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Do the Right Things for the Right Reasons

This essay is another example of leaving out the most important ideas because I take them for granted. I left the ideas here out of my two books on religion.

In several places, I say God wants us to do the right things for the right reasons. He does not want us to do the right things out of hope of reward (heaven, worldly success) or fear of punishment (Hell, social failure). God would not like Pascal's Wager. I think this idea is quite important. But I don't make a point of this idea, and I hardly mention it in the book "Religious Stances".

Mostly I don't mention it because I overlooked it because I take it so much for granted. Alas. Partly I did not make a point of it for the same reason I don't make a point of "Love your neighbor as yourself". If people try to do it, they freeze. They get caught up in traps. They end up doing less well than if they had not heard of it. People second guess their own motives so much that they spend all their energy on worrying and not enough on acting. They try to be pure in their motives. "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him".

Yet, once you get the idea of God, and once you think that God wants you to do the right things for the right reasons, you almost cannot have purity of motive. You can't help but want to do the right things not because they are the right things but to please God. Even if you don't want to please God out of hope of reward or fear of punishment, still you want to please God, and that is not the best reason. Besides, humans, including me, cannot stop from thinking about reward and punishment when they know that God wants us to do some things and not do others.

So, what to do? Borrow from Aristotle's idea of character building and maybe borrow from Taoism and Zen. Figure out what are the right things. Figure out how to best use your talents, energy, time, and resources (money). If the best ways to use your talents etc. displease you and you know you would do a bad job, then find something(s) you would do well and that is useful. Then do it. Don't worry if your motives are pure enough. Don't worry if you do think a little bit about reward and punishment. Don't worry how much impurity is enough or too much. Come to peace with Ben Franklin and his wretched autobiography. Just do stuff. Just do stuff even if the stuff is thinking and sorting out. Do stuff even if the stuff is writing, listening to music, or looking at painting, sculpture, and buildings. Do stuff even if the stuff is science and politics. Don't worry if you make mistakes or misallocate. While hanging from the cliff, don't forget to eat the berry. Got it?

If you do this long enough, especially if you can see some actual good come, even if you don't change the world, even if you fail a lot, even if the world gets worse while you are trying to make it better, you can relax a bit. You can sort out right things and right reasons. You begin to reinforce yourself. You

begin to actually do the right things without worrying about wrong reasons, right reasons, or any reasons at all. That is doing the right things for the right reasons. You begin to trust yourself and trust God or whatever higher power you believe in. Then you can throw away all the sutras and sermons. Don't forget to keep a few as souvenirs.

Don't do bad things no matter how tempting and how much fun. Don't get caught up in bad causes such as political fundamentalism, political super-partisanship, and religious fundamentalism. Don't get caught up in anything that undermines the ideas of person, the Golden Rule, "applies equally", or the Rule of Law. Try not to participate in causes just because that makes you feel justified and saved, although participating to feel justified and saved is part of the reasons why people participate in causes and we cannot entirely not-feel that way.