Enduring meaning is found at the intersection of what is truly good and what we individually have to offer. We are capable of discovering both.

We can find meaning in anything by understanding what makes it good and unique. This is meaningful understanding and it goes beyond just identifying what a thing is. To understand what is unique and good about a thing, experience, or most importantly, a person, is to grasp its reality as it relates to us and the wider world.

Chase Meaning explores every aspect of meaningfulness, from the practical utility of paying attention to the philosophical underpinnings of ethical decision-making. The thread that runs through it all is the conviction that real meaningfulness is discoverable, it is worth pursuing, and each of us is equipped to do so through the perception of our understanding. This pursuit is what makes life worth living.

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THE CHASE MEANING *PRIMER*

ANDREW BIBB

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How to Understand Meaningfully and Why It Matters

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Introduction

"Meaning" is one of those concepts that is hard to define but unmistakable when experienced. Each of us can point to a moment in time when we seemed to peek behind the veil of the mundane and momentarily perceived the transcendent. It was so fleeting and unrepeatable that perhaps we convinced ourselves it was an illusion, a trick of our own imagination. This, whether real or imagined, was an experience of transcendent meaning. Even though we know intuitively that such an experience cannot be forced, we often try anyway, usually with disappointing results.

But we also have experiences of "ordinary" meaning, a kind of fulfillment that is less intense but steadier. We can't fabricate

experiences of transcendental meaning. We can only be on the lookout for them and show gratitude when they manifest. But meaning of the ordinary, reliable kind is well within our reach and worth pursuing. The alternative is a slow decay of the soul.

For something to be meaningful it must possess two qualities: it must be both truly good and distinctive in some way. Its distinctiveness catches our attention. Its goodness gives it its inherent value. There is hardly any relationship or experience that we cannot find meaning in because there is usually something good and unique about each them. But we should set our sights not on what is merely incidentally good, but on what makes us come alive with meaning.

Ordinary experiences of meaning show up when we apply ourselves to something worth

doing for its own sake. Anytime we give of ourselves, genuinely expecting nothing in return, we sense we have done something both meaningful and repeatable. When we practice a skill, create a piece of art, or make progress in an activity we have a natural affinity for we experience meaning of a slightly different shade, but just as real.

The meaning associated with pursuing what we are both interested in and good at grows out of a primal need to contribute something unique and valuable to our community. We can ignore this need and become only consumers of value rather than producers of it, or we can become overly competitive, which tends to pervert the pursuit of meaningfulness into a fear of failure. But what we really want is simply to feel that we are an asset, not a liability.

Actions, behaviors, and attitudes that are truly good, such as respecting the dignity of others or showing gratitude when it is earned, are inherently meaningful in the deepest sense. The moral realm is the foundational level of reality upon which all else depends. To live in accordance with the moral law is to pursue happiness of the best and highest kind.

To chase meaning is to pursue this kind of happiness. We do not have perfect knowledge of the moral reality this endeavor depends on, but we do have the tools with which to discover it. More specifically, the perception of our understanding, variously called intuition, faith, or common sense, is an imperfect but reliable guide to meaningfulness grounded in goodness.

The perception of our understanding reveals not only what is meaningful about our

experiences and interactions with others, but also what is useful about them. This is a utility that goes beyond pure utilitarianism, however, because it never loses touch with the moral dimension of reality. It does not only ask, “Is it useful?” but also “Is it good?”

We can find meaning in anything by understanding what makes it good and unique. This is meaningful understanding and it goes beyond just identifying what a thing is. To understand what is unique and good about a thing, experience, or most importantly, a person, is to grasp its reality as it relates to us and the wider world.

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thread that runs through it all is the conviction that real meaningfulness is discoverable, it is worth pursuing, and each of us is equipped to do so through the perception of our understanding. This pursuit is what makes life worth living.

Part I - Primer

PRIORITIZE UNDERSTANDING

Attend deliberately. Understand meaningfully. Act assertively.

Whenever it has followed this process, mankind has progressed morally, politically, economically, technologically, etc. It is intuitive that to interact with something effectively and meaningfully one must gain sufficient understanding of what it is and how it works by paying attention to it. Only then is he or she ready to act effectively in relation to it. So, if the process is intuitive, why talk about it?

Because, even though we do it, we are often sloppy about it. Some pay attention until they understand but never act on what they know,

accomplishing nothing. Others act well before they achieve sufficient understanding and then fail to make any meaningful progress. They often make the situation worse than if they had simply done nothing.

The steps for interacting with reality meaningfully and effectively are simple: 1) Pay attention deliberately and carefully, 2) Understand meaningfully and sufficiently, and 3) Act assertively and responsibly. To neglect one or more of these steps is to guarantee an unsatisfactory outcome. It is to fail to fully engage with the reality of the person, thing, or idea with which we are dealing. But to prioritize meaningful understanding is to enable effective action and avoid these pitfalls.

I experienced this during my training to become a US Army civil affairs officer. The

emphasis of the training was on dealing with people, in this case played by actors, who were often belligerent and usually from a different cultural background. Early in my training I frequently failed in these interactions because the ambiguity of the scenarios made me so nervous that I couldn't establish a connection with the person with whom I was dealing, much less make any progress toward solving problems.

That changed when I realized my first and greatest responsibility was simply to understand, and to do that I just had to pay attention. That was the key that opened the door to meaningful conversations. By simply paying attention to my conversational partner rather than allowing myself to be distracted by my own insecurities a number of things happened as if by magic.

EFFECTS OF UNDERSTANDING

1. My anxiety disappeared by degrees, replaced by confidence. I was no longer stuck playing defense. Having such a clear and solid overarching purpose, to understand, made me a rational being to contend with rather than a plaything to be dominated. The pursuit of meaningful understanding became my backbone where I had previously been spineless. Focusing my attention on the words, actions, and behaviors of my conversational partner rather than my own insecurities made me intentional, whereas before I was entirely passive.

This effect was especially important for me because I've never been a temperamentally courageous person. My childhood memories are tinged with feelings of timidity, and I joined the

military in large part to overcome this. Adopting the pursuit of understanding as my purpose diverted my focus from my inadequacies, real or imagined. I traded self-consciousness for meaning-consciousness. In forgetting myself, I also forgot to be nervous.

I had this realization while I was in a training environment and being evaluated on every interaction, the failing of which could disqualify me from service in civil affairs. But I committed to prioritizing the pursuit of understanding above my evaluations. While difficult to do, the results were undeniable: my evaluations improved to a degree I hadn't dared to hope for previously.

2. I signaled genuine concern for my conversational partner and validated their existence as a person worth listening to. I had

previously assumed that to build relationships and earn trust I had to always be ready to say exactly the right thing. Most of the time, doing so only made me seem arrogant and unsympathetic. But when I began by paying attention to the other person, with no agenda but to understand them, the barriers to earning their trust came crashing down.

This made sense when I thought about how I felt when someone gave *me* their undivided attention. When someone truly listened to me with the goal of understanding where I was coming from I ceased to be another piece of furniture in their environment and instead was a truly rational being, capable of real pain, pleasure, concerns, dreams, goals, and desires. Their attention to my words and the sense that they understood, or at least tried to, made me feel

like someone worth listening to. This made me want to trust them.

To listen to others for the sake of understanding them validates their existence as rational beings. Even if there is little or no agreement on the topic of the conversation, this act of paying attention at least establishes a foundation of mutual respect. This was very often enough to head off conflict and foster trust instead.

3. I signaled my intention to engage honestly, implicitly demanding the same from them. Before I prioritized understanding, I thought that social savviness was the key to successfully engaging with people. Very quickly, I found that those I dealt with saw through my attempts to be charming and likable, which gave them the impression that I was not a reliable person to deal

with. Smooth talk only gets you so far. It doesn't get you anywhere if you're not good at it.

In making meaningful understanding the centerpiece of my approach, I signaled to the other person that I meant what I said and could be dealt with on a firm foundation of integrity. This proved much more powerful than any attempt to be charming. Charisma, if you have the gift, may prove useful in getting your foot in the door, but provides no foundation for a long-term cooperative relationship. A relationship founded on mutual honesty, however, sets the conditions for a meaningful partnership.

4. I gained an understanding of what was happening rather than imposing my assumptions on the situation. When we make decisions based on assumptions, rather than on understanding grounded in reality, we often have

either a negligible effect on the situation or we make it worse. That is what I found myself doing before prioritizing understanding. My preconceptions acted as a security blanket that I refused to let go of in the face of contradicting information because that is where I felt safe. The cost was utter ineffectiveness.

When I traded in my assumptions for the pursuit of understanding I discovered a different kind of security, one borne of a partnership with truth rather than antagonism toward it. It was empowering rather than just consoling. It is this phenomenon that Peterson describes, explaining:

> If you identify things, with careful attention and language, you bring them forward as viable, obedient objects, detaching them from their underlying near-universal interconnectedness. You

> simplify them. You make them specific and useful and reduce their complexity.[1]

Attention promotes meaningful understanding and effective action.

This is especially true when dealing with people. People are complicated, and deliberate attention is needed to pierce through to their true motivations and concerns. But doing so opens the door to mutual understanding, trust and, perhaps, cooperation.

5. It reinforced the importance and utility of intellectual humility. Prioritizing understanding required me to come to grips with the fact that I am a finite being and don't know everything. Facing the unknown can be debilitating. We fear

[1] Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), 276, EBSCOhost Ebook Collection.

what we don't understand and novelty is unnerving.

The pursuit of understanding over the security of already-understood turns the fear of not knowing into an appreciation for the potential to know. Rather than viewing the unknown as a threat, we may approach it as an opportunity. The unknown is transformed from a hazard to be avoided into a gold mine from which nuggets of truth and meaning may be extracted through deliberate and careful attention.

THE ENGAGED AWARENESS CYCLE

The power of prioritizing understanding for interacting with the world and the people who populate it birthed a desire in me to know how

and why it worked. I started practicing this in various personal and professional contexts, from dealing with people to comprehending complex ideas and concepts.

In every instance, paying attention to the point of sufficient and meaningful understanding for effective action produced positive results that I could stand behind. In trying to understand why this was the case, I developed the model I call the Engaged Awareness Cycle (EAC).[2] The EAC, which is a product both of extensive research and experience, provides a cognitive roadmap for understanding and engaging with reality as it is, not as we assume or wish it was.

In the EAC, the only two steps that require the practitioner to do anything are the

[2] See a graphic illustration of the EAC at the end of this book.

"Attend" and "Act" steps. Much of the utility of the EAC comes from placing these steps in their proper order. The purpose of the rest of the model is to provide context, as well as to highlight the central role meaningful understanding plays in our ability to engage with reality.

The EAC begins by acknowledging that we operate within a given environment: physical, cultural, social, moral, etc. This environment determines much of what we can know and act on at a given point in time and space. We are only partially aware of the various factors that comprise that environment, further limiting our ability to understand it.

It is within this "bubble of awareness" that we can engage with our environment and its constituent elements. Every time we engage with a person, thing, or idea, we bring to it an initial

cognitive framework. This framework is made up of our assumptions, biases, worldviews, and underlying philosophies. This is where we must decide to either impose our initial (and often erroneous) preconceptions onto the objective in question or pay attention to the object itself and allow our understanding to grasp its reality.

In attending to the object, we break it down into its parts to better understand the whole. When we pay attention, we direct our understanding "just as one might pull a bow when aiming at a target."[3] We make the target clearer by stretching our minds in its direction and, with small adjustments, center our aim. This is the process of understanding. It is not

[3] Carolyn Dicey Jennings, *The Attending Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1-2, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108164238.

something we force, but our minds' natural response to the stimulus of attention.

This interplay of attention and understanding continues until we achieve meaningful and sufficient understanding for effective action. What qualifies as "sufficient" depends entirely on the factors involved in that particular situation. Desired outcomes, time constraints, the people involved, and a myriad of other influences all get a vote in deciding what is sufficient for effective action. As we practice paying attention and become more familiar with both the general process of understanding and the specifics of a given situation, what constitutes sufficient understanding becomes clearer. However, at the end of the day, it is a judgment call on the part of the practitioner.

Once we determine we have achieved meaningful and sufficient understanding, we act. We can do so both responsibly and assertively because of the understanding we've gained. This understanding imbues our actions with confidence and purpose. Such actions drive us toward our desired ends and alleviate the danger of action for action's sake, which often produces negligible or negative effects.

The action does not conclude the cycle, however. Using the EAC, once we act we return immediately to the "Attend" step to evaluate the effects of our action on the object of our engagement (and on ourselves). This restarts the cycle of paying attention and understanding with the new input of the effects of our actions, further refining our understanding of the object and our relationship to it. This cycle repeats and

continues until we conclude our direct engagement with the object.

At this point we allow our minds to reassemble the constituent parts of the object (which we previously broke apart to examine its particulars more closely) into a fresh and truer concept of what that object is and what it means. Through engagement, we were able to examine the nature of the object and see how it responded to our interactions with it. In post-engagement reflection we reconceptualize the object with the inputs of the engagement to more accurately reflect reality. We come out a little farther along in our pursuit of meaningful understanding than we went in. In the process we: 1) Gained and shared relevant knowledge; 2) Established and cultivated meaningful relationships; and 3) Leveraged, or created the potential to leverage,

that knowledge and those relationships as influence.

