; you cannot judge the practical instructions of parents according to some abstract and absolute philosophical standard. My parents were not philosophers – they were simply telling me the truth that they believed, that they thought was accurate.”

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The wonderful thing about applying philosophical concepts to our own lives is that theories are very easy to test. Discussing a philosophical theory about the causes of the decline of the Roman Empire is a largely theoretical exercise, since we cannot go back in time and test it.

Theories about our families, however, are very easy to test, assuming that we have access to the relevant family members.

It is my firm belief that most human beings are absolutely brilliant. I have come to this conclusion after decades of studying philosophy and having the most amazing conversations with countless people. I am now certain that parents know exactly what they are doing – and a relatively simple test can prove this to the satisfaction of any rational person.

A Practical Exercise

Sit down with your parents and ask them what the capital of Madagascar is – or some other piece of trivia that they are unlikely to know. They will very likely smile, shake their heads and say, “I don’t know.” They will not avoid the question. They will be more than happy to help you look it up. It will be a trivial fact-finding interaction.

After you have established what the capital of Madagascar is, ask them: “What is goodness?”

I absolutely guarantee you that there will be an instant chill in the room – there will be an enormous amount of tension, and your parents – and probably you – will feel a very strong desire to change the subject, or drop the question.

Why is that? Why is it that when you ask your parents to explain what goodness is, the tension in the room spikes dramatically?

Well, for the same reason that Socrates was introduced to a grim libation called hemlock.

There is terror in the face of the question “What is goodness?” because authority figures claim the right to tell us what to do based on their

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superior knowledge. If we decide to learn karate, we submit ourselves to the judgment and instruction of somebody who is an expert in karate. If we become ill, we submit our judgment to a doctor, an expert in the field. In other words, when we lack knowledge, we defer to those who claim greater knowledge.

Our parents claimed the right to instruct us on good and bad based on their great knowledge of ethics, not based on their power as parents. Our fathers did not say to us: “Obey me or I will beat you.” Although that terrible sentence might have come out of their mouths at some point, the basis of their ethics was that we owed them obedience as a just debt, and thus could be punished for failing to provide it. “Honour thy father and thy mother” is a staple of moral instruction the world over, both religious and secular. However, the honour that we are supposed to bestow upon our parents must be based upon their superior knowledge and practice of virtue – otherwise the word “honour” would make no sense. If we were thrown in jail, we would obey the prison guards because they held power over us, not because we “honoured” them. If a mugger presses a knife to our ribs, we hand him our wallet – obey his wishes – not because we honour him, but because he has the power to harm us.

By using the word “honour,” parents are claiming that we owe them allegiance due to their superior knowledge and practice of virtue.

Currently, the foundational “ethic” of the family – the entire basis for the authority of adults – is that parents know right from wrong, and children do not. Metaphorically, the parents are the doctors, and the children are the patients. Parents claim the authority to tell their children what to do for the same reason that doctors claim the authority to tell their patients what to do – the superior knowledge of the former, and the relative ignorance of the latter.

If you are unwell, and put yourself in the care of a doctor, and follow his instructions, but find that you do not get better – but in fact seem to get worse – it would be wise to sit down with that doctor and review his abilities – particularly if you cannot change physicians for some reason.

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Since following his instructions is making you worse, you must ask:
“Why should I follow your instructions?”

It would be logical to begin by asking the doctor to confirm his actual credentials. Then, you might continue by asking what his definition of health is, to make sure that you were both on the same page. Then, you would continue to drill down to more specific questions about the nature of your illness, the nature of his knowledge of the human body, and his understanding of your ailments and the methodology by which he came up with your cure.

This is the conversation that you must have with your parents regarding the nature of virtue and their knowledge of it. Your parents were the moral doctors of your being while you were growing up – if, as an adult, you are happy and healthy, full of joy and engaged in deep and meaningful relationships, it is still worthwhile to examine the knowledge of your parents, since you may have children in time, and will yourself become a “doctor” to them.

If, however, you are not happy and fulfilled as an adult, then it is *essential* that you examine your parents’ ethical knowledge. If your health regimen has been established by a quack who has no idea what he is doing, you will never be healthy as long as you follow his instructions, since one can never randomly arrive at the truth.

If a madman passes himself off as a doctor, when a patient asks for his credentials, he will smile, spread his hands, and say, “Well of course I don’t have any!” His openness about his lack of knowledge and credentials establishes his relative innocence.

However, when the patient asks for a doctor’s credentials, if the doctor evades the question, or becomes hostile, or dismissive, then clearly the “doctor” is fully aware of what he is doing at some level. A man who commits a murder in a police station may claim insanity; a man who murders in secret and then hides the body has the capacity for rationality, if not virtue, and thus cannot claim to be mad.

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The fact that your parents will do almost anything to avoid the question “What is goodness?” is the most revealing piece of knowledge that you can possess. It is the fact that blows the cage of culture wide open. It is the horrifying knowledge that will set you free.

You will not just benefit from examining your parents. You can also sit down with your priest, and examine him with regards to the nature of the existence of God (this is a useful conversation to have with religious parents as well). If you are persistent, and do your research in advance, you will very quickly discover that your priest also has no certain knowledge about the existence of God – and will become very uncomfortable and/or aggressive if you persist, which you should.

Is it wrong for a priest to say that he only believes in God because he “has a feeling”? In terms of truth, not exactly – in terms of integrity, absolutely.

The fundamental problem is not that the priest claims the emotional irrationality of “faith” as his justification for his belief in God, *but rather that the existence of God was presented to you as an objective fact, and also that you were not allowed the same criteria for “knowledge.”*

These two facets of the falsehoods you were told as a child are essential to your liberation as an adult.

Fiction as Facts

When you were a child, you did not have the ability to objectively validate the commandments of those who had power over you. Your susceptibility was a great temptation to those who would rather be *believed* than be *right*. All power tends to corrupt, and the power that parents have over their children is the greatest power in the world.

A child is biologically predisposed to trust and obey his parents – this has great utility, insofar as parents will often tell their children not to eat poisonous berries, pull hot frying pans off the stove, or run around all

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day outside without sunscreen on. The requirements of survival tend to discourage endless “trial and error.”

When parents instruct their children, they can either present that instruction as conditional, or absolute. Conditional instructions – do not hit your brother except in self-defence – tend to lead to endless additional questions, and quickly reveal the parents’ lack of knowledge. As the child continues to ask what exactly defines self-defence, whether pre-emptive strikes are allowable, whether teasing can be considered aggression and so on, the fuzzy areas innate to all systems of ethics quickly come into view.

As these fuzzy areas become clearer, parents fear once more the loss of moral authority. However, the fact that certain areas of ethics are harder to define than others does not mean that ethics as a whole is a purely subjective discipline. In biology, the classification of very similar species tends to be fuzzy as well – at least before the discovery of DNA – but that does not mean that biology is a purely subjective science. Water can never be perfectly pure, but that does not mean that bottled water is indistinguishable from seawater.

Due to their desire for simple and absolute moral commandments, parents spend enormous amounts of energy continually herding their children away from the “cliff edges” of ethical complexities. They deploy a wide variety of distractive and abusive tactics to achieve this end – and all these tactics are designed to convince the child that his parents possess absolute knowledge of ethical matters.

However, as children grow – particularly into the teenage years – a certain danger begins to arise. The children, formerly compliant (at least from the “terrible twos” through the latency period) begin to suspect that their parents’ “knowledge” is little more than a form of hypocritical bullying. They begin to see the true conformity of their parents with regards to culture, and really begin to understand that what was presented to them as objective fact was in reality subjective opinion.

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This causes great confusion and resentment, because teenagers instinctually grasp the true corruption of their parents.

A counterfeiter necessarily respects the value of real money, since he does not spend his time and energies creating exact replicas of Monopoly banknotes. The counterfeiter wishes to accurately reproduce real money because he knows that real money has value – he wishes his reproduction to be as accurate as possible because he knows that his fake money does *not* have value.

Similarly, parents present their opinions as facts because they know that objective facts have more power and validity than mere opinion. A “doctor” who fakes his own credentials does so because he knows credentials have the power to create credibility.

Recognizing the power of truth – and using that power to reinforce lies – is abominably corrupt. A man who presents his opinions as facts does so because he recognizes the *value* of facts. Using the credibility of “truth” to make falsehoods more plausible simultaneously affirms and denies the value of honesty and integrity. It is a fundamental logical contradiction in theory, and almost unbearably hypocritical in practice.

Thus it always happens that when grown children begin to examine their elders, they rapidly discover that those elders do not in fact know what they claimed to know – but knew enough about the value of the truth to present their subjective opinions as objective knowledge. This hypocritical crime far outstrips the abuses of mere counterfeiting, or the faking of credentials, because adults can protect themselves against false currency and fake diplomas.

Children have no such defences.

Do As I Say, Not As I Do...

The second major hypocrisy involved in presenting subjective opinion as absolute fact is that parents reserve this power only for themselves – and self-righteously punish children for doing exactly the same thing.

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Take the question of going to church. Religious parents tell their children that they must go to church. When the children ask why, they are told, “Because God exists, and He loves you,” or other such nonsense. In other words, parents command their children with reference to objective absolutes. Children are absolutely *not* allowed to say, “I don’t want to go to church because I don’t *feel* like it.”

Fast-forward a decade or so. The child – now a teenager – sits down with his parents and asks: “Why do you believe in God?”

If he is persistent and knowledgeable, he will quickly corner his parents into admitting that they believe in God because of “faith.” In other words, they have no proof that God exists, but believe in God because they *feel* like it – since no matter how emotionally compelling faith is, it remains in essence a feeling that contradicts reason and evidence.

However, when that teenager was a child, he was never allowed to make decisions because he just *felt* like it. He was not allowed to stay home from church because he didn’t *feel* like going. He was always sent to school despite his preference for staying home at times. *His* feelings did not create truth, or establish objectively valid criteria for action.

When he used *exactly the same methodology that his parents used*, he was called disobedient, wrong, sinful, wilful, immoral, stubborn and a thousand other pejoratives. For his parents, acting on the primacy of feeling is praised as an absolute and objective virtue. For him, acting on the primacy of feeling is condemned as an absolute and objective vice.

Conformity

As the child grows up, his tendency to want to “merge with the herd” is criticized as an immoral weakness. Any susceptibility to fashion trends, linguistic tics, prized possessions, general sexual habits or any other form of “groupthink” is opposed by his parents on supposedly objective and moral grounds.

