

PART 5: SOME USEFUL RELATED MATERIAL

Desires, Passions, Morality, and Practicality; Ends and Means; Rationality

See the sections above on morality and practicality and on terms. See the material below on Adam Smith and related topics.

People have desires. People have more than one desire. People seek ways to satisfy their desires. In particular people seek ways to best satisfy their whole set of desires. People cannot fully satisfy all desires at the same time all the time. You cannot drive a car and text at the same time. You cannot swim and play the violin at the same time. People have to balance one desire against another at this time, for the future, and in the future.

People also feel morality. We can see morality as merely another desire. Often that is a correct view of morality but not always. Morality can push us to act in some ways regardless of personal desires. We might feel morality is in accord with our personal desires as when we wish all children including our own to act honestly. Yet we can feel morality is at odds with what we wish as when morality tells us not to steal even when we could get away with it, give to a homeless person that we do not know and we never will get a return from, or allow people to own some guns even if we dislike guns and the people that wish to own them.

Moralists say morality should always win but that does not happen in real life. Morality pushes us despite our desires but not necessarily against them. Do not think of morality as anti-practical or anti-personal. As noted above, I think most often morality and human desires coincide. Think of morality as something distinct in itself that works alongside our desires but does not always work like most other desires. Sometimes when morality and our desires do not coincide, our needs (desires) win anyway as when a poor mother steals food for her children or when we steal printing paper from work.

In cases where morality is enough like other desires, we simply balance morality with our other desires. In cases where morality is not like our other desires, when we clearly feel its character as morality, and when morality costs much or is impractical, but morality does not cost so much that it would ruin our lives or our families, then we can feel the clear victory of morality over practicality, then sometimes morality does “flat out” win. But more often we balance morality against desires. We are moral when it doesn’t cost too much. Even when we do balance morality against other desires, when the moral call and practical class are both clear, and we can find a livable compromise, the situation feels differently than when we merely balance merely practical considerations. When we wish to be honest but don’t wish to confess to a girlfriend or boyfriend that we lusted after someone else but did not have sex with the other person, the situation feels differently than if we want to have healthy food and chocolate cake too. We seek reliable ways to balance morality with other desires and costs. In cases where morality is not like another desire, when morality’s character as morality stands out, we have to know when we can afford to act morally or when morality costs too much – costs either directly or in what we give up. The

Mike Polioudakis, from “Democrats and Republicans”, Part 5

poor mother has to know that she cannot let her kids go hungry even if she has to steal. The typical office worker has to know when he really can afford to buy printer paper rather than steal it. As part of a group, we have to know when the group can afford to act morally or when the costs are too high.

Evolved humans have any morality at all because morality always had to balance with practicality during our evolutionary history when we evolved the capacity for it. Morality is part of our nature as evolved humans. Balancing morality with other, practical, considerations is part of our evolved human nature. Morality, and balancing morality, can be painful, be we have had practice.

Figuring out the balance of desires for one person, and the balance of morality with desires for one person, is hard enough but figuring it out for a group, or many groups interacting, is quite hard. We cherish any methods that help us to figure out these things.

We need not only desires to act, we also need passion. A desire is a desire but it means nothing unless we act on it or choose not to act on it. We can wish to have an apple but if we don't also feel the wish for the apple, and feel it strongly enough, we just sit on the couch. We can wish to help victims of a hurricane, but if we don't have the passion, and have it strongly enough, we never pick up the phone to give Red Cross our card number. We not only have desires, we have passions of particular strengths that go with the desires. How strong any passion is for any particular desire at any time, determines what I do and don't do. Strength of passion is one way in which we balance desires. When we feel the passion of morality stronger than the passion of sex, we don't have sex with our too-drunk date, even if we previously have had sex with him/her and to have sex would be OK if he/she were not too drunk to consent. When we do feel the passion of sex more than the passion of morality, we go ahead. (Ignore the circularity in this argument.)

What people desire, sometimes including morality, is called “ends”. How people get what they want is called “means”. Philosophers and political thinkers differ on whether they include morality among ends or how they include morality among ends. You have to pay attention to each writer to figure out what he/she means in any particular passage. I try to be consistent and to note whether I include morality or do not include it. Usually, when I, and other writers, do not explicitly include morality as an end, we leave it out of consideration for the present.

“The ends do not justify the means” means that we may not do an immoral act in pursuit of a moral goal. “The ends do justify the means sometimes” means we may do an immoral act in pursuit of a moral goal if the moral goal is important enough and the means are not too vile. We may torture a terrorist to get information that would stop a mass bombing of children. You have to decide the general question and a lot of specific questions for yourself. School courses love this topic.