COMMON SENSE UNDERSTANDING

I found that when I paid attention, deliberately and carefully, something in my mind operated that was beyond just intellect or reason (as it is commonly understood), but neither was it mere instinct. The act of attending liberated my understanding to determine and explore the reality of the thing I paid attention to, not just in terms of what it was but also what it meant in relation to me specifically. While I never understood completely, I usually understood sufficiently. This empowered me to act assertively and responsibly.

After discovering this, the next step was to find out why it worked as well as it did. I needed to know if the Engaged Awareness Cycle (EAC) was trustworthy and, if so, why. I found that the phenomenon I had stumbled upon has been deeply appreciated and comprehensively explored by a school of thinkers known as the common sense philosophers. Their approach is "to begin with and continually return to the immediate knowledge of reality as disclosed in primary experience."[4] For them, common sense "beliefs, intuitions, and principles…have authority with default status and should only be

[4] Scott Philip Segrest, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 1, ProQuest Ebook Central.

given up, if that is possible at all, in the face of extraordinarily strong reasons."[5]

The two-fold experience of experimenting with my own "Attend – Understand - Act" cycle coupled with learning from the common sense philosophers restored my faith in my capacity to meaningfully understand the world of my experience. I learned that a person's understanding is a force that actively seeks the truth about reality and, if we cooperate with rather than hinder this force, it does so very well. The EAC and common sense philosophy gave me the confidence to pursue

[5] Rik Peels and René van Woudenberg, "Introduction: Why Common Sense Matters," in *The Cambridge Companion to Common-Sense Philosophy,* ed. Rik Peels and René van Woudenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 4, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108598163.

understanding with a tenacity I previously thought myself incapable of.

One of the greatest thinkers in the common sense tradition, James McCosh, traces the history of its essential features back to the ancient Greeks. He highlights Aristotle's assertion, "By nature man is competently organized for truth, and truth in general is not beyond his reach."[6] Aristotle concluded that, although people are limited in their understanding, what they do understand is real and valid, not illusory. The understanding may be trusted as far as it goes.

McCosh agrees and shows that, just as the physical body has senses that retrieve

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[6] James McCosh, *Realistic Philosophy Defended in a Philosophic Series, Volume II: Historical and Critical* (1887; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1977), 11.

information for the mind, the understanding has perceptions as well. He calls these perceptions of the understanding "intuitions," which "look immediately on the object or truth."[7] This explained why it seemed that my understanding worked of its own accord, prior to me applying any logic, when I simply paid attention. I previously thought I had to figure everything out through inferential and logical reasoning, ready to articulate an airtight case for every assertion I made. But McCosh showed me that the perceptions of the understanding, or intuitions, are prior to inferential reasoning. In fact, these intuitions make logic possible, not the other way around.

[7] James McCosh, *Intuitions of the Mind Inductively Investigated,* 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1882), 22.

Thomas Reid, the Scottish thinker responsible for popularizing the term "common sense," explains this relationship by arguing that reason has two modes, or "degrees." The first of these is common sense or intuition, the direct apprehension of truth by the understanding. The second is logical reasoning, which "reaches farther truth by inference."[8]

McCosh describes the process, reflected in the EAC, of turning intuitional and self-evident truths into logical concepts. The mind:

> …acquires first a knowledge of individual things, as they are presented to it and to its knowing faculties, and it is out of this that all its arranged knowledge is formed by a subsequent exercise of the understanding…Starting with the

[8] McCosh, *Realistic Philosophy*, 20

> particular, the mind reaches the general by observing the points of agreement.[9]

Rather than deductive, beginning with general ideas and working down to specific conclusions, this process is first inductive and builds from self-evident and necessary truths to general concepts. Since the inductive approach is built upon intuitional truths that are directly apprehended by the understanding, it provides a solid foundation from which to act. It is based on bedrock reality rather than broad assumptions. It does not neglect deduction, but ensures it is well-informed.

Lest we assume that this common sense and intuitional approach to reality is a vestige of a bygone age of outdated Newtonian ideas, it is important to point out that there is no

[9] McCosh, *Intuitions of the Mind*, 102.

disagreement between it and modern science, including quantum theory, in its proper realm. Common sense is the best way to navigate the reality of human experience in most cases. Theoretical physicist Roland Omnès explains that "humans prefer to focus on the coarsest features of objects…due to the imperfection of their senses," and, "They are wise to do so."[10]

Omnès elaborates that, for humans, common sense "is a kind of logic well suited to the world [we] live in." The "probability for common sense to be wrong is practically always negligible, as long as it deals with macroscopic objects and does not approach too closely the world of the infinitely small."[11] He concludes,

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[10] Roland Omnès, *Quantum Philosophy: Understanding and Interpreting Contemporary Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 178, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[11] Ibid., 181-2.

"Restricted to its own sphere of application, common sense becomes a valid form of the laws of reality."[12] That is why our goal is not perfect, but sufficient, understanding. It will never be perfect, but we can absolutely achieve understanding that is good enough to enable assertive, responsible, and meaningful action.

Likewise, McCosh recognizes that, no matter what advances science makes, nothing will ever replace one's reflection on the workings of the mind from within his own consciousness as the best way to comprehend how and why we understand:

> Whatever aid physiological research as it advances may furnish to psychology, it must always be by the study, not of the brain, and nerves, and vital forces, but of our conscious operations, that a

[12] Ibid., 185.

> philosophy of the human mind is to be constructed.[13]

The best way to understand how and why we understand is to reflect on our own understanding.

MEANINGFUL UNDERSTANDING

It is easy to see why appreciating the perceptive and intuitive powers of the understanding is so powerful an engine for effective action. But what about meaning? What constitutes meaningful understanding? Is meaning imposed by the one who understands, found in the object of understanding, or both?

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[13] James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy: Biographical, Expository, Critical, from Hutcheson to Hamilton* (1875; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139149815.

That there is meaning to be found, real meaning that rejects classification as illusory despite its intangibility to the physical senses, is a self-evident intuition that requires no proof other than the immediate perception of that truth by our understanding. We recognize very early in our lives that mere survival is not enough for us. We apprehend that there are such things as goodness, truth, and beauty, and that meaning is to be found in pursuit of these. We sense at a primal level that right and wrong are real qualities, not imagined, and we are sensitive to our relationship with them until we dull our moral sense through misuse and abuse.

This perception of the understanding that has meaning as its object is called faith. A modern common sense philosopher, Scott Philip Segrest, beautifully describes faith in this sense

as "predoctrinal, antecedent to any verbal symbolizations, to say nothing of hardened dogmatic creeds, and its rational basis is intuitive rather than argumentative." It "is only a particular kind of rational intuition," a direct perception by the understanding of a self-evident truth.[14]

Our meaning-seeking nature drives us to find the good, the true, and the beautiful in the world we experience. It is in these and our relationship to them that meaning is found. To deny this core quality of human nature is to dehumanize ourselves, and to deny that they exist to be found in the course of everyday human experience is to cease living in every way except biologically. Although their existence cannot be

[14] Segrest, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense*, 71.

proven, they are known directly and immediately by our faith-perception.

Segrest makes the preceding observation while exploring the ideas of another great common sense philosopher, John Witherspoon. Witherspoon was the only college president and clergyman to sign the American Declaration of Independence, partaking in an immensely meaningful act of global consequence. He did so in the understanding that such action was in accordance with the moral laws woven through the fabric of reality, perceptible by the understanding through moral intuition.

For Witherspoon:

> …all moral understanding depends on perception of moral qualities in moral agents. You see the moral quality of human intentions as indicated by words and actions. Simultaneously you recognize certain moral relations

> involved. Reflection on the moral qualities and relations leads to a further intuition of principles and rules that should guide will and behavior.[15]

Morality is discovered through reflection on singular events. When we hear of a man abusing his wife or children we know, intuitively and without a doubt, that such an act is objectively wrong and we can generalize further from that indisputable fact.

It is in recognizing the reality of moral relations that the EAC becomes helpful. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to understand the proper moral relationship between two people with no prior interaction. But in paying attention for the sake of meaningful understanding we position ourselves to act in such a way that is

[15] Ibid., 72-3.

beneficial to both of us, which is the right relationship between moral agents who take that ethical responsibility seriously. When both parties do so the product is mutual trust.

It is in achieving sufficient understanding of the moral implications in any interaction that we grasp that interaction's meaning. Meaning and morality, by which we mean everything functioning according to the purpose it was created for, are manifestations of the same ground truth about reality. To pursue meaningful understanding of that order and to act in accordance with it is the only sure path to a life of fulfillment rather than mere survival. To act otherwise is to fight a losing battle against reality itself.

The goal of Chase Meaning is to continue the work begun by the common sense

philosophers, who made their students “feel that they had a mind, and stimulated them to independent thought.”[16] Following their example, Chase Meaning seeks above all to restore faith in our ability to understand meaningfully. This is a critical mission, because it is the only path to discovering meaning in the human experience.

[16] McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy*, 8.

Part II – Chase Meaning Essays

WRITE FROM THE GUT

I'm a classic overthinker, which makes blogging almost impossible without some serious intentionality behind it. I tend to approach a blog post like I'm putting together a scholarly article for a peer-reviewed publication rather than what it's really good for, which is a public venue to wrestle through my own thoughts. So, I thought I'd "write my way out" of this rut by exploring what the Engaged Awareness Cycle (EAC) might have to say about the process of writing.

Writing is a great way to get thoughts out of my own head into a space where I can analyze them objectively, see if they make sense, and identify some of the gaps. Writing also triggers an engaged consciousness, focusing my attention on a given subject (in this case the writing process itself) to see what insights reveal themselves along the way.

Focusing my attention through writing helps me access what the Scottish philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries referred to as "common sense." I equate common sense in the EAC the interplay between understanding and intuition, which correspond directly with making judgements about that which I have understood. This is what I mean by "writing from the gut." It is to write intuitively.

Writing from the gut is a hard sensation to describe, but you know it when you feel it. The key is to tell the truth as you see it, nothing more and nothing less. Whenever I make the mistake of writing to impress, I feel as if I'm pretending rather than creating and whatever I come up with in that state feels flat, shallow, and insincere. I sense weakness in my words and it drains all meaning from the writing process.

It's a completely different sensation from when I set out to simply tell the truth as I see it. Even if I'm wrong, at least I'm honest. And honesty is the key to moving toward fundamental truth rather than away from it. Socrates asserts in Plato's Republic that "the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the

organ to see it with."[17] To write with a commitment to truth orients the soul toward what is right and good, and opens one's eyes to its influence. It's how and where meaning is found.

One of the difficulties of writing this way is the vulnerability it demands. To write honestly, to tell the truth as I see it, puts me in a position to show how little of that truth I may actually see. Those who know more than I do, if they lack a generous spirit, could very well make me look like an idiot by publicly advertising all the ways my writing is erroneous or incomplete. Then there are those who argue and critique just for the

[17] Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," in *The Republic of Plato*, ed. and trans. by Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 232, https://www.umasd.org/cms/lib/PA01000379/Centricity/Domain/518/Documents/allegory%20of%20the%20cave.pdf.

sake of contention, regardless of if they've put any real thought into the matter.

But if the "world can be validly construed as a forum for action," then to avoid action, such as the act of writing, simply for fear of the reactions of others is to forfeit any chance of doing anything meaningful.[18] It is worth any amount of criticism to increase my awareness of and engagement with the truth about reality, because that is where meaning is found: in cooperation with reality as a truth-seeking being. No amount of discouragement is worth giving up that pursuit.

The prospect of writing for public consumption is less daunting if one starts with a

[18] Jordan B. Peterson, "On Facts, values, rationality, and stories: Part III of Response to Harris," https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/philosophy/on-facts-values-rationality-and-stories.

healthy dose of humility. It is for me to take *truth* seriously, not myself. It's not a matter of if I make a mistake, but when. But mistakes made in pursuit of truth and meaning can barely be thought of as mistakes. They may be bumps in the road, but taking the road itself is worth it because deepening my understanding of the truth of a thing is better than arriving at accidental and transient correct answers. The thing to do is do the thing as best as I can, even if I'm not totally convinced I'm up to it. We "cannot define our tasks by our powers, for our powers become known to us through performing our tasks; it is better to fail nobly than to succeed basely."[19]

[19] Leo Strauss, quoted in Harry V. Jaffa, "The Legacy of Leo Strauss: A Review of Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy, by Leo Strauss," *Claremont Review of Books* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1984), https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/the-legacy-of-leo-strauss.

So, what if I hit a roadblock? If I have a goal of writing a thousand words or so, the purpose being critical thought and meaningful inquiry, what if at five hundred words I just have nothing left to write that's not meaningless fluff? I've found the best support for writing well is reading well. Reading other authors who have fundamental truth and highest good as their aim during the writing process puts me in dialogue with them, stimulating my own intuition. If, as in the EAC, attention activates and feeds understanding, then attending to great writers promotes great understanding and great writing. Through the process of induction, I assimilate a bit of the spirit of the author, which catalyzes my own creativity and critical thinking. It exercises the truth-seeking muscles of the soul.