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Again – generally in the teenage years – the child begins to realize that his parents do not actually oppose groupthink or conformity on *principle*, but only attack *competing* conformities. If a son begins to run with a wild gang, his parents will criticize him on the grounds of conformity, but it is not conformity that they object to, but conformity with a gang they disapprove of, rather than with a group they approve of.

And it gets even worse than that.

The reason that the parents dislike the child's new gang is because the parents fear disapproval from their own gang. If the son of religious parents starts hanging out with a group of atheists, his parents will criticize him for his mindless conformity, and pointless rebellion – but only because they fear being attacked, criticized or undermined by their own religious peers. In other words, they effectively tell their son: “You should not be susceptible to the disapproval of *your* peers, because we are susceptible to the disapproval of *our* peers.”

Is Ignorance Hypocrisy?

The argument is often made that parents are not aware of all the complexities of their own hypocrisies, and thus are not morally responsible for their inconsistencies.

Fortunately, there is no need for us to rely on mere theory to establish the truth of this proposition.

If I tell you to take Highway 101 to get to your destination, and it turns out that this takes you in the exact opposite direction, what would be a rational response if I were truly ignorant of the fact that I was giving you really bad directions?

Well, I would first insist that they were the correct directions, since I genuinely believe that they are. However, when you sat me down with a map and pointed out exactly why my directions were so bad, I would see the truth, apologize profusely, and openly promise never to give out bad

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directions again – and buy a whole bunch of maps to boot, and spend some significant amount of time studying them.

However, if I got angry the moment that you brought up that I had sent you in the wrong direction, and refused to look at any maps, and refused to admit that I was wrong, and kept changing the subject, and kept distracting you with emotional tricks, and got more and more upset, and refused to tell you how I came up with my directions – and ended up storming out of the room, you may be unsure of many things, but you would not be unsure of one thing at least.

You would no longer imagine that I was *ever* interested in giving good directions.

In the realm of the parent-child relationship, this realization comes as a profound and terrible shock. This realization lands like a nuclear blast over a shantytown, radiating out in waves of destruction, smashing down the assumptions you have about all of your existing relationships.

The moment you realize that your parents, priests, teachers, politicians – your elders in general – only *used* morality to control you, to subjugate you – as a tool of abuse – your life will never be the same again.

The terrifying fact that your elders knew the power of virtue, but used that power to control, corrupt, bully and exploit you, reveals the genuine sadism that lies at the core of culture – it reveals the awful “cult” in *culture*.

A doctor who fakes his credentials is bad enough – how would any sane person judge a doctor who studies the human body not to heal it, but to more effectively cause pain?

A fraud is still better than a sadist.

What can we say, then, about parents and other authority figures who know all there is to know about the power and effectiveness of using moral arguments to control the actions and thoughts of children – who

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respect the power of virtue – and then use that power to destroy any capacity for moral integrity in their children?

In movies, terrorists almost invariably kidnap the wife or child of the hero in order to enforce his compliance with their wishes. His virtues – love and loyalty – are thus turned into the service of evil. The better he is, the worse he must act. The more he loves virtue, the more he is controlled by evil.

And thus do the best become the worst.

And thus are children raised.

And this was your instruction.

Reluctance

We instinctively shy away from confronting the moral void at the core of our relationships – and, fundamentally, the moral void at the core of our relationship with ourselves.

There is a simple and terrible reason for our reluctance to confront this emptiness.

Societies are generally built upon mythologies – in fact, a society can be accurately defined as a group of people who all share the same mythology.

I use the term “mythology” here because I want to ease you into the idea of social fictions, and the degree to which they distort your relationship to yourself and others – and thus your relationship to reality.

There are two major disciplines, which help us dispel the corrosive cobwebs of social fictions and reach through them to grasp reality. The first is theoretical; the second is practical.

The first discipline is *logic*, which is the process of organizing our thoughts in a systematic and non-contradictory manner. The second is

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science, which is the testing of logical theories against empirical observations. The union of these two disciplines is *philosophy*, which is in its fundamentals the testing of theories of knowledge against both logic and empirical observation.

Logic will tell you that two plus two equals four; science will verify that placing two rocks next to two other rocks will result in an aggregation of four rocks.

But it is *philosophy* that tells us that logic plus empirical testability are both key requirements to the establishment of the truth. It is *philosophy* that specifically rejects the primacy of faith, or the primacy of emotion, or the primacy of authority, or the primacy of age, or the primacy of preference, or the primacy of biology – or any of the other foolish and exploitive mechanisms that human beings have used as substitutes for logic and evidence in order to inflict “truth” on the helpless.

Philosophy is the opposite of mythology. Or, more accurately, *truth* is the opposite of *falsehood*.

We are, all of us, deeply aware of the deficiencies of our beliefs. The basic knowledge that our beliefs are mere prejudices, inflicted on us by parents and teachers, is a fact that, deep down, we are all perfectly aware of. The amount of energy that we all put into pretending otherwise is staggering, and debilitating. There is a reason that depression is one of the most prevalent forms of illness.

The contradiction at the core of social mythology is that these cultural falsehoods are always presented as objective and absolute truths.

Americans, for instance, are famously proud of their country, and the beliefs that they have inherited from the Enlightenment philosophers and the Founding Fathers. This is a very strange notion when you examine it.

The average American just happened to be born in America – it is a mere accident, not something *earned*. The average American takes pride in his cultural heritage, which he did not invent, and which was taught to

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him by others, who also did not invent it. Believing that you are virtuous because you were born in a particular country is like believing that you are an excellent businessman because you inherited a lot of money, or that you are a good person because you happen to be tall.

The average American has no idea of the philosophical premises underpinning the ideal of a constitutionally limited government. The average American enthusiastically supports a government that is hundreds of times more oppressive and brutal than the British government from which his ancestors fought to free themselves. The average American enthusiastically celebrates Independence Day, despite the fact that, when his country was founded, slavery was protected, and basic rights for women and children were denied.

In other words, the average American blindly praises his own culture and history because he is *taught* to praise it, not because he has any rational understanding of its actual merits and deficiencies.

This is not to say that America is not a better country than, for instance, Syria. It is, and I am glad not to be living in Syria. However, the methodology for transmitting value from parent to child remains the same in both countries. The genuine values in America arose from rational thought and breaking with tradition, not from blind allegiance to dirt and cloth.

The average American considers himself superior to the average Muslim, because he believes to some degree in the separation of church and state, supports limited democracy and the rights of women, and respects certain aspects of the free market. He believes that these are good values to hold, and criticizes Muslims for not holding the same values.

The sad fact is that while specific beliefs vary from culture to culture, the methodology of belief in all cultures is identical. The simple fact is that if the average American had been born to Muslim parents in Syria, he would be *exactly the same as the average Syrian Muslim*. He would be no more likely to value the separation of church and state than the average Western woman born in Manhattan would be likely to wear a burka.

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Patriotism is the hijacking of the achievements of others – usually ancestors – and taking ego gratification in them as if they were one's own. This involves a curious distortion of logic that is blindingly obvious when seen.

Either someone is a good person because he was born in America, or because he conforms to objective standards of goodness. You either like a car because it is a Buick, or Buicks are good cars because they get excellent mileage.

If someone is *good* because he was born in America, then clearly he cannot judge a man born in Saudi Arabia as deficient in any way, either morally or culturally. The essence of aristocracy – the eternal plague of mankind – is the belief that we are “born into” superiority; that our “excellence” is somehow innate. However, if an American is “superior” to a Saudi, then that superiority is not *earned*. If Bob were born in Saudi Arabia rather than America, he would be an “inferior” Muslim rather than a “superior” Christian or American. Thus Bob's superiority – or lack thereof – has nothing to do with his personal choices, but is rather defined by the accidents of geography and birth. Either Bob claims to be better due to geography, which is impossible – or due to his own personal virtue, in which case geography has nothing to do with it.

Both Americans and Muslims are simply reproducing what they are told – what is inflicted on them through emotional punishments when they are children – and calling it “morality.” This is exactly the same as a child who is force-fed, who then calls being overweight “moral,” while the child next door is underfed, and then calls being skinny “moral.” Sports fans are the same way – the closest franchise is just somehow the “best.”

Basically, culture is the compulsion to call whatever surrounds you “moral.” If you live in the mountains, it is moral to live in the mountains. If you were taught to swim, then swimming is moral. If you were *not* taught to swim, then swimming is immoral. If you were taught to cover your legs, then baring your legs is “immodest.” If you were taught to uncover your legs, then covering them up is “prudish.” If you

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were taught to fold the flag a certain way, then folding the flag any other way is “disrespectful.”

When I was six, I was sent to an English boarding school. One of the rules there was that I was had to wear garters around my socks to keep them up, especially in church. I was told in no uncertain terms that if I entered the church without my garters on, I was being “disrespectful to God.” This didn’t make much sense to me; I argued that God made my legs, and men made garters, and I was sure that God would appreciate looking at his own creation rather than something that men made.

Naturally, my objections were also framed as immoral talkback – I was being “disrespectful” to the headmaster.

I am sure you get the idea.

Everything that surrounds you is framed in terms of ethics, because framing things in terms of ethics *works*. If you can get a child to believe that something is right or wrong, you control that child’s mind, his body, his allegiance, his very *being*. Moral arguments have a power that is unmatched in any other form of human interaction. In terms of social control, moral arguments are the ultimate WMDs.

Susceptibility

As children, we are highly susceptible to moral arguments because we so desperately want to be good, and because we know that “morality” is synonymous with praise, while “immorality” is synonymous with punishment. When our parents, priests and teachers tell us that something is “good,” what they are really saying is: “You will not be punished for this – and you may even be rewarded!” Conversely, when we are told that something is “bad,” what we are really being told is that we will be punished for doing – or even contemplating – whatever it is.

We are not punished for being bad. “Being bad” is invented so that we may be “justly” punished.

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Those in authority are continually driven to hide their perpetual use of power over their victims. Our teachers do not like to openly tell us that they will hurt us if we disobey them, because that is too naked a display of abusive power.

It is also a highly inefficient form of control.

If your teacher were to say, “If you lie to me, I will punish you” – and just left it at that, then lying would always be more or less a calculated risk – and being punished for lying would have no more moral significance than being fouled while playing basketball. If a teacher is facing a class of 30 students, each of whom is calculating whether or not he can get away with a lie, then clearly, as more of them lie, each lie becomes that much harder to catch, just as it is harder to figure out exactly who is talking when 20 children are chatting rather than just two.

