

06 Codes

From Dion and the Belmonts:

“I got my two fists of iron but I’m goin’ nowhere”

Introduction and Synopsis.

Codes guide: soldiers, martial artists, detectives, knights, tough guys, bar fighters, stand-up guys, moms, dads, feminists, bimbos, right wingers, left wingers, golfers, football players, con artists, nature lovers, right to lifers, pro-choicers, righteous crusaders, martyrs, and trophy-hunting Predators (don’t kill pregnant women or women without weapons). Codes are a big way by which to deal with a confusing world. Codes are stances. This chapter explains the idea of a code and assesses a few codes.

In the modern world, especially in modern pluralistic nations, most people don’t understand the dogmas of traditional religion, New Age, and politics. Even when people fight for dogmas, often they don’t get them. Usually conflict is more about “us” versus “them” than about “our ideas” versus “their ideas”. Just because people don’t focus on ideas does not mean people don’t need ideas. People seek a simple set of ideas, a code, to live by, that they can understand, and can defend.

I do not distinguish much between: way, way of life, role, occupation, profession, station, “act”, “shtick”, role, and code. Compared to the other items, I think a code is more coherent, smaller, more focused, and more likely to center on principles. A person could follow a soldier code while carrying out the occupation of business. A person could follow no real code while following externally the guidelines of a profession such as teacher, banker, or soldier.

Most codes can serve as havens against uncertainty. Rather than flounder in uncertainty, people adopt some code as a haven. People adopt a particular code because of their own personality and history. Most people just fall into a way of life and a code. Except for remarks below on a person’s “true you”, I don’t consider why much people adopt particular codes. I do want people to adopt a particular code for the reason that it is a good code.

At any time in human history, but especially in the modern world, you could not be everything, and you could not know firsthand the results of every life. You cannot be man and woman, child and adult, hunter and farmer, artist and ruler, Chinese and French, Muslim and Taoist. You have to choose, and, then, stick to it. You hope your choice works out well for you and the people around you, and in general; but you can’t know for sure.

To live by any code alone is not enough. First, you have to believe in the code. Second, the code has to go along fairly well with your “true you”. Third, and most important, you have to live by a code based on the right principles. So, fourth, “your true” you and the right principles have to get along well enough even if not perfectly. Fifth, you hope your code does more good than harm.

Once we see the right principles, they are more important than any particular code. Good codes are only the means by which to live out the right principles, under particular conditions. You hope your particular way promotes right principles well enough. In my view, the right principles are the ideals of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values.

Right principles are not simply a list. Right principles are based on an underlying spirit. Right principles need judgment based on the underlying spirit. From the TV show “NCIS”, even Gibbs’ list has a guiding rationale, even if we can’t easily state it.

In the sappy “Twilight” books and movies, and “Underworld” movies, it is not enough to be a true-to-the-code vampire or werewolf. Most vampires and werewolves do that much. You have to adhere to deeper better values. You have to be better than bad vampires. You have to be better than average vampires and even better than ruling vampires. You have to be better than the good vampire clan (Cullen) and the good werewolf clan (Jacob) before they became friends. You have to be as good as they are after they made friends. You have to adhere to values that can create friendship across group lines even while you are kicking the crap out of bad guys and defying autocratic rulers. Adhering to those values allows you to bring out the best in codes, yourself, and all groups. It allows you to defeat bad groups and bad rulers. Even if this vision is one version of Christian idealism, it is true enough to take seriously.

Insisting on rules without judgment leads to zealotry. It squashes the empathy and sympathy that are part of the underlying spirit for the right principles. At the same time, judgment is not mere relativism and it is not a self-serving excuse to do what you want. “Principles” means “principles”. Having a spirit behind principles means keeping that spirit through the judgments of particular cases.

Not everybody can feel the principles and the underlying spirit. Most people have to rely on a list of rules as in the “Bro’ Code” of the TV show “How I Met Your Mother”. Even people who do understand usually find it easier to live by a set of simple rules than always to ponder judgment. When we personally are not adept at principles, then we have to live by codes. Even when we are adept, always referring back to principles is a lot of work and is not always productive. We fall back on codes as a more realistic way to deal with a complex world. We fall back on codes as “rules of thumb”: “detectives never betray a client” especially if she is young, pretty, and in trouble.

Regardless of how adept you are at principles, sometimes life punches you so hard that you have to fall back on the list until better days come, as in movies and graphic novels about people who take righteous vengeance until they can “re-humanize” with new friends and family.

People who do see the underlying rationale have to steer other people toward codes that are based on right principles without forcing the other people. That is part of what it means to be a good teacher or a good religious counselor.

We hope our codes do much more good than harm. We hope they are a good way to live even in the confusing modern world. We use codes that have proven themselves over time, such as for respected professions like soldiers, doctors, teachers, homemakers, and business people. We use codes that are

based on simple proven principles even when we know that one set might not cover all cases all the time correctly, such as the principles of personhood, honor, hard work, or being useful.

When we see that our code is not working out well, we try to find a better code. The feeling that our old code is failing can be scary. To a veteran doctor or teacher, the idea that the “tried and true” methods don’t work anymore, and that you might have hurt your patients or students, hurts your guts. The search is just as scary. To find a new code, we have to assess various codes against basic principles. If we could assess with this degree of skill to begin with, we could have adjusted our old code and would not have to look for a new one. The fact that our old code didn’t work out well is evidence that we will have trouble looking for a new one. Still we try.

Accepting a code that does not use right principles invites abuses such as glamorizing criminals, even when some aspects of the code have merit. This is a serious modern mistake.

Usually being faithful is a good part of a good code, but not always. Being true to a code is admirable but being true to a code - intense commitment - does not by itself make you right. It does not justify you and save you. Being faithful to a bad code does not make up for the code being bad. Being faithful to a bad code does not make up for the bad ideas and acts. A faithful gangster can be admirable in a limited way but he-she is still a gangster, and that is bad. Living by a bad code is living a bad life no matter how faithful you are. Only when Darth Vader stopped being faithful to the Sith code could he become what he really should be: good family guy. The conflict between commitment and principles is the core dilemma of some classic “films noir”, of which some of my favorites star Alain Delon.

If you live by a reasonable code, with the right intent, and stay faithful, but then the code does not work out because of nothing that you could reasonably help, or your actions lead to bad results that you could not reasonably foresee, then you are not to blame. Then your commitment is praiseworthy in itself. Sometimes things just turn out badly and it is not our fault. This assessment is not the same as the excuse “I was only following orders”.

Knowing right principles but not living up to them is worse than no code. Once you know right principles, then you are bound to seek a code that works with them.

Sometimes, in one situation, you live by one code, then things change, and you live by another code. If things change again, so does your code. This is the premise behind “vengeance” movies such as “The Punisher”, “Taken”, and “The Losers”. Hopefully you don’t do anything too bad while you are taking care of business. The fact that we sometimes shoot up a place of business after getting fired, or shoot up our in-laws, shows we can err. In theory, there is one set of principles behind the apparently different codes for different situations, but I can’t go into how that works here. It is like the switch from “flight” to “fight” and then to “calm after the storm” among animals.

Even within the same time in life, or even on the same day, we can act according to more than one code. The same man can act according to the husband code, game warden code, angry sports fan code, and community citizen code, all in the same day. Again, in theory, one set of principles underlies all the codes and the switches, but the topic is too much to go into here. How this works out is the subject of some TV shows such as “The Good Wife” and “Revenge”.

What if the right principles don't go along with your true individual nature and deepest desires? Is it better to be an honest adept "true you" who does not work hard for a better world or to be a bumbling strained fake do-gooder? Is it right to give up a chance to express your "true you"? Is it right to force yourself to act against your true nature? To force yourself against yourself seems not to help the world. Is it right to force yourself to be a superficial do-gooder if your true nature is to do commerce, write silly pop songs, or even cleverly con people? For Americans, this way of posing the question pre-answers in favor of being your "true you" no matter what. Being a "true you" more than makes up for not working to make the world better. The America view is not usually harmful but it is not always true.

Most people can mix their "true you" with the right principles, with working hard to make the world better, and with "do unto others". Codes can help people find ways of life that merge their true nature with acting well. You don't need to dedicate yourself to charity and then give away everything that you own. Even cartoons and silly pop songs help the world. See the movie "The Travels of Sullivan". To go along with your "true you" you can aggressively fight bad economic development. You can fight for good economic development. You can fight for the free market.

People have to struggle to find the balance but the struggle is worth it. The modern world could not have been built without this struggle. We would not have the rule of law and would not have a good mix of ideals and reality without it. Fun TV shows are built on characters who struggle to mix their "true you" with the right principles, and mostly win, but don't always win, such as "Happy Days" (Arthur Fonzarelli), "Magnum, PI", "White Collar", "The Mentalist", "Law and Order", and most police shows.

If you can't merge your "true you" with actively doing the right principles, then it is better to be your "true you" as long as you do no harm. If you want to sit on the couch watching sports or "rom coms", then do that as long as you do no harm. "Faking it" uselessly does more harm than good.

If your "true you" leads you to act badly, then it is better to fight your "true you". If you lose the struggle, if you must do harm and-or live by bad principles, then it is better to kill yourself. If you must be a bad person who hurts other people, then it is better to die. It is better to kill yourself than to molest children, kill innocent people in the name of God or to keep power, abuse state help, torture animals, or despoil nature. See "Dial 'M' for Murder", "Pickup on Main Street", "8 mm", or any good film noir. If you are a bad person and can't kill yourself, then expect other people to do it.

Even people who act badly feel as if they have to act badly by a code. The ideology of codes can enable people to act badly while feeling righteous about it. People can merge their bad "true you" with a code, and feel good about it. Movie villains, real dictators, bad bureaucrats, bad bosses, and some careerist academics, all act by their idea of a code, and use it to excuse what they do. The organized fantasy of some serial killers is a code. It serves not just to enable killing but also to let killers feel as if killing means something. Gangsters act badly and feel righteous about it, especially when we glamorize them. All this is why we have to be clear about codes and principles.

In the modern world, we ask a lot from the fit between our codes and our selves, maybe too much. We want the fit between our codes and our selves to come naturally without much work, like being a "natural" at tennis or baseball. We yearn for codes that lead to success, let us feel that we make the world a better

place, express our “true you”, and allow us to “be ourselves”. We hate conflict between what we want versus what we should do. We detest conflict that we can’t resolve and that causes much pain. We don’t mind a little conflict and pain if it makes us seem nobler and if we can resolve conflict in victory. We want our code to grow out of our sense of self rather than have to adjust our sense of self to a code. We want our self-expressive code to serve greater good even if it is not an obvious do-gooder code such as poor nurse’s aide. At the same time, we want to make money and live well by following our code without effort. Even if our code involves violence, intoxication, self-intoxication, and crazy driven focus, we expect our code to serve the greater good, as with the detective. We expect to be a bit naughty and to have fun. In fact, we expect to live up to our code better if we are naughty and have fun. If we have to choose among established codes such as “honest business person”, we expect to find one that fits us personally well. We expect destiny to guide us to the right code.

We can see modern expectations about codes in formulaic cutesy fantasy detective shows in which the hero and heroine have slightly flawed characters but not really bad characters, make the world better by catching bad guys, still act out their own “true you” slightly naughty character, and have fun doing it; see the list above; see “Hart to Hart”, “Macmillan and Wife”, “Burn Notice”, “The Mentalist”, “Elementary”, “Castle”, “Psyche”, “Rizzoli and Isles”, etc. In modern versions, such as “The Mentalist” and “Castle”, the heroes and heroines need an evil opposite who lives by an organized life style fantasy, a code, but a bad code. For the modern beginning of cutesy couples, read “The Thin Man” by Dashiell Hammett.

Even people who feel all-out rage can build a code on that true self and can act on it as long as they kill bad guys and save good guys. For an early version, read “Red Harvest” by Dashiell Hammett. See any movie based on righteous vengeance such as “Four Brothers” or the movie from which it likely came, “The Sons of Katie Elder”.

We have so many TV shows and movies telling us that we can find what we want by starting from the self because we know, in real life, we can’t have success that way and that easily. We need to be convinced of what is not true, and the media make money by helping us convince ourselves. They give us fantasies to make us feel better.

Unluckily, rationalizing our life in terms of a contrived code based on our “true you” has costs, especially when the media gives us so much help. We are not sure we are correct. We lose the ability to assess codes, decisions, results, and ways of life. We lose the ability to assess links between principles, “true you”, codes, the good and bad we do, and the greater scene.

One reason we need codes is because, in an uncertain world, we are not sure where the world is going. If we want society to go to a particular place, we don’t know how to there from here. We don’t know how to steer society. In the modern world of democracies, that means we don’t know how to govern well. We can’t place our code in the context of a good society because we don’t know what a good society is and we don’t know how to get one. For decades, our leaders have offered us no vision or plan. We can’t be sure our code is really good enough. To assess the issue of codes in the modern world, I would have to explain why we can’t self-govern well, and what to do about it. That topic lies beyond the scope of this book.