Good writers also know when to stop writing.

WHY PURSUE TRUTH?

To pursue truth in the fullest sense is to recognize the critical role objective moral truth plays in every human experience. It is to simultaneously seek the highest kind of happiness.

The pursuit of truth is key to Chase Meaning's ultimate purpose, so it seems fitting to think through why that pursuit matters. Aristotle helpfully explains that to "say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true."[20] But to understand the importance of doing so requires a more nuanced discussion.

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[20] Michael Glanzberg, "Truth," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/truth/.

To have such a discussion we must make certain assumptions about the nature of reality. The most consequential of these is that an objective reality exists apart from our subjective and personal experience of it. The “everything is relative” approach might sound appealing, but it is unlivable. Consider that two people who look at the same thing or live through the same situation often experience that thing or situation in very different ways. But we also recognize that one perspective is usually more accurate than the other. From this we can deduce that our subjective and personal perception does not impose itself on reality, but the opposite. A single, unified, objective reality imposes itself on our senses. We, being limited in our ability to grasp that reality, only have access to our

perspective of that reality rather than the whole of it.

The goal in pursuing truth, then, is to align our perspective with the true nature of a thing as it exists on its own. Among those who genuinely work toward this goal there seems to be, for the most part, an overlap in our differing perspectives in which we agree. This is what we refer to in everyday speech as "common ground." If everything is relative then this common ground is nothing more than similarity in subjective experience. There is no reason to agree on anything at all except that agreeing on a particular point suits our preferences. But if objective reality exists then we are right to think that the overlap in our perspectives serves as a good point to conditionally agree that something

is true until we encounter sufficient evidence to the contrary.

Most of us agree, at least in practice, that an objective physical reality exists. But a survey of the history of human experience shows that the human race generally understands the physical world as only one aspect of a larger reality, including such realms as the moral, the social, and, according to many, the spiritual. We also agree with this in practice, if not in theory.

Regarding the moral realm, we know that there are certain acts that are objectively wrong, meaning we can imagine no scenario in which we would have grounds to approve of them. For example, to inflict unnecessary suffering on innocent people can only seem right to someone who has no sense of its inherent wrongness. The rest of us don't say that person is entitled to their

opinion on such matters. We say they are deeply wrong, mentally disturbed, and even evil.

We can offer explanations as to why this is the case and why there is a bedrock foundation to morality apart from our own opinions and preferences, but we cannot prove it to be true with mathematical certainty. We behave as if moral truth exists because there is no alternative if we are to act as rational beings and live meaningful human lives. We intuit the reality of objective and independent morality, even if we don't admit it.

So, it's not calculated intellectual analysis that feeds our moral intuition, but vice versa. "We don't search for ultimate meaning, for the truth of what's most important, because we have no knowledge of it—but because we don't

understand what we know."[21] Our innate sense that behaving a certain way is better or worse than another drives us to understand why. To pursue moral truth is to better attune our understanding to what is best and most meaningful about reality. It is to nurture to full flourishing our nascent and immature sense of the Good, or that which is good in and of itself. It is like learning the intricacies of music theory after hearing the music has already awoken our souls.

But the purpose of the pursuit of truth is not only to increase our understanding of morality and, consequently, of the Good. The ultimate purpose of this pursuit is moral happiness. The 18th century Scottish philosopher

[21] Segrest, *America*, 71.

Francis Hutcheson taught that human nature "indicates three possible paths to human happiness: (1) sensual pleasure, (2) the delights of the intellect and imagination, and (3) the delight in 'moral excellence' as revealed in the dictates of conscience." To Hutcheson and others who built upon his ideas, the third kind of happiness is the highest, most meaningful, and most enduring. Consequently "the way leading to the truest happiness is a life of contemplating and acting in accord with moral excellence."[22]

So, to pursue truth in the fullest sense is to recognize the critical role objective moral truth plays in every human experience. It is to simultaneously seek the highest kind of

[22] Ibid., 79.

happiness. And it is the endeavor most deserving of our attention.

TURNING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

One pitfall I hope to avoid in exploring ideas in pursuit of truth is for the ideas to get so theoretical that there is no application to practical living. The ability to do this is likely why the great moral teachers have such great staying power and relevance to non-academic audiences, especially in comparison to strictly theoretical philosophers. Morality can be practiced, tested, and explored daily, whereas theory can really only be discussed. But theory is not useless. It seeks to find cohesiveness and consistency in our practical ideas.

Thanks to our intuition, or common sense, the theoretical and practical need not be estranged. The intuitive dimension of reason is, among other things, the aspect of our mind that synthesizes the theoretical with the practical. It is the key to discovering the "why" behind the "what." In terms of the Engaged Awareness Cycle (EAC), awareness is to discover *that* something is. To attend is to discover *what* that thing is, and to understand is to discover *why* it is what it is.

One of the main purposes of the EAC is to facilitate the integration of theory and abstract ideas into action and behavior. This is a critical ability in fields such as diplomacy and foreign policy, where abstract ideas like human rights must be translated into action. It's also necessary for growing as human beings in that, as moral

agents, our souls only flourish in proportion to our alignment with that transcendent morality.

To illustrate, we'll take the idea of the Golden Rule, that we should treat others the way we want to be treated, and see how it may be integrated into our behavior over time. The first step is for this idea to enter our awareness or consciousness, which, for many of us, happens as early as childhood. But this idea can slip out of our awareness just as easily as it entered. We only lock it into our consciousness and prevent it from fleeing our minds by paying attention to it.

Attention is like a cognitive tractor beam that holds an idea in place so our intuition can go to work on it. It activates our inner, or common, sense to judge both the truth and the utility of the idea. It does this by comparing and contrasting the idea with our own experience and any

understanding gained so far. To assess the Golden Rule, we observe how it operates in the lives of others. Is it useful? Are the people who practice it those we want to be like? Do we want the results they get? Do we sense at a gut-level that this is the right way to live?

As we attend to the operation of the Golden Rule in the lives of others our intuition goes to work and we gain a sort of second-hand understanding. But we only gain deep, first person understanding when we attend to its operation in ourselves. A second-hand understanding prepares us to integrate the idea into our own behavior, which then allows us to observe its operation from the inside. This restarts the “Attend - Understand - Act” cycle on a deeper and more intimate level of the principle,

because we are able to observe the operation of the idea in our own minds and actions.

Seeing the operation of the Golden Rule, or any idea, from the inside makes the theoretical infinitely personal. Our own experience of the difficulty and rewards of treating others how we want to be treated plus our reflection upon that experience increases our sensitivity to the operation of that principle. In doing so we cultivate our intuition toward the Golden Rule and, in the process, find that it is not just a socially advantageous way to behave. We find that we are tapping into a primordial moral law that transcends cultural nuance.[23] As the Engaged Awareness Cycle repeats itself with the Golden Rule as its object, we immerse ourselves deeper

[23] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 35, https://archive.org/details/TheAbolitionOfMan_229/.

into this moral law and its effects on our day-to-day lives increase in proportion.

We can use the EAC in this way with just about any abstract moral idea or theory. As we cultivate our intuition we find some of these ideas affirmed by the moral law that is woven into the fabric of reality. We keep these and progress on the journey of moral happiness. We also find other ideas to be at odds with that moral law and should jettison from our thinking and behavior.

In either case, we interact with ideas in two ways. The first is to discover the truth or falsehood of it. The second is to incorporate the true ideas into our behavior. The Engaged Awareness Cycle is the way we do both.

TO HONESTLY KNOW AND DO

Our intuition, that built-in sense that feeds truth directly to our understanding, is not something we can actively control, but it is something we can cultivate, educate, and train in a particular direction. Intuition is that which is at the core of our minds that enables us to perceive the truth and integrate it into our reasoning and behavior. But one thing is required for intuition to be able to do its job correctly. That thing is honesty.

Our intuition will not override our will if we insist on believing something that is not true. We can silence the intuitive voice within us if we are committed to crafting our own narrative rather than allowing reality itself to reveal its secrets to us. This is why vices such as pride, vanity, and willful ignorance are so self-

destructive. They blind the "truth-seeing organ" that Socrates tells us is built-in to every person.[24]

But Socrates himself gives us an example of how we can take that blindfold off. He was considered the wisest man because he knew how much he didn't know.[25] He was honest and self-aware enough to know that in a universe as vast as ours and with lives as short as ours we are bound to know only a little of all there is to know. Humility is simply the recognition and acceptance of this fact.

At the same time, inaction is not an option when it comes to living a meaningful life. So we must also accept the fact that we will never know

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[24] Plato, "Allegory," 232.

[25] Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 1,* trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg002.perseus-eng1:21.

everything that is good for us to know even as we commit ourselves to the pursuit of truth. And we must not let the awareness of our limitations stop us from undertaking that pursuit.

This approach is built into the structure of the Engaged Awareness Cycle (EAC). It begins with laying aside our preconceptions and attending to the world as it presents itself to our senses (both external and internal). But it does not demand complete understanding before acting, only sufficient understanding. Deciding how much understanding is "sufficient" is more art than science. Every scenario, circumstance, and choice requires its own determination as to whether we understand enough to act.

Hippocrates' admonition "to do good or to do no harm" is a good place to start when deciding whether to act, and in some cases that

may be the best we can do before some action is demanded of us.[26] But we should strive to meet two additional criteria for our actions: that they be effective and meaningful. To be effective is a practical matter and is simply to ask, "Are my actions achieving the ends I set out to achieve in the first place?"

To act in a way that is meaningful, however, is a moral matter. It is, as far as possible, to align those actions with the moral law woven into the fabric of reality. It is to act in a manner that is truly, and not just apparently, good.

The action is not the end of the process, however. During and after the "act" phase,

[26] Robert H. Shmerling, "First, do no Harm," *Harvard Health Blog*, Harvard Medical School, 2020, https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/first-do-no-harm-201510138421.

attention must be paid to both the action itself and its effects. This takes us right back to the first phase of the EAC and restarts the cycle. The knowledge gained through understanding that action and its effects sets the conditions for even more effective and meaningful action moving forward.

But the EAC as a process only works if used in a spirit of honesty, humility, and self-awareness. To demand that reality, both external and internal to our own selves, be something other than what it is to both reject the truth and inhibit our own ability to influence anything within it. It is to set ourselves at odds with the natural order of things, which is always a losing battle. But to prioritize true understanding and right action over self-aggrandizement is to find belonging and value within that order.

THE SUBJECTIVE AND PARTICULAR

Even if I reject the premise that objective moral law exists, and that the highest kind of happiness depends on aligning my thoughts and actions with that law, I will inevitably assume such a state of things by my actions. For example, if I work hard and do an exceptionally good job I expect to be rewarded for it, whether in material compensation or praise. When my hard work goes unnoticed my emotions scream, "That's not fair!" But unless I assume a moral standard, there's no such thing as fairness.

There is a danger, however, in forgetting that there are at least two entities involved in moral activity: the first is the moral law itself, the second is me. My relationship to that law injects

a subjective element that is subservient to the objective, but it is not irrelevant. If I were a perfect being there would be no tension between the two but, since I am not, I must take that imperfection into account.

I see two factors at play in my subjective relationship to objective morality that profoundly affects that relationship: intent and ability. When I am most self-aware and honest with myself I recognize that I want very much to do what is right (i.e. in agreement with the moral law) but am often incapable of doing it well and consistently. This disparity between the two complicates how I make decisions, but it also gives me a goal to strive for: moral happiness, which increases in proportion to my ability to know and do what is right.

Further complicating matters, however, is the fact that in addition to general truths, which are true in all places and all times, there are particular circumstances that must be accounted for when deciding how to act. Successful navigation of these circumstances requires a mature moral intuition, which is cultivated through moral education. Certain actions must be confined to specific circumstances, and wisdom is the ability to match these in accordance with moral law. The dance between general truth and particular circumstances, or prudence, is the application of that wisdom.

Glenn Ellmers helpfully explains this dynamic:

> Prudence supplies the overarching purpose that allows a virtuous man to know how and when to exercise his moral habits. A courageous man, for example,

> is bold *when appropriate.* Yet it is not the habit of conquering fear, by itself, that supplies this understanding. Courage can be distinguished from recklessness, on the one hand, and timidity, on the other, only when some judgment or discernment is present.[27]

So, prudence depends on a deep understanding of general moral truths, coupled with the ability to attend to and understand one's particular circumstances. A good example of this is the use of violence. The great moral thinkers in the history of the West have generally agreed that violence should be avoided when possible, but there are circumstances when passivity is self-evidently and objectively wrong. Depending on my temperament, I may be more inclined to either use force when inappropriate or fail to act

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[27] Glenn Ellmers, *The Soul of Politics: Harry V. Jaffa and the Fight for America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2021), 93, Nook.

when violent action is right and proper. But my subjective feelings do not determine its appropriateness.