Furthermore, if a parent openly uses brute force to compel compliance from a child, then the pattern-making centers in our brains will immediately extract a principle out of that interaction. Within our minds, every decision and interaction is involuntarily extrapolated into a principle. If our parents compel our compliance with brute force, then the principle that we extract from that interaction is: “Whoever has the power should use it abusively to control everyone else.” Or: “Whoever has the most power should inflict his will on whoever has the least power.”

Due to the natural decay of organic life, this is a rather dangerous principle for parents to establish. If we think of a single mother raising two boys, we can easily see that creating a principle called “brute force rules” – while perhaps having a certain practical utility when they are young – will scarcely serve her well when her boys hit their teenage years, and become physically far stronger than she is. Even fathers will reach dotage and physical weakness relative to their sons, and thus will scarcely benefit from applying the principle of “whoever has the most power should forcefully subjugate whoever has the least power.”

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Thus the use of force must be forever shrouded in the fog of “ethics.” This is a very tricky business logically, because what is required is a simultaneous appeal to both a *principle*, and a *person* – which is directly contradictory.

The Contradictory Appeal

When your father says, “Honour thy father and thy mother,” he is invoking both a *principle* and a *person*. The *principle* is that *all* mothers and fathers are honourable, and so deserving of respect. The *person* that he is invoking is himself and your mother specifically – *thy* mother and father.

Logically, this makes no sense.

Saying, “Honour thy father and thy mother,” is like saying, “Honour all the women who are my wife.” If I must honour *all* women, then I will automatically honour your wife, since she is a woman. If I must honour *your* wife, then there is no point saying that I must honour her *as a woman*, because that would involve honouring all women again. It’s one or the other.

If you must honour the *category* “father” and “mother,” then you must respect *all* mothers and fathers equally. Showing preference for your own parents would be unjust.

If you must show preference for your *own* mother and father, then the category of “mother” and “father” is irrelevant. It must be for some other reason, then, that you should honour these particular individuals.

If you should bestow honour upon your mother and father *as individuals*, and for no objective principle, then what is really being demanded is not honour, but obedience towards individuals in the guise of honour as a principle.

This basic logical contradiction, while complicated to discuss syllogistically, is something that every child instinctually understands. When our mother demands that we respect her, do we not feel contempt, frustration and despair? Demanding respect is like demanding

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love, or hijacking an aircraft. It is commanding a destination, rather than respecting the free choices of individuals.

We cannot imagine someone hijacking an aircraft on its way to Vladivostok and demanding, “Take me to Vladivostok!” People hijack planes because the plane is *not* going where they want to go.

Efficient Control

If, however, through intimidation, the distinction between the *principle* and the *person* can be blurred and buried, a far more efficient mechanism of control is achieved. If a child – or a citizen – can be taught to obey a *person* as if that person were a universal *principle*, the foundations of hegemonic dictatorship, whether in the family, the church, the school or the state, are firmly established. If a child’s *mind* can be taught to obey the whims of an individual to the same degree that the child’s *body* obeys the absolutes of gravity, then near-perfect control can be established.

Of course, this control incurs a terrible cost – and a terrible risk. The cost accrues to both the parent and the child, as is the case in all corrupt interactions. By using false and inconsistent principles to teach the child to obey a *person* rather than a *principle*, the child’s ability to extract principles from interactions is crippled. Such children inevitably grow up to repeat destructive patterns in relationships, seemingly without any ability to learn from their mistakes. How could they learn from their mistakes? They have been taught *as a principle* to obey individuals – how can they then conceivably extract generalized principles from the behaviour of those individuals? That would be like hoping that water will flow uphill. Expecting such people to extract productive principles from their interactions with others is like expecting a medieval monk who believes that the world follows the whims of the gods to discover the theory of relativity – or even the scientific method itself.

For the parents, the cost is a perpetual and growing fear of the intelligence and perceptiveness of their children, which manifests in a variety of ways, such as genial blankness, corrosive contempt, yawning indifference or fussy irritability.

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For our parents – and our elders in general – the modern world has virtually guaranteed that the gig is up.

The antidote to false morality is a multiplicity of false moralities. The antidote to irrational prejudice is more irrational prejudices.

It is by being able to see the world *as a whole* that we can finally set ourselves free.

Detonating Mythology

If we were only ever exposed to English, we would not think of it as “English,” just as “language.” The need to differentiate English as a language only arises when we come into contact with *other* languages.

Similarly, if we are only exposed to our own mythologies, we do not think of them as mythologies, but rather as *the truth*. If we only know our own god, then we can refer to this fiction as “God” – this is a universe away from saying “a god,” – or, more accurately “our god.”

Deep down, each of us knows that our faith in our fragile fairy tales can only be sustained if we constantly steer clear of competing fairy tales. This tends to cripple our capacity for empathy – we must in our hearts ridicule the foolish beliefs of other cultures, and never take the terrifying leap of trying to see our own culture through their eyes.

The fear and hatred that so often mars the relations between different cultural groups does not arise out of ignorance, but rather out of knowledge. Christians feel uneasy around Muslims – and Muslims feel uneasy around Christians – not because they are different, but because they are the same. Two adulterous women who know each others’ secrets will, if forced to sit together for lunch, have a very uncomfortable time – not because they know too little about each other, but rather because they know too much.

The only way that mythology can sustainably dominate generation after generation is by pretending that it is not mythology, but reality.

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To help clarify this, consider the following thought experiment.

Imagine that the water in a sink has consciousness, and is sentient. Now imagine that I pour this water into a variety of glass containers, each of a different shape. The water, since it is sentient, would doubtless congratulate itself on its individuality. Since it would be unable to see the glass that surrounded it, contained it, and shaped its very form, it would honestly believe that its true physical shape was a mug, jar, test tube, or martini glass.

The sentient water filling the test tube would look at all the funny glass shapes around it and be enormously amused. “Do they not know how ridiculous they seem from the outside? Can they really imagine that *that* is their true shape? It’s madness!” it would chortle, pressed up against the glass of its own conceptual prison. And the water in the martini glass would look at all the other containers – including the test tube – and say exactly the same thing.

And this, really, is the state of all of the different cultures around the world. Each of us is poured into a clear glass container, which we believe represents the truth, which provides us with a shape and an identity that we mistake for “human nature.” And this can work relatively well – at least until we begin to catch sight of all the *other* glass containers surrounding us.

For a time, we will endeavour to maintain the illusion that only *other water* is contained in an obvious glass container – not us! However, there are those among us who can break free from the glass cage of culture – we stand outside such containers, and from *our* vantage point, the differences in the sizes and shapes of the containers are practically irrelevant.

The size and shape of your prison is not important. The fact that you are *in* a prison is.

The knowledge that you are in a prison does not have to be learned. It only has to be accepted. It is not something that you do not know. At a

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very deep level, you are perfectly aware that what you call the truth is just the magical physics of invisible fairy tales.

How do I know this?

As with every idea in this book, there is no need to take my word for anything. You can easily discover your deep understanding of this fact with a few simple experiments.

As I have mentioned before, you can sit down with your parents and ask them about goodness. You can sit down with your friends and tell them that you are afraid that you are living in a fiction that is sapping your joy and independence. You can go to a mosque and ask if you can observe. You can put yourself in someone else's "glass container" and see how you feel.

Try it. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine sitting down with your parents to ask them about goodness, or having a drink with your friends and talking about social mythologies. Do you feel nervous? Do you feel a vague and uneasy fluttering in your stomach at the very *thought* of such honesty and curiosity?

Why? Why do you feel afraid? Why have you never asked such questions? Who told you that such questions were not allowed? Were you ever punished for asking these questions in the past? Is there any law against asking such questions?

What will happen when you ask such questions?

You already *know* the answer. That is why you are afraid.

It is not cowardice that makes you afraid. It is wisdom that makes you afraid.

Because *you have every reason to be afraid*.

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Mythological Love

Our whole lives, we are surrounded by people who claim to love us. Our parents perpetually claim to be motivated by what is best for us. Our teachers eternally proclaim that their sole motivation is to help us learn. Our priests voice concern for our eternal souls, and extended family members endlessly announce their devotion to the clan.

When people claim to love us, it is not unreasonable to expect that they *know* us. If you tell me that you love Thailand, but it turns out that you have never been there, and know very little about it, then it is hard for me to believe that you really love it. If I say that I love opera, but I never listen to opera – well, you get the general idea!

If I say that I love you, but I know little about your real thoughts and feelings, and have no idea what your true values are – or perhaps even what your favourite books, authors or movies are – then it should logically be very hard for you to believe me.

This is certainly the case in my family. My mother, brother and father made extravagant claims about their love for me. However, when I finally sat down and asked each of them to recount a few facts about me – some of my preferences and values – I got a perfect tripod of “thousand yard stares.”

So, I thought, if people who know almost nothing about me claim to love me, then either they are lying, or I do not understand love at all.

I will not go into details about my theories of love here, other than to say that, in my view, love is our involuntary response to virtue, just as well-being is our involuntary response to a healthy lifestyle. (Our affection for our babies is more *attachment* than mature love, since it is shared throughout the animal kingdom.)

Virtue is a complicated subject, but I am sure we can agree that virtue must involve some basics that are commonly understood, such as courage, integrity, benevolence, empathy, wisdom and so on.

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If this is the case, it cannot be possible to love people that we know very little about. If love requires virtue, then we cannot love perfect strangers, because we know nothing about their virtues. Love depends both on another person's virtue, and our knowledge of it – and it grows in proportion to that virtue and knowledge, if we are virtuous ourselves.

Throughout my childhood, whenever I expressed a personal thought, desire, wish, preference or feeling, I was generally met with eye rolling, incomprehension, avoidance or, all too often, outright scorn. These various “rejection tactics” were completely co-joined with expressions of love and devotion. When I started getting into philosophy – through the works of Ayn Rand originally – my growing love of wisdom was dismissed out of hand as some sort of psychological dysfunction.

Since my family knew precious little about my virtues – and what they did know they disliked – then we could not *all* be virtuous. If *they* were virtuous, and disliked my values, then my values could not be virtuous. If *I* was virtuous, and they disliked my values, then they could not be virtuous.

And so I set about trying to create an “ethical map” of my family.

It was the most frightening thing I have ever done. The amount of emotional resistance that I felt towards the idea of trying to rationally and morally understand my family was staggering – it literally felt as if I were sprinting directly off a cliff.

Why was it so terrifying?

Well, because I knew that they were lying. I knew that they were lying about loving me, and I knew that, by claiming to be confused about whether they loved me, I was lying as well – and to *myself*, which is the worst of all falsehoods.

Love: The Word versus the Deed

Saying the word “success” is far easier than actually achieving success. Mouthing the word “love” is far easier than actually loving someone for the right reasons – and being loved for the right reasons.