To pursue means effectively and efficiently is called “rational”. The more efficient and more effective, the more rational is the thought and action. “Rationality” is the correct balancing of desires, and the correct use of means, to achieve a lot of something, especially to achieve the most of something that is possible in that situation. Analysts differ on what the something is, and I don't have to settle the issue

now. To “be rational” is to act rationally. The idea of rationality can be made very exact, and some social scientists such as economists routinely do so; but here we don’t have to worry that much.

The above use of “rational” is from economics and differs a little from common use. How any particular writer uses the term varies. Ordinarily, people think of rational as “able to give reasons, see the forces at play, balance the forces and balance the relevant reasons, so as to give a good outcome or the best outcome, and to be able to give a coherent account of how and why”. “Rational” in this way is about reasoning as much as about acts. However, if you can give good balanced reasons, then usually you also can act rationally. If you can give good reasons, and balance reasons, then you will act effectively and efficiently to get a lot or to get the most. So the common use gave rise to the technical use, and the two often are mixed up. I don’t always sort out which I mean because that does not usually make much of a difference and it takes a lot of space.

“Irrational” now often means “mad, crazy”. (“Mad” did not originally mean “angry” but “insane”.) The term “irrational” might have come from not being able to give good reasons and not balancing reasons, but now the sense is stronger than that. In economics, the term does not usually mean mad or crazy but means “not acting consistently with the best most effective most efficient means when you know those means or should know those means” or means “not knowing your own desires, not feeling your own passions, or not knowing the usual means, so as to balance desires correctly to achieve what is overall best for you”.

“Means rationality”: to use the available means effectively and efficiently. It does not explicitly take into account ends. To go from the suburbs into the city, for whatever reason, often it is more means rational to take a commuter train than to drive.

“Ends rationality”: to balance the desires (ends) properly, usually so as to get the most, or to pursue a particular end effectively and efficiently – again I do not specify any “most”. “Ends rationality” does not take into account if the goal is usually worthwhile or sane. It does not explicitly take into account the means. “We want to go into the city tonight to have fun rather than stay home and watch reruns on TV” is ends rational. A serial killer murdering enough victims to get satisfaction but not so many as to get caught is ends rational but deplorable.

When you use a GPS to get somewhere, the destination is the end and the directions that the GPS gives you are the means. The means should lead to the end.

Some writers require that an end be moral and otherwise valued by most people to be truly rational and for acts to be truly ends rational. A person bungee jumping can be means rational but a person jumping to his/her death without cords is not means rational even if that was the goal.

It is hard to separate means rationality from ends rationality. If you are ends rational then likely you are means rational and vice versa. The commuter train is the most rational means to go to the city if your end is to get to the city. If your end is to get to your neighbor’s house, likely the most means rational

way is to walk, unless you recently broke your foot. I don’t worry about this issue here but it gets to be a worry in real life issues such as how to best re-use an old city waterfront.

People and groups seek means rationality as a way to automatically also achieve ends rationality. Often we can get a reasonable amount of what we want and can balance various desires fairly well, even if not perfectly, if we can find a means and stick to it. If following the directions from our GPS very often gets us where we want to go, efficiently enough if not perfectly, then we are means rational to use our GPS, and, by being means rational, we also are ends rational. Police officers have definite means they use in their work. Soldiers have to follow orders, and it usually works out. Good students learn how to study effectively. People learn how to use the instructions for how to assemble pre-cut wooden furniture.

When we are means rational as a way also to be ends rational, we don’t have to think much, and don’t have to fight much, and people like that. People seek to be means rationality as a way not to have to think about ends rationality.

A person can be means rational but not careful about ends rational, and the results can be bad. If you always trust GPS and this time you end up in Wyoming instead of Illinois, then were means rational but it did not work out and so you were not ends rational. In a big country, all the people cannot participate in making laws, so we elect representatives. In America, we elect Congress. Selecting representatives is means rational but it does not always work out. When I want to eat ice cream and I want the dial on the scale to be lower, I tell myself that five more minutes of exercise will work; but I know in my heart that I am wrong. We don’t want to approve means rationality if the end is immoral or questionable. A sexual harasser might have developed a really effective technique but that is not something we want. We can get lost in a habit that becomes a vice such as drinking or gambling. Many people go out compulsively every weekend thinking for sure that is the way to have a good time. Many people ride around with immoral low-pitched crap rocking their cars thinking that is the way to be a real person.

Republicans tend to pay a lot of attention to means rationality and pay only selective attention to ends rationality. They like to think that, if they follow accepted methods and cost effective methods, the goal is automatically good. This is not true. You can use very rational effective techniques to cut a forest and build a strip mall where the forest once stood, and the mall can even make more profit than the forest ever could, but that result does not mean you were also ends rational. To be fully human, you really have to pay attention not only to means but also ends. You have to pay attention not only to practicality but also to morality.