It matters what the truth is, and it also matters how I think and feel about that truth. However, I become ineffective and self-defeating when I place more emphasis on what I think or feel about reality than discovering what it truly is. If I avoid knowing the truth about reality then I can never cooperate with it, which is utterly self-defeating. But just knowing general moral truths is not enough either, at least in practice. I must be able to hold the moral law in one hand and the particularities of my circumstances in the other and act in such a way that satisfies them both.

CHASE MEANING

Prioritization is a difficult task. It is easy to chase what is meaningful when external pressures drive us in that direction. It is much more difficult when our intuition, the (imperfect but reliable) meaning-finder, pulls us in a direction that those external influences regard as unimportant at best. The purpose of prioritization, then, is to determine how best to pursue what is meaningful while simultaneously managing our other personal and professional responsibilities.

Most of us experience this tension on a regular basis. Not everyone finds meaning in what they do for a living, and those that do don't have that sense of meaning all of the time. So how do I bridge that gap? There are a few questions that I can ask to help this process.

Have I identified, generally and/or specifically, what I find meaningful?

The best part of a good childhood is the opportunity to explore different activities. Trying new things helps us to home in on what we are wired to enjoy doing. I played a few different sports in grade school, but as far as hobbies go I didn't feel really fulfilled until I picked up a guitar and started playing in a band. When I did I immediately sensed that I had found an activity that meant something to me on a soul-level. To this day sports are fun, but music is essential.

This process of meaning-seeking never ends, but it never even begins if we don't allow our intuition to work by trying new things and having new experiences. Much, if not most, of those experiences will not yield the sense of

meaning we seek. Some, however, will present themselves to our internal sense so vividly that we can't help but recognize our affinity for them.

What opportunities am I missing?

Understanding comes from paying attention, and we can only attend to that which we are aware of. We don't know what we don't know, and we will always miss out on opportunities if we are too proud to ask for help. But if living meaningfully is more important than appearing totally in control then humility is a small price to pay for fulfillment.

How can I infuse what I find meaningful into my daily work?

There may be an overlap between what is expected of us and what we find meaningful that,

if found, enables us to do both. For example, mathematics and philosophy seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of what one may find interesting. However, there is such a thing as philosophy of mathematics.

Other Considerations

The pursuit of meaning requires endurance. Unfortunately, not everyone views meaning as the most important thing in life. They mistake success or pleasure for meaning and expect everyone else to do the same. Strong focus and a community of fellow meaning-chasers are critical to staying true to our ultimate goal.

As we chase meaning, we must remember that we cannot divorce a sense of meaning from the moral law undergirding creation. Meaning and the moral law go hand in hand. In fact, moral

principles may best be understood as guides to finding true meaning and exposing illusions that masquerade as meaning. A thief may find utility or momentary exhilaration in the act of stealing, but it is a hollow victory. The craftsman does that which is truly meaningful by engaging in the creative process and improving his world.

That is not to say every act is inherently wrong or right, but it is to say that every act is nested within a moral framework from which it cannot be extracted. Even if the act is morally neutral it is only so because there is true right and wrong to judge it by. A truly meaningful pursuit may be neutral and is usually good, but it can never be evil. If a pursuit is evil any meaning found therein is illusory. The moral law supports and sustains only that meaning aligned to itself.

THE LONG GAME

Short and mid-range goals are necessary, but they mean little without some conception of a meaningful end in view. There is no permanence in tasks accomplished in a vacuum. Short-term success, if not translated into long-term purpose, ends up as only a fond memory.

Like everything else in the human experience, ground-zero for determining what this means practically is to first consider the moral context. The moral law is where long-term meaning lies hidden just beneath the surface of our day-to-day experience. It pops up frequently at the edges of our consciousness, inviting us to attend to and understand it. Our intuitive minds are equipped and disposed to judge whether an act or goal aligns with the moral law or not. In

alignment there is permanent meaning. In misalignment, all is temporary.

We know when we are failing to identify or move toward an enduring purpose because our intuition, if we don't silence or abuse it through misdirection, cues us into the fact that we are not being and doing all we ought to. It produces a sense of meaninglessness and apathy that makes us feel as if nothing matters, ourselves included. This failure to act is different than failing *in* the act. When we try and fail, as long as our long term purpose is sufficiently noble and grounded in permanent moral realities, we are able to adjust and try again from a different angle. Failure to act, however, is a slow suicide of the soul. It is to surrender one's agency and settle for sub-humanity.

Moving toward such a purpose need not necessarily involve a physical or tangible act. Much of the time, and often most powerfully, action toward a meaningful end happens at the cognitive and soul levels. In fact, all behavior is driven by attention and understanding, as is illustrated in the Engaged Awareness Cycle (EAC).

Because behavior is driven by understanding, the best way to find long term purpose, I think, is to pay attention to those men and women who seem to have found theirs. I propose that no one has lived a truly meaningful life without modeling aspects of it after someone else's, whether those models were living or historical. This is because our intuition, that by which we understand, requires experiential material to work with.

Intuition perceives and evaluates, but does not create. Meaning is grounded in the moral law, and we cannot produce morality, only discover it. Consequently, we cannot create true meaning, but we can find it.

Enduring meaning is found at the intersection of this moral law and what we individually have to offer to the world. Talent and passion are much like money and power in this regard. We possess them to varying degrees, but the degree is only secondary. The most important part is whether or not that talent, passion, money, and power is used in accordance with the Good.

That is why the moral aspect of any endeavor requires attention and understanding. Only with understanding of both general moral principles and their particular applications to our

specific circumstances can we direct our efforts and resources to a meaningful end as nested in the moral framework of reality. And only by paying attention to both people and ideas can we gain that understanding.

For many of us, the most difficult part of this process is slowing down enough to allow ourselves to achieve sufficient understanding before taking definitive action. In a culture that defines success by how much is tangibly accomplished rather than the ends to which those accomplishments are directed, to live so deliberately is to travel against the social current. But societies rise and fall. The moral law endures.

LIES MAKE YOU FRAGILE

To speak or write is to convey our perception and understanding of the nature of reality. Even the author of fiction imposes an imaginative moral landscape on his characters which is representative of his own understanding of human nature (even though the characters themselves may not be human). A quick comparison of two works of fantasy illustrates this point well enough.

The Lord of the Rings, written by J. R. R. Tolkien, is not allegorical, but it is saturated with Tolkien's Roman Catholic morality. Objective good and real evil, nobility, chastity, virtue, humility, and fighting for the right things simply because they are right pervade his stories, but are not his own inventions. The characters he creates

live out realities that are prior to, but adopted by, his own imagination.

Conversely, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series presents a Machiavellian view of human nature in which the lines between good and evil are blurred. Both Tolkien and Martin write in the fantasy genre and both place their characters within a moral framework. The difference is in the framework itself. In each of these instances, the characters are implicitly judged according to each author's morality, which they impose on their characters.

One of the advantages of fiction is it relieves the author of the burden of factual accuracy, giving him free reign to illustrate how his character navigates the moral landscape, which his judgement imposes as he crafts the story. In our everyday lives, this is not the case.

We navigate life by articulating what we perceive as true day-to-day. Unlike these writers of fiction, who impose their moral framework on their story, in real life the moral law imposes itself on us. Though we can rebel against it, we can't escape it. Nor would we ever want to if we truly understood it.

The more we speak and write in accordance with how we truly believe things are and what the moral law demands of us, the more reliable we are seen to be. We still get things wrong from time to time, but a mistake acknowledged as such is fixable. The more we calibrate our intuition toward truth, the more closely aligned with the moral law we become. What is true, what is real, is the only firm foundation from which to act in the world. Even

characters in a fictional setting must be grounded in a moral framework to have a story at all.

This further guides our actions in that, if we commit to speaking only the truth as we understand it, we will be more careful not to do those things that we (if we live in a healthy society) would feel inclined to lie about. The habit of honesty breeds behavior of integrity. It cultivates self-accountability. Conversely, a proclivity to lie betrays an underlying inclination to do things that demand to be lied about.

For these reasons, among others, lies make us fragile. When we believe them, we detach ourselves from the firm foundation of reality. When we speak them, we set ourselves up to be proven unreliable. But truth, and the pursuit of it, proves a reliable foundation and makes us reliable in turn. Contrary to some of the fictions

we tell ourselves, that is the moral framework in which we actually operate.

REALISTIC GRATITUDE

Growing up, I never liked the idea of gratitude. That seems like a very odd thing to dislike, but the reason was fairly simple. I, for some reason, equated the idea of gratitude with being fake. I thought that to be truly grateful you had to pretend that nothing is wrong, embrace insincerity, and praise people for more than they actually deserve.

This approach, not grounded in reality, is built on lies and therefore unappealing. But it is not true gratitude. True gratitude is a realistic assessment of what people have done to have a positive impact on you, especially when they

could have done otherwise. This is hard to do when you are young because you take more for granted. For example, I grew up in a two-parent house with a present mother and father who never failed to put food on the table, clothes on my back, and true ideas in my head. It is only with the perspective that comes with time and seeing how many others grew up not having those things that I realize how truly fortunate I have been. There is nothing fake about this kind of gratitude. It is a fact that others sacrificed for my good, and the gratitude I have for them is grounded in that reality.

John Witherspoon, signer of the American Declaration of Independence, president of Princeton, and common sense philosopher, describes gratitude in his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* as a component of love,

which "is founded on esteem, on the real or supposed good qualities of the object."[28] Love, according to Witherspoon, cannot be fabricated. It is generated by the characteristics of the thing or person that is loved.

For Witherspoon, to be grateful is "to have a lively sense of favors received, and to esteem them for the sake of the person from whom they came."[29] For him, there are two parts to gratitude: the favor or act itself and the person doing it. In his framing of the matter the favor serves as an opportunity to appreciate the person in and of him or herself, not just for the favor given. The favor is the catalyst for this recognition.

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[28] John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, ed. Varnum Lansing Collins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1912), 48, https://archive.org/details/lecturesonmoralp00withrich.

[29] Ibid.

Witherspoon also points out that "every man who has bestowed signal favors upon another, expects to see evidence of a grateful and sensible mind, and severely condemns every sentiment or action that indicates a contrary disposition."[30] In other words, while there are no grounds for expecting gratitude in the absence of an act that warrants it, the person who does something for someone else is right to expect gratitude in return. As with the person receiving the favor, the one giving it is not unrealistic in his or her expectations. This reciprocation, however, depends on the recipient possessing a "sensible mind."

Elsewhere, the common sense philosophers (Witherspoon included) describe

[30] Ibid., 50.

the moral fabric of reality as something that may be sensed by human beings through what they variously refer to as common sense, judgement, intuition, and simply the moral sense. Within that moral framework, when one person does a favor for another the moral law is triggered and demands satisfaction. It is not not that gratitude is the nice or socially acceptable response to favors bestowed. It *really is* the good and just response, given the moral order of the universe we inhabit.

Witherspoon sees gratitude as a human right, but an imperfect one. Unlike perfect rights, such as the right to self-preservation, "Imperfect rights are such as we may demand, and others ought to give us, yet we have no title to compel

them."[31] Since imperfect rights are those "you ought not to use force to obtain in a state of natural liberty," then "human laws in a well constituted state will not give [them to] you."[32] In other words, gratitude is an obligation in which the first and final arbiter is the moral law itself. Consequently, it is not enforceable through any man-made law and it cannot be coerced, either by the state or individuals.

What, then, is the point of showing gratitude if it is unenforceable and we suffer no loss of life, liberty, or property in refusing to do so? To answer this we must look to Witherspoon's understanding of human nature and the three classes of gratification or pleasure.

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[31] Ibid., 55.

[32] Ibid., 70.

The first and lowest, although not inherently wrong, is the "gratification of the external senses," which "affords some pleasure."[33] The second "are the finer powers of perception," which include "[p]oetry, painting, music…and the exercise of mental powers in general."[34]

Gratitude falls into the third class of human gratification. "Superior" to the first two classes, the third "is a sense of moral excellence, and a pleasure arising from doing what is dictated by the moral sense." Of the three classes, this third one is "the most *noble, pure* and *durable*" and consequently "is to be preferred before all other sources of pleasure."[35] Gratitude, therefore, is not simply a social expedient, and it is far from

[33] Ibid., 19.

[34] Ibid., 20.

[35] Ibid.

irrelevant just because it is unenforceable through man-made law. On the contrary, to be grateful is to embrace the highest class of human happiness.

However, even more foundational for Witherspoon than this observation regarding gratification is the fact that the "moral sense implies also a sense of obligation, that such and such things are right and others wrong." To show real gratitude for real acts of kindness is not just to participate in the noblest, purest, and most durable form of happiness. It is to recognize "that we are bound in duty" to respond to our moral sense.[36] Gratitude, and morality in general, is not just a matter of happiness. It is a matter of meaningfulness. Meaning is found in thinking,

[36] Ibid., 21.

doing, and being that which is truly right and good. A grateful society pursues this kind of meaning above all else.