If we do not have any standards for being loved, then laziness and indifference will inevitably result. If I have a job where I work from home, and no one ever checks up on me, and I never have to produce anything, and I get paid no matter what, and I cannot get fired, how long will it be before my work ethic decays? Days? Weeks? Certainly not months.

One of the most important questions to ask in any examination of the truth is “compared to what?” For instance, if I say I love you, implicit in that statement is a preference for you over others. In other words, compared to others, I prefer you. We prefer honesty compared to falsehood, satiation to hunger, warmth to cold and so on.

It is not logically valid to equate the word “love” with “family.” The word “family” is a mere description of a biological commonality – it makes no more sense to equate “love” with “family” than it does to equate “love” with “mammal.” Thus the word “love” must mean a preference compared to – what?

It is impossible to have any standards for love if we do not have any standards for truth. Since being honest is better than lying, and courage is better than cowardice, and truth is better than falsehood, we cannot have honesty and courage unless we are standing for something that is true. Thus when we say that we “love” someone, what we really mean is that his actions are consistent, compared to a rational standard of virtue. In the same way, when I say that somebody is “healthy,” what I really mean is that his organs are functioning consistently, relative to a rational standard of well-being.

Thus love is not a subjective preference, or a biological commonality, but our involuntary response to virtuous actions on the part of another.

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If we truly understand this definition, then it is easy for us to see that a society that does not know truth cannot ever know love.

If nothing is true, virtue is impossible.

If virtue is impossible, then we are forced to *pretend* to be virtuous, through patriotism, clan loyalties, cultural pride, superstitious conformities and other such amoral counterfeits.

If virtue is impossible, then love is impossible, because actions cannot be compared to any objective standard of goodness. If love is impossible, we are forced to resort to sentimentality, or the shallow show and outward appearance of love.

Thus it can be seen that any set of principles that interferes with our ability to know and understand the truth hollows us out, undermining and destroying our capacity for love. False principles, illusions, fantasies and mythologies separate us from each other, from virtue, from love, from the true connections that we can achieve *only through reality*.

In fantasy, there is only isolation and pretence. Mythology is, fundamentally, loneliness and emptiness.

Imagination versus Fantasy

At this point, I think it would be well worth highlighting the differences between imagination and fantasy, because many people, on hearing my criticisms of mythology, think that they are now not supposed to enjoy Star Wars.

Imagination is a creative faculty that is deeply rooted in reality. Fantasy, on the other hand, is a mere species of intangible wish fulfillment. It took Tolkien decades of study and writing to produce “The Lord of the Rings” – and each part of that novel was rationally consistent with the whole. That is an example of imagination. If I laze about daydreaming that one day I will make a fortune by writing a better novel than “The Lord of the Rings” – but never actually set pen to paper – that is an

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example of fantasy. Imagination produced the theory of relativity, not fantasizing about someday winning a Nobel Prize.

Daydreams that are never converted into action are the ultimate procrastination. Imagining a wonderful future that you never have to act to achieve prevents you from achieving a wonderful future.

In the same way, imagining that you know the truth when you do not prevents you from ever learning the truth. Nothing is more dangerous than the illusion of knowledge. If you are going the wrong way, but do not doubt your direction, you will never turn around.

As Socrates noted more than 2,000 years ago, doubt is the midwife of curiosity, and curiosity breeds wisdom.

Fantasy is the opposite of doubt. Mythology provides instant answers when people do not even know what the questions are. In the Middle Ages, when someone asked “Where did the world come from?” he was told: “God made it.” This effectively precluded the necessity of asking the more relevant question: “What *is* the world?”

Because religious people believed they knew where the world came from, there was little point asking what the world *was*. Because there was little point asking what the world was, they never learned where the world came from.

Fantasy is a circle of nothingness, forever eating its own tail.

Defining Love

If people fantasize that they know what is true, then they inevitably stop searching for the truth. If I am driving home, I stop driving when I get there. If people fantasize that they know what goodness is, they inevitably stop trying to *understand* goodness.

And, most importantly, if people fantasize that they already *are* good, they stop trying to *become* good. If you want a baby, and you believe that you *are* pregnant, you stop trying to *get* pregnant.

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The question – which we already know the answer to – thus remains: *why do people who claim to love us never tell us what love is?*

If I am an accomplished mathematician, and my child comes to me and asks me about the times tables, it would be rude and churlish of me to dismiss his questions. If I go to my mother, who for 30 years has claimed to love me, and ask her what love is, why is it that she refuses to answer my question? Why does my brother roll his eyes and change the subject whenever I ask him what it is that he loves about me? Why does my father claim to love me, while continually rejecting everything that I hold precious?

Why does everyone around me perpetually use words that they refuse to define? Are they full of a knowledge that they cannot express? That is not a good reason for refusing to discuss the topics. A novelist who writes instinctually would not logically be hostile if asked about the source of his inspiration. He may not come up with a perfect answer, but there would be no reason to perpetually avoid the subject.

Unless...

Unless, of course, he is a plagiarist.

What We Know

This is the knowledge that we have, but hate and fear.

We know that the people who claim to love us know precious little about us, and nothing at all about love.

We know that the people who claim to love us make this claim in order to create obligations within us.

We know that the people who claim to love us make this claim in order to control us.

And they know it too.

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It is completely obvious that they know this, because they know *exactly which topics to avoid*. A counterfeiter will not mind if you ask him what the capital of Madagascar is. A counterfeiter *will* mind, however, if you ask him whether you can check the authenticity of his money. Why is this the *one topic* that he will try to avoid at all costs?

Because he knows that his currency is fake.

And he also knows that if *you* find that out, he can no longer use it to rob you blind.

Obligations

If I own a store, and take counterfeit money from a con man, but do not know that it is counterfeit, then I am obligated to hand over what he has “bought.”

In the same way, if I believe that I am loved – even when I am not loved – I am to a degree honour-bound to return that love. If my mother says that she loves me, and *she* is virtuous, then she must love me because *I* am virtuous. Since she is herself virtuous, then I “owe” her love as a matter of justice, just as I owe trust to someone who consistently behaves in a trustworthy manner.

Thus when somebody tries to convince you that they love you, *they're actually attempting to create an obligation in you*. If I try to convince you that I am a trustworthy person, it is because I want all the benefits of being treated as if I were a trustworthy person. If I *am* in fact a trustworthy person, then I must understand the nature of trust – at least at some level – and thus I must know that it cannot be demanded, but must be earned. Since *earning* trust is harder than just *demanding* trust, I must know the real value of trust, otherwise I would not have taken the trouble to earn it through consistent behaviour – I would have just demanded it and skipped all the hard stuff!

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If you demand trust, you are demanding the unearned, which indicates that you do not believe you can earn it. Thus anyone who demands trust is automatically untrustworthy.

Why do people demand trust?

To rob others.

If I want to borrow money from you, and I demand that you trust me, it's because I am not trustworthy, and will be unlikely to pay you back.

In other words, I want to steal your money, and put you in my power.

It's the same with love.

Love and Virtue

If I am virtuous, then virtuous people will regard me with at least respect, if not love. Corrupt or evil people may regard me with a certain respect, but they will certainly not love me.

Thus being virtuous and refusing to demand love from anyone is the best way to find other virtuous people. If you are virtuous and undemanding, then other virtuous people will naturally gravitate towards you. Virtue that does not impose itself on others is like a magnet for goodness, and repels corruption.

The practical result of true virtue is fundamental self-protection.

If my stockbroker consistently gets me 30% return on my investments, is there any amount of money that I will not give him, other than what I need to live? Of course not! Because I know I will always get back more than I give.

It's the same with real love.

If I am virtuous, then I will inevitably feel positively inclined towards other virtuous people – and the more virtuous they are, the more I will love them. My energy, time and resources will be at their disposal,

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because I know that I will not be exploited, and that they will reciprocate my generosity.

If you and I have lent money to each other over the years, and have always paid each other back, then the next time you come to me for a loan, it would be unjust for me to tell you that I will not lend you anything because I do not think you will pay me back. Your continued and perpetual honesty towards me in financial matters has created an obligation in me towards you. This does not mean that I must lend you money whenever you ask for it, but I cannot justly claim as my reason for not lending you money a belief that you will not pay me back.

In the same way, if you have been my wife for 20 years, and I have never been unfaithful, if a woman calls and then hangs up, it would be unjust for you to immediately accuse me of infidelity.

A central tactic for creating artificial and unjust obligations in others is to demand their positive opinion, without being willing to earn it. The most effective way to do this is to *offer* a positive opinion, which has not been earned – to *claim* to love others.

If, over the past 20 years, I have rarely paid back any money I have borrowed from you, it is perfectly reasonable to refuse me an additional loan. I may then get angry, and call you unfair, and demand that you treat me as if I *were* trustworthy, but it would scarcely be virtuous for you to comply with my wishes. Indeed, it would be dishonest and unjust for you to ignore my untrustworthiness, because you would be acting as if there was no difference between someone who pays back loans, and someone who does not.

When we act in a virtuous manner towards others, we are creating a reservoir of goodwill that we can draw upon, just as when we put our savings into a bank. A man can act imperfectly and still be loved, just as a man can eat an occasional candy bar and still be healthy, but there is a general requirement for consistency in any discipline. I could probably hit a home run in a major-league ballpark once every thousand pitches, but that would scarcely make me a professional baseball player!

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If I act in a trustworthy manner, I do not have to *ask* you to trust me – and in fact, I would be very unwise to do so. Either you will trust me voluntarily, which means that you respect honourable and consistent behaviour, and justly respond to those who do good, or you will *not* trust me voluntarily, which means that you do *not* respond in a just manner to trustworthy behaviour, and thus cannot be trusted yourself.

If, on the other hand, I come up to you and demand that you trust me, I am engaged in a complex calculation of counterfeiting and plunder.

The first thing I am trying to do is establish whether or not you know anything about trust. The second thing is to figure out your level of confidence and self-esteem. The third thing is figure out if you know anything about integrity.

An attacker will always try to find the weakest chink in your armour. If I demand trust from you, and you agree to provide it – without any prior evidence – then I know that you do not know anything about trust. Similarly, if you do not require that your trust be earned, then I know that you lack confidence and self-esteem. If you are willing to treat me as if I were trustworthy when I am not trustworthy, then it is clear to me you know very little about integrity.

This tells me all I need to know about your history. This tells me that you were never treated with respect as a child, and that you were never taught to judge people according to independent standards, and that every time you tried to stand up for yourself, your family attacked you.

In other words, I will know that you are easy prey.