When we can't be sure of the rightness of our code, paradoxically, we fall back harder on our code. We "double down". We find codes that were widely accepted in the past such as the detective's (knight's) code, and we find codes that make sense because they seem to come from human nature such as the parent's code, teacher's code, protector's code, and martial artist's code. We look for codes that demand hard irreversible commitment such as the soldier's code or code of righteous revenge. We hope the code is correct enough. We hope relying on a proven code can absolve us somewhat in case society is so screwed up that we chose wrongly. For a limited human being, often that is the best that can be done. In these cases, more than ever, we need guidance from leaders, and should get it, but, more than ever, we don't get it. For a good movie with most of these ideas, done well, see "Man on Fire" starring Denzel Washington, Dakota Fanning, and Rachael Ticotin.

Commitment.

I am not sure how long, but at least since the 1920s, the West has taken commitment as the primary sign of good action within a code and the sign of a good person. If you act with commitment, then you have done well, even if your code is accidentally bad, and even if the results are unfortunately bad. We admire people who "stick to it", even to a hopeless cause, or sometimes to a bad code. We admire gangsters, even the Al Pacino character in the movie "Scarface", and the Jimmy Cagney movie characters from the 1930s. We admire dedicated Nazi and Confederate soldiers as long as they personally acted honorably, such as Erwin Rommel and Robert E. Lee.

Commitment is common to every code, even for bimbos, gigolos, and heartthrobs; see the Rob Schneider comedies about male gigolos. Commitment is a point of stress in codes where people face opposition and temptation such as for police, soldiers, lawyers, and teachers. As far as I can tell, commitment is the only thing that is necessarily common to all codes. So commitment comes close to being the essence of a code. That is one reason we value it so highly. Commitment is not quite like other values, such as honor, "always get your man", "never leave a comrade behind", or "if you've got it, flaunt it", but it is enough like other values so we can think of commitment the same way and commitment can seem like the essence of codes. See the Bibliography for more on commitment as part of game theory and in our evolutionary past.

We think good people are more committed than bad people in general, except for crazy bad people who want to take over the world. Good guys stick it out while bad guys run away to save their own skins. We take commitment as a sign of good actions and a good character. Usually, at least in the short run, it is harder to be good than bad. It is hard to resist temptation. If you can resist temptation and stick to your code, then maybe you are a good person. You are committed, and that is a good sign. Maybe you are a good person in general even if some of your actions are bad or your code is bad. You have character, and you have potential. If we could make sure your children stuck to the good side rather than the dark side, we wouldn't mind if our children married your children.

This is one reason why we think any code is better than no code. It is better to have a code, any code, even if your "true you" is simply being shallow. If you have to make a code of being shallow, then that is better than just being shallow accidentally. If you have to make a code of being a selfish woman hunter, that is better than just chasing women willy-nilly. Thus we have "woo girls" and "Barney Stimson" on the TV show "How I Met Your Mother", and a legion of side-kick girls in teen shows and movies. One of the

first characters I recall that made a code of his foibles was the sidekick played by Andy Devine on the old TV show "Wild Bill Hickok"; he might be descended from Falstaff.

If you are committed, and so are more likely to be a good person than bad, maybe your code is good too after all, or at least good enough. Maybe your code is only misplaced in a bad situation. A soldier really has a good character and good code, but he-she might apply it to the wrong situation in a bad war.

In the modern world, it is so hard to tell a good useful code from a bad harmful code that, too often, we give up on assessing the code and its results. Who can tell if a soldier, lawyer, or even doctor follows a good code with good results, especially in these days of "spin" and of ads on TV?

We need a sign that a code is working out. For all the reasons given above, we still use commitment as that sign. So, the less we are able to assess codes and principles, the more we take commitment as the sign of good acts, codes, and character. We stand on commitment instead of principles. We substitute commitment for principles. To some extent, we also substitute blind emotion for reason, but I don't want to push this point here.

In committing to commitment, and using commitment instead of principles, too often we glamorize it. We accept any character and any acts in the name of commitment. We accept bad characters and bad acts in the name of commitment. We also glamorize blind emotion over reason.

For codes that do little harm except maybe to the actor, such as the bimbo code, "valley girl" code, "frat boy", or "rugged outdoor guy", using commitment as the index of goodness does little harm. I don't care much about these codes.

In other cases, commitment alone is admirable but is not enough. Maybe in our evolutionary past, using commitment as a sign of good acts, code, and character, even in a bad situation, might have been reliable, at least as a sign of character. Somebody who was determined to defend the "good guys" in the group even when they made a mistake might have been an admirable person. In our modern world, blind commitment is only weakly reliable at best as a sign of good acts, good code, and good character. By itself, it is not enough. We have to commit not just to any code but to a good code that is likely to lead to good results in our world. We have to commit to a good code with good principles, and we have to pay attention to what happens as a result of our acts based on the code. We have to know the police officer's acts really do help good guys and do not go against the principles of good guys. We cannot glamorize bad acts and bad codes because actors are committed; we cannot extol junkies. When the bad pirate in the Tom Hanks movie about the ship "Maersk Alabama" declares "I am captain now", and means it, we don't think he will now resolutely act the role of a good captain.

In cases where we can't judge well acts and results, then we can admire commitment but we still can't extol or glamorize commitment by itself. We can admire loyalty to a business firm as long as we have no reason to believe the firm does bad things. When we think the firm destroys nature and-or exploits poor workers in poor countries, then we cannot excuse loyalty. We might admire honor among thieves who steal jewels from rich people without any violence; we can't glamorize honor among pedophiles. We can admire "school spirit" but not when the school chews up student athletes, ruins their bodies, allows them to rape, allows them to not learn, and never graduates any.

This chapter cannot reverse the glamorization of commitment and the resulting bad codes, people, and acts. Maybe this chapter can help us see the need to look at codes in terms of principles, and help us to think about right principles. At least we can get over some stupid glamorizing. This was the point of the Jimmy Cagney classic anti-gangster movie "Public Enemy". We can start to admire people who try hard to act well by what they hope are good codes. These comments apply to Existentialism below.

Disclaimer: "True You".

This section "covers my ass" against some criticisms. Americans assume people have a "true you", and I go along for here. The idea that we all have a "true you" might not be fully true but it is true enough for what I need here. I correct the idea somewhat in a later chapter on the self, and also in the chapters on Buddhism.

A "true you" comes both from genes and learning. I take no side on "nature versus nurture". Learning comes partly from society. Society partly determines our "true you" but only partly. I don't draw the line between individual and society, at least in theory. In my own mind, I tend toward American independent individualist versions of "true you" that minimize social determinism and struggle against it.

Your "true you" can change. It can change as a result of situations or from choices that you make. If your "true you" can change, then we can debate over how "true" and "you" it is but I don't enter that debate. At any moderate period of time, your "true you" is true enough.

To some extent, you can make yourself. You can get better and can get worse. If you could not make yourself, then it would be hard for your "true you" to change, and to get better or worse. Choice would not make the same sense it does now. It sounds odd to say a "true you" can make its own self but I go along with the idea anyhow. There are limits on how much your true you can make its self. It is hard for a meek decent person to make him-herself into a self-gratifying bully; and hard for a dedicated bully to make him-herself into a moderate decent person; but it has been done, and is the topic of teen epics. I cannot go into the implications of making yourself.

If (a) your "true you" changes as a result of making choices, (b) your "true you" can make its self, and (c) situations can change your "true you", then (d) all those facts imply there is a "real true you" deeper than your apparent "true you. The "real true you" that underlies your apparent "true you" really makes choices and really sets situations. Perhaps you have a secret true soul that is in touch with the one great cosmic soul; all people are really just different aspects of the one true Buddha mind. Maybe your "true you" is a secret darkness in touch with cosmic evil; really, you are a hidden witch who hurts everyone around you without knowing or consciously trying. I think this is a misleading way to think about "true you" and what drives your "true you", and I do not accept it.

Human nature evolved. Each particular person is, to a large extent, the unique combination of a group of evolved abilities. Our evolved self is not a simple consistent whole but a bundle of abilities. It is not clear how well our evolved selves are integrated. Likely we are not nearly as well integrated as the American idea of a "true you". It is not clear if our evolved selves are integrated well enough for the purposes of this chapter; but I think they are; and I rest with that declaration for here.

Mission from God.

A “mission” is a code in a code. It is actions aimed at a goal, all governed by a set of principles, a code. Whether a mission is a good mission or a bad mission depends on who ordered the mission or what situation called for the mission, who carries it out, the goal, the guiding code, the methods, who gets hurt, and who benefits. All this is covered by Christian-Muslim ideas of a just war and by American military ideas of “rules of engagement”. Sometimes the mission is ordered by a respected authority as in “A Team” adventures, sometimes the needs of a good person require it as on the TV show “Burn Notice” to help a “client”, and sometimes a situation arises that calls for a response as in the movie “The Losers”. There is not much more I can say about missions that I don’t say below about codes.

A fun example of a mission from God is in the movie “The Blues Brothers”. I agree with Jake and Elmore that they were on a mission from God. This is the kind of mission from God that most people can “get behind”. You can assess if the benefit is worth the damage. Another funny but instructive example, and a good movie, is “Dogma” by Kevin Smith, with a great cast.

Aside from Jake and Elmore, most people who think they are on a mission from God are not. They are self-deluded. They use the idea to fool themselves and to enable themselves to do something they want to do for other reasons. They use the idea as an excuse to hurt other people if they have or want to. Terrorists are on a mission from God. They use the idea to hurt themselves or keep themselves in a box for most of their lives. Self-delusion for selfish reasons is likely true of most self-appointed missions even if they are not from God, but I don’t know enough to go further into it here. Be careful around people who are on a mission from God; other characters in the movie even had to be careful of Jake and Elmore, and they really were on a mission from God. Of course, “God” also includes “Dharma”, “Heaven” and the “Tao”.

Pascal’s Wager.

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician and religious thinker in the 1600s. To help out a gambler, he pioneered probability theory. The computer language “Pascal” was named after him. Pascal offered a religious “wager”. Here is my version. (A) Suppose God exists, and you believe in him. You get a rich reward in heaven, and likely get one on Earth through fellowship and through business deals with other believers. (B) Suppose God exists, and you refuse to believe. By not having an anchor to God, you might be able to gain more materially while you are still alive. More likely, you will be hurt by society now for your bad acts and punished by God in the future. (C) Suppose God does not exist, and you wrongly believe in him. You are not likely to lose much, and most of the loss will come from moral acts that you would do anyway. Besides, you might gain from good relations with other believers and by being a good member of society. (D) Suppose God does not exist, and you do not believe in him. You gain little, and you might lose on the whole because society dislikes you. If you look at the options rationally, you should believe in God. That is how you stand to gain most; that is the best bet. Ever since Pascal, apologists for religion have offered versions of his wager as a real argument for belief.

The most common version of Pascal’s Wager is social. Religious believers think only other believers are fit for society. It is better if other people believe in the same religion as us but it does not have to be the

same religion as long as their religion does not conflict openly with our religion. Any religion is better than no religion. Atheists, agnostics, free thinkers, and religiously lazy people cause problems. Most people want society to work. You, personally, want society to work both because that is good in itself in general and because a working society is good for you and your children. To make society work, you should believe in a religion, teach your children to believe, and encourage other people to believe. Belief tends to follow behavior. So, to make society work, you have to go to church-temple-mosque regularly, take your family, and get other people to go too. Apologists for religion really do offer this argument. If you don't believe, then society will fall apart. So, believe, conform, and get others to believe and conform too. Ideally, you should believe as we do. Since the rise of Political Correctness, the Left says the same thing in its own way. Even political leaders who really don't believe in much of anything want the people to believe in something because it makes them more governable. The social version of Pascal's Wager was one of the key themes in social science from about 1890 onwards when social scientists assumed that people went along entirely with social rules.

Pascal's Wager raises issues of purity of motive, codes, principles, and "true you". The idea has echoes in modern economics and politics. Pascal tried to substitute his idea of objective self-interest for the true self. Rather than act on the basis of true self, we act on the basis of objective self-interest, and then that self-interest becomes our true self. Yet, in contrast to Pascal, most of us don't want to believe or not believe through a rational calculation of costs and benefits. We want to believe because deep in our heart we think it is true. If, in our heart, we don't think a religion is true, we cannot make ourselves believe just because we hedge our bets and want to gain the most. Our true self is not simply rational calculation. We cannot make ourselves believe because it is good for us, good for society, or good for Big Brother. True human beings don't work that way, or ought not to work that way. True human belief does not work that way. You either believe because you think it is true or you do not. You either believe because it is an expression of "true you" or you do not.