Often I use “practicality” for what people desire combined with ends that can be achieved by rational means, without regard to whether morality is in or out of the set of desires. I use it much the way we would say “practical business strategy”, “practical way to get to Boston”, “practical way to learn to play the piano”, “practical way to pursue Peggy Sue”, or “practical way to contribute to various charities so you use your limited contribution for the most good”. My use does not mean practicality necessarily excludes morality but only that we can think of practicality apart from morality and often have to. Non-philosopher lay people like me tend to think in terms of morality versus practicality, and I go along, but I

also like to be fairly precise. So I make clear what I intend. When I say “practicality versus morality”, I intend to contrast them and I do exclude morality from practicality. In those cases, I use “practicality” much like “means rationality” combined with non-moral goals, but there is also a conflict with morality. For example, I would like to make sure all children eat three good meals a day, and I wish to use the schools for that purpose, but I am not sure this good moral goal is practical both because of the costs and because of resistance from people that fear the state.

In evolutionary biology and evolutionary anthropology, the division between some of these terms is a little different. It is too much to go into details here, and not needed. Evolutionists tend to see morality as just another desire; in the context of their approach, to see morality as just another desire is correct. In the broader human and religious context, it is not enough. Evolutionary biologists tend to take better account of passions than do political and moral analysts. See my other work.

Some foreshadowing comments on the free market: In theory but not in practice, the free market is a means, a method, an institution that also is a method, a means rationality, one that automatically finds how to balance the desires of many people, including the desire for morality, so the greatest welfare is achieved by the group. The market settles how to find the best balance among a bunch of people. The market finds ends rationality through means rationality. The market is the Righty equivalent of going out every weekend to the same bars in search of happiness and Mr. Goodbar.

In theory, a person need use no methods in a free market other than that he-she pursues his-her desires effectively, including morality as a personal desire, in the context of many people doing the same and interacting. Self-interest by all pursued as rationally as possible does the whole trick. Self-interest is the means rationality that substitutes for ends rationality. Moreover, in theory, the market works well only when people act rationally according to self-interest and do not let any genuine self-sacrifice else get in the way. While in theory this view makes sense, in practice, dogged pursuit of self interest and only self-interest on the market is the equivalent of driving around in a 1970s big car blaring bass-heavy sexist racist crap thinking that fulfills you.

The market treats morality as just another desire to be balanced against other desires. Each individual has to balance for him-herself as he-she sees fit, and the market takes care of the group automatically.

Of course, the market does not work well enough in any of these ways although the real does approach the ideal pretty well. If we paid attention to how it does and does not work well, we could stop relying on the market as infallible means rationality and instead use it better.

Economists and Republicans like this view of the market because it means they don’t have to think any more. They substitute means rationality for ends rationality, and that is that. They don’t need to think about vexing moral and practical questions, especially not for the group. They simply rely on the market to think for them. If you already have power, this view is an effective way to rationalize, keep it, and get more power. I like using the market when it works correctly but it does not work so well that we don’t have to think about questions such as poverty, prejudice, good jobs and bad jobs, school shootings,

guns, and welfare. The market does not work well enough so we can substitute means rationality for ends rationality. It does not work so well that we can let it make moral decisions for us. It does work well enough so we can take some guidance from it when we have to decide practicality versus morality. No self-respecting person should allow any means or institution to do his/her moral thinking for him/her. Part of what makes us really human is thinking about these issues for ourselves, even if that is hard. You can always take some trusted advice into account.

Technically, “wish” means much like “desire” while “want” refers to something that we need but we lack or we lack enough of. Sometimes it is clearer to say “want for” something instead of merely “want” something. Harold did not eat breakfast, and now it is ten a.m., so Harold wants for a snack to keep him until lunch. I wish for a Nobel Prize but I want for clean air. “For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the kingdom was lost”. We usually wish for what we want but we do not want for (need) everything that we wish for. I wish for daily bread and I want it too. When young, I wished for many pretty girls to succumb to my charms but I did not really want for that, and usually they neither wished for me nor wanted for me. In common American speech, “want” has replaced “wish” and people do not say “want for” but simply “want”. “I am really hungry and I want a big fat juicy burger”. I don’t make a fuss over “wish” and “want” but you should know them in case you read old political or moral philosophy.

Human Nature and Human Society

Theories of human nature and theories of society go together. Any analysis of human institutions needs a theory of human nature to go along with it or the analysis is prone to abuse and won’t last. Any social analysis implies a view of human nature whether the analyst knows or not. Likewise, any view of human nature affects how we see society. If we think society is all about justice then we think of people as able and willing to seek justice. If we think society is all about preserving humanity and spreading it through the galaxy, then we think of people accordingly. If we think all people are altruistic angels when given a chance, we see society one way. If we think power corrupts and all people with power are thoroughly selfish pigs, we see society another way.