I cannot create an obligation in you unless you accept that I have treated you justly in the past. As in all things, it is far easier to convince a weak person that you have treated him justly, than it is to actually treat people in a just and consistent manner. If I can convince you that I have treated you justly in the past, then you “owe” me trust and respect in the present.

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“Love” as Predation

Imagine that we are brothers, and one day you awake from a coma to see me sitting by your bed. After some small talk, I tell you that you owe me \$1,000, which you borrowed from me the day of your accident. I tell you that because I am a kind brother, and you are in the hospital, you do not have to pay me back the thousand dollars – I would just like you to remember it, so that the next time I need to borrow \$1,000, you will lend it to me.

You might look in the pockets of the jeans you wore the day of your accident, and you might look around your apartment to see if there was \$1,000 lying around, but there would be no real way to prove that I had not lent you the money. You would either have to call me a liar – an accusation for which you have no certain proof – or you would feel substantially more obligated to lend me money in the future.

If you call me a liar, I will get angry. If you accept the obligation without ever finding the \$1,000, you will feel resentful. Either way, our relationship is harmed – and by telling you about the \$1,000, I have voluntarily introduced a complication and a suspicion into our relationship, which is scarcely loving, just or benevolent.

This is the kind of brinksmanship and deception that goes on all the time in relationships – particularly in families.

When our parents tell us that they love us, they are in fact demanding that we provide for them. They are basically telling us that they have lent us \$1,000 – even if we cannot remember it – and thus we owe them trust in the future, if not \$1,000 in the present!

In other words, our parents spend an enormous amount of energy convincing us that they “love” us *in order to create artificial obligations within us*. In doing so, they take a terrible risk – and force us to make an even more terrible choice.

Brinksmanship

When somebody tells you that they love you, it is either a statement of genuine regard, based on mutual virtue, or it is an exploitive and unjust demand for your money, time, resources, or approval.

There is very little in between.

Either love is real, and a true joy, or love is false, and the most corrupt and cowardly form of theft that can be imagined.

If love is real, then it inflicts no unjust obligations. If love is real, then it is freely given without demands. If a good man gives you his love, and you do not reciprocate it, then he just realizes that he was mistaken, learns a little, and moves on. If a woman tells you that she loves you, and then resents any hesitation or lack of reciprocation you display, then she does not love you, but is using the word “love” as a kind of hook, to entrap you into doing what she wants, to your own detriment.

How can you possibly know whether the love that somebody expresses towards you is genuine or not?

It's very, very simple.

When it is genuine, you *feel* it.

What happens, though, when a parent *demand*s love from us?

Well, we must either submit to this demand, and pretend to respond in kind, or we must confront her on her manipulation – thus threatening the entire basis of the relationship.

Would someone who truly loves us *ever* put us in this terrible position?

Society and Religion

The principle of inflicting a good opinion in order to create an unjust obligation occurs at a social level, as well as at a personal level. Soldiers are supposed to have died “protecting us,” which creates an obligation

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for us to support the troops. The mere act of being born in a country creates a lifelong obligation to pay taxes at the point of a gun, in order to receive services that we never directly asked for. John F. Kennedy's famous quote, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country," is another way of saying, "One of us is going to get screwed in this interaction, and it ain't gonna be me!"

The same thing occurs in the realm of religion, of course, as well. Jesus died for your sins, God loves you, you will be punished if you do not obey, Hell is the destination of unbelievers etc. etc. etc.

All of these emotional tricks are designed to create an obligation in you that would not exist in any reasonable universe.

"Sacrifice," in other words, is merely demand in disguise.

Unconscious?

All of these substantial criticisms rest on the premise that people *do* actually know what love really is, and merely counterfeit it for the sake of personal gain – just as any moral criticism of a counterfeiter rests on the premise that he actually does know what money is, and copies it for the sake of personal gain.

Naturally, it is hard to imagine that those around us are constantly striving to inflict artificial obligations on us through appeal to a fantastical kind of social mythology. When you think of your sweet, white-haired old mother, who sacrificed everything for you, what could it mean to condemn her for failing to be able to perfectly define the nature and properties of love, a question that baffles even great philosophers?

Well of course it would be grossly unfair to ask the average person to accurately define the true nature of love, just as it would be ridiculous – not to mention dangerous – to grab the average man on the street and ask him to perform your appendectomy.

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It certainly is unfair to judge people by standards that they can scarcely be aware of. However, it is not at all unfair to judge people according to the standards *that they themselves have set*. I cannot alone determine at what price you will sell me your car – but if you yourself put the price in the window, it is not unreasonable for me to expect you to honour it.

Thus when people use the word “love,” they are “putting the price in the window.” Love of course is considered to be a feeling of high regard for someone, and is either based upon the virtues or characteristics of the loved person, or it is not. If love is not based on the characteristics of the loved person, then it must be based on the willpower of the person who loves him or her.

If love is based on the willpower of the person who is “doing the loving,” then it must be considered virtuous to love so altruistically. If it is not virtuous to love so altruistically, then there is nothing beneficial or positive in the interaction, since neither the person loving nor the person being loved possesses any positive characteristics. We might as well define obsessive stalking as “love.”

If it is “good” for Person A to love Person B despite Person B’s lack of lovable qualities, then this “good action” is either a universal principle, or a merely personal preference. If I say that ice cream is “good,” I do not mean that ice cream acts with virtue, courage and integrity. If I say that a particular action is “good,” then it must be good for more than one person, if it is to rise above merely personal preference. However, if it is “good” to love someone who has no lovable qualities, then an instant paradox is created.

If I have no lovable qualities, then I do not possess “goodness,” since goodness is a lovable quality. If it is “good” to love someone despite an absence of lovable qualities, then by definition I am incapable of loving someone, since I lack goodness. In this way, two opposing moral rules are created, which cannot be valid. Person A does “good” by loving Person B, who is incapable of goodness. Person B can then only enable Person A’s “goodness” by receiving without giving – thus what is good for Person A is not good for Person B.

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Again, though this can be complicated to examine syllogistically, it is an argument that adult children of a co-dependent parent have continuously. If I see my mother perpetually sacrificing everything for my father, I will continually ask her that if sacrificing everything for your spouse is good, then why does my father not sacrifice everything for her? Why is such sacrifice only ever good for *her*? Why does my father get off scot-free?

It cannot be considered “good” to love someone who lacks lovable qualities. Love, then, is a form of payment for virtue.

I must confess that I understood this at the age of 13, when I was a very shallow young man. In school, word got around that I was going to ask a girl to a dance. My criteria, sadly, was solely based on physical attractiveness. When my classmates cornered me and pestered me to reveal whom I was going to ask out, I finally mentioned the girl’s name, and was greeted with rather shocked silence. This girl, while admittedly attractive, was considered rather coarse and unintelligent.

“Why would you ask her?” a friend demanded.

“Uh, because of her... personality,” I stammered, convincing no one.

Why was it that, even at such a tender age, I felt the need to invent *virtue* as the basis for my desire? Would it have been wrong to say, “She’s kinda purdy!” and be satisfied with that?

And the looks in the faces of the people around me were very interesting. It was not so much that they knew that I was lying – that much was obvious. It is more that they knew *why* I was lying – and they actually had some sympathy for that, I think.

They knew that I was lying because it is easier to make up “good” reasons for wanting the wrong thing than to actually want the right thing.

And this lesson we have been well taught by our teachers - but I will get into that later.

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When I was about 11, I stole some money from my brother to buy a book. He suspected me of the theft, and spent a good deal of time and energy cross-examining me as to where I'd gotten the money to afford the book. He never could prove that I stole the money, and I stonewalled and evaded with fairly decent ability.

There are three things that I remember very strongly from that long afternoon.

1. I was not troubled fundamentally about stealing, but only worried about getting caught.
2. If someone had asked me if stealing were wrong, I would have said "yes" – and mean it.
3. I was not worried about that blatant contradiction.

In other words, I knew that stealing was wrong, but that knowledge was a mere abstraction, like knowing how many moons Jupiter has, or the name of the drummer for Led Zeppelin. I believed that stealing was wrong – but what that really meant was that I knew that I would get punished if I did not *say* that stealing was wrong. So I said it aloud, like a magical spell that wards off punishment, like any pagan.

It was similar to how I would chant out my times tables, before I had any real understanding of arithmetic. The sentence was not "Yes, I know that stealing is wrong, but I wanted a book!" It was even less related than that: "Stealing is wrong, and I wanted a book." Just two facts, a principle and a desire, not even orbiting one another...

So did I know that stealing is wrong? Sure, I think I did, but for me, "wrong" just meant, "disapproved of." By this time, I had lived in a number of different countries and classes, and I knew that "wrong" was not objective, because "disapproved of" varied so enormously from place to place. And obviously I myself "approved of" taking the money from my brother, because I did it. So there was my little "approval," and lots of other people's "disapproval," and I thought: *well, if other people get*

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to disapprove of things that I prefer, then surely I have the right to approve of things that they do not prefer.

Logical, you may say. Amoral, but logical. And I would have to agree.

But the important issue is that I knew the rules, then I broke the rules by applying them to myself, and so I just made up new rules. This is, I believe, far more common than is generally admitted.

And so we come to the fundamental question: *how responsible are we in the face of our own hypocrisies?*

The Open Cage...

I'd like you to imagine a man standing in the middle of a large meadow. You spend some time watching this man, and it doesn't take you very long to notice that he paces back and forth in a small square, about 10 feet on either side. That's all. Just 10 feet.

After a few hours of watching him do this, you walk up to him. When you reach forward to shake his hand, however, your fingers are burned by a strong electrical shock from an invisible barrier.

Startled – and hurt – you cry out. The man looks up.

“What's the matter?” he asks.

“I just ran into this invisible wall which gave me a hell of a shock!” you cry.

He frowns. “I didn't see anything.”

You blink. “Really? You've never heard or seen or felt this invisible barrier?”

He shakes his head slowly. “What invisible barrier?”

“The one that surrounds you – the one that keeps you penned in this little 10 foot square!”

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“What little 10 foot square?” he demands. “There’s no little 10 foot square! I can go wherever the hell I want!”

“No you can’t!”

“Who the hell are you to tell me where I can and cannot go? I decide that!”

“I’m not telling you where you can and cannot go – I’m just telling you what you are actually doing!”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Well, I’ve been watching you for the past few hours, and you’re standing in the middle of this great big meadow, and yet all you do is pace back and forth 10 feet.”

“I can go anywhere I damn well please!” the man repeats angrily.