Pascal's Wager points to a contradiction. People are free to choose, and must be free to choose in order to make religious progress and to decide Pascal's Wager. But to accept belief along the lines of Pascal's Wager is to distort free will and even to negate free will. To believe because of cost-benefit rather than because of truth goes against how we think free will works. If cost-benefit determines will more than truth, then will is not free as we think. To believe out of self-interest, rather than because we evaluate evidence and freely choose, amounts to hypocrisy, posing, false belief, and bad attitude. If you believe in a religion that depends on free will, such as Christianity, then you cannot believe in it because of Pascal's Wager. You cannot believe along the lines of Pascal's Wager or you betray free will, belief, God, and the religion that you supposedly choose. If you accept Pascal's Wager, then you negate the basis for the Wager. If you believe because it is part of your true self to believe, fine; but, then, you do not believe because of the self-interest in Pascal's Wager, you believe as an expression of your true self. (I do not go into relations of the "true self", will, and truth.) In the "Matrix" movie series, Agent Smith could not understand why Mr. Anderson kept getting back up and kept fighting when it was so obviously not cost effective and was so obviously irrational. Neo answered "Because I choose to". In the early 1800s, Artur Schopenhauer put the issue another way when he said: You can will but you cannot will to will. You can will to go to the mall but you cannot will to will to go. You either will or you will not. You cannot will to believe. You either believe or believe not. "You do or you do not, there is no trying". You either follow your "true you" or you do not.

Sometimes your “true you”, your will, and what you believe, do not coincide with your senses, facts, evidence, science, reason, and apparent truth. People who oppose evolution are like this. This is an important issue but it is another issue. This issue is not relevant to the main issue here.

I disagree with Pascal and I agree with his critics. We cannot believe as an expedient. We can believe only because we believe. We have to go along with our true selves. We have to go along with what we think is true. If it is in our true self to go along with evidence and reason as a way to belief, then we have to go along with evidence and reason. I remember reading Pascal's Wager as a child and wondering how people could be so foolish, selfish, self-deluding, and self-manipulative. God would rather have honest muddled atheists – who still act well – than have self-serving believers who follow Pascal's Wager.

Pascal's Wager is seductive because it makes us think we follow good principles, our true selves, and self-interest all at once. Pascal's Wager makes morality, God, logic, our true selves, and self-interest all seem to coincide and get along. It is so logical. It leads us to God. It depends on the fact that we identify God with goodness automatically. We seem to freely choose. We choose benefit rather than loss, like adept modern business people. Our salvation is an expression of our true selves and of our self-interest at the same time. We can easily overlook that we ignore free will. What could be wrong about something so neat? Although almost four hundred years old, Pascal's Wager is a good example of modern thinking: calculations of cost and benefit aimed centered on the self, even in non-material realms.

Suppose we had strong evidence that God wanted us to act badly. In that case, we could re-frame the Wager so we come out ahead if we do act badly and do not act well. It would be just as rational, and it could be just as much an expression of our true selves. But we would reject it, and we would not want to think of our true selves in that way at all. We could see the contrived accord between logic, goodness, God, self, self-interest, and selfishness; and reject it. We would rather change our true selves if we could. We would seek a true self that aligned with correct principles rather than a true self that fooled itself into aligning with selfishness and badness.

Pascal's Wager shows that we are not consistent in what we think about the self, reason, circumstances, strategic action, freedom, choosing, belief, principles, our “true you”, and how our “true you” connects with God. Rather than break into these topics here, it is enough to say we seek to reconcile them but don't often make it. Likely they can't always be reconciled. When we find a reconciliation that works well enough to let us succeed in normal life without bad feelings, we tend to stick with it. Sometimes that is the basis for whole societies and sometimes that is the basis only for codes.

Four points: First, people can make themselves really believe something out of self-interest. You really can talk yourself into something. You really can talk yourself into something so that you can succeed in life. That is sometimes why people adopt particular religions. Americans are really uneasy about calling this true belief but it does happen. Americans hope it happens only to people of weak will and bad character, and that is how it is shown in the movies, but sometimes it happens even to people of normal will and modestly decent character. Careerists do it to themselves all the time, even careerists for whom freedom is supposed to be a special point such as academics. People really believe because they need comfort, help, protection, etc. Missionaries of all faiths sell their gods primarily by saying their gods (or ideas) can deliver what we need and not by explaining how their god (or dogma) is true. As beautiful as it is, the statue of Jesus without outstretched arms in Rio de Janeiro sells Jesus by what he has to offer

rather than by the truth of him. Allah (Mohammad), Krishna, Kwan Im, the Tao, and the Force all offer the same.

Second, sometimes, other people can make us believe. Other people can override our free choice. This is a theme of the novel “1984”, and the movies “The Manchurian Candidate” and “Brazil”. Usually other people don’t use force and don’t use long-term clever coercion. Instead, they use clever manipulation and persuasion. Other people do this to us by first appealing to our self-interested need to succeed, as Pascal did, and then by using that as leverage to get inside us. That is what the Devil does in countless movies and TV shows. Whether from force or manipulation, our susceptibility to other people making our beliefs and making our “true you” scares Americans. I don’t know what these points say about the nature of the real self and about true belief.

Third, if we can’t resort to Pascal’s idea of self-interest to mold free true selves, is there a reliable way we can get people freely to adopt codes based on good principles? Is there a way to make sure self-expression and good values coincide? Can we get correct principles to mold the self without hurting the self? That is the dilemma of parents, teachers, and state crafters. That is the dilemma of good political correctness. That is the dilemma both of every “free spirit” and every stubbornly self-promoting careerist. I don’t see any way to absolutely do this. The best we can do is to explain the situation and live correctly. Luckily, evolution gave us a good base to work from. Most people are mostly good most of the time, and are susceptible to reasons and good institutions. Under good circumstances, usually that is enough. If not, then we resort to bad reasons, bad religion, bad atheism, and strong government.

Fourth, in its own way, evolution (natural selection) gets our “true you” to coincide with what is practically good for us (fitness) regardless of whether what is practically good for us is objectively true (usually) or not true (too often). If “to believe in God despite no evidence or despite contrary evidence” led to greater fitness, then natural selection would mold our brains (to tend) to believe. Biologists and economists who want to substitute fitness or utility maximization for Pascal’s practical benefits of believing in God use natural selection to do the trick. We can make ourselves believe because it is obviously practical to our evolved minds. We screw ourselves up to believe in God because we can see it is practical to do so or because other people can get us to. Natural selection certainly did shape our ability to make ourselves believe in what is useful and shaped our susceptibility to other people. We believe not because it is true but because it is practical. Our “true you” really is our “practical you”. We make our “true you” into our “practical you”. Our “practical you” always guides our “true you”. Pascal’s Wager is only one instance of the general trend of “practical you” making “true you”. The fact that natural selection molded our minds, at least somewhat, weakens the naïve American view of the “true you”. In this chapter, I put arguments so they do not go against the idea that natural selection shaped our minds. Despite the fact that evolution shaped our minds, we can still salvage enough of the naïve American view of the “true you” to make this chapter useful. We have a “true you” that often does, yet sometimes does not, coincide with practicality. Our “true you” is not just the part of us that transcends practicality but is in both the parts that do go along with practicality and that do not. I make no guess here as how to partition this all out. I can hold both to the view of a “true you” and “practical you” without feeling too contradictory. Other than this declaration, I don’t go into the debate any further.

Pascal’s Wager and Meeting God.

Many times in this book I say: (1) If you do as Jesus said, without thinking of him as God, you will be alright when you meet God. (2) If you do not do as Jesus said, even if you think of him as God, you will be in trouble. (3) If you do not do as Jesus said, and do not think of him as God, you will be in trouble. (4) If you do as Jesus said, and think of him as God, then you will be alright, but don't get all proud about it. Although I put this issue in practical terms about what happens when we meet God, really I want you to do what is right because it is right, and not because of anything you get out of it in this world or when you meet God. I want you to fashion a code based on what is right, as best you can, given your "true you", and the situation that you face, even if your code is not perfect. I want you to merge your "true you" with the principles of Jesus as best you can. Wanting to do right because it is right without worrying about God is not necessarily an argument for atheism; the stance still acknowledges God without stressing him; see the chapter on atheism.

Superficially, my advice is like Pascal's Wager. I advise based on what I expect happens when we meet God. Hopefully, what I say differs enough from Pascal so the difference matters. First, what I advise does not require you to mangle your "true you" much. It is not hard to follow Jesus' advice mixed with practically and Western values, as long as you know you will not be perfect, and you can expect some trouble. Second, I don't expect you to believe much. I do expect you to believe you will meet God, and so expect you to believe in God, but I don't expect you to believe Jesus is God. Without going into details, Pascal did expect you to believe a fair amount, and all religious teachers who use him (whether they know it or not) expect you to believe a lot. Most people can go along with what I propose. Third, what matters is not what you believe but what you do. You don't have to believe in God or Jesus-as-God, and so don't have to mangle your "true you" much if you don't want to believe in Jesus as God. Even if you don't believe in God, but still act well, I think you are alright. Fourth, I don't think the punishment for not believing in God and Jesus-as-God is Hell. As long as you act well, I doubt you are in much trouble. If you do not act well, then it doesn't matter what you believe because you will still have a hard time when you die. If you refuse to believe in God, and act badly on that basis, then I don't know what to say, and I would not try to talk you out of your stance with my usual logic. We will both find out when we die. Fifth, I would leave practicality out of the issue entirely except that people insist on putting these questions in a practical framework of what happens after we die. If we can forget about practicality, then we are entirely away from Pascal's wager, and the issue is the relation of morality to our "true you". I think most people can go along with Jesus' ideas of morality, and I leave the issue up to you.

If you insist on seeing my view as conniving, using the appeal of practicality, using the appeal of a good outcome when we meet God, using fear, regardless of our "true you", to determine our behavior, then it is hard for me to argue you out of your view. I don't see the situation that way. For people who believe in God, and trust God, then practicality is not relevant. Do what you can consistent with your "true you" and the situation, and things will work out alright for you in the end.

Now Back to Codes.

"Ours is not to question why, ours is but to do or die," from "Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I could not resist quoting that line.

When Jesus worked for the Kingdom of God, he believed it would come, knew what it would be like, what the citizens would be like, how to work for it, and what the citizens would do. When Jesus died before the

Kingdom arrived, his followers could be sure of none of that anymore. They had to remake it all. If you know your goals clearly, and know your actions will aid your goals, then it is easy to know what to do. If not, then it is hard to know. It is easy for me to say we should work hard to build a better world but unless I can be clear about the better world and how to build it, then I have not said much. If I think it might be impossible to build a better world, and I still want us to try, I better have good reasons.

Sometimes for a while the world makes sense, as apparently it did to many people in Medieval Europe, during the time of King Asoke in India under Buddhism, or during one of the great dynasties of China. In those times, people have well-defined roles. The roles are structured by a code, such as a knight, cleric, bureaucrat, or peasant. Even when the world does not make as much sense, the roles and the codes live on. People can still live by what used to be good, still makes a lot of sense if not perfect sense, and gives structure. They do this even though the codes and roles might be corrupted and seem silly, as the codes do in Chaucer or in Cervantes. For a while after Jesus died, I think people did just that until they could live by new roles and new codes in a new world that made sense.

When I ask people to work hard to build a better world although I think we might not get a better world, and I ask people to be decent in a world that is often indecent, then I am asking people to live by old codes that might make sense in the transition, might help the transition, and might make sense in the new world. All I can do is hope this is true.

John the Baptist was Jesus' teacher and likely his mentor. During John's time, the Romans had taken over Israel. Romans and Jews (Israelites) both were concerned with proper behavior, especially under such confusing conditions. Roman soldiers and Jewish officials wanted to know what was proper for them. John told them to do their jobs. Follow obvious standards of justice. Don't abuse their positions. Don't use their positions to squeeze money out of the people or merchants. Don't think to get rich from their positions. Do use their positions to give mercy. In giving this advice, John combined the idea of a role-with-a-code with the idea of greater moral principles that might apply in most societies under most conditions. The idea of a role-with-a-code already made sense to both Romans and Jews, so they could follow John readily. Jesus picked up John's ideas. We have been using the ideas ever since. This is one basis for the "work ethic".

People like to think the modern world is more confused than anything that went before. I think that is not true, but, in any case, it is usually hard to know what to do in the modern world. Our response has been to develop roles with codes, to carry out these codes, and to live by these roles. As much as possible we base the roles-and-codes on universal ideas of morality, decency, and dignity. We look to the recent past for models. We hope that, as long as we act these roles sincerely according to the codes, we do well enough. The "work ethic" is one such code, and it still is effective. The idea of a "calling" or "profession" is another.

If you have seen a movie made after 1930, or seen a TV show made in the 1950s or 1960s, then you have seen classic roles-and-codes remade for the modern world. If you have seen a movie or a TV show about a soldier, detective, police person, CSI tech, or medical examiner, you have seen the same. If you have seen a movie or TV show about a lawyer, doctor, or gangster, you have probably seen it. If you have seen a Western, you were soaked in it. My favorite is the private detective genre, probably because of the movies I saw as a child, and then from reading Dashiell Hammett ("Maltese Falcon") and Raymond

Chandler (“The Big Sleep”) in my youth. The detective is the modern knight. The modern equivalent to a knight on a quest is the detective on a case. If you live sincerely by the detective code, then your life is alright, no matter what else. You have to really mean it; you have to make you and your code one; you have to live sincerely by your code-self. In “The Maltese Falcon”, Sam Spade turns in the woman he loves to the police because she murdered his partner, although he detested his partner and he was using his partner’s wife as a sex toy. Since the 1970s, space movies and martial arts movies have been the biggest arena for the knight-detective’s code. Obiwan Kenobe tracking down the assassin-bounty-hunter is Sam Spade on a case. Obiwan Kenobe fighting the newly-become-bad Darth Vader is Sam Spade turning in the woman he loves.