SPLINTERS OF THE CONSCIENCE

Just as removing a physical splinter brings instant relief and a sense of contentedness, removing a splinter of the conscience is accompanied by the sense of a burden being cast aside. To recognize our error, make amends, and forgive ourselves is to release ourselves to actively pursue meaning once again. The conscience is allowed back in the driver's seat.

Splinters are small by nature, but they absorb our whole attention when we get one. A tiny piece of debris stuck in your skin automatically pulls cognitive resources from

everything else to that single problem. If that splinter is in your eye, the demand for your attention increases exponentially. Unless you address the problem by extracting the splinter it will inhibit your ability to meaningfully engage with everything else going on around you.

Splinters are not only physical. There are such things as splinters of the conscience. Conscience is the aspect of our understanding that concerns itself with moral realities. It constantly guides and guards us,[37] preparing us to discern "between good and evil,"[38] and helping us to navigate the most meaningful aspects of our lives.

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[37] James McCosh, *First and Fundamental Truths: Being a Treatise on Metaphysics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), 336, https://archive.org/details/firstfundamental00mcco.

[38] Ibid., 164.

Conscience "is not only a cognitive, it is a motive, power,"[39] meaning that "when our moral convictions say that a particular line of conduct should be pursued" we feel "not only that we may do it, but that we should do it."[40] We are often tempted to treat this sense of obligation as a roadblock to our pursuit of pleasure and fulfillment. But this moral sense is in fact a guide that drives us toward the deepest and most significant kinds of these. Conscience teaches us to avoid cheap imitations of meaningfulness, prompting us toward a way of living that provides the greatest degree of soul-level satisfaction.

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[39] Ibid., 221.

[40] Ibid., 222.

Splinters of the conscience are habits, behaviors, and attitudes that seem insignificant but limit our ability to attend to, understand, and act in accordance with reality, especially the moral realm upon which all other aspects of reality depend. Like a splinter in the eye, these splinters of the conscience blur our vision and inhibit the meaning-finding function of our understanding. And since conscience is a motive power, splinters of the conscience hinder our progress by disconnecting us from our sense of obligation, which is the engine of meaningful progress and productivity.

The renowned psychologist and pragmatic philosopher William James places conscience "at the core of our innermost self."[41]

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[41] Segrest, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense*, 13.

James McCosh, a brilliant common sense philosopher and predecessor to William James, declares the conscience to be supreme ”among the other moving powers” of the mind.[42] If these great thinkers are correct, and they almost certainly are, then splinters of the conscience affect our very personhood. In disrupting our connection to that which is meaningful, these splinters dehumanize us and rob us of that which separates us from the animals.

We see this truth vividly represented in the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), steps four through ten of which focus exclusively on identifying and removing splinters of the conscience. The founders of A.A. write of their journey to sobriety that “liquor was

[42] McCosh, *First and Fundamental Truths*, 222.

but a symptom," and the real causes of their prodigious alcohol consumption were "the things in ourselves which had been blocking us."[43] Their physical sickness was caused, or at least aggravated, by a disruption of conscience. They recognized that their only hope was to renew and strengthen that connection with conscience and, in doing so, open themselves up to the "sunlight of the Spirit."[44] When "the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically."[45]

These A.A. pioneers discovered the truth of what they wrote through experience and introspection, which is how we identify all other

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[43] Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, *Alcoholics Anonymous,* 4th ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001) 64, https://www.aa.org/the-big-book

[44] Ibid., 66.

[45] Ibid., 64.

splinters of the conscience as well. Just as our own bodies tell us where the problem is, our consciences cannot rest until the splinter is removed. A restless mind is a good indicator of a disturbed conscience. The alcoholic tries to distract his moral sense through drink, but substituting food, entertainment, sex, popularity, etc. for a clean and active conscience are each just as futile and, potentially, destructive.

Just as removing a physical splinter brings instant relief and a sense of contentedness, removing a splinter of the conscience is accompanied by the sense of a burden being cast aside. To recognize our error, make amends, and forgive ourselves is to release ourselves to actively pursue meaning once again. The conscience is allowed back in the driver's seat.

But there is no room for laxity once a splinter of the conscience is removed. People are not stagnant beings. If we are not actively moving toward the good we will be pulled away from it. Conscience, if given its rightful place as ruler of our conduct, does not ensure perfection, but it does guarantee progress. When conscience is king, meaning is not far away.

To Understand Is to Become

I try to write in the spirit of exploration and discovery, not dogmatic finality. As I explained previously, to write is to focus my attention on a particular subject to see what that subject reveals about itself. My perception of the subject may, and likely will, be flawed to some extent, but even a roundabout route takes one closer to his

destination than not traveling at all, as long as the general direction is correct.

In this case the subject is Understanding. To understand meaningfully and sufficiently is the second step in the Engaged Awareness Cycle (EAC), but it is first in priority. Within the flow of the EAC, we pay attention for the sake of understanding. We act because understanding drives us to such action. Those many elements that occupy our awareness only interest us inasmuch as we suppose that they are worth understanding and, perhaps, interacting with.

In our age, the word "understanding" seems to refer exclusively to those neurological processes which enable humans to navigate the material world. I "understand" that fire burns, therefore I am careful not to touch it. And while

this understanding of "understanding" is accurate, it seems insufficient.

There is an aspect to understanding that eludes scientific analysis. It is easy to see why understanding the destructive nature of fire makes sense from an evolutionary biological point of view in that it directly contributes to the survival of our species. But how many of us, staring into the dancing flames of a campfire as we warm ourselves on a crisp autumn night, can't help but feel the tug of the numinous, somehow understanding that there is something more taking place than chemical reactions?

To use another example, the fact that certain musical chord progressions evoke specific deep-seated and predictable emotions in us shows that we understand at a soul-level something that can't be fully expressed in

scientific terms, nor can it be explained in a materialist paradigm.

The use of the word "soul" is problematic for those who look to science to provide answers to philosophical questions. Because "even modern science admits it has difficulties explaining consciousness—the residue of the soul in beings that think," it is easier for committed materialists to sidestep the issue entirely.[46]

But, whether he admits it or not, even the skeptic can't help but acknowledge upon honest introspection, "The mirth is not in the merry peal, nor the melancholy in the funereal toll of the bell; nor is the music in the flute or organ, but in the

[46] Glenn Ellmers, "Soul, Man," *Claremont Review of Books* 19, No. 1 (Winter 2019): 91, https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/soul-man.

soul which breathes and beats and rings in harmony with the external movements."[47] He must concede that the soul "has principles at once deeper and higher than sense, and the faculty which compounds and compares the material supplied by sense."[48]

While this discussion doesn't focus on the nature of the soul per se, it is an important component because, as some reliable and grounded philosophers have asserted, the understanding is a "capacity" or "faculty" of the soul. Some said there were two of these: the understanding and the will. Others, such as John Witherspoon, added a third: the affections, such as pleasure or pain.[49] But regardless of the others

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[47] McCosh, *First and Fundamental Truths*, 299.

[48] Ibid., 286.

[49] Russell D. Kosits, "Of Faculties, Fallacies, and Freedom: Dilemma and Irony in the Secularization of American Psychology,"

involved, the understanding at least was always viewed as an activity of the soul.

To reduce understanding to chemical reactions in the gray matter of one's skull is as superficial as reducing music to simple sound waves with complete disregard to its effect on the listener. Something is happening that gives music its transcendent quality that cannot be measured scientifically. Likewise, something is happening when one understands that goes beyond neurological response to physical stimuli.

So, assuming that understanding is a capacity of the soul, then to understand is to engage the soul in a process of development. We cannot understand something deeply and consistently without that understanding affecting

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History of Psychology 7, No. 4: 346, https://doi.org/10.1037/1093-4510.7.4.340.

who we are at the deepest level. Granted, understanding that fire burns doesn't seem to be the kind of realization that changes lives. But a deep understanding of the destruction that fire is capable of, combined with the will (also a capacity of the soul) to do something about it, gives many a firefighter a meaningful way to do good for his or her community.

To understand meaningfully is both to comprehend a thing, at least to some extent, and its relationship to the one who understands. I can know all there is to know about a certain bus schedule but it means nothing to me unless I or someone I care to help needs to use it. In this sense, meaningful understanding is a dialogue between the subject and the object, as well as a comprehension of the relationship between the two.

Take, for example, the sentence, “There is a dog.” I may know much or nothing at all about the dog’s breed or history. But what matters much more than that is whether or not it is *my* dog. My relationship to it determines whether I am responsible for it and how dangerous it may be to me. In such a case, understanding the relationship matters as much or more than understanding the thing itself.

Now for the sentence, “There is a God,” which 87% of Americans affirmed according to a 2017 Gallup poll.[50] Like the dog, my relationship to God matters, but in this case understanding what “God” means is even more critical to comprehending my relationship to him.

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[50] Lydia Saad and Zach Hrynowski, "How Many Americans Believe in God?" *Gallup*, June 24, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/268205/americans-believe-god.aspx.

This is because that which is greater sets the terms of the relationship. The dog, by nature of being a dog, is lesser than I. God, by nature of his divinity, is greater. As a human, I may own a dog. I can never own a God. If I could, he wouldn't be God.

The point is that the object plays a major part in determining our relationship with it just by virtue of what it is. Between the dog and I, I am the greater being so I have much more of a role in determining, rather than simply understanding, my relationship to it. But in my relationship to God, he is the greater so he sets the terms except inasmuch as he limits himself and empowers me. As a result, understanding God is infinitely more consequential to the state of my soul than understanding the dog.

In this sense, to understand that which is greater than myself is to become greater than I was before. The more I understand God, limited though that understanding may be, the more my soul postures itself appropriately before him. I shed my pride as I understand his sovereignty. I grow in resilience as I understand his goodness in spite of the inevitable suffering I encounter. I become more responsible as I understand just how great and terrible a mission he has entrusted to mankind and the particular role I have to play. I become more reliant as I understand how fragile and error-prone I am, making his goodness and forgiveness that much more relevant to me.

So, if to understand is to become, and if paying attention frees our understanding to go to work on the object of our attention, then what we pay attention to deliberately and consistently

determines who we end up being. And if that is the case, then the pursuit of truth is much more than the accumulation of facts. It is soulcraft at its most fundamental level.

Observing Memorial Day

One "great and apparent distinction between man and the inferior animals" is memory.[51] In animals, there seems to be a basic ability to recognize familiarity and act accordingly through instinct, but only humans can capture past events accurately enough to relive stories about our past. Our ability to do this informs how we comprehend reality. It allows us to understand the present and future based on what we know about the past.

[51] Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 7.

However, according to John Witherspoon, even memory cannot provide all that is necessary to extract meaning from the past. To do that requires judgment, our intuitive perception of what is meaningful about things and events. He asserts, "A man of memory, without judgment, is a fool." But when judgment is applied to memory it acquires "luster" and commands "universal esteem."[52]

Memorial Day is the perfect illustration of this phenomenon. We intuitively perceive that there is something good, noble, and honorable about sacrificing oneself for the protection and preservation of others. We know that in doing so

[52] John Witherspoon, *The Works of John Witherspoon: Containing Essays, Sermons, &c., on Important Subjects...Together with His Lectures on Moral Philosophy Eloquence and Divinity, his Speeches in the American Congress, and Many Other Valuable Pieces, Never Before Published in This Country, Vol. IX* ([Edinburgh], 1815), 260, https://archive.org/details/worksofjohnwithe09with.

we are not necessarily saying that the war or conflict itself was just. Many believe that the wars these men and women died in were misguided or, in some cases, immoral. There are even some who believe that taking up arms in any capacity is wrong. But very few believe that this makes the sacrifice of individual servicemembers any less honorable.

I believe this is because we perceive through our moral sense that self-sacrifice for another is the highest of human acts. It is the one human act that defies explanation within a utilitarian, relative, or social constructivist view of morality. It may be argued that a willingness to give one's life for another is driven by the belief that they will be rewarded in the afterlife, and is therefore still a selfish act. But I have known soldiers who did not believe in an afterlife

and were still willing to give their lives in the service of their country. That being the case, only one of two things may be true: either they believed there was an afterlife despite their stated denial of that belief, or they perceived that what they were doing was worthy of self-sacrifice in and of itself.

Memorial Day when properly observed is about remembering individuals who have made the ultimate sacrifice simply because they deserve to be remembered. But it is also about fostering in ourselves the courage to emulate that self-sacrifice. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates suggests “the value to society at large of noble storytelling” is that in “capturing the popular imagination” it “inspires people to noble

lives."[53] Memorial Day is an exercise in this kind of storytelling. This "study of human excellence, then, helps us develop our own inner capacities and thus construct the best possible self."[54]

So, to truly observe Memorial Day the right way is to "give ourselves over to visions of excellence and of inner meaning until they drive us to action, and we must persist in exploring such visions and acting on them until personal virtue and justice toward others become ingrained habit."[55] The purpose of the holiday is to not only remember those who sacrificed but also to understand those acts of sacrifice and ourselves in relation to them. Then we discover

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[53] Segrest, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense*, 198.

[54] Ibid., 199.