“You say that, but all you do is pace around and around in a little 10 foot square! If you can go anywhere you please, why don’t you just try taking one extra step?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he growls. “Now get the hell off my damn property!”

“Wait – I can show you!” You reach down and pick up some grass. You throw it towards the man. A few feet away from his face, the blades of grass burst into flame and evaporate. You do this several times, proving definitively that there is in fact an invisible force field that surrounds him, roughly 10 feet by 10 feet.

“Do you see?” you ask eagerly. “Do you see that you are in an invisible cage?”

“Get the hell off my property, you madman!” he cries, shaking with rage.

“But you must know that you are in an invisible cage,” you cry out. “You must know that, because you never try to go outside these walls. You

must have at one time tried to break free of this cage, and were burned by the electric shock, which is why you never take more than a few steps before turning around! Don't you *see*?"

He pulls out a gun, screams that he has a principle of shooting trespassers, and, quite sensibly, you run away.

This is the great paradox of attempting to teach people what they already know. Everybody claims complete freedom, but paces back and forth, trapped in a little square. Everyone is surrounded by the invisible cages of culture and mythology, and denies it completely. The evidence of these cages is very clear, because people always turn back just before they hit them. But then they deny that these cages exist.

Everybody acts as if they are perfectly free, and perfectly enslaved at the same time. Nobody admits to being in a prison, but everyone shuffles around in an invisible 10 x 10 cell.

In the same way, everyone tells you that they are free, but in fact everyone is trapped in little tiny cells of allowable conversation. Everybody tells you they love you, but strenuously avoids talking about what love is, or what about you they love.

Everyone tells you to be good, but they have no idea what goodness is – and will savage you for even having the temerity to ask the question.

Everybody talks about the truth, but the real truth is that *nobody can talk about the truth* – what it is, how it is defined, how it is verified, and its value.

Responsibility

If the man in the meadow were put into his cage when he was a toddler, he would have discovered the limits of his confinement – painfully – when he was very young. It is entirely conceivable that he would end up just avoiding his invisible prison bars, to retain his illusion of freedom,

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and repress the pain of imprisonment. If you cannot escape your prison, then you might as well imagine that you're free.

The man is not responsible for being put in the cage when he was a toddler, and he is not responsible for his resulting repression, and he is not responsible for not testing the bars of his cage, but instead turning away before he touches them.

There are two things, however, that he *is* responsible for.

The first thing that he is responsible for denying is clear and tangible evidence that contradicts his belief. There are two primary pieces of evidence: the grass that bursts into flame, and the fact that although he *says* he is free, he never takes more than a few steps in any direction before turning around.

The second thing that he is responsible for is shutting down the conversation when it makes him uncomfortable.

The essence of wisdom is learning the value of “staying in the conversation,” even when it makes you uncomfortable.

Especially when it makes you uncomfortable.

Falsehood and the Conversation

The most important thing in life is not to lie to other people – honesty is the most fundamental virtue. Now, just about every time a philosopher brings up the virtue of honesty, a blizzard of questions blocks his progress – questions designed to find the fuzzy areas at the limits of ethical behaviour, such as “Is it okay to lie if someone holds a gun to your head and demands to know where your wife is so that he can kill her?”

This is all very interesting, but absolutely irrelevant to the world as it is.

In the world as it is, we are so far from being able to tell the truth to each other that focusing on the fuzzy areas of practical honesty is like

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asking a man who stumbles into an emergency room clutching his own severed arm if he needs a manicure. Or, to take another medical analogy, I view philosophers as essential doctors in the middle of a terrible plague. All around us, people are writhing and dying, and we must work as hard as we can to save as many people as we can – with the full knowledge that very few people will make it. Most modern philosophers, however, are sitting in the midst of all this suffering, and debating what the best course of action should be if a patient presents with a heart attack, diabetes, and a hangnail, and is struck by lightning while being examined.

My response to that is: when we have reached a world that is so healthy that the once-a-century problems are the most important things that we can deal with, we shall scarcely need philosophy at all!

Thus let us roll up our sleeves, and try to deal with the plague that is devouring us *now*, and leave the improbable problems to a future happier time.

The reason that the man in the invisible cage above is to blame for his actions is that he was lying to you.

When you began to point the truth out to him, he felt uncomfortable. At first, he seemed genuinely baffled – whether that was a ruse or not, we cannot tell. Then, as the evidence began to mount up, both logically and empirically, he began to get hostile.

Was he lying? Of course he was.

He was lying because he did not tell you that he was feeling uncomfortable, but rather began jabbering about trespassing, cursing, and ended up pulling out a gun.

Was this honest? No. Was this man aware that he was feeling increasingly uncomfortable? Of course. Did he honestly express his discomfort? No. He evaded his own discomfort by attacking you.

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As an example, when I sat down with my brother, after I had decided to stop seeing my mother, he presented to me the following argument:

“Stef, you should see mother because if you don’t see her, then she is exercising control over your choices. If you allow the fact that you dislike her to control your actions, she has won, and you have lost an essential freedom.”

“So,” I replied, “if I understand you correctly, you are saying that I should see people that I like because I like them, and I should see people that I dislike because otherwise they will have power over me. In other words, there is no one that I should ever refuse to see.”

As usual, he rolled his eyes and shrugged.

“But let me tell you what bothers me about this family,” I continued. “I strongly feel that I am never allowed to have any real preferences. I mean, I am allowed to have preferences in my own way, but nobody ever respects those preferences and changes their actions. You would prefer that I see mother, and so you are trying to get me to change my actions based on your preferences. However, at the same time, you tell me that my preferences are meaningless, in terms of whom I see. But how can *your* preferences require a change in my actions, but *my* preferences should require no changes in my actions?”

Sadly, inevitably, the conversation was over at that point.

It was clear to me even at the time that my brother was intensely uncomfortable with my questions. He telegraphed all the usual signals – pursed lips, eye rolling, tight shrugs and endless frowns. I felt a very strong resistance as I ploughed on, and I asked my brother if he felt uncomfortable. He said that he did not.

This was, of course, the key moment in our interaction. If he had been honest with me, and told me that he felt uncomfortable, we could have talked about his discomfort, and the ways in which that discomfort might have been affecting his position.

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By telling me that I was doing something wrong, when what was actually happening was that my choices were causing him discomfort, my brother was lying to me. He was, essentially, trying to manage his own discomfort by inflicting moral commandments upon me. He tried to appeal to my self-interest based on a vague “higher standard,” and when that failed, he disapproved of my “resistance.” My decision not to see our mother anymore created great anxiety in him, because it opened up the possibility of choice, where before there had only been an absolute.

This was an essential aspect of our interaction. I think that I will have had a long life if I live to be a hundred years old. If, however, it turns out that technology can now allow us to live to be 200 years old, a hundred years will no longer seem like such a long life. Where there is no possibility of reaching 200 years of age, we do not feel anxious if we fail to reach it. If there is no possibility of *not* seeing your own mother, then we feel far less anxious if we continue to see her, even if, deep down, we do not want to.

However, the moment that somebody says: “I am no longer going to see my mother,” this creates great anxiety within us, because a possibility now exists *that deep down we really want* which formerly we thought was impossible.

When I made my decision, my brother had two choices about how to best manage his anxiety. He could examine that anxiety and try to understand its source – or, he could attempt to reduce his anxiety by manipulating me into seeing our mother again.

When *choice* enters into our lives, where formerly we felt there were only absolutes, we feel anxiety, because deep down we know that that choice always existed, but we have been told that it was *wrong* to think about that choice. Emotionally, this leads us back to our early traumas, through which “culture” was inflicted upon us – and thus to a deep and bitter criticism of our parents and teachers – bringing us right up against the invisible electric fence of mythological punishment.

We really, really do not ever want to go there.

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If somebody breaks out of prison, you can either try to break out of prison yourself, or you can help the guards get him back into prison. The tipping point of the decision is what you decide to do with your own anxiety. If you decide to deal with your anxiety as an *internal* state, related to your core beliefs, your history, your false allegiances to false virtues, then you will be catapulted through the entire cavalcade of growth that is the inevitable result of deciding to stop using others to manage your emotions.

It is a sad reality that, for most people, their prison doesn't *feel* like a prison until somebody tries to break out of it. The conclusion they leap to is that the person who has broken out of prison is the one who actually *turned it into a prison* – by the very act of breaking out of it! It's madness, of course, but all too common.

When I sat down with my mother, about eight years ago, a very similar interaction occurred, just as you would expect. And, just as you would expect, she was much more efficient than my brother, because she taught him.

The fundamental conversation went this way:

I said: “Mom, I feel that you don't listen to me.”

My mother replied: “Don't be silly – of *course* I listen to you!”

Do you really need any help figuring out the blatant contradiction in this interaction?

I doubt it.

Exploitation

If I am sick, and I need you to donate a kidney to me, I have four general choices:

1. I can tell you that I would like you to donate a kidney to me, with no expectation that you must do so.

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2. I can decide not to ask you for a kidney.
3. I can tell you that I really need you to donate a kidney, and you should do it because I want you to.
4. I can tell you that it is immoral to refuse to donate a kidney to me, and thus you are ethically obligated to give me your kidney, just as you are ethically obligated to pay back a loan.

In the first case, I am simply expressing my true and honest desire for your kidney. I am not manipulating you. I am not bullying you. I am telling you what I want. My request is not a demand – and my request, fundamentally, is not for your kidney, but for you to understand that I would *like* your kidney.

This is a crucial difference, which is so easily overlooked. Saying, “I would like your kidney,” is not saying, “Give me your kidney!” Saying, “I would like to be an astronaut,” is not saying, “Make me an astronaut!”

Either I am free to express my thoughts and feelings to you, or I am not. If I am free to do so, then of course I must be free to express what I would prefer you to do, if that is what I think.

If you interpret my preferences as commandments that you must *comply* with, then you will naturally prefer that I never express a preference. If you hate the taste of ice cream, but every time I said, “I like ice cream,” you had to eat a bowl, you would obviously prefer that I not say “I like ice cream” anymore. Because my desires enslave you, you must enslave my desires.

The best and most terrible way to enslave another human being is to interpret his desires as commandments. If, every time I express my preferences, you interpret them as commandments, then you must inevitably be led to controlling, minimizing, ignoring or attacking my preferences.

In other words, if my desires are commandments, then my preferences are attacks upon you.

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And the only antidote to this is curiosity.

Curiosity

The opposite of tyranny is curiosity. The opposite of ignorance is curiosity. The opposite of manipulation is curiosity.

The opposite of immaturity is curiosity, because to be curious is to be wise.

What is the most logical and mature response to the statement: “I would like you to give me your kidney.”?