We try to live by a code but we can’t know if our code is “in synch” with life and we don’t know for sure if our code will help make the world a better place. So, even if our code follows clear moral principles, we are playing a game again. All these roles and codes are a game. Children figure that out right away. The game might be serious, might be a good game, might be a necessary game, might be the only thing an honorable person can do – and I think it is - but we don’t know and can’t know. So we have to think about what kinds of games are better than others.

It is easy to satirize roles-and-codes, especially in their aspect as games. “Don Quixote” was the first such satire, done in the 1600s, although the book was written with love. At least since the “Batman” TV show in the 1960s, it has been easier to make fun of roles-and-codes than to figure out what is really needed. Often, a little satire is needed, especially with codes.

“I and Thou”.

Martin Buber, around 1930 (date unclear), in the book “I and Thou”, gave a great description of relations between persons. We people might be individuals but we are not isolated. We need to see ourselves as persons, and we need other persons in our lives with whom to relate. We need to see God in the same terms. We need to see God as a person with whom we can relate, need to think God wants the same, and wants to relate to us as persons. God really is a person and really will relate to us. Judaism gives plenty of precedent for thinking of people and God in this way. Christianity and Islam have carried on with the Jewish precedent.

Buber’s ideas imply that good codes can arise only out of relations among persons. Codes have to be made by persons who deal with other persons. Other persons usually have to relate to us as persons too. The ideals of the code can be important in themselves, but they have to be ideals with bearing on being a person. Even for the loner detective, the ideals, such as honor and duty, are about relations that normally take place with other persons.

Not all people are naturally social. There is a place for monks and other solitary people in the world of codes, roles, and persons; but here is not where to go into that issue. At least, they can relate to God as the most important other person in their lives. Some people can relate to animals and to nature.

Buber’s work fits with evolutionary ideas of the role of selves in the evolution of sentience and morality. Persons evolve only in the context of other individuals that are evolving as persons too. To be a person, we have to accept and respond to other persons as persons. As evolved persons, we never lose the

sense that much of our self depends on the relations that we evolved to have with other persons, that we normally do have those relations with other persons, and that we are ourselves only through the relations that we normally have with other persons.

Existentialism.

“Existentialism” was the “hip” philosophy of the middle 1900s. It was a formal version of codes and roles. The basic ideas are: People do not come with a built-in nature. We make who we are by what we do and the choices we make. We make a code for ourselves that becomes our true nature. Our code need not be set out in formal principles; our basis for action come out in what we do. We do best when we live true to the code that we made for ourselves. Two of the chief thinkers were Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, both of France. She was a founder of modern Feminism. She wrote a clear short introduction to Existentialism.

Most people of my age learned of Existentialism in high school through reading Albert Camus’ short good books “The Plague” and “The Stranger”; listen to the song “The Stranger” by The Cure. For a brush-up on popular Existentialism, see any movie starring Alain Delon and see most French “New Wave” cinema such as directed by Francois Truffaut. All have been dubbed in English. They show how Existentialism got mixed up with Romanticism (see later chapter) and with romanticizing underbelly beautiful tough guy loner losers – a situation we live in to this day.

Among the critics of Pascal was the Dane Soren Kierkegaard in the early 1800s. He saw that this life is real, people are free, we have to take real risks, we cannot be everything, we have to decide, we have to commit to finite programs (points of view, types of people, and codes), and we might fail. We have to decide and commit out of our “true you”. Kierkegaard detested when simple cost-benefit thinking typical of small capitalists and frugal workers was misapplied to Jesus, God, relations to other people, and life. He disliked raising the mechanistic view of some science to a metaphysical dogma. He foresaw that Romanticism would seep into modern thinking to distort all modern life, and he rejected Romanticism, about a century in advance of his times. Kierkegaard wanted people to see the good Jesus, decide for the good Jesus, and commit to the good Jesus. His ideas helped fuel modern feelings of a direct personal relation with Jesus and God although most “born again fundamentalist Christians” and other people who use the ideas now do not know the ideas come through him. Kierkegaard was not sure how to get free people to follow him into a close relation with Jesus, and he knew free people instead would make mistakes. That is part of freedom, risk, and the reality of life. That dilemma disturbed him and still disturbs many people. It is not clear to me that Kierkegaard understood that God knows of this dilemma. Existentialists borrowed Kierkegaard’s ideas on the reality of this life, freedom, risk, limitations, decision, and commitment but redirected them away from Jesus toward individual programs. Kierkegaard is fun to read, and worthwhile, but his style can be difficult.

In 1952, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a book called in English “Saint Genet”, about a man named Jean Genet. Sartre used Genet as the paradigm of a person who knows himself, creates himself on the basis of what he has to start out with, accepts himself, creates his own code to express himself, follows his own code sincerely, and endures what he must to remain true to himself and his code. Jean Genet is an Existential hero-saint. Genet had a difficult childhood. He was small, homosexual, and a habitual petty thief. He educated himself and became a poet and playwright. Genet saves himself through self-acceptance,

commitment, being himself, sincerity, and expression. As Sartre portrayed him, Genet was not harmful, and was rather charming. In those times, to be a homosexual was highly stigmatized, and so for Genet to be openly homosexual was brave. Sartre chose Genet because there was nothing heroic about him in the standard sense, and much to put people off. But Genet was a spiritual success anyway because he knew himself, made himself, and remained true to himself. Genet had to find himself (invent himself) despite society rather than through society. Genet later became a hero to the early Gay movement, and was referenced in a song in the 1970s from the band Dire Straits, called "Les Boys". People similar to Genet, in being on the outside of normal society but true to themselves anyway, are heroes of Romantic anti-society.

About 1944, Sartre wrote a play called in English "No Exit". Three dead people arrive in Hell. Contrary to stereotype, Hell is not torment-by-fire-or-ice but consists of being locked without relief in a room with self-centered people, including, of course, yourself. Each of the damned has a distinct personality, which we can think of as a code-and-role. Nobody has any empathy or sympathy for anybody else. They never really talk to each other but always talk past each other. When they do interact, they cannot help each other but only hurt each other. They can imagine other joys, but, when it comes down to it, the only joy they can pull off is the joy from inflicting psychic pain. They come to hate each other, and, sometimes, to see they hate themselves too. There is no "I and thou" of distinct but interacting selves, who support each other. There is only "The Wall" as from Pink Floyd and Roger Waters. This is the all-too-common gap between people of different ethnic groups, cultures, religions, genders, and socio-economic classes. It is the gap behind the culture wars in America.

You can't have it both ways. You can't extol somebody for knowing himself and sincerely carrying out his-her own code regardless of anything else, and then complain when his-her project leads to a social hell. It is good for people to be their own self and to carry on sincerely with their codes, but the selves, and the codes, have to connect them to other people as people, and have to do it the right ways. If the selves and codes are not based on deep principles of morality and human nature, then the selves and codes are likely to hurt the person him-herself and other people. The selves and codes can be based on deep principle of morality and human nature without forcing us to deny ourselves or to become insipid robots of society and of some ideology. The only way we can become our selves and not become robots of society or ideology is to align our selves with deep principles of morality and human nature. There is plenty of room under that umbrella for self-expression. Ideologies to which we become slaves include Romanticism and Existentialism.

In recent slang in America, a sincere person, especially one who tries to be true to him-herself and who lives by a code, is a "real" person while an insincere person who imitates real people is a "poser" or a "phony". Sartre said posers have "false consciousness". Imitation is an important evolved proximate ability and people are adept imitators. Most of us are posers much of the time. The problem of real person versus poser is the same as the problem of sincere faith or sincere moral action. Existentialism and modern American attitudes about self and codes arose in part as a response to insincere self-serving posers that dominate in large states with corporations, labor unions, and bureaucracies. Seeking alternatives to false people is admirable but we should not let it mislead us.

If selves and codes look to general principles, they cannot be exclusively subjective and individualistic. The self to whom you are true cannot be just any self. No matter how talented you are and how much

you want to be true to yourself, you cannot make up your own world without reference to general human principles and still expect to live in it as a person. You have to find a balance between a sense of self, the code that expresses self, and the general needs of morality and humanity. This result goes against the idea of a pure self and pure code somewhat, of being true-to-yourself, but not necessarily too much.

It was easy to overlook this reality in Sartre's portrait of Genet because Genet was mostly innocuous, often charming, and sometimes helpful. Genet was like the gay man who is a common staple of TV now after "Will and Grace": a combination of Jack, Will, and Karen, a bit bitchy, self-centered, vain, but often insightful and helpful, and you could rely on him if you and he were true friends. He could guide you into finding your new true you and your new true life. Genet was a cure for the supposedly repressed 1950s. Genet was sometimes disgusting but we didn't really have to deal with that no matter how much Sartre pretended we had to deal with it because, for most people, Genet was a character in a book. Sartre romanticized Genet; and the romantic portrait overlooked how much Genet took his values from a list that Sartre and most people approve of.

Sartre used Genet to make us accept that we are mixed beings, that we have a dark side. In the 1950s, apparently that insight was a revelation. Sartre was fighting conventions of goody-goody morality and Christian spiritual pseudo-purity. Sartre was fighting hypocrisy. Listen to the Vaselines' song "Pure Enough". In the 2010s, the fact that we have a dark side seems tame. Most people's dark side is only a few shades of gray anyway. We can stop finding status as a self-styled romantic existential hero through accepting the fact that we secretly despise a lot of people. The hypocrisy now is not in repressing your true dark self but in trying to live it through self-indulgence. The modern Genet is the obnoxious "trashy" person on a pseudo-celebrity reality TV show. We can stop trying to be him-her. Instead we can figure out what to really do. Most people can deal with their dark side without becoming repressed, cramped, and self-contradictory.

Genet's "dark side" consisted of some odd sexual acts. As long as Genet confined himself to consenting adults, and did not cause any physical damage that raised the cost of health insurance, then I wouldn't care. Some people have a dark side that will cause real damage, such as the person wants to abduct, rape, torture, and kill. Then the person must repress that dark side, give him-herself to the police before doing anything bad, or kill him-herself. I can see nothing romantic Existential heroic about living up to that bad true self. There are lines. They lines come from outside us as well as from inside us.

A self-made entirely self-oriented sincere person with a circular code is not a hero but a demon. Sincerity is necessary for a successful existential hero but sincerity alone is not enough. Being true to your self is necessary but it is the wrong thing to do if your self is bad. Being sincere and true to your self does not guarantee that you are good and will do good. Some bad people and selfish people have codes and are really sincere. In the TV show "Lost", one character was a torturer for a theocracy, and he was sincere. In the movie "8 mm" with Nicholas Cage, the bad people are sexual sadists and killers. They are freely that way; that is their true self; the worst of them makes a point of saying that no bad childhood made him that way; he just likes it. They have a code, with elaborate fantasies, and they live up to their true selves, code, and fantasies. They are Romanticism and Jean Genet gone horribly wrong. Modern literature is fascinated with serial killers for the same reasons. Bank robbers can be logically consistent and genuinely sincere. Modern robber barons who don't mind impoverishing the middle class can be logically consistent and genuinely sincere.

The “culture of victimization” is one logical conclusion of “Saint Genet”. The true modern version of Genet is not an existential post-punk rocker working class hero but the whining self-indulgent self-styled victim on a TV talk show seeking acceptance and enabling. In contrast, when Dr. Phil scolds a self-indulgent manipulative harmful person, and scolds that person’s enablers, he puts into practice the good lessons of “No Exit”: get real and get human at the same time, and thus get out of hell.

The codes of bad people often mimic good codes but have a deep flaw that makes them deviate. Often they see the world entirely in terms of “us and them” and they mistake good general society for a bad “them”. The “them” is not really persons, not really human. They construct a bad group around them for an “us”; their small group consists of the only “real” persons. Magneto in “X-Men” is an example. So is the scarred villain in “The Phantom of the Opera”. Quasimodo, the hunchback in “The Hunchback of Notre Dame”, just barely escapes this fate, as does Oliver in “Oliver Twist”. Writers speculate on where these people go bad and how we can avoid their misstep.

In literature, movies, TV, and comic books, we explore the need for the balance between an unusual self, a strong code, and principles that have to do with personhood. We explore through characters that are in-between. These characters are sometimes helpful to society but cannot live in normal society because of who they are and because of their codes. Their self, and their code, make them both helpful and unacceptable. The smart-mouth detective of the 1920s probably was the first in this line. In the movies, this in-between person is forced into righteous vengeance, rights a wrong, but now cannot return to the society he-she saved. On TV, it is the person, or duo, who have been scarred by social injustice but still go around helping victims: “The Lone Ranger” in various updates, including the doubly-aptly named “Person of Interest”.

