

The Single Ethic

Let us make a distinction between thought whose sole purpose in the mind of the thinker is to figure out how best to pursue a known and clearly defined objective, and thought undertaken for other reasons.

'I don't have a specific objective: that's half the point of thinking: to discover what you want out of life so you can know what direction to take.'

The speaker has no objective. When we try to pin him down with the question, 'Perhaps you simply want to find the best way to be happy, in which case happiness is your objective?' he says he is not sure happiness is his objective but that perhaps there is something else to be pursued. He never admits to an objective. Consequently, none of his decisions can be faulted. To judge the worth of a thing we must have some scale of worth upon which to base our judgement. To define a scale of worthiness for decisions, we must first define an objective towards which the decisions are assumed to be directed. The worthiness of a decision is the extent to which it leads to the satisfaction of the objective. When our philosopher jumps from a fourth floor window to his death, we do not know whether to commend or condemn his thinking. If his objective was to end as soon as possible the suffering he experienced as a perceptive human being, his decision was wise. But if his objective was to live a long and happy life, then he was foolish.

'I am in search of truth: not trivial truths like the knowledge of whether or not the sun is going to come up, but deeper and more far-reaching truths about the framework in which the value and meaning of our lives can be judged.'

Our second speaker is similar to the first in that she is equally beyond fault. She defines an objective, but her definition is so vague that there is no way of telling how well it is ever satisfied by her actions.

We shall use the phrase 'free thinking' to mean any type of thinking which is not dedicated to the pursuit of a clearly defined objective, and we will say 'predictive thinking' to mean thinking that is dedicated to the pursuit of a clearly defined objective. Our two speakers are free thinkers. They do not agree upon any scale by which to judge the worthiness of anything, so they need not agree about anything, and they can get along well together, so long as they are sitting around doing nothing but talking.

A predictive thinker has a clearly defined objective. When she thinks about what to do next, she chooses the course of action her reason tells her will bring the greatest satisfaction of her objective. Her primary objective will spawn many secondary objectives. If her primary objective is X , and she decides this means she must do another thing, Y , then we can regard Y as a secondary objective spawned by X . A secondary objective cannot be treated in the same way, since there are always ways to satisfy a secondary objective which conflict with the primary objective. For example, if a writer's primary objective is to improve her writing, she can argue that sharpening her mental faculties is a step in the right direction. Playing chess sharpens her mind, so she has a secondary objective to play chess. But if she plays so much chess that she has no time to write, then she has failed in her primary objective.

Consider what happens when a predictive thinker defines more than one primary objective to guide his decisions. Perhaps he wants not only to improve his writing, but also his chess game. How is he to divide his time between the two pursuits? How is he to measure his progress in either endeavor? Suppose he surmounts these philosophical difficulties, and writes down an arbitrating statement, which declares how he should share his time between chess and writing. Thus, he might think, he arbitrates between two primary objectives. But his alleged primary objectives are subject to the decrees of the arbitrating statement, so that, in effect, his arbitrating statement is his primary objective.

A predictive thinker can have only one primary objective. To have more than one either leads to conflict, or to an arbitrating statement which then becomes the effective primary objective. It is possible to regard our lives as being made up of the pursuit of many objectives. We could apply predictive thinking to the pursuit of each of these objectives, and so hope to increase our success. But our efforts to pursue each objective will interfere with one another unless we have a way of arbitrating between them. We could choose to ignore such conflicts, but if we ignore them then we risk wasting a time and effort fighting against ourselves. Nevertheless, it is common to meet people who say something like the following when asked what they want out of life:

'There are many things I want to do. I want to travel around Asia when I can afford it, but I also want to be successful in my career. Of course I would love to meet the right man and raise a family, but I cannot say when that is going to happen.'

Our new speaker might work so hard on her career that when Mr. Right shows up she is too out of shape and hasty to attract him. After that, she is stressed all the time. Her subordinates despise her. She spends half her day telling

people how busy she is. Free thinking is a useful anaesthetic under such circumstances.

If we treat life as one big challenge, and decide to use predictive thinking to meet this challenge, we must define a primary objective for our predictive thinking. This objective becomes the sole pursuit of our lives. It is the 'single ethic' by which we direct our behavior. But if we are not prepared to sacrifice everything in the pursuit of our primary objective, it is not a primary objective at all, but one that is secondary to others that we have not declared.

Let us consider the pursuit of pleasure as a primary objective. One of the first questions that arises in a contemplation of the pursuit of pleasure is whether one should seek to avoid pain. Hypothetically, one might be faced with a choice between a great deal of pleasure at the cost of considerable pain, or less pleasure and less pain. In the strict pursuit of pleasure, by which we hope to maximize the amount of pleasure we have in our lives, we would not consider pain as a deterrent to any action which brought pleasure. We would do whatever it took to fill our lives with the most happiness, regardless of how much we suffer to earn it. Furthermore, if it turned out that we would be happiest if we exploited other people and made them miserable, then we would have to do so, regardless of how squeamish we were about it. On the other hand, if it turned out that we would be happiest being honorable and kind, then we would have to be honorable and kind, regardless of how difficult it was to be so.

Another potential primary objective is to minimize pain in life. This one is a bit redundant, since the best thing to do to minimize pain is to commit suicide immediately. Alternatively, one could seek to balance pain with pleasure, but if it turned out that one always had to suffer more pain than pleasure was worth, one would also have to commit suicide.

Most people prefer free thinking to predictive thinking. They proceed through life without knowing why they make their decisions, or what they want to achieve. They may be happy, or they may be sad, it just depends upon their character and their luck. The predictive thinker proceeds through life knowing what he wants to achieve, and directs all his efforts in that direction. He may be happy, or he may be sad, it just depends upon his objective, his luck, and his tenacity..