Is it:

- a. “Sure, here you go – I even iced it for you.”
- b. [b l a n k s t a r e]
- c. “Don’t ask me, it makes me uncomfortable.”
- d. “How about those Mets?”
- e. “I *told* you not to play rugby, you never listen to me, I can’t believe you would have the balls to ask me, how selfish and manipulative can you *get*?”
- f. “Tell me more.”

If we really understand the nature of the statement, which is “I have a feeling called ‘I would prefer for you to give me your kidney’,” then together we can examine the nature of that feeling. If I am standing at a bus stop, and a woman next to me says, “Feels like rain,” it would be quite logical for me to ask, if I was curious, “What does that feel like?” Arguing about whether rain was imminent or not would be illogical, because the woman did not say, “It’s about to rain.” What she said was, “Feels like rain,” which is quite different. It is a statement of an inner experience, not an outward prediction, command or expectation.

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If I say to you, “I dreamt about an elephant last night,” could you logically disagree with me? You might not be particularly interested in my dream, but it would make precious little sense to dispute my statement. Either I am telling the truth, or I am not. If I am telling the truth, there is nothing to argue about – if I am not, there’s still nothing to argue about, because you will never have one single shred of evidence that I am lying.

Thus when I say to you, “I would like you to give me your kidney,” it’s the first three words that are important, not the last four. But everyone focuses on the last four, considers them a bullying demand, and thus must spend the rest of their mortal existence managing and controlling the first three.

Statements of *preference* are just statements of inner experience, and if we care about the person who is expressing them, we will be *curious* about her inner experience.

Thus, to extrapolate to something slightly more generic than kidneys, if you are doing something that bothers me, I have four general choices:

1. I can tell you that I am bothered by what you’re doing, with no expectation that you must change your behaviour.
2. I can leave the situation.
3. I can tell you that what you’re doing bothers me, and that you should stop it because it bothers me.
4. I can tell you that what you’re doing is immoral, and you should stop it because it’s wrong.

Of course, if people in general were mature and wise, they would mostly choose what was behind door number one – occasionally, they would leave through door number two for a brief period if they were upset, but they would never open doors three and four.

However, the world is neither wise nor mature, and so children quickly learn that when adults are upset or anxious, it is the *children’s* behaviour

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that must always change. If my mother is anxious about me dating, the “solution” is for me not to date. If my father will be embarrassed by my absence from church, I must go to church. If my mother will feel embarrassed if I do not kiss my smelly old grandmother, it’s pucker time! If my mother will feel mortified if I snatch a toy from another child, the solution is for me to “play nicely.” (Of course I really should not snatch toys; the problem is that my mother is not curious why I do so, but merely controls the symptoms, instead of working to understand the cause.)

Attack

When I was 14 or so, I took a summer school course, desperate to get out of the mental gulag of public school as quickly as humanly possible. I had a brittle and belligerent male teacher, who demanded that we show up on the dot at 8:30 am, but then would have us sit and read a textbook for the first 30-40 minutes of the class. He also showed really boring documentaries, spoke in a monotone, and was completely obsessed with JFK assassination conspiracy theories.

Occasionally, I would get very sleepy, and I would put my head down on my desk for a few minutes. I never fell asleep, but it certainly could have looked that way.

After a couple of weeks of classes, I got up to do a presentation on slavery. Just before I began, this teacher held up his hand and ordered everyone to put their heads down on their desk.

All the other children were pretty confused, as you can imagine – as was I. After a few minutes of bullying and ordering, all the children in the room put their heads down on their desks. My face was very pale, and I was alarmed, to say the least.

When everyone’s head was down, the teacher turned and literally screamed at me: “Do you see how it feels? Do you *see* how it feels when you’re trying to teach people something, and they put their heads down

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on their desks? DO YOU SEE HOW IT FEELS? THAT'S RUDE!
DON'T DO THAT!" His veins were literally bulging out of his neck.

And then, of course, he demanded that I deliver my presentation.

What was going on here?

The amazing thing about people who abuse children, is that they really have no idea how the children actually see them. I knew that he had all the power, but it really was a very sad spectacle, and I got a very strong impression of a futile, self-loathing and pathetic life. Perhaps they imagine that bullying children makes them look strong, but the degree of contempt that I felt – and feel – towards those who bully the helpless is almost beyond words, and I do not think that I am alone in that. When we think of the radioactive contempt that teenagers often have towards their parents and other authority figures, I think it's fairly easy to see that bullying children does not generate respect – any more than beating your wife generates love.

Let's call this teacher Bob, since I have no idea what his name is, after all these years. Clearly, Bob did not feel like a very good teacher, because a good teacher would regard an exhausted student with curiosity. I could be tired because I cannot sleep, or have problems at home, or have a hormonal imbalance, or some other reason that has precious little to do with his teaching ability – or I could be tired because he is a boring teacher.

If Bob shows no *curiosity* as to why I am tired, then he will never know why. If I am sick, or stressed (and I was working three jobs at this point in my childhood), he might be able to help me in some way – or at least, he will have established that it is not because he is a boring teacher.

If he finds out that I am tired because he is a boring teacher, then obviously that can be painful, but I have absolutely no doubt that Bob would prefer to be an exciting teacher than a boring one. If he had invested the time to try and figure out – with me – why I was tired, then he might have been able to learn how to become a more exciting

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teacher, which would have been in line with his own values, and so made him happier.

The truth of the matter, of course, as we have seen above, is that, deep down, Bob was absolutely convinced that he was a terrible teacher.

When I put my head down on my desk, it confirmed his worst fears, which he violently rejected.

When we understand the power of mythology, it is clear how little Bob understood about what I was doing, and what I was communicating.

When I put my head down on my desk, I was not saying, “Bob, you are a terrible teacher.” I was not saying, “I am putting my head down on my desk to defy your authority.” I was not saying, “I am putting my head down on my desk because I am a rude and selfish individual who cares nothing for anyone else’s feelings.”

When I put my head down on my desk, I was only saying: “*I am tired.*”

Everything else was just mythology – paranoid and vicious fairy tales.

Everything else was Bob’s invention, and he invented everything else in order to strenuously avoid being curious.

Why? Why was he so terrified of curiosity?

It’s simple.

The reason that we are not curious is that we already know the answers, and we do not like them.

Wisdom and Pain

Pain is our body’s way of telling us what we need to deal with, of helping us prioritize our actions relative to health. Our body does not report on organs that are functioning well, but the moment that a tooth gets infected, we know *all* about it!

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In other words, pain tells us what we need to do. If our tooth hurts, we need to go to a dentist. Pain informs us of the problems we need to solve.

If we think of our life before anaesthetics, it's easy to understand that we usually had to accept an increase in pain in order to become healthier. An infected tooth had to be pulled out. Nowadays, we sometimes have to go through the pain of chemotherapy in order to treat cancer.

This is the challenge of pain – we do not like it, but often have to accept a temporary increase of it in order to become healthier.

If I break my leg, it really hurts – that's why I stop moving it. After my leg has healed, to regain full strength and mobility, I have to endure the pain of physiotherapy.

Injuries can also make us stronger. If I survive a heart attack, I may choose to lose weight, eat better, exercise and so on – I may in fact be healthier than if I had never *had* a heart attack. Similarly, if I break my leg, my leg can end up stronger, as a result of the exercise required to restore strength and mobility. Losing a tooth can generate a desire for better oral hygiene.

There are several key differences between physical pain and psychological pain, however, which you really need to understand if you want to become healthier and happier in the long run.

The first and most important difference is that *psychological pain can be transferred from one person to another*. If my tooth hurts, I cannot transfer my toothache to you – but quite the opposite is true for psychological pain, at least in the short run.

If I feel anxiety about what you are doing, I can temporarily reduce that anxiety by forcing you to change your behaviour, just as I can temporarily reduce the pain of a toothache by taking painkillers – the difference being that when I take painkillers, *you* do not feel my toothache.

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The transfer of psychological pain almost always occurs in a hierarchical relationship, such as parent-child, boss-employee, a dominant/submissive marriage and so on. Helplessness and dependence – real for children, fantasized for adults – are required to be on the receiving end of this kind of parasitical emotional exploitation.

This is the main reason *why* hegemonic or hierarchical power relations exist. We do not throw our garbage into a dump because the dump just happens to be there – the dump only exists *because* we need to throw our garbage somewhere. In the same way, we do not exploit people because they're helpless; we make them helpless *in order to exploit them*.

Bob did not end up abusing children because he had power as a teacher – he sought power as a teacher in order to abuse children.

Power does not create corruption; the desire to corrupt creates power.

When we are in an agony of psychological distress, it is utterly counterintuitive to want to feel *more* of that agony – just as it is counterintuitive to want to pull out a tooth that already hurts, or start chemotherapy when you do not feel sick.

Yet that is precisely what is required, if we wish to become healthy.

If I choose not to go to physiotherapy after my broken leg heals, *I* am the only one who has to live with the resulting weakness and lack of mobility. If I choose to manage my anxiety by attacking the helpless, however, I gain temporary relief from my discomfort only by inflicting my distress on others.

And this is how the entire system reproduces itself.

In essence, by attempting to humiliate me so horrendously, Bob was attempting to infect me with the virus of abuse. Because he was not mature or wise enough to take ownership for his own emotions, he inevitably believed that *I* was the source of his anxiety. Since I was “inflicting” anxiety upon him, I was acting in a “hostile” manner, just as

if I were injecting him with a poison – and thus his attack on me was a twisted form of self-defence.

Furthermore, by inflicting his “humiliation” on me, Bob was demanding that I have empathy for his feelings – but if empathy is a value, why would he not have empathy for my exhaustion?

Without a doubt, Bob had been ignored and repeatedly humiliated as a child, and forced to comply with the irrational whims of those who held power over him. The natural pattern-making habits of his brain thus created a universal commandment: “You must obey those in power!” – or, more accurately: “Disobeying those in power will cause you to be attacked and humiliated.”

There are three major components to the psychological agony that results from the establishment of this principle.

The first is the shame and embarrassment that results from being humiliated.

The second is the horror of being trapped in the power of those who act abusively.

The third is the rage that results from being told that such abuse is actually virtuous – “This is for your own good!”

When we are abused as children, we are put into a terrible predicament, because we are utterly dependent on our abusers. A form of the “Stockholm syndrome” sets in, and we force ourselves to “respect” those who abuse us. This is an entirely sensible survival strategy, because the horror of knowing that we will be under the abusive control of our parents for years to come would be too great for us to bear. Also, since we are punished for not showing respect, it is easier just to “respect” them rather than continually have to pretend to – which they will doubtless see through, and punish.