A beautiful cinematic version of a once-useful loner who has problems connecting is in the movie “The Searchers”. Uncle Ethan (John Wayne) lives strictly by a harsh code, and, because of that, can do for society what no other man could do. But because of the same code, he cannot live in normal society. His value for society makes him unfit for society; other people are destined to gain the rewards of his life while he is destined to gain only loneliness. In the famous final scene, Uncle Ethan is framed standing in a doorway through which he cannot pass, standing outside a social world that he protected but into which he can never enter. He makes a world for other people in which he cannot live himself. Sarah Connor from the “Terminator” movies has the same problem. We can see her go from normal person to obsessed loner back to hero over several movies. Even gentle Frodo must leave Middle Earth when his wounds prevent him from connecting with the people he saved. Many young people think himself-herself is one of these in-between persons, useful to society but unappreciated and unable to enter society - which is why we have Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse Comics. This situation raises a logical question about paradox, into which I cannot go here.

In real life, this situation of making a world for others in which you cannot live yourself is the problem of “wounded warriors” who return from fighting wars but now cannot fit back into society. It is a genuine problem about which we ought to do all we can to help.

Much of the pain of modern life comes from bouncing between the options of “Saint Genet” and “No Exit”. We want to be ourselves but we also want to have friends and be a part of society. We want society to

be a community. We want to be good useful contributing members of a community. We want to be good members through being ourselves and we want our contribution to come about through being ourselves. We want other people to appreciate us for who we are without our having to conform too much: "If you want them to live you, just be yourself". We want to be able to appreciate other people for who they are without their having to conform too much. Yet we do not want to be alone and are willing to compromise to be in a group, to be "in with the in crowd".

Meaning and Existential Projects.

On the whole, Existentialism is silly, and is typical of the modern tendency to center life, existence, and metaphysics around our selves. But it does have aspects that I like. These aspects are not limited to Existentialism, but they were expressed well in Existentialism.

First, Existentialism stresses that there is no intrinsic meaning to life. Whatever meaning we find in life, we make. This insight goes along with the fact from evolutionary biology that evolution is an automatic process without any intrinsic goal. Evolution does not necessarily lead to big, smart, fast, complex, interrelated, moral, or beautiful. Evolution is only reproduction followed by reproduction with a slight difference; over and over again. Whatever meaning we find in life, we put there. I think the fact that morality, sentience, and art are bound to evolve together points us toward finding meaning in those. I find meaning in science, curiosity, imagination, and, when I can get it, companionship. You are free to find meaning elsewhere.

Second, we conduct our lives well, and we likely conduct our lives best, when we have projects. Just as we make meaning in the world, so we put our selves into the world, we project ourselves into the world and onto the world. We have goals. We work toward our goals. Even if our goal is only to experience the world and to have fun, that is a goal. Even if the goal is to escape the world, or to let go of the world, that is a goal, at least until we succeed. Trying to live without bondage to ideology is a project, even if it is also an ideology. We change the world a little by being in the world.

Third, people make themselves in interaction with the world and with other people. People do not exist in a vacuum, even if they decide to stand on their principles and live by their code. People and the world mutually make each other. People and other people mutually make each other. We meet resistance from the world, and we overcome the resistance. We impose ourselves on the world. The world imposes back, often in surprising and fun ways. We and the world mutually shape our selves.

A project can be as small as teaching kids to play checkers or as large as a unified field theory. People who have projects seem happier and get along better. They are like people with hobbies. People with projects understand other people with projects and get along with them. Finding yourself often is a matter of finding meaningful projects.

Not everybody needs a conscious organized project to feel good and succeed as a person. Life provides obstacles every day that we have to overcome. That is a project without trying to make it a project. So is raising a family. Simple decent people who have little ideology about being decent do not necessarily need a project to succeed. If a project becomes a binding ideology, a project defend wrong ideas, or a project gets in the way of better things, then it is time to undo the project.

The Bhagavad Gita.

The “Bhagavad Gita” likely is the most famous poem in the world. It is Hindu, part of the longest epic poem in the world, the “Mahabharata” (“Great Story about Bharat [India]”). The “Gita” is self-contained and short. It has been translated into many languages. You can see a good short fun cinema version of the Mahabharata, in English, about five DVDs long, but easy to watch and well worth the time. Below I give my version of the Gita. Please don’t trust me but consult a translation into your native language. This section shows a code that very nearly works because it is based on principles that are great but the code does not entirely work because the principles have flaws. The flaws are part of the tremendous appeal of the principles. Principles can be too beautiful and too profound.

The stars of the Gita are Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna (“Ar joon na”) is the best fighter in the world, of the noble warrior (“Kshatriya”) class. He is one of five brothers, all exemplary, with only a few minor faults. The brothers have been drawn into a war with their cousins. The cousins are mostly good, but have done bad things, and now face the results. Both sides gather huge armies of the best fighters in the world, human, godly, animal, angelic, monstrous, and demonic. The final battle will be horrible. Hundreds of thousands of people will die. Innocent families will be ruined. On the eve of the battle, Krishna says he does not want to fight. It is better to surrender than to kill so many people, mostly innocent, and destroy so much goodness, just to make a point. Krishna is Arjuna’s charioteer and mentor. Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu, one of the three main gods of Hinduism, the god who sustains the world. Krishna scolds Arjuna. I offer the gist of what he says:

“Grow up. You were trained as a warrior. Your cause is just. Your elder brother is the leader of your side and of you personally, and he says to fight. You have a social duty (dharma) and greater duty (dharma) to fight. You must do your duty and live by your code as family member, brother, younger brother, and warrior. Yes, many people will die, but most are not civilians and not innocent. Even among the innocent, nobody lives forever, and nobody is entirely innocent. More people die every day of natural causes than will die in this battle. Of the people who die here, this is their day to die, and this their means of death. If they do not die this way today, they will die another way tomorrow.

Besides, if you think anybody ever really dies forever, you are wrong. People live this life now and die this death today, but this was not the beginning and this will not be the end. People return again to lead other lives and die other deaths. They have lived countless lives before, and they will live countless lives in the future. The world you see here today is only one world among many. The real world is the world that includes the world here today, the world here tomorrow, and countless other worlds like it. Today some people will lose and die; in future lives, they will win and live. Today some people will win and live; in the future, they will lose and die. Everybody gets countless turns to win and live, and to lose and die. If some people did not lose and die today, there could be no happy victors today. If the happy victors of today did not lose and die in the future, other people could not win and live then. The world sustains by turning forever like a wheel on which people take places according to their acts in previous lives and in this life, and in which people exchange places with other people according to everybody’s merits. People were made as instruments in the past to do what they do now. For the world-of-worlds to go on forever, it must change constantly in the present.

Nobody is entirely good or entirely bad. The people who are mostly good in this conflict still have bad parts of their personality and bad deeds they have done. Think of what your own elder brother did to draw you into this war. The people who are mostly bad in this conflict still have good parts of their personality and good deeds they have done. Think of the honor and bravery of your cousins and of the heroes who fight with them. You do not betray goodness, and you do not sustain badness, by fighting here. Rather, you carry on the relation of goodness and badness, which is even better than either.

Even if the present world does not really change but only appears to change, still we must go through the appearance of change in the current world or the greater world of which this current world is only a small part would not go on.

If you refuse to fight, refuse to do your duty (your personal dharma in the system of dharma), then you force the world-of-worlds to stop, you deny the winners of today the victory they earned from deeds in the past (their personal dharma), deny the losers of today their victory tomorrow (their personal dharma), deny the idea that the actions of your cousins must bring consequences (karma), deny that the actions of you and your brothers must bring consequences (karma), deny that all deeds must bring consequences (karma), deny there is a system (dharma), deny the world-of-worlds its great joy from continually coming into being and going out of being, and thus deny the world-of-worlds its great joy from forever simply being. Arjuna is one part of this greater whole. Arjuna was made who he is, to do what he is supposed to do, as part of this one great joyful world. As one part, Arjuna represents the whole and is the whole. The whole shows itself in Arjuna, and the whole depends on him for its arising, continuation, changing, and persistence. Be this Arjuna of this world this day and thereby be the whole world-of-worlds forever and beyond time. Do your duty (your personal dharma) so that all duty (all dharma) persists even if you die today. Fight.”

This is amazingly beautiful. It has inspired many hundreds of millions of people. People apply it not just to being a warrior but to being a teacher, police officer, grounds keeper, house spouse, banker, and any occupation or any role-with-a-code. If life were just like this, it would be easy to accept this stance and to live by this stance.

Life is not quite just like this. This argument-as-a-whole has many subarguments, to which I cannot pay the attention they deserve. Here I focus on what is directly relevant. For now, I assume that Arjuna was bright enough to work things out and make up his own mind if he had time enough. Below I mention the case in which people need a strong guide. The criticisms here do not apply only to Hinduism. They apply to any elaborate high-sounding religious, moral, or political system, especially to one that takes us away from a direct feeling for what is simply decent and away from a direct tie between our “true you” and what is simply decent. I use Krishna and Arjuna to illustrate the problems because Arjuna and Krishna are noble people and Hinduism a noble religion; if it could happen to them under Hinduism, it could happen to anybody under any elaborate dogma.

(1) Krishna replaces Arjuna’s good judgment with doctrine. In this particular case, Arjuna’s judgment might be off track, and Arjuna’s doctrine has much good about. Still, in general, it is wrong to replace judgment with doctrine. Doctrine does not have to be wrong for it to be a mistake to replace judgment with doctrine.

If we strip away the amazing mythological cosmology, Krishna's argument boils down to "don't think too much, do your duty, live the code that has been given to you, and follow properly given orders". Arjuna's problem is neither a bad character nor flawed ideas about a just war. Arjuna's code comes from good ideas about society, duty, and justice. Arjuna's code is based on the good doctrine that Krishna explains. In many cases, Arjuna's code would lead him to do the right thing. In many cases, Krishna's view of the code and his advice to Arjuna would be correct. But not in every case, and that is the problem. Krishna's glib placing of this case in a cosmic context leads Arjuna not to assess this case and would lead Arjuna not to assess any case. By placing this case in cosmic context, Krishna cleverly also replaces the good judgment of Arjuna with doctrine. Krishna glibly talks Arjuna into acting without also thinking hard about the specifics of this case or any case. Arjuna does not make up his own mind about the ideas of the code and how they apply in this case or any case. Arjuna should stop to think about his actions in this case in terms of universal principles. Only with such practice would Arjuna be able to apply universal cases in other cases. If Arjuna had such practice in the past, likely he would not have gotten so confused in this case. Even if Krishna is correct in this case, because Arjuna did not himself assess and did not make up his own mind, he is insincere and has erred. Arjuna has not cultivated judgment. Arjuna is likely to be wrong in other cases. We cannot put codes, and decisions, in contexts that allow us to fool ourselves, not even into grand otherwise correct contexts.

(2) When we replace good judgment with doctrine, even with good doctrine, we cause problems. One problem is that we open the door to evading responsibility and to bad action, to "I was just following orders" or "I was just going along with everybody".

Krishna creates a similar problem that Sartre did with Genet and "No Exit". Krishna tells Arjuna to "follow orders, do your dharma duty, be a spoke in the wheel of Dharma". Soldiers who do bad things say, "I was just following orders, I was just doing my duty". Bad police officers and bad agents of the state say that when they hurt people in the name of the state. Serial killers invent mythologies to make into a duty what they really do to please themselves. Good vampires override the vampire code of killing to adopt bigger principles while bad vampires simply follow their vampire dharma to kill. Doing your duty is not enough even when it clearly is your duty. You must do more than your apparent duty. Sometimes no duty is enough. Sometimes duty is not the right response. Sometimes duty is not the right response even when it comes from the cosmos as dharma. You must assess your duty to the extent that you can. You cannot let duty be your only self. You must assess your code to make sure it is good in this case according to the best principles even when your code originally came from good principles. You must consider if there might be better principles than in your code, or if the same principles should be applied better in this case. The United States military faced this issue after atrocities in Viet Nam led to the distinction between legal-moral orders versus illegal-immoral orders. Each soldier must decide if an order is moral.

(3) In substituting doctrine for judgment, we allow the big whole to subsume away the small individual. We overlook individual importance and responsibility. An important part of the "true you" gets submerged in social duty. We give the individual means to evade responsibility by alluding to the whole.

In American terms, Krishna talks Arjuna into letting social duty define him, thus letting society define him, and thus letting the whole subsume away the individual. Arjuna becomes simply the instrument of duty and of the warrior class. Because the warrior class is part of society, society defines Arjuna. Because

society is part of cosmic dharma, dharma defines Arjuna. When dharma defines Arjuna in this way, it defines away Arjuna. In contrast to what Arjuna does, we can resist being subsumed away into society and doctrine. We can insist on defining ourselves even if we make mistakes sometimes. We can define ourselves without also becoming vain and proud and without necessarily fighting the dharma and society. We can insist that our “true self” not be defined by society and the dharma even when, as a matter of fact, we always act within the law, never act badly, act socially, and help. Even when we act to make a better world and better society, we need not let society and the dharma define us. We can seek the correct way between self and society and between the self and the dharma.