[55] Ibid.

how we may absorb their lessons and grow into a higher state of moral excellence. In this way, we truly honor their sacrifice, both as individuals and as a society.

The key is in understanding not only what they did or the circumstances in which they did them, but also why those sacrifices were worth making. Whether we tell the stories on a national scale, focusing on the protection and preservation of the nation and its interests, or on a personal level, such as sacrificing to save fellow servicemember, every story is full of moral truth and meaning. To make the most of their sacrifice is to learn the lessons they have to teach us through their actions.

Rhetorical v. Tangible Good

We live in an age where the reigning presumption is that morality is based on how strongly one feels about a given issue at a given time and that simply feeling a certain way makes one a good person. Emotionalism drives modern ethical discourse. Goodness depends not on reality, but on our own subjective feelings. Since emotions are fleeting, unreliable, and often wrong, so is any approach to morality based on them. And since the degree to which we find enduring meaning in life is directly related to how well and faithfully we serve what is truly good, we find little of that kind of meaning in feelings-based morality.

Consider the outrage against the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in September 2021. The

world watched in horror as women were again subjugated to treatment that violated their dignity as human beings. Citizens of Western countries voiced their opposition on social media. Then some months passed and few seemed to care anymore.

We see something similar playing out now with Ukraine. At the start of the conflict, pro-Ukrainian sentiment swept the Western world as social media users changed their profile pictures to blue-and-yellow flags. But even now interest in the conflict is waning.

But there are some for whom Afghanistan and Ukraine are not dead issues. These are people who continue to provide real aid to real Afghans and Ukrainians. Their commitment is not based on popular sentiment or even their own feelings. They see the value in taking action on behalf of

those who can't help themselves, regardless of how many Twitter followers they pick up along the way. They don't just signal their support and then move on to the next popular issue. They don't stop at registering their feelings on social media. They act. They give of their time, energy, and resources, often at considerable risk to their personal safety. Their goodness is tangible, not rhetorical.

Those who serve the Good, rather than just talk about what feels good, do so by improving the lives of individual people, flesh-and-blood human beings. Such actions are necessarily particular, even though they align with a universal moral law. The principle may be general, but the good being done is for a specific person or people.

For example, one may post, write, and talk about how terrible the sexual exploitation of children is and how someone should do something about it. This is simply to acknowledge an objective universal moral truth, which is good as far as it goes but it doesn't really help anyone.

But if that same person gives his time, energy, or resources to an organization like Operation Underground Railroad (O.U.R.) he does real good for real children in harm's way. Since 2013, O.U.R. has taken tangible action to rescue thousands of survivors from sexual exploitation by working with host-nation governments, providing aftercare for survivors, and equipping law enforcement agencies with the tools to effectively address the problem. They don't just talk about what feels morally superior.

They do real good for real people, one child at a time.[56]

John Witherspoon explains that "to make the good of the whole our immediate principle of action, is putting ourselves in God's place, and actually superseding the necessity and use of the particular principles of duty which he hath impressed upon the conscience."[57] To set out to save the world is to affect nothing because none of us are capable of it. Such an approach leads to inaction and wasted breath.

But to do real good for real people as we are able, to take seriously our particular duties, and to prioritize specific actions over general statements of support is to truly serve the Good.

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[56] https://www.ourrescue.org.

[57] Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 29.

This approach leads not to just a brief emotional high, but a deep sense of the enduring meaningfulness of our actions.

Duty, Conscience, and 1776

"Duty" is a word that, for many, elicits feelings of obligation and restriction. It conjures images of joyless servitude and seems to threaten individuality. But duty in its purest sense not only provides direction and purpose. It also unlocks our potential to live meaningfully and to express our individuality and humanity to the fullest.

This truest and highest kind of duty is grounded not in societal expectations or man-made systems, but in "the nature of man. That is to say, if we can discover how his Maker formed him, or for what he intended him, that certainly

is what it ought to be."[58] This kind of duty springs directly from the soul of man. It is in discovering and pursuing the purposes for which we were created that we fully embrace what it means to be human and, in so doing, fulfill our highest duty.

To do one's duty is both the most meaningful way to live and the most gratifying, even though it often involves self-sacrifice, discomfort, and even suffering. John Witherspoon notices that "the beauty and sweetness of virtuous action arises" from the fact "that it is a compliance with duty…" He asks, "Why is it more pleasant to do a just or charitable action than to satisfy my palate with delightful meat, or to walk in a beautiful garden, or read an exquisite poem? only because I feel myself under

[58] Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 4.

an obligation to do it, as a thing useful and important in itself. It is not duty because pleasing, but pleasing because duty."[59]

Duty that springs from the soul does not only define our relationship to our Creator and other people but also ourselves. James McCosh, an intellectual and institutional successor to Witherspoon, explains, "Self-cultivation is a special duty. So far as God allows, we are to improve every faculty which God has given. If there be any special gift which He has bestowed--say of philosophy, or poetry, or science; of business, or calculation, or discovery in travelling--we must reckon that as a call on the

[59] Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 21-2.

part of God specially to engage in it" (pg. 49-50).[60]

This sense of duty drove the Continental Congress in 1776 to declare independence from the British. They did not do so frivolously or out of purely utilitarian self-interest. They did it because they felt they were unable to simultaneously maintain their allegiance to the crown and discharge their higher soul-level duty to themselves, their neighbors, and their Creator.

In the preceding years, they made a considerate effort to resolve the issue by peaceful means, but the British government backed them into a corner. They were left with only two

[60] James McCosh, *Our Moral Nature: Being a Brief System of Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), 49-50, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/590be125ff7c502a07752a5b/t/61e60fc8228da66cae108160/1642467276459/McCosh%2C+James%2C+Our+Moral+Nature.pdf.

options. They could surrender their freedom to pursue their higher duty and, in doing so, settle for a less meaningful existence. Or they could fight for the freedom to follow the dictates of conscience, both as a nation and as individuals.

They saw the latter choice as not only undesirable but also objectively wrong. For individuals to be truly free to pursue their duty they required security of life, liberty, and property (including intellectual and intangible property, such as ideas and convictions). The crown not only failed to secure these, but it was actively constraining them. The Americans decided they had no choice but to secure these rights themselves.

John Witherspoon was one of these men. He was a delegate and signer of the Declaration of Independence. He was also indicative of and

influential on the thinking of the leading men of his generation. His political involvement came after his work as a clergyman and president of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton. In these roles, he educated ministers, statesmen, and commanders of American forces.[61]

Witherspoon's view of duty as the highest and most gratifying of callings was shared by his contemporaries, as may be seen in the document itself. The Congress affirmed that when a government threatens the freedom of a people to discharge their higher duty and "evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to

[61] "1776: Witherspoon, Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men (Sermon)," Online Library of Liberty, accessed June 30, 2022, https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/1776-witherspoon-dominion-of-providence-over-the-passions-of-men-sermon.

throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."[62]

These men were motivated by what McCosh refers to as "supreme among the other moving powers": conscience.[63] Witherspoon defines it as "the law which our Maker has written upon our hearts, and both intimates and enforces duty, previous to all reasoning."[64] It is hardwired into the soul of every person and it moves us to fulfill our highest calling.

But the fact that we come pre-packaged with a conscience is no license for moral and intellectual laziness. Witherspoon advises us to "take the rule of duty from conscience

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[62] U.S., 1776, accessed April 26, 2021, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.

[63] McCosh, *First and Fundamental Truths*, 222.

[64] Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 18.

enlightened by reason, experience, and every way by which we can be supposed to learn the will of our Maker, and his intention in creating us such as we are."[65] The men of 1776 were not only interested in intuiting what was good but in learning through reason and experience to better understand and do what they were created for. This led to heated debates and sharp disagreements in the years that followed but, generally speaking, protecting the freedom of individuals to do their duty as best they understood it was the reason behind the actions they took and the policies they instituted.

As we take the time to appreciate the legacy these men left to us, we should remember that the best thing we can do for our country, that

[65] Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 30.

which is "productive of the greatest good,"[66] is to discover, understand, and pursue the highest of duties, manifested in the nature of man and his created purpose, driven and guided by conscience, and informed by reason and experience. That is our inheritance from the heroes of 1776 and why they signed that document on the 4th of July. It is an example worth emulating.

Self-Cultivation

Depending on one's perspective, the term "self-improvement" either holds the promise of growing beyond the mistakes of the past or it is an unrealistic aspiration to be better than we actually are. I think most of the time we find

[66] Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 30.

ourselves somewhere in the middle. We aspire to be a better version of ourselves than we were the day before but we find ourselves making many of the same mistakes.

Instead of "self-improvement," some moral philosophers use the term "self-cultivation."[67] There's nothing wrong with the former term, but the latter seems to be a better fit for the human condition. Consider the cultivation of a plant. To do so requires the gardener to identify what the plant is and what it needs to develop into its full flowering. There is nothing forced or artificial about it, as can sometimes be the connotation given when using the word "improve."

[67] McCosh, *Our Moral Nature*, 49.

Rather, the successful gardener learns how to cooperate with the laws of nature to help the plant become most fully itself. This fully-developed state is already woven into the cellular structure of the seedling before it is even planted in the soil. The role of the gardener is not to force growth, but to unlock and facilitate it.

Like the plant, the blueprint for what humans are meant to be is written into their souls from the earliest stages of personhood. Even before a mother hears her baby's first cries on the day of birth, that baby already has a destiny and a purpose: to understand what is good, do it, and take pleasure in doing it.

Like the plant, the baby doesn’t need to be forced to grow. What he or she needs is to experience the right set of conditions for the body

and soul to realize their potential for truth, beauty, and goodness.

Like the plant in the garden, we don't force ourselves to improve. But what we can do is set the conditions for growth. Anyone who's made an effort to get into better physical shape knows the hardest part is A) understanding what the right program is for you, and B) just getting to the gym. Once you've got those, momentum is on your side.

Just as a plant must be pruned as well as nourished, so do our souls. We are not perfect beings, and much of our growth comes from clearing out obstacles to development. So self-cultivation consists of two major parts: an infusion of what is good along with a cleaning out of what is not.

What is interesting is how often these two go hand-in-hand. We do not usually succeed in removing something bad without replacing it with what is good. Or maybe it's the new good thing that drives out the old bad. Either way, the void will be filled. The question is, with what?

I experienced this vividly while in the early stages of sobriety. I was so used to reaching for a bottle or can in my free time that not doing so seemed impossible. The way I beat this response was instead of picking up a drink, I picked up my guitar. Within seconds my attention was drawn from any thought of alcohol and instead was consumed with musical creation. It was concurrent pruning and fertilizing.

This brings up another relevant point: No area of growth is inconsequential. The soul is not compartmentalized, so self-cultivation in areas

that seem inconsequential, such as healthy hobbies or interests, is as nourishing to one's soul as anything. Witherspoon confirms, "There is such a connection among all the arts that improve or embellish human nature, that they are best promoted in conjunction, and generally go in a body."[68] This explains why the connection between my musical cultivation and my sobriety is much closer than one might suspect.

Cultivation in Community

The principle that defines Chase Meaning, that meaning is found where what is truly good and what makes an individual unique intersect, is interesting as an abstract idea but it is only useful

[68] Witherspoon, *The Works of John Witherspoon Vol. IX*, 230.

if applied in the realm of the practical. That means we must understand what is good, both in general and about ourselves, and use that understanding to benefit our families, friendships, and workplaces. The Chase Meaning principle works best at the community level.

This is because, while true goodness is universal and permanent, the individual is located in a particular time and place. His pursuit of moral understanding should not be to transcend his environment but to serve as a conduit of that goodness to the real people around him.

A healthy community addresses both of these requirements for meaningful living: understanding of what is good and individual contribution to actualize the good in real life. These are not two separate activities but are

concurrent and mutually supportive. Intellectual ascendance is not enough. To fully participate in what it means to be human is to contribute our unique talents and interests to benefit the community.

This kind of community is not only useful to the cultivation of the individual. It is necessary. Witherspoon asserts that the most telling difference between humans and other animals is "that the individual is more helpless as well as the kind more noble; and therefore the intercourse of society and mutual assistance is absolutely necessary to his improvement and perfection."[69] For animals, mere survival is enough. But not so for the human race, which, "with all its defects, is certainly the noblest and

[69] Witherspoon, *The Works of John Witherspoon Vol. IX*, 227-8.

most valuable in this lower world, and therefore the most worthy of cultivation" (p. 227).[70]

A community's first responsibility is to facilitate understanding of what is good, especially among the young. C. S. Lewis observes, "Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt."[71] He argues that children must be trained at an emotional/sentimental level to recognize good

[70] Ibid., 227.

[71] Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 6.

from evil and right from wrong even before he can grasp its rational basis.

But if the community stops here then that understanding will wither before it has even taken root. It is not enough for humans to understand. We must also be allowed to act on that understanding. If I learn everything there is to know about music theory but never sing a note or strum a chord then that understanding goes to waste. I must use that knowledge for its inherent purpose, which is to create. This is the second responsibility of the community: to provide those opportunities for action and creation.