Furthermore, since abuse is always cloaked with self-righteous moral justifications (“It is morally wrong to disobey me!”), we also experience

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an *existential* horror, because we know that our parents are using moral terms – and our own desire for goodness – to humiliate, control and bully us. In other words, they use *goodness* in the service of *evil*, which is the worst corruption of all.

Thus we are inevitably led to invert rational moral standards – bullying the helpless inevitably becomes virtue.

Absolutes

We can choose not to eat, but we cannot erase our body's need for food. We can choose to jump off a cliff, but we cannot choose to defy gravity.

We can pretend that lies are true, and that vices are virtues, but we cannot turn lies into truth, or vices into virtues.

We cannot erase the truth within ourselves; we can only suppress and distort it.

Fundamentally, philosophy is not invention, but excavation; not exploration, but archaeology.

When we are abused as children, as Bob surely was, we desperately try to numb our pain by imagining that our abusers are virtuous. Deep down, we know the truth though, which is why our distortions cause us such agony in the long run.

We can use other people to “manage” our anxieties as surely as we can use drugs and alcohol to “manage” our anxieties.

The disparity between the mythologies we must invent in order to survive our childhoods and the reality we know to be true is the most fundamental source of our depression and anxiety.

In other words, fantasy is the scar tissue of abuse.

When Bob saw me put my head on my desk, I “created” anxiety in him because I was *not* acting on a premise that he believed to be a moral

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absolute: “You must respect and obey those in power!” His hysterical reaction to my innocuous doziness resulted not because he believed that I *should* obey those in power, but because, deep down, he knew that it was in fact *immoral to obey those in power* – and because he also knew that if someone in power demands obedience, it is because that person is *not moral*.

In other words, he avoided the pain of his own abuse by pretending that he was not abused – by pretending that his abusers were moral. He did this by transforming the control that was inflicted on him from a practical principle of obedience to a moral standard of perfection.

Justification as Prediction

Imagine that I live in England, and for decades I have been ranting about immigrants who do not take the time to learn English. “How can you come and live in a place and never take the trouble to learn the language? It’s disrespectful, it’s rude, and it’s cloistered. Anybody who wishes to be a decent citizen *must* take the trouble to learn the language!”

I publish countless articles on this topic, I make public speeches on it, and end friendships with those who disagree with me.

In other words, I am *really* committed to this idea.

Then, imagine that I move to Sweden. I live in Sweden for a year, and then come back to England for a visit.

“So, how’s Sweden?” you ask.

“Great!” I reply.

“And how’s your Swedish coming along?”

“Oh, I haven’t learned any Swedish, why would I?”

Would that surprise you? Would you feel that I was being rather hypocritical? Would you feel a strong desire to cross-examine me more

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closely about my strong and openly professed belief that the inhabitants of a country are morally obligated to learn the language?

If I explain the inconsistency between my beliefs and my actions by saying that it turns out it is very hard to learn a new language, and that it is not really necessary if you live within the confines of an expatriate cultural group – would you feel compelled to point out that this is the *exact opposite* of the position that I have publicly and vociferously taken for many years?

I imagine that you would suggest it would be appropriate for me to write a follow-up article, repudiating my earlier views, based on my new understanding.

Would my blanket refusal to do any such thing affect your opinion of me?

This is the cycle of abuse.

When we, as children, justify the abuses of our parents in order to survive the situation, we are setting up moral absolutes about the right and proper use of power. “It is moral for those who have power to hurt those who do not have power, in order to protect them, guide them, or ‘toughen them up.’”

This is how we justify and survive the harm done to us.

This is why we so often repeat and re-inflict the harm done to us.

If I were a publicly xenophobic Brit who moved to Sweden, I would be perfectly aware of all the criticisms I would face if I did not try to learn Swedish. I would know that I would either have to learn Swedish – and learn it well – or publicly repudiate all my earlier opinions.

“Flip-flopping” on principles is very humiliating, because everyone who proclaims a truth inevitably claims that that truth is based on reason and evidence. No one puts forward a “truth” claiming it is based on mere unsubstantiated opinion – because then, of course, it would not be the truth.

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Thus someone who claims “the truth” always says that this truth is merely derived from reason and evidence – even those who claim “faith” as the basis for their beliefs say that faith provides evidence, and thus it is rational to believe truths based on faith.

If someone who claims a truth later has to completely reverse his position, he can only credibly do so if new evidence arises. For instance, if it turns out that the universe is in fact powered by invisible pixies on treadmills, I will have to revise some of my opinions on reality – but only because new evidence has come to light.

If, however, no new evidence has come to light, then clearly evidence cannot be believably cited as the justification for one’s earlier position. What becomes clear is that one’s earlier position was based on prejudice, *but that reason and evidence were cited as justifications.*

This is an essential point – and very similar to the ethical and cultural hypocrisies discussed above.

When I cite reason and evidence as the justifications for my beliefs, I am affirming the power of reason and evidence. In other words, I fully accept and respect the primacy of reason and evidence in determining the truth-value of beliefs.

If it turns out that I had no real reason or evidence for my beliefs, then I am engaged in the same kind of terrible hypocrisy perpetrated by those who use moral arguments for immoral ends. I am using reason and evidence to support subjective bigotry.

This hypocrisy lies at the root of my public and private pronouncements regarding truth. If it comes to light that I have been using the values of reason and evidence to promote bigotry and prejudice, then not only have all my prior statements become worse than useless, but I stand revealed as a hypocrite, a fraud and a manipulator.

All my credibility is shot. All my prior statements become examples not of empirical truth, but of rank hypocrisy.

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Not good.

This is exactly what happens when we maintain our childhood justifications for our parents' abuses into adulthood.

If we believe that the abuse of power is moral, we will inevitably be led to abuse power. If I go to Sweden, but do not learn Swedish, then I will have to lie and prevaricate, or pretend that I have learned Swedish, or am about to learn Swedish and so on. Or, I will have to enter the magical land of "this is just somehow *different*," which will inevitably require that I substitute aggression for consistency when questioned.

We replicate what we praise. Our justifications guide our lives as surely as train tracks guide a train. The lies we believe today are the lives we will live tomorrow.

The teacher who humiliated me did so because he believed that that's what those in power must do.

Almost everyone, when faced with the choice of hypocrisy or abuse, chooses abuse.

Sadism as Salvation

If I go to a doctor because I have made myself sick by smoking, and the doctor prescribes a treatment that causes me pain, my doctor is not cruel, but helpful. The doctor does not seek me out and hurt me because he is sadistic, but rather I must seek out the doctor for a cure because I have hurt myself by smoking. I should not resent the doctor for the pain of his cure, but rather thank him for his ability to help me. The doctor is not responsible for my pain. I am.

A child born in a prison will almost inevitably say: "I don't obey the prison guards because they are sadists with truncheons, but rather because the prison guards are morally virtuous, and trying to help me."

There is a terrible cost to this belief, as there is to all fantasies.

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If my prison guards hit me with truncheons, I must obey them. If I accept that I obey them because they hit me with truncheons, I feel terribly humiliated and helpless, but retain an accurate assessment of the situation. On the other hand, I can choose to reduce my humiliation by imagining not that I comply because I am hit, but rather *that I am hit because I disobey*. It is not my noncompliance with the guard's *whims* that gets me beaten, but rather my noncompliance with moral virtues. The guards do not beat me because they are sadistic – I am beaten because I am evil. The guards are not responsible for beating me – I am responsible for being beaten. The guards are not trying to humiliate me; they are trying to help me, to make me a better person, just as the doctor is trying to help me by making me healthy again.

Do you see how the agony of moral corruption can be transferred from one person to another?

If my parents beat me not because *they* are bad, but rather because *I* am bad, I can retain some sense of honour and control within an abusive and hopeless situation.

If, however, I retain this fantasy after I become an adult – after I gain power over others – then my survival strategy will become exploitive destruction. The equation of abuse with virtue that formerly allowed me to survive now corrupts me. I have become what I originally feared and despised.

Thus, when my actions conflicted with Bob's belief that it was virtuous to obey those in power, I created great anxiety in him, and triggered his defences, by triggering all his memories of being abused.

I was creating a choice where he believed there was only an absolute. I was also acting in an "immoral" manner, and he had been taught as a child that it is moral to attack someone who is acting in an "immoral" manner.

Thus, to defend his fantasies about his parents' virtue, to ward off the growing anxiety and horror he felt about the lies he had to invent to survive his own abuse, to crush the freedom that I possessed and which

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he did not, to legitimize a false moral absolute – and, fundamentally, to both re-create his parents’ abuse, and to be the “bad” person his parents claimed him to be – all in order to justify their abuse – he attacked me.

If I had never understood this, I would very likely have become Bob, and passed along my own abuse.

If I had taken Bob’s abuse personally, I would have absorbed an agony that I would have inevitably inflicted on others, most likely children.

But Bob’s abuse had no more to do with me than my sleepiness had to do with Bob.

He lashed out at me because he knew the truth deep down, but could not accept it.

He tried to humiliate me because, in his own mind, *one* of us had to be humiliated – and I started it!

He did evil in order to protect the “virtue” of evil.

And it is time for us – all of us, around the world – to stop.

How To Change

I was originally planning for this book to be longer, but as I reached this point in the text, I began to feel a growing anxiety, which was hard for me to understand. I thought it might be because I had started this book without a plan, and was losing my way. As my wife and I reread the book, though, it was clear that it flowed quite well.

Last night, we went for a walk, and discussed the content and form of this book. In just over 16 months, I have produced over 800 podcasts, so it’s not as if I am anywhere *close* to running out of things to talk about!

However, when you have been immersed in a discipline for a quarter-century, it can be hard to remember what it’s like starting out. I am now quite sure that my anxiety stems from a concern that a longer book

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would be too hard to digest. When you want to eat a dessert, five pies are not better than one pie.

We will surely speak again, but I think that we have spoken enough for now.

The ideas in this book will change your life if you think about them, and act upon them. The purpose of philosophy is not thought, but action – just as the purpose of medicine is not treatment, but health.

These ideas are in your mind now, and will never go away. You will no more be able to unlearn these truths than you will be able to unlearn that two plus two make four. Thus it is essential that your journey does not stop with reading this book. It is essential that philosophy be a *conversation* in your life – that you talk about your experience of these ideas with those around you, no matter how terrifying it is.

This book is not a call to meditation, but to action.

In a world full of falsehoods, the truth will isolate you if you do not stay in the conversation.

So – go and live the truth by speaking the truth.

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