In more abstract terms, Arjuna chooses and changes in a way that negates his self, ability to choose, and ability to change. Arjuna changes his “true you”, but, in that change, he does not continue as a personal agent who is able to act by choice on a good code. In accepting Krishna’s advice to bow to the dharma, without also examining the dharma according to universal principles, Arjuna’s chooses to stop choosing. Arjuna lets the dharma define him, and in so doing, stops being a human. Arjuna chooses to not become a person who can choose. Arjuna changes so as lose his ability to change. Arjuna chooses and changes so as to stop being what we consider a real person. Arjuna changes so as to lose himself in a bad way. Arjuna changes to allow himself to be subsumed into society and the dharma, and, so, from here on, is not really the person that once was Arjuna. Only if Arjuna personally looked into things, and decided, on the basis of broad good principles, to fight for reasons intrinsic to this situation, would Arjuna continue to be an independent person as well as doing his duty, helping society, and helping the dharma.

It is good to recognize that God and the world are bigger than you are, and good to feel part of something bigger than yourself. It is good to submit to God (Allah). At the same time, we can do this without losing our selves. Usually even mystics cherish the part in the middle of the whole. We accept the whole in a way that preserves our selves. If the whole made us, then the whole made us as persons, and wants us to act on our personhood in a way that does not negate our personhood.

(4) We give other people the means to manipulate us, and we give ourselves the means to rationalize what we want to do and to fool ourselves. The more elaborate and high-sounding the system, the greater is the scope for manipulation and self-deception.

Krishna is the voice of the dharma and of society. Krishna has great sway over Arjuna. Krishna can get Arjuna to do almost whatever Krishna wants. In this case, we trust Krishna to do the right thing and to get Arjuna to do the right thing. But not everybody, every doctrine, and every society, is like good Krishna. When we submit blindly to the dharma, we submit blindly to society. Then society, or people who control society, can use us as tools. They can use as tools to do good things or do bad things. Usually they use us as tools to do bad things. Only if we use our God-given (dharma given) ability to assess and choose can we avoid becoming the tools of bad people and only then can we make ourselves into the instrument of goodness. Even if other people use us to do good things, still we have been reduced to the status of “tool”, and so reduced to the status of a thing that does not have self, choice, or change.

As other people can fool us, so we can fool ourselves, and rationalize what we really want to do. From the poem, it is clear that Arjuna is honest when he says he doesn’t want to fight, and when he agrees to fight anyway. But not everybody is like Arjuna. Suppose Arjuna really wished to kill, rape, plunder, take territory, wealth, and power - yet not get blamed. It is easy to feign a high mind, even to yourself, and to

let other people talk you into doing your duty so that you can really get what you want. This attitude is the staple diet of soap operas at all times of the day and all around the world. We can see it in nearly all political ads, especially the negative ones. It is something children learn by the time they are five years old, and something spouses learn to do to each other to get what they want.

(5) The high mythological cosmology doctrine is beautiful but its beauty obscures that we must assess this particular case and that we must live here and now in this particular life. We cannot let beauty fool us. We cannot fall into any doctrine because it is beautiful, and then rest content with that beauty and its consequences.

In particular, we cannot live in other lives when we live this life, and we cannot make choices about other lives while we live in this life. This life is real, it is the only real life, and it is the only life that matters. If we do wrong in the present then we do wrong always. We cannot make up in the future for what we do wrong now. Only if we act well right now do we act well forever. In contrast, the high airy mythological cosmology of the Gita makes this life, all lives, and life, a game, an ephemeral lightweight game. Think about the context of a never-ending wheel in which life-is-death, death-is-life, right-is-wrong, wrong-is-right, change is needed for sustenance, and change is needed for ultimate fulfillment. Such a context allows a bad Krishna to excuse anything. A child molester, rapist, torturer, dictator, killer, or religious zealot offers the same argument and it makes sense. The only way we can be sure that we are doing right and not rationalizing wrong is to look at this case in its own terms right now. We have to take this case out of the cosmic context and look at this case as if it were real. If we want Krishna's advice, we have to trust that this Krishna is a good Krishna. The only way we can know this Krishna is a good Krishna is to examine the principles on which he stands now and that he uses to argue about the present. So we don't need the mythology and we are better off not to dwell on it.

From the movie, "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel", set in India, the hotel keeper says something like, "It is all alright in the end. If it is not alright yet, it is not yet the end". As a matter of fact, that is not true, and we have to live in the world where it is not true. Even if it is true, we do not live in the happy ending all the time. We only live in the present all the time.

(6) Krishna uses the ideology of waking up to bend Arjuna's mind to what Krishna wishes. He tells Arjuna to wake up to the real world, and gives Arjuna a world to wake up to – the high mythological world where everything turns out alright even if we live by a bad code true to a bad self – as a way to get Arjuna to do what Krishna wants Arjuna to do. Krishna could have awakened Arjuna to another world that would have led Arjuna to put down his weapons for this battle or to put down his weapons for all battles. Other versions of Hinduism, and related versions of Buddhism, do just that. We have to be careful when people tell us to "wake up". We have to assess the worlds and the lessons to which we wake up.

(7) The system of many lives includes good guys and bad guys. In it, the bad guys are as necessary as the good guys. The good guys sometimes become bad guys, and vice versa. Without bad, there could be no good in contrast just as without some ugliness there is not beauty. Without bad guys, there could be no joy in goodness and there could be no bad guys. Goodness and badness depend on each other. In this situation, it is good to be a bad guy. If you are a bad guy, revel in being a bad guy. If you want to become a bad guy because it suits your character, it is more fun, or just because you want to be a bad guy, go ahead.

This point of view is a version of moral relativism. This point of view is a version of the idea above that you can excuse bad behavior as “just following orders”. It is a version of “I was compelled to act badly because of my genes, learning, and brain chemistry”. Hinduism does stress compassion, and makes clear that goodness is better than badness. Hinduism condemns badness. But, at the same time, it opens the door for dwelling in badness, and it cannot shut the door.

(8) If the high mythological cosmology is not taken too seriously then it can help rather than hinder. Some people are nervous and worried. If we tell them a story, they calm down and do what they should have done anyway. (That is only partly what this book does.) The high mythological cosmology of the Gita might be offered this way. If people think it is true, and go ahead with what they need to do anyway, then there is much benefit and might be little harm. Especially if the mythology allows them to evaluate this case on the basis of its particular merits without worrying about the great beyond, there can be benefit with potentially little harm. If a person would make a serious mistake unless the person had a “crutch” of some kind, such as high mythological cosmology, then it is better to offer the half-truth of a good story than to allow the person to make a serious error. Some Mahayana Buddhists interpret Hindu high mythological cosmology in this way. They call it “using expedient means”.

Although stories can be useful, they can also be misleading. Once you have seen the truth beneath the story, if you can do it, both Hindus and Buddhists advise getting rid of the stories (expedient means). The Western philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called this “getting rid of the ladder once you have climbed up the ladder”.

I do not think the original writers of the Gita meant the high mythological cosmology in this way, mostly as a convenient means to get people free to act rightly. I think they believed high mythological cosmology literally. I think they meant this high mythological cosmology at face value, and did not mean it primarily as a method to quiet minds so that people could assess properly and do the right thing. I am not sure what later Hindu thinkers have made of the Gita.

I am wary of the stories (expedient means) because they are easily abused. People who learn through one story (expedient means), such as a high cosmology, too often never can get beyond that particular vision to the real issues of morality and life that lie underneath. They cling to the story and it becomes another kind of trap for them. People who learn several stories (expedient means), and thus catch a glimpse of what lies beneath, too often become rather arrogant, and thus betray what they glimpse.

Hinduism has high principles by which to make decisions and to practice Krishna’s code of duty and honor in particular cases. Hinduism has some of the most sensitive and admirable principles ever stated. Hindus could see out what to do in particular cases. In the particular case of Arjuna and the war, Krishna likely gave Arjuna the correct advice. That fact does not argue against my point, it supports my point. If we already have high principles, and base our action on those, then we do not need dogmas, such as the high mythological cosmology and the false waking up, especially when they lead us astray. We should simply practice our high principles as they are needed. Do the right thing, right now. Elaboration adds nothing no matter how grand it is. Reality is more interesting, and ultimately more useful, even than the greatest fantasy.

Some people can't think through many particular cases. They need guides. Nearly all of us get stuck sometimes in cases that we can't think through. We all need guides sometimes. Codes and laws are guides. Teachers are guides, largely because they can interpret codes for particular cases. Sometimes we have to trust the judgment of teachers. This is a big part of the guru-student relation in India. But this is not what was going on with Krishna and Arjuna. Arjuna was no fool. Given time, he could have made up his mind, and should have made up his mind before the battle. Krishna does not represent the good teacher that we need because we have limited abilities. Krishna represents an ideology that is used to control Arjuna and, eventually, to subsume Arjuna away. We should resist ideologies like that and resist teachers who push ideologies like that.

When teachers have students who cannot make up their own mind, then teachers have an obligation to get it right both for themselves and their students. Teachers have an obligation to move their students to the point where the students are as independent as possible. Even military officers have this obligation with their subordinate soldiers. Some situations are not about figuring it out but about acting quickly and decisively, such as in the military or in martial arts. In those cases, the ideas that I have been describing have to be modified. They don't have to be abandoned. These are examples of particular cases that we have to figure out. These topics do not undermine what I have said so far and so we don't need to go into them anymore.

It is hard to live in a confusing world, find a deeply principled code, realize we have to assess our code ourselves, actually do it, and relate to people while we are doing all this.

The Illiad.

The usual name for what Americans now call "Greeks" was "Hellenes" ("hel-leens") because in myth they descended from a man named "Hellene". Their homeland was called "Hellas" and the Hellenes were also called "Hellas". "Hellas" is often called "Achaeta" ("Akhea", "Ahea", "Achea", or "Ashea") and the people called "Achaetans". "Greece" was one part of Hellas-Achaeta. "Ilium" was the Hellenic name for the city-state that we now call "Troy". Ilium was on the west coast of what is now Turkey, flourishing before 1200 BCE (AD), well before Kings David and Solomon in Jerusalem. The Trojans likely were Hittites, cousins of Greeks and Romans. Their name for their city likely was "Wilusa" (so "Ilium") or "Triwusa" (so "Troy").

The "Iliad" ("story about Ilium") is an epic poem about the war by the Hellenes against Ilium for control of the Eastern Mediterranean. The war likely happened before 1200 BCE. The poem likely was recited by 1000 BCE, and written down before 600 BCE. It was already a treasure from the far past by 450 BCE. It was written about the same time as the Pentateuch and the histories in the Tanakh (Old Testament).

The woman "Helen of Troy" is called that because she went to Troy but originally Helen came from Crete, Mycenae, or Sparta (the story comes in versions). Helen was the daughter of Leda of Mycenae or Sparta, and sister of Castor, Polydeukes (Pollux and "Polioudakis"), and Clytemnestra. Helen was the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta, but she ran away to Ilium with Prince Paris of Ilium. Paris was the youngest of two princes of Ilium. Then, "Paris" was a boy's name. This silly affair provided an excuse for a war by which to achieve bigger goals. Menelaus' brother Agamemnon was king of the pre-eminent Hellenic city-state Mycenae, sister state to Sparta, and thus Agamemnon was one of a few kings entitled to lead all Hellenes in a crisis. In this event, he saw an excuse to unite the Hellenes against Ilium and so

to gain power both for Hellenes and him. The King of Ilium was Priam (“Pree-am”). Besides Paris, Priam had a son named Hector, the eldest Prince, brave, honorable, noble, the second or third best fighter in the world, and a good family man. He was a model man for Ilium and the world. The “Iliad” ends before the famous Trojan horse. The Trojan War has been made into a movie many times. “Troy” starring Brad Pitt and Eric Bana was good, and gave the main theme well. The ending is a bit sappy and it differs from the feel of the poem but that fault is not serious.

Really, the Iliad is the story of one warrior, Achilles (“A-kil-lees”, or, in my parents’ dialect, “ah-shil-less”), and of the change in Achilles. Achilles was a Hellene, the best fighter in the world, and knew it. He took nothing from nobody. He never backed down and he never gave up a chance for glory. Glory was immortality. He did not look for frivolous fights, did not oppress people, did not kill weak people, but he did not mind killing, and could enjoy it. He was leader of the soldiers from his city, the “Myrmidons” (“ant people”), the best force of Hellas and thus the best in the world. Nobody thought less of Achilles for how he acted. The Hellenes and the world knew and respected him. They knew he lived by the code of a fighter. Achilles was not a dolt or a brute, and had been raised well by a famous civilized teacher; but glory and honor overrode all. Achilles was like the characters played by Charles Bronson, Steve McQueen, and James Coburn at the start of the movie “The Magnificent Seven”. Achilles was not like the Yul Brynner character, Chris, the “gunfighter in black”. Achilles was like a modern smart tough guy in a “hood” who is over-sensitive to disrespect (“dis”), and fights constantly, but Achilles always won.