One of the most telling qualities of any community, be it a company, a church, or any other organization, is how well it facilitates opportunities for these unique, individual contributions. Some of these communities

centralize everything, creating an “in-group” of a few select producers and creators and treating everyone else in the community as consumers with nothing of real value to offer. While what they are offering may be good, the lack of opportunity for individuals to take part nullifies much of the positive effects of living in community.

I am sure all of us can recall being involved in such a community and looking back on the experience can see that without opportunities to contribute meaningfully leaving such a community is inevitable. We have no sense of ownership in a place where there is no room to contribute, so leaving such a place is easy. To consume even good things is not enough to live meaningfully.

But those communities that take individual talents and interests seriously and create space for those to flourish are those that make meaningfully living possible. They make possible the intersection of what is good universally and individually. These are the communities that one never wants to leave.

Individuality and Goodness

It cannot be said enough: meaning is found at the intersection of what is truly good and what the individual uniquely has to offer. But, although our understanding of what constitutes goodness changes and (ideally) increases over time, what constitutes goodness does not change. It is woven into the fabric of reality, the moral aspect of existence which is also the most foundational.

We intuitively grasp what is good not by "gazing immediately on" it "in the abstract or in the general."[72] We do so by paying attention to specific people and instances and intuitively grasping what is good (or not) about them. "Our Intuitions look to Single Objects, and not to abstract or general notions."[73] Virtually everyone can see the goodness in buying a meal for a homeless person or holding the door open for someone who has their hands full. They can see the evil in a parent neglecting to feed their children or a bully picking on the weak.

It is through reasoning up from these particular instances that we can identify general moral principles. The first principle we come

[72] McCosh, *First and Fundamental Truths*, 7.

[73] Ibid.

across is that good and evil are not relative. Try to imagine a universe in which abusing children or the elderly is good. Unless your soul is utterly corrupted and disconnected from reality it is impossible. Our souls reject such a proposition as contrary to the nature of reality. Our intuitions tell us that goodness is fixed, even though our understanding of it may evolve.

This fact requires acknowledgment of an important dynamic. If meaning is found at the intersection of what is truly good and what the individual uniquely has to offer, and if goodness is fixed, eternal, and universal, then to find that intersection requires the individual to change. We cannot redefine goodness to accommodate our imperfections. Goodness is fixed. It's not going anywhere. So we must move toward it if

we are to find the intersection where meaning is located.

A great example of this dynamic may be seen in the recent blockbuster movie *Top Gun: Maverick* (minor spoiler to follow). There is a character who is confident, aggressive, and extremely talented. But he is also self-absorbed and is constantly putting his teammates in unnecessary danger through his cocky and selfish behavior. However, at the end of the movie he channels his aggressive and assertive behavior to save the lives of his teammates rather than put them at risk.

This character teaches us a couple of lessons about goodness and individuality. First, he had to change if he was to act in a manner we could recognize as good. There was a fixed standard he had to meet and it involved putting

the needs of his team before his own. Unless and until he did that his actions were not good, regardless of how impressive they may have been.

Second, realigning his behavior to what was good rather than self-aggrandizing did not in any way threaten his individuality. On the contrary, it emphasized and highlighted what was uniquely good about him. Whereas before he was just another run-of-the-mill jerk with some talent, caring about what was good made him more fully himself.

The key point is that we find the intersection of what is good and what makes us unique not by trying to be more unique, but by growing in goodness. Our unique qualities will manifest themselves of their own accord. Our individuality is necessarily prepackaged in

everything about us. Those unique traits find their fullest expression not in service to the self, but in service to the good.

Part III – Military Leadership

IT'S NOT CODDLING TO CARE: WHY "ENGAGED LEADERSHIP" CREATES STRONGER MILITARY UNITS

Originally Published at Modern War Institute[74]

In an isolated camp in Iraq in 2008, I stood nervously in front of my team leader's barracks door, trying to summon up the courage to knock. I was an infantry private on a weapons squad in

[74] Andrew J. Bibb, "It's Not Coddling to Care: Why 'Engaged Leadership' Creates Stronger Military Units," *Modern War Institute*, April 9, 2021, https://mwi.usma.edu/its-not-coddling-to-care-why-engaged-leadership-creates-stronger-military-units.

the 3rd Ranger Battalion. And I had just screwed up.

I rapped on the door and my team leader, a specialist, told me to come in. Standing at parade rest, I explained that during the previous night's raid on a suspected enemy compound I failed to fully seat my M4 magazine in my weapon after I cleared it to board the helicopter that would take us home. The magazine fell out onto the desert floor, and by the time I noticed this the helicopter was already airborne. It was too late to fix my mistake.

My team leader thought for a moment. I tensed in anticipation, expecting a blistering reprimand. Instead, he simply replied, "Don't let it happen again."

"I won't, Specialist," I replied, shocked and relieved.

He continued, “You know this would be a very different conversation if I had to find out from someone else, don’t you?”

“Yes, Specialist.”

“You’re dismissed.”

I couldn’t articulate it at the time, but my team leader had just modeled engaged leadership. Having worked with me for several months by that time, he knew I was not reckless with my gear and felt guilty about overlooking even the smallest details. He also knew I would learn from my mistake. With those aspects of my particular personality in mind, he adapted his response accordingly.

My team leader was not one to coddle his subordinates. He drove me to perform my duties as a Ranger and never settle for anything less than exceeding the standard. The difference

between him and many of his peers was that he actually paid attention to me as a complete person, not just as a Ranger private. He listened. He rewarded strong performance. To this day, he is the only person who has taken the time to write a counseling statement just to tell me what I was doing well. He encouraged my healthy hobbies, even those that had no bearing on work. When he corrected me, it was not to crush my soul but to improve my character and competence.

The single factor that set him apart was that leader engagement was a point of pride for him. It wasn't optional, nor was it a sign of weakness. It was an expression of strength. He took the promise of the Ranger Creed never to

fail his comrades seriously.[75] Yes, I was his subordinate, but I was also his comrade.

Leader Engagement: The Key to Belonging

My current unit, the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, recently conducted an internal survey to understand the drivers of and obstacles to organizational trust among paratroopers within the brigade. We found that the most critical element in cultivating a sense of belonging and ownership among our paratroopers, especially at the platoon level and below, is leader engagement. The unit brand—maroon berets, jump boots, and even the legacy we inherit from the heroes of World War II—only goes so far. What really matters to

[75] "Ranger Creed," https://www.army.mil/values/ranger.html.

servicemembers is feeling that their leaders value them as human beings.

Our organizational culture study continues to bear this out. For example, we asked our paratroopers, “What can we do to make you feel safer?” While some of them recommended physical improvements such as better lighting in and around barracks, most responded that all they wanted was for their supervisors to be more approachable. Approachable leadership produces a layer of psychological security for subordinates that no amount of physical security, while important, can emulate. Our junior enlisted paratroopers recognize this instinctively.

As we dug deeper, we found that most of our paratroopers feel they can tell their immediate supervisors when something is wrong and leaders respond swiftly to get them the help

they need. However, this level of engagement often only takes place after a negative incident has occurred. Day-to-day leader engagement in the absence of catastrophe is lacking.

It takes little imagination to see how improving leader engagement before a negative incident would radically improve our ability to address corrosive behaviors and tragic outcomes such as sexual harassment and assault, substance abuse, discrimination, and suicide. Engaged leaders are attuned to subtle behavioral changes and are more likely to notice warning signs early. Engaged leaders are also approachable, giving their subordinates the freedom to seek help early rather than wait for something tragic to happen.

How to Engage

So, what does engaged leadership look like in practice? As I have argued elsewhere,[76] engagement in any form consists of a recurring three-step process: (1) Pay close and deliberate attention; (2) Gain sufficient understanding to act effectively; and (3) Act assertively and responsibly. When intentionally applied, this engagement cycle never fails to yield useful information, cultivate meaningful relationships, and create opportunities for influence. This is nowhere more applicable than in leadership.

Leader engagement is a continuous cycle of deliberately paying attention to the individuals under one's care until a sufficient understanding of their particular characteristics is achieved to lead them effectively. In other words, rather than

[76] See Part I of this book.

simply acting on knee-jerk assumptions, engaged leaders get to know their subordinates as individuals through watching and listening. This builds an understanding of each of those subordinates and reveals facets of their personalities not readily apparent on the surface. Paying attention is the most critical step in this cycle because it is the engine that drives the rest of the process.

This is especially relevant when it comes to enforcing standards and discipline. It is not enough to publish standards and expect compliance without considering the strengths, weaknesses, and circumstances of individuals. Of course, we must establish and enforce standards. It is also critical that first-line supervisors know their subordinates well enough as individuals to identify roadblocks to meeting

those standards and tailor their corrective measures accordingly. Maybe trigger squeeze isn't the reason your soldier is failing her weapons qualification. Maybe she struggles to focus on her sight picture because her body armor doesn't fit.

In addition to building understanding for effective action, paying attention to individuals yields psychological benefits for all involved. To pay attention to others is to signal genuine concern for them. It is to recognize their humanity and validate them as worth listening to. It signals one's intention to engage honestly and implicitly demands the same from others.

This engagement cycle is what differentiates caring from coddling. To coddle is to insult a subordinate by signaling, "You don't have what it takes, so I'm not even going to try."

It is disengagement and indicates fear and laziness. To care, on the other hand, is to take up the burden of leadership. It is to know one's subordinates and understand their strengths and weaknesses. It is to leverage that knowledge to act effectively in their best interests and that of the organization, driving all involved toward excellence. To care is to project strength and vitality.

A Point of Pride

The US military must normalize leader engagement as a point of pride, and we do that through our everyday words and actions. We must be willing to insist that you are not a real leader unless you engage your subordinates personally and meaningfully. You are incapable of achieving the necessary degree of lethality and

readiness unless you are intimately aware of what makes those who follow you tick. You cannot command until you learn how to pay attention to those you are charged with leading. You are not a true patriot unless you give a damn about those your country has entrusted to your care.

Seeing leader engagement this way, as a noble challenge rather than an annoying obligation, instills pride in both leaders and subordinates. When leaders know their people well enough to tailor their leadership styles appropriately, and when subordinates feel their leaders are approachable and trustworthy, each grows in their sense of value and belonging. Just as combat strengthens the bond between comrades who emerge having proven worthy of each other's trust, engaged leaders actualize the esprit de corps necessary to a cohesive

organization. That sense of belonging doesn't just come from a unit crest. It grows out of trust between leaders and the people entrusted to their care. And building trust starts with paying attention.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE: A 'NEW' FRAMEWORK FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY?

Originally Published at 19FortyFive[77]

[77] Andrew J. Bibb, "The Declaration of Independence: A 'New' Framework for U.S. Foreign Policy?" *19FortyFive*, June 1, 2021, https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/06/the-declaration-of-independence-a-new-framework-for-u-s-foreign-policy.

To be human is to experience limitations, and no limitation is as tangible as one's finite ability to know.

To surmount these cognitive limitations, one makes assumptions based on what is already known, trusting that in the process of exploration one will learn whatever is needed to reach his or her ultimate goal. But behind and underlying these assumptions is a philosophy that constitutes the reason for acting in the first place. Assumptions have their place in foreign policy and strategy, but only if they are securely nested within a clear and cohesive philosophical framework.

For American foreign policy professionals, that framework is and ought to be the principles articulated in our Declaration of Independence.

Strategic Assumptions

In a whole-of-government approach, foreign policy professionals operate in a stratified view of reality in which disparate tactics and operations converge into a unified strategy. This strategy is often, and appropriately, full of assumptions to be confirmed or denied. These assumptions are necessary to start moving toward a desired end. Perhaps no one explains this dynamic better than Brigadier General (Retired) Huba Wass de Czege.

Wass de Czege, an innovative thinker and founder of the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, illustrates the role of assumptions in strategy through the metaphor of an early American explorer. The explorer sends out scouts for limited, concrete, and actionable

purposes, but within a flexible strategic framework. As Wass de Czege explains, “Strategy is about choosing the ‘best’ way forward – one that usefully exploits the potential of what is known.”

The strategist, like the explorer, begins his journey with many unconfirmed assumptions that are necessary to begin movement but not sufficient to achieve his desired end state. He must hold these assumptions loosely and “constantly evolve his strategic rationale.” The strategist is in a perpetual state of learning, enabled by a healthy combination of confidence and intellectual humility. As he confirms and denies assumptions, he formulates new ones to take their place. He moves “from one promising position to another, occasionally retracing steps

to find a way around obstacles, and following where learning takes it."[78]

Strategy in a vacuum, however, is insufficient. Defining strategic ends requires input from a source outside the strategy itself. Just as the explorer needs a reason to brave the unknown and a general idea of which direction to start in, the strategist finds his purpose in the presuppositions he brings to that strategy from elsewhere. Those presuppositions, or things "taken as being true or factual and used as a starting point for a course of action or reasoning," are inevitably philosophical in nature.[79]

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[78] Huba Wass de Czege, "Thinking and Acting Like an Early Explorer: Operational Art is Not a Level of War," *Small Wars Journal,* March 14, 2011, https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/710-deczege.pdf.