There is a generic human nature, something that shows up to some extent in all societies and cultures, and something that we need to take account of even when we explain details of particular societies and cultures. Likely generic human nature evolved. Some theorists think there is no human nature apart from particular societies and cultures but I disagree. Even if there is an evolved general human nature, you still have to stress particular situations to do good social analysis. Particular societies, cultures, institutions, and history all matter, and often matter more than general evolved human nature.

I gave my relevant theory of human nature in other work. If you can get rid of your political biases, and can think of people as a mixture of good and bad, with good prevailing when possible, but with people a little too opportunistic to sustain general good, then that is about right for this essay.

People who wish to see society in a particular way often use a tacit theory of human nature for support but don't make the theory explicit because they know other people will disagree with their view of human nature and so reject their theory of society. If you believe religion is the glue that holds society together, or should be, you have to think religion is important to people, more so than wealth, family, or success. If you think lust for wealth and power hold society together, then you have another view of people and society. But if you say either view explicitly, few people go along. In reading political ideas and commentary, watch for implied theories of human nature.

When the theory of human nature is not made explicit, and-or when it is not full enough, then particular kinds of mistakes come up. Here is not the place to go into this topic separately. Liberals, Democrats, Conservatives, and Republicans all make their own typical mistakes because they do not offer a full and explicit theory of human nature. I describe some of the mistakes below. L, D, C, and R don't state their full theories of human nature because then their agendas would be revealed, or their hypocrisy would be revealed, and their programs largely rejected.

In using a hidden theory of human nature, L, D, C, and R, often fall back on their version of what social scientists call a “folk model”. A “folk model” is what people in a particular culture and society tacitly think about a certain subject. In the American folk model of physics: “what goes up must come down”, bigger objects fall faster, rocks don't float, even when one object goes behind the other object the first object still exists, and there is a qualitative difference between living things and not-living things. There are folk models of life, marriage, family, society, and religion. Folk models do coincide with scientific models fairly well but never perfectly. Some aspects of folk models are factually wrong. Usually the gaps are not important except when science says one thing but people will not believe it because they don't want to believe it, such as with global climate change. Folk models are not necessarily consistent within themselves or with folk models about other fields. The American folk model of biology is not consistent with the model of physics because we like to think animals have free will, trees talk, people can soar through the air by using will alone, in magic, and in innate difference between white (green) witches and black witches. We like to believe that life leads to super people and that these super people are good.

When L, D, C, and R use a tacit theory of human nature, they borrow from the folk model but they don't borrow all of it. They borrow from the folk model partly because that is what they inherited as a base by growing up here. They also borrow because people feel comfortable when they recognize motifs from the folk model, and L, D, C, and R wish people to feel comfortable so people will accept the L, D, C, or R selection, analysis, and agenda. L, D, C, and R do not use all of a folk model. They use what helps their case and hurts opponents. They reject or overlook the rest. This kind of argument is common all over the world in lots of arenas. Your children, spouse, friends, colleagues, and boss do it to you all the time. You do it to them. L, D, C, and R borrow in ways that are typical of their stance but I cannot go into that topic in much detail. I simply point out cases when I need to.

Most political analysts and commentators have an agenda. NPR and all the cable news channels have an agenda. The best analysts try not to think in terms of “us versus them” but they are rare. In America

and in most of Europe, there are two political parties and two large blocks in each country. The parties oppose each other. It is part of evolved general human nature to think in terms of “us versus them”, not always, but often enough. So, “us versus them” is more common than good impartial analysis. Almost always, simplistic “us versus them” is wrong. When people think in terms of “us versus them” they tend to have two ideas of human nature and society, one idea that applies to us and one idea that applies to them. In both cases, ideas of human nature and society are hidden, so you have to watch. “(A) Almost always, we are moral, reasonable, know what is realistic, still have good ideals, know what is best for everybody, know how to get people to act up to their best, we can get people to go along and help the whole if only we have power, and we can make good institutions. (B) They are immoral, stupid, never reasonable, do not have a realistic view of human nature or society, have crazy ideals or no ideals at all, make people act badly through their policies, make bad institutions, and erode the goodness of the whole through the bad institutions they make and the bad people that come out of bad institutions.” Of course, neither view is correct. The problem is that it is hard to figure out what is true in this climate. It is easier to become a partisan.

Westerners like a dichotomy between Reason versus Emotion (Passion). The dichotomy is overall false and misleading but it persists because it is partly true and it is useful for arguing. Sometimes you will wish to think Liberals and Democrats are Reasonable while Conservatives and Republicans are driven by bad irrational passions such as greed, xenophobia, and irrational religious commitment – or vice versa. Resist the temptation. Humans need goals, reasons, and passions. Try to see when you are slipping into a bad dichotomy and then stop. Try to see the goals, rationality, and passion behind both Liberals and Conservatives.