Achilles and Agamemnon had a running conflict because Achilles would not accept the personality or the authority of Agamemnon while Agamemnon envied the fighting skill of Achilles and the respect given him. Achilles took captive a woman named Briseis (“bris-ay-ees” with “ay” as in “play”). Then, in a roundabout way, as part of their conflict, Agamemnon claimed Briseis because he was King of Hellas for the war, and so technically outranked Achilles. Agamemnon used Briseis to show his superiority to Achilles in the only way he could, and everybody knew so. Achilles threw a snit fit, refused to fight in the war, and refused to allow the Myrmidons to fight. Although Achilles liked Briseis personally, that was not what the argument was about. Achilles denied that anybody came before him; and he asserted that nobody had any right to take from him what he had taken in a fight. By his code then, Achilles was right.

Without Achilles, the Trojans nearly routed the Achaeans (Hellenes). To save the Achaeans, Achilles let a lifelong friend, Patroclus, wear his distinctive armor and lead the Myrmidons into battle. The Myrmidons saved the Achaeans but Hector killed Patroclus in single combat. Hector had done no wrong but Achilles was furious anyway. Achilles and Agamemnon patched up, and Achilles went to war against Troy. Achilles faced Hector man-to-man, and killed Hector. Instead of giving Hector’s body back for funeral rites, as was the custom among Hellenes and Trojans, Achilles dragged Hector’s body around behind his chariot, and dragged it back to the Achaean camp - a serious breach of ethics and a base insult. Achilles was within his code as a fighter but dragging Hector’s body and keeping it was vile anyway. Achilles judged badly.

Risking everything, Priam, King of Troy, father of Hector, snuck into the Myrmidon camp at night to beg Achilles for Hector’s body. For the first time in his life, Achilles saw not an opponent but a simple human, a father, in pain, with simple needs; and Achilles could help this man. He recalled his own father and the better teachings of his youth. Achilles changed. He began to judge well. He gave Hector’s body back to Priam, made sure Priam got back to Ilium, and enforced a peace between Hellas and Troy for twelve

days so Priam could give Hector the full rites that he deserved. Achilles saw that something was more important than glory and revenge. In the movie, Achilles saw that Hellas was more important than his glory, and he fought for Hellas. (In the poem, the gods get a lot of credit for sending Priam to Achilles, and for predisposing Achilles to accept Priam. Giving credit to the gods was natural for the time. Even so, I think the main emphasis is on people, and I stand by my interpretation.)

Achilles' ability to see Priam his enemy as another person is like Jesus' teaching to see other people as persons like us, and even to love our enemies; but Achilles never reached that level. He was able to see his enemies as persons like himself, and that is a great good thing. Achilles ability to see Priam his enemy as another person like himself is like the teaching in the Hindu Upanishads "you are that" and the teaching in many Hindu documents to love all life. Achilles does not rise to that level either but it still is along the same lines. Once we get Achilles' ideas of simple decency and its connection to seeing people as persons like us, we can use the idea to appreciate other principles, adopt other principles, and assess the principles that other people hold.

Achilles was never as good a man as Arjuna or Hector. Even after he changed, Achilles did not become a thoughtful nice man. Achilles rose maybe to the level of the Steve McQueen character at the end of "The Magnificent Seven". After the change, Achilles chose to fight in this particular war, just as Krishna urged Arjuna to fight in his war. Achilles' newfound feeling for persons did not make him a statesman or wimp. Still, however modest, the change in Achilles is important. Achilles looked at his code and saw that the fighter code was not the best he could live by, even if he could live by it and get respect. Achilles saw that he lived as a person, and that the fighter code did not allow him to act best as a person. Achilles saw that the fighter code was not the best application of his principles in this case, and he sought the best application. Achilles saw that the fighter code was not the best in general, and sought something better. Achilles did not rationalize his new self or new actions. He said no grand speeches. He had no ideology or system. Achilles simply responded to decency and humanity. He used his talents as he could to make a better world right then right there as much he knew how. Achilles woke up. He woke up by himself. Nobody woke him up to show him a particular world with particular rules. Achilles did not wake up to any mythological metaphysical system but to the simple world around him, made of people with values, who struggle to live by their values.

Achilles "true you" changed in response to the situation and as the result of his choice. He made his new self in response to the situation and to better principles. He became a good responsible soldier instead of a glorious fighter. Whether there was a deeper truer self "in there" all along, a person who was somehow in accord with better values, it makes little sense to debate. It is enough to see that Achilles did change and that his new true self was more in accord with correct principles.

The idea of simply waking up to obvious decency, without serving an elaborate system, is why I tell this story. Once we wake up to that, we can make a code for ourselves as befits our raising and our situation, in line with the principles of simple decency and with our true selves. If we pursue ideology later, that is fine, but we should not let ideology get in the way of seeing simple decency and following it. We should not cling to a code that harms basic decency. Seeking simple decency first does not always work but it is the best place to start. I find it much easier to move from simple decent good acts to the ideals of Jesus, practicality, and Western values about persons and good government, than to get there from any other

starting point, including the grand beautiful cosmic-social duty of the Bhagavad Gita, the logic of Pascal, the call of Existentialism, political correctness, Libertarianism, or any political ideology.

Is simple decency enough of a base on which to build a code? By itself, it is not. But along with simple decency we have the ideas of people like Jesus, Moses, Mohammad, the Buddha, Confucius, Chuang Tzu, and Krishna. We have enough to extend simple decency. If we start with decency, we can extend it using other ideas without letting other ideas fool us into compromising the original sense of decency. We can extend decency into different situations in different way. We can see if our extensions compare well with other extensions, and can use our basic feeling of decency to judge other codes.

I don't think Achilles chose to fight again because he bowed to the pressure of society, to his social duty, to his dharma, or to the great dharma. If he felt like that, he would have fought before. I hope Achilles based his decision to fight again on his new principles and his new sense of a true you.

I am not saying here that all aspects of Hellenic-Western culture are better than all aspects of Hindu culture. Hindus certainly understand Achilles and his change. I am saying these issues are old, and we can learn from what other people have thought. It is good to have a code and to be true to your code. Sometimes that is the only way we can live. Sometimes even vengeance makes sense. It is best if your code is based on deep principles of morality, decency, duty, honor, and human relations. If you find better principles than the principles that you use right now, you have to change your code and yourself accordingly. If you find a better application (interpretation) of your principles, then you have to adopt it. You have to look at your code and principles from time to time to make sure what is best to do. You have to look at your context, of this case, in this life, now. That is what Achilles did. When you change your code to accord with better principles, you also likely change your "true you" for the better. In that respect, Western-Greek principles are better than Hindu principles.

To be honest, in a later chapter, I do criticize Hinduism, and what I said here sets the stage. Although Hinduism knows of the correct principles, and knows that codes should change to accord with the right principles, it does not commit to the right principles. It gets trapped in a metaphysical system that allows people to override simple decency, rationalize self-interest, and bolster a bad class-and-sexist society. Hindus are not committed to the ideals of Jesus mixed with practical reality and Western values. Most Hindus are not enough like Gandhi and Nehru. Hinduism developed the ideals of the Bhagavad Gita in the wrong ways.

Waking up to something bigger and better than yourself is a theme of the movie "Hero" with Jet Li. More important than personal revenge, or than sectarian revenge, is your nation and its welfare. Waking up to something bigger and better than yourself, to true good principles, is one theme of "A Few Good Men". More important than following orders is protecting people who can't protect themselves, such as Private Santiago. A true officer is not a person who expedites matters but a person who gets to the bottom of issues and who makes a system in which honorable soldiers do protect the innocent. Maybe the people who do examine their codes have trouble handling reality, as the Jack Nicholson character notoriously proclaimed ("You can't handle the truth"), but so do the people who doggedly impose a code regardless of who gets hurt. We need a constant search among principles for best codes and best applications.

Achilles has many descendants, even if few are as heroic or profound. Not every character that changes and grows is an Achilles, but, still, some characters do echo him, especially if they come to feel common humanity, dignity, decency, and something bigger than themselves. One of my favorites is in the movie "Casablanca" in which Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, comes to see that his issues "don't amount to a hill of beans", and that the war for freedom is far more important. In the movie "The Magnificent Seven", the young man who wants to be a gunfighter, and who grows up during the movie, is like Achilles. The book of Jonah in the Tanakh (Old Testament) likely was written a few hundred years after the Iliad and it has similar lessons. Although Jonah the Israelite hated the Assyrians for conquering Israel, God made Jonah go to the capital Nineveh to preach to the Assyrians. When the Assyrians took God to heart, Jonah came to see the Assyrians as human like him and as followers of God like Jews. The real change was not the Assyrians but Jonah. A real human man, Malcom X, an American Black Muslim, started as a bigot hating Whites. Then he went to Mecca, felt common bonds with Muslims of all colors from all over the world, and gave up his hate. Many characters in the media recently have come to see Gay people as real people, and to see their humanity as more important than sexual (gender) orientation. The Australian movie, "Strange Bedfellows", with Paul Hogan, likely was the prototype for the American movie, "I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry". In the movie "La Cage Aux Folles", "straight" people had to make a leap to greater humanity. The TV shows "Will and Grace" and "Modern Family" helped modern people to do the same.

Even characters that are not always noble, characters that hold a righteous grudge, such as the Hulk and the Punisher, still can come to moral high ground. They stop hating their enemies even if they can't stop fighting their enemies. They come to see a small group of humans as helpful and friendly. They find their lost humanity. Figure out for yourself if Jean Genet is a descendant of Achilles.

Sadly, Achilles and his change are now abused by the culture of "15 minutes of fame" and "victimization". People can feign the need to change, and can fake a big change, just to get in the spotlight and to gain sympathy. Bad people appeal to good people using the Achilles paradigm. The bad people pretend to change, and the bad people allow good people to feel like Achilles becoming a better person, so that the bad people can get money from the good people. "You can help me overcome addiction". "I can help you overcome addiction and stop being a burden on your family". This is what comes of substituting bad ideology for good judgment.

We like Achilles more because he does a good act and he changes into a good man than because he was a good man all along and did a lot of good all along. Achilles is like the Prodigal Son rather than like the good son. In the Iliad, other characters are much better men than Achilles and do much more good than Achilles; Nestor and Odysseus come to mind. Yet they do not change from bad to good, and so do not attract us as much. In the movie "Casablanca", several characters are better than Rick and do much more good than Rick all along, such as Rick's old girlfriend, Else (Ingrid Bergmann), and her husband, who is a key figure in the resistance. Even the French policeman is better than Rick in general. We are not as fascinated by the consistently good characters as by Rick the changed person. In the Tanakh (Old Testament), David is really a reformed bad boy with a lot of the old bad boy still around. Here is not the place to go into why we are more fascinated by characters who change into better people than by people who are good along. I don't know how long the idea of a reformed bad boy or girl has been a theme in Western and Hebrew literature, and how widespread the theme is outside of Israel and the West.

The idea of a reformed bad boy or bad girl shows up now in many ways, many of the ways are not good, and how we treat the idea is not always good. First, rather than focus on the good acts and the change in character of bad boys and bad girls, we are fascinated by the bad part. We romanticize the bad part. We cling to the bad part. The badder we were, the better we are, and the better we will be. This attitude shows up in later chapters, so keep it in mind. Second, we wrongly think everybody can change and everybody has a good person waiting inside to come out. In the movie “Knocked Up”, the bad boy, Seth Rogan, changes into a good respectful respectable responsible husband and father, even though, in real life, that change does not often happen as women want. Not everybody can change, and not all of us can be saved. This situation too shows up often enough so you should keep it in mind. For a movie that is more PC “gender distributed” and shows many of the other themes too, see “My Super Ex-Girlfriend” with Uma Thurman and Luke Wilson.

Code as Game.

Hopefully this poem “The Lost Master” by Robert Service is out of copyright:

“And when I come to die” he said,
 “Ye shall not lay me out in state,
 Nor leave your laurels at my head,
 Nor cause your men of speech orate;
 No monument your gift shall be,
 No column in the Hall of Fame;
 But just this line ye grave for me:
 ‘He played the game’.

So when his glorious task was done,
 It was not of his fame we thought;
 It was not of his battles won,
 But of the pride with which he fought;
 But of his zest, his ringing laugh,
 His trenchant scorn of praise or blame:
 And so we graved his epitaph,
 ‘He played the game’.

And so we, too, in humbler ways
 Went forth to fight the fight anew,
 And heeding neither blame nor praise,
 We held the course he set us true.
 And we, too, find the fighting sweet;
 And we, too, fight for fighting’s sake;
 And though we go down in defeat,
 And though our stormy hearts may break,
 We will not do our Master shame:
 We’ll play the game, please God,
 We’ll play the game.”