[79] "Presupposition," *Merriam-Webster.com Thesaurus*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/presupposition.

Foreign policy professionals, uniformed servicemembers, and diplomats are no exception. They may strive to remain apolitical, or at least nonpartisan, but it is impossible to avoid espousing a particular philosophy. A whole-of-government strategic approach by definition cannot be divorced from politics, economics, etc. since it entails the cooperation and coordination of all those things. Therefore, strategic assumptions must be made according to a common national philosophy for a national foreign policy to be cohesive. This philosophy guides and propels international engagement and gives it purpose. Without a clear national philosophy there is no foreign policy per se.

The US National Security Strategy is itself a strategy and as such cannot be relied upon for philosophical guidance. Each iteration

inevitably rests upon philosophical presuppositions, which are just as inevitably drawn from external sources. The challenge, then, is determining which philosophy delivers the noblest, most realistic, and most appropriate set of presuppositions by which to direct national strategies and foreign policy.

Our National Philosophy

The first step in identifying a cohesive philosophy for international engagement is to understand the character of our own nation.[80] Foreign policy expert Angelo Codevilla teaches that "the arts of diplomacy, economic suasion, influence, and war are *means by which to move other countries.* They are logically subordinate to

[80] Angelo M. Codevilla, *A Student's Guide to International Relations* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010), 1.

decisions about the *ends* proper to one's own country and prudent in its circumstances."[81] Lieutenant General (Retired) Charles T. Cleveland, former commanding general of US Army Special Operations Command, agrees that even the way we wage war should "reflect who we are as a people, our diversity, our moral code, and our undying belief in freedom and liberty."[82]

Fortunately for US foreign policy professionals, American national philosophy is woven into the very fabric of her institutions, making the proper philosophy readily accessible by which to guide strategic assumptions. Everyone "elected or appointed to an office of

[81] Ibid., 58.

[82] Charles T. Cleveland and Daniel Egel, *The American Way of Irregular War: An Analytical Memoir* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), xxiii, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA301-1.html.

honor or profit in the civil service or uniformed services" is required to take the oath of office for this very reason.[83] In doing so we assume the responsibility to safeguard our Constitution faithfully and diligently, not only the structure of the government it institutes but also the reasons for which it exists. Therein lies the key to our national philosophy in foreign affairs.

Abraham Lincoln, writing on the cusp of his inauguration and full-fledged civil war, articulates the philosophy that would guide his strategy to end slavery and preserve the Union. He describes the Constitution as a silver frame that surrounds and gives structure to an "apple of gold." The apple is a single principle: "Liberty to all," which according to Lincoln finds its fullest

[83] Oath of Office, U.S. Code 5 (1966), § 3331.

expression, rationale, and definition in the Declaration of Independence.[84] Winston Churchill, even as an Englishman and not an American, agrees that "the great principles of freedom and the rights of man…find their most famous expression in the American Declaration of Independence."[85]

If Lincoln and Churchill are to be believed, then to swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution is to commit to the principles of liberty as defined by the Declaration. The US is unique in that the presuppositions that guide her foreign policy are articulated in the very document that gave birth

[84] Hillsdale College Politics Faculty, eds, *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 67-8.

[85] Winston S. Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace," (acceptance speech at Westminster College, Fulton, MI, March 5, 1946), https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1946/s460305a_e.htm.

to the nation. These self-evident truths are not mere rhetorical devices. They are the very ends for which our Constitution was framed and for which the US government exists.

Foreign Policy Implications

The Declaration is essentially a foreign policy document. It presents the self-understanding of the American people to the world and defines how they expect to be treated. It asserts a uniquely American view of reality, ethics, and human nature. It shows respect for the opinions of the watching world by clearly outlining America's justification for independence, revealing its signers' appreciation of the important role international relations play in the life of a nation. It also attempts to persuade

other nations, especially France, to support its cause.[86]

Key to the Declaration's concept of liberty is the assertion that all human beings are "created equal." This does not mean similar in all, or even most, respects, nor does it mean equal in every way. If this were the case then government agencies would have to do away with performance evaluations, order of merit lists, and other ranking mechanisms. Instead it means all people possess the "same degree of dignity" by virtue of their humanity.[87] This presupposition serves as the basis for the concept of inalienable rights, bestowed not by government but by nature and its Creator.

[86] U.S., 1776, accessed April 26, 2021, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.

[87] Webster's Dictionary 1828, s.v. "equality," http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Equality.

Government can either safeguard or assail these rights, but it cannot take away from or add to them in any essential sense.

Though often imperfectly applied, this principle has guided the US in her strategies to account for and appreciate the value of non-American peoples as well as her own citizens. She has championed human rights on the world stage and is a trusted ally because of it, serving as an example of right and goodness. The vigorous prosecution of war crimes and advocacy on behalf of persecuted minority groups are but two examples of this principle in action.

The Declaration is clear that, while all people possess equal inherent dignity, one's first responsibility is to one's own countrymen. The implication for strategic assumptions follows

easily. As foreign policy professionals pursue their strategies they must not only ask, “Is this good for all people?” but also, “Is this good for the American people?” A government that derives its powers from the consent of the governed is responsible for its citizens’ “Safety and Happiness” before anyone else’s. This does not mean isolation, but it does mean prioritization.

Respecting the tension that exists between universal human equality and duty to one’s own countrymen, the Declaration’s authors emphasize that they reached their decision to take up arms only after exhausting every diplomatic avenue available. It was not until their “repeated Petitions” had been answered by “repeated injury” that war became necessary. The American way is not one of conquest, but of

assertiveness when necessary and peace when possible. For us might does not make right. Strength is only proper when subordinated to goodness and truth. It was not enough for the Declaration's signers to affirm what circumstances "are," detached from any moral considerations. They found their justification in recognizing what "ought to be."

The closing lines of the Declaration do not qualify any of the preceding statements or build in any room for excuses for the potential failure of its enterprise. Its signers assume full responsibility for their actions and any consequences that follow. With "a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence," they commit in no uncertain terms to see the mission through or perish in the process.

This only scratches the surface of the vast cohesive and magnanimous philosophy to be gleaned from the Declaration by foreign policy professionals who seek to guide their strategic assumptions by foundational presuppositions. Strategic assumptions in support of cohesive foreign policy may only be made within the context of sound philosophy as a framework for action. Most importantly, if our oath to the Constitution means anything it means taking the Declaration's philosophy seriously, for it is the very purpose of the Constitution we swear to support and defend.

PROFESSIONAL FULFILLMENT: HOW FINDING YOUR PURPOSE PROMOTES UNIT COHESION

Originally published at From the Green Notebook[88]

The first time I took the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) I felt as if a massive burden had been lifted off my shoulders. My Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) scores were steadily declining as I aged. I was frustrated because I knew I was fit to fight. To stay that way, my fitness routine focused much more on overall strength and endurance than push-ups, sit-ups, and 2-mile runs. This meant I had no issues with

[88] Andrew J. Bibb, "Professional Fulfillment: How Finding Your Purpose Promotes Unit Cohesion," *From the Green Notebook*, September 23, 2021, https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2021/09/23/professional-fulfillment-how-finding-your-purpose-promotes-unit-cohesion.

field problems and ruck marches, but my APFT scores suffered.

I didn't know what to make of the ACFT until I took it for the first time. To my happy surprise, almost all of the ACFT events measured the things my training regimen emphasized. The kettlebell is my training implement of choice, and kettlebell training transfers very nicely to most ACFT events. When the grader told me my score after that first test, I was elated. After years of trending downward my score was suddenly respectable again.

It remains to be seen what the future holds for the ACFT, but I pray it's here to stay. Not only because it is objectively more relevant to modern warfare than the APFT, but also because I'm much better at it. This may seem petty, but it actually reflects a primal urge to prove oneself

valuable. There is a deep-seated desire wired into all of us to be good at the things that matter to others, especially in a professional context.

This fact reflects a self-evident truth that, if applied, can mean the difference between being a mediocre leader and a great one. Professional fulfillment is found at the intersection of what one is good at and what the organization values. There are few things more emotionally taxing than spending precious working hours engaged in activities one has no affinity for. However, engaging in activities that cater to an individual's natural abilities and inclinations assists in finding meaning and developing a healthy sense of professional pride.

In a previous article on engaged leadership, I highlighted the ongoing effort in my brigade to understand the drivers of both

discontent and satisfaction, the goal being to resolve the former and enhance the latter. As my team gains understanding, we increasingly realize just how critical healthy competition is to the satisfaction of our soldiers. They regularly communicate their desire for competitive events, especially at the team and squad levels.

Their goal is not just bragging rights. It is professional fulfillment. If this fulfillment is found in being good at what the organization values, then healthy competition is a method to find out what that is. Competition is more than just a chance to show off. It is an opportunity to explore talents, abilities, and interests, and to match those to organizational priorities. It is also a chance to become familiar with the dynamics of the team and associate placement within that team.

Viewed through this lens, competition becomes more than a zero-sum game. The way one competes is often as important as the outcome. If winning is the only goal then the benefits of competition are fleeting. But if self-discovery is part of the process, then one reaps the permanent benefits of growth and improvement.

For example, a squad leader may have a soldier who is a subpar machine gunner. Despite robust remedial training, the soldier sees no improvement. Rather than continue to force the issue, the squad leader may find during warrior task training that this soldier excels in calling for indirect fire, throwing grenades, or land navigation. Having identified the latter to be the case, the squad leader makes this soldier his point man on patrols, wielding a compass and a rifle

rather than the squad automatic weapon. Not only is the squad made better through good talent management, but the soldier also gains a sense of pride in being an asset to the organization.

To fully achieve this may require a servicemember changing occupational specialties. I was a decent infantryman, but I'm a much better civil affairs officer. Consequently, I am much more fulfilled in my professional life. I also work harder because the work is more meaningful to me. I know I'm bringing something unique to the table.

But the measures we take to match servicemembers to tasks they are naturally fitted to may not need to be so drastic. Even within occupational specialties there are numerous ways to shine. All it takes is an engaged leader willing to work with their subordinate to figure out what

those are. Here I refer the reader to the three-step engagement process I articulated in a previous article.

All this being said, it is impossible to enjoy every task we are assigned. Some tasks are just not interesting or well-suited to one's natural abilities, but they need to get done nonetheless. At these times it is especially incumbent on leaders to explain the purpose behind even menial tasks. Unlike the "because I told you so" approach, which is only valid if time is a critical factor, explaining the purpose for tasks creates buy-in. It transforms the subordinate from a drone into a valuable and valued part of the team.

Not only is this good for the subordinate, it's great for the mission. When one has a reason to care about what he or she is tasked with, work quality improves and becomes easier to endure.

Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor and well-known psychiatrist, famously echoed Nietzsche in asserting, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*."[89] Often all it takes to go the extra mile is to know that your work matters and that others are depending on you to do it well. This is true for the mundane tasks in life as well as for profound suffering. If a leader can't provide a good reason for doing the task, maybe he or she should reevaluate if it is worth doing in the first place. Maybe the leader should prioritize other actions that do have a purpose.

One may simplify these ideas by simply applying the golden rule. I know that I would rather work in areas I am naturally gifted for, so

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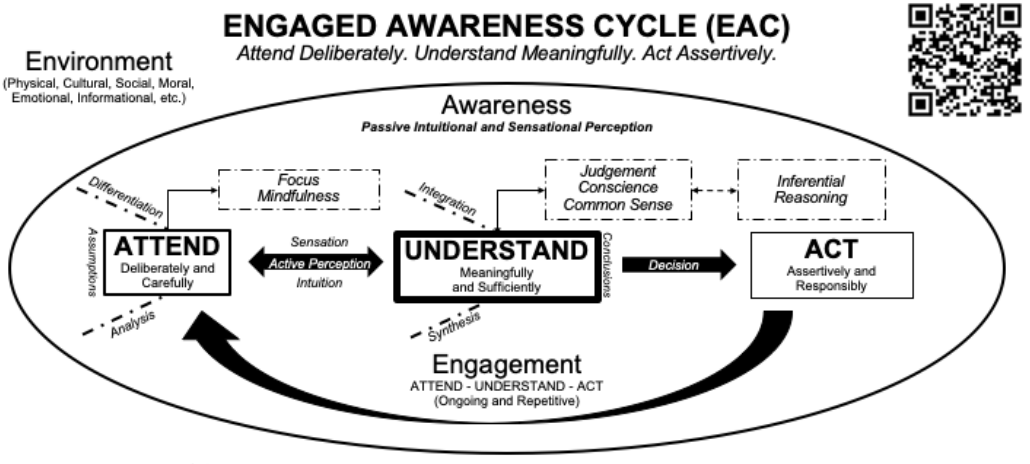
[89] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 84, https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/3403095/mod_resource/content/1/56ViktorFrankl_Mans%20Search.pdf.

I should take that into account when tasking subordinates. I know I am much more eager to work if I know the purpose I am working toward, so I should take the time to explain that purpose to those I lead. When applied, both of these considerations inspire the healthy pride in the organization and the individuals who make it up.



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