Toward the end of the movie “Conan the Barbarian” starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Conan has to face a horde of expert fighters sent by the evil wizard Thulsa Doom, and Conan has for allies only three friends. Conan says, long after this fight is over, what people will remember is not that good faced evil, or that ordinary people faced a wizard and his minions, but that a few faced many. People will remember the battle, not why it was fought. I understand but disagree. What matters about D-Day is not that Allied casualties, in the first wave of the assault, were nearly one hundred percent; what matters is the battle was for the future of the world, the right side won, and the right side fought rightly. Dedication to the game is laudable but dedication to the right principles in the game is much better.

To live by a code is to play a game. Genet, the doomed souls in “No Exit”, Arjuna, Krishna, Achilles, and, Chris, Yul Brynner’s gunfighter dressed in black, all play a game. This poem extols commitment alone as sufficient cause to praise a comrade. But that is not true. What the poem does not make explicit, but what we assume, is that the game was not a really bad game, even if it was a rough game, and might have been a good game. The fallen comrade played “the game of life”, and we assume that is always a good enough game. Then we might take commitment alone is good enough. The necessary unspoken background questions are: What kind of game really? How do we play it best? The Iliad makes clear that Achilles plays the wrong game at first. We make a mistake if we play the simple game of “make your own code and be true to it” that Sartre offers in “Genet”, and if we turn the game of justification offered by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita into a game of rationalization and excuse. The best way to get clear is to compare specific various codes, games, types of people, and situations.

I feel strongly the appeal of the kind of person praised in “The Master” and the appeal of his commitment to the game over any mere tokens of winning or losing. The master does not appeal to me just because he plays any game. The master appeals to me, and to his followers, because he plays a particular kind of game, and he has the character (“true you”) that goes along with commitment to that kind of game. This kind of person was valued when I grew up in Oregon. I don’t point out what kind of game it is or is not; most Americans can figure that out by looking at what the master does values and does not value. The kind of game in the poem is not only one particular kind of game such as soldier, hunter, prospector, or dedicated worker for goodness. This kind of game is really family of games. The games in the family might seem less on the surface than the obvious game of the poem but really are just as important if we commit to them and their values, and play them fully: parent, husband, wife, good child, good citizen, honest business person, and honest politician. This game cannot be one in which the fighting is valued only for the sake of fighting without also paying attention to what you are fighting for; it cannot be a game for mere killers – you can save that for video games.

When most people think playing a game well is enough regardless of the content of the game, really they do care about the content but not as they wish people to know. They seek to live in the kind of made-up games that allow them to feel good about themselves. They play at games that their culture says are worthwhile so they can feel justified, regardless of whether they personally have considered the value of the game. Usually they superficially play at superficial games derived from more serious games. They get lost in glorious losing; they play the demon-haunted reluctant hero. They see themselves as warriors out to protect the “hood” rather than as thugs or racists. They see themselves as poets trapped in cruddy jobs, who make life worthwhile by going to hip places on weekends. They see movies about warriors in a last stand against “the man”. They see TV shows about long-suffering abused victims. They dream of

being a Klingon dying a glorious death in battle whether the battle is fought between the stars or in a dysfunctional household. The way out is to examine the game, and not to assume that, just because you play a game approved by some subculture, you are automatically justified. “Hate the game, not the player” is just an excuse for self-indulgent rationalization. If the game is silly, then so are you. If the game is good, you stand a better shot at being decent, although, whether you make it, does depend on how you in particular play.

Here I can only repeat what religions have said about just wars for millennia: If you are in a good game and you play it according to good principles, then fine. If you are in a good game but you play it along bad principles, then you are wrong. If you are in a bad game, but don't know it, and you play it as best you can according to good principles such as decency, then you are alright. If you are in a bad game and you know it, then get out, regardless of what principles you play by. If you are not sure about the game, try to find out; if you can't find out, then play by good principles. If you are in a good cause, and you want to play by good principles, but the people on your side, or your enemies, play dirty, then you have a hard problem, and I can't settle it here. You get the idea, and should do what you can.

Duty and Honor as Good but Inadequate Principles.

Arjuna and Achilles lived by a fighter code. Thankfully, the American military knows quite well that the fighter code is not enough. The American military usually live by a higher code that includes duty and honor. Arjuna also lived by the code that the modern American military would understand, including duty and honor. Achilles came to understand that code, and more. Duty and honor are good values. There is nothing wrong with them. It is hard to live by principles such as “work hard to make the world better”, “pay it forward”, “do unto others”, “applies equally”, “responsible adept citizenship”, “the greater good”, “rule of law”, and “put office before person”. Rather than try to live by those principles, isn't it good enough to live just by duty and honor? Aren't those good enough? If you personally really can't understand more than duty and honor, they are enough. But if you can understand more, then they are not enough, and you have to try to live by more, as, eventually, Achilles did.

Although we might not recognize it, Americans debate this question in our popular culture. We are apt to put it in terms of revenge-and-justice as with the Hulk and the Punisher. This issue includes movie characters such as the man with no name in the Clint Eastwood “spaghetti” Westerns. It includes the undercover police officer, and the spy, who have to become like the bad people he-she fights in order to fight them. It is the dilemma of Donnie Brasco. Duty and Honor sometimes require revenge. In pursuing revenge, sometimes we have to become almost as bad as the people we kill. If we do become that bad, then we have betrayed the honor and duty we set out to advance. We have to be able to put honor and duty into a greater context or we are likely to lose them in pursuing them. At the same time, we do have to stop the bad guys, and we need honor and duty to find the strength to stop the bad guys. This is a real issue for which there is no simple solution. The fact that we continue to debate it, even if in the popular media, is a good sign. Tyrannies do not debate this issue.

Principles and Judgment.

Having a code implies strongly adhering to the rules of the code, as with a soldier or detective. Strongly adhering to rules without judgment usually undermines principles, and kills the empathy and sympathy

that are at the basis for most correct principles. Even if you don't have sympathy for bad guys, you do have to have sympathy for the good guys that the code ultimately means to protect, such as in the movie "A Few Good Men". Finding sympathy guided Achilles to a better code with better principles. Relations between principles and judgment are a large topic that I don't go into here. If a code consistently lacks sympathy and consistently hurts good people, then it is using wrong principles or is following rules without also using judgment.

Theory and Practice: Literary Cases.

It is easy to say we should use "applies equally" and the Golden Rule as our basic principles but that is not the problem. Nearly everybody agrees in theory on these as basic principles. The problem is that these grand principles need to be interpreted and broken down into smaller rules for specific cases, and people quickly disagree at that level. That is what we should expect with animals that evolved their sense of morality. "The Devil is in the details". People are just doomed to argue about codes and behavior at the level of particular cases. We work out our humanity by arguing specific cases. This section presents a contrast between similar codes, in two more literary cases, to show we have real disagreements and that we have to think it out for ourselves.

In an episode of the classic TV show "Law and Order", a working class father wants his son to go to a prep school so the son can have a good education and good connections. The "preppies" look down on the boy, exploit his desire to fit in, and exploit his particular working class code of brotherhood. One clique fools him into acting as their stooge. The leader of the preppy boys gets the working class boy to kill a man while the leader looks on. The police figure it out. The preppy leader is happy to incriminate the working class boy to save his own skin. The police cannot act against the preppy leader unless the working class boy "rats him out". The working class boy refuses even though it means another ten years in jail at least, and even though he knows a bad person will go free. The working class boy is true to his code, which is based roughly on "do unto others in our group as we need to do, as an ideal member of our group would do for us". The working class boy is true to this code even though he knows the other person is not true to the same code, does not respect that code, and does not treat the working class boy as he would wish to be treated. The preppy leader is true to his own code if we take his code to mean: first save your own skin; then treat other people of your class as you might wish to be treated; and you may abuse people of another class.

Along with Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler is the best of classic detective writers. In "The Long Goodbye", the hero, Phillip Marlowe, makes friends with a man named Terry. Terry once had a good basic character but lost it through dissipation. Terry gets in trouble and then disappears without saying goodbye and without explaining. Marlowe feels it is his duty to find out what happened and to help Terry if he can. Marlowe hunts him down. In the process, Marlowe gets abused by police, gangsters, and assorted bad people. Marlowe learns that Terry disappeared in part because of his bad character. When it is clear to powerful people that Marlowe will not give up, and he might make too much trouble for big people along the way, the people who arranged for Terry to disappear arrange for Marlowe to meet him. When Marlowe meets him, Marlowe tells Terry what an ass he is, and then leaves. The powerful people who hid Terry assumed Marlowe went through hell because he was loyal to Terry personally. Marlowe did like Terry personally despite Terry's faults but that is not why Marlowe found him. Marlowe went through hell because Terry was a friend, regardless of his personality, in the same way an American

soldier tries hard not to leave a fallen comrade even if the comrade is an ass. Marlowe was loyal to the idea of friendship rather than to the particular person who might happen to be in the category of friend. Marlowe did his duty in a code in which he expected another friend would do the same for him as a friend, regardless of whether he deserved it as a particular individual. Marlowe did it for who Terry ideally was, and might have been, not for the real Terry.

I think the working class boy was wrong and Marlowe was right.

It Takes All Kinds.

When faced with annoying behavior, my father used to say, “It takes all kinds to make a world”, usually to hide the fact that he had no idea what was happening and what to do. If everybody acted according to high moral principles, the world would work out fine. When some people act badly, the other people, who want goodness to prevail, often have to abandon their high principles except among themselves. Then, we need tough guys, self-righteous guys, bulldogs, muscle, shooters, schemers, persuaders, whiners, and even lawyers. We need vengeance, anger, retribution, punishment, and fear; and we need the kind of people who can do that. The people who can do what needs to be done sometimes don't have hearts of gold and love sweetness. Sometimes it is only a lucky accident they are on our side. All these kinds can serve as the basis for a code.

Even when people don't act badly, people don't spend most of their lives acting according to high moral principles, nor should they. Not all codes are basically moral. People have regular lives. We have to go to work and mow the lawn. People just do things. Being a good mathematician might be governed by a code but the mathematician's code isn't necessarily moral. We don't always respond according to a code based on high moral principles. Sometimes we don't respond according to any code. Sometimes we just respond. As long as we don't break high moral principles, all this is fine.

Natural Codes.

Western people want their codes to have deep roots in nature and human nature. We want the validation of nature for our personal way of life. If we want to live the code of a “brave heart”, it would be good if the code of a brave heart had roots in our past as hunter-gatherers and helped in the evolution of morality. Western people like thinking of ourselves as the noble savage.

Unfortunately for our longings, few codes have such a pedigree. Few codes are simply natural. No code in modern life has simple roots in our evolved nature and only there: tough guy, avenger, femme fatale, tough woman, gangster, soldier, professional, business person, clergy person, professor, activist, techie, teacher, farmer, etc. None of these people existed as such in our evolutionary history. Hunter-gatherers did not have soldiers, farmers, priests, or feminists. Even if we could twist our history to find a basis for these people in the past, that is not the same as a warrant for a code in the present.

We have made up our codes out of a combination of natural abilities, culture, society, history, economics, politics, etc. It is hard to decide which dominates. It is not likely that any other force could go against evolved human nature for too long but that does not mean some kind of pure human trait is the key to any particular code. We evolved a general ability to play particular games, and no particular game could go

against our evolved nature for any long. We can understand some aspects of some games on the basis of evolved capacities, such as that golf might be based partly on an evolved joy in hunting and gathering outdoors. But, when we want to understand a particular game, we are much more likely to find what we seek in the history and cultural background of the game. We learn more about golf from knowing it began among shepherds in Scotland, spread around the world with the American military, and is often played by aspiring members of the middle class. Similar analyses work with codes such as the code of politically correct people or religious fundamentalists.

Sometimes the best we can hope is a code that has a basis in an attitude with roots in our evolutionary history and that does no wrong. The super hero as a fighter for the underdog, defender of morality, and scourge of bad guys, might have roots in the tendency to moral indignation of our past. The good parent certainly has roots even if what it means to be a good parent changes with time and place. The faithful spouse definitely has roots in our past.

Even here we have to be careful because not all of our tendencies that have close ties to our evolutionary past are good. The Black Widow, Prostitute, Cad Seducer, Spouse Abuser, Unfaithful Wife, Unfaithful Husband, and Killer all likely have roots in our past but we do not want to teach our children how to make lifestyle codes out of those characters.

We can look for simple personality types and for simple attitudes that make sense given our evolutionary history and that are useful today. We can make codes out of tendencies. Hunter-gatherers did not have soldiers but they did have men and women who would fight to defend their families and groups and who would argue vigorously for right. Out of that we can make a good template for soldiers who serve a good policy. Our ancestors took care of sick and injured people, and gave hungry people food. Out of that, we can easily make roles for medical personnel and for people who work in charities. The modern "artiste" did not exist among hunter-gatherers but people who could draw a picture, blow a tune on a flute, sing a song, chip a good stone spearhead, or weave a colorful basket were respected and did well. Out of that we can imagine modern singer-songwriters or even Mad Men.

Whether a code has roots in our past does not matter as long as the code is fun, useful, makes the world more interesting, does no harm, and gives people a regular way to get by in the confusing modern world. If the code also makes the world better, follows moral values, and promotes moral values, then so much the better. Let people live a regular life according to their "true you" as long as it does no harm. That is a good code too.