3

KNOW YOURSELF

This above all—to thine own self be true.
— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1600-01

For the great majority of mankind are satisfied
with appearances, as though they were realities,
and are often more influenced by things that seem
than by those that are.
— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1513

THE CITY OF DELPHI, seat of the most important ancient Greek temple and oracle, dates back at least to the fourteenth century B.C. The oracle was consulted on private matters, to be sure, but also on affairs of state, war, and colonization. So often was the same brief message—"Know thyself" —given to inquirers that it was soon carved in stone on one of the temple walls. "Know thyself" is in the imperative mood. That is to say, the gods weren't suggesting this as a bit of helpful advice, take it or leave it; they were commanding it. Much as we might say, "Know yourself—or else."

Most Greeks believed that the god Apollo had spoken and thus must be heeded. "Know thyself" was most frequently interpreted to mean, "Beware of *hubris*; don't overstep your bounds; you're not godly." In any event, the earliest sages and even later philo-sophers adopted it as a (when not *the*) guiding principle at the very dawn of reason. It implies at least two directives, one negative, the other positive. First, we aren't well acquainted with ourselves, which ignorance probably occasions most of our vital mishaps. Second, to those willing to submit to a diet of personal truth, fulfillment beckons.

Note that Delphi distinctively comes down uncompromisingly on the spartan side of "thyself": personal responsibility or accountability. It necessarily implies, while inviting, as much personal freedom, autonomy, and self-dominion as possible. Each of its adepts is to look *within*—not without. We customarily elude responsibility, thinking that our happiness (or lack thereof) is tied up with external circumstances or other people or even the dispensations of some mysterious gods or "fate."

It's truly amazing how many and varied are the contemporary causes *out there* with which we agitate and distract ourselves. The compelling but unspoken goal seems to be for each to discover a favorite enemy or conspiracy, but always conveniently in the remote third person, to be reviled for all the world's ills. Many militants seem to be acting on the psychological need to believe in something —anything—sufficiently evil on which to vent a big head of moral steam, and thus to justify their existence. They often inhabit, as G.K. Chesterton put it, "the clean well-lit prison of one idea."

It's as if the oracular voice were telling us: "Stop this childish finger-pointing; better yet, point it at yourself. The only thing standing between you and utmost bliss is you, thoughtless you, lying you, self-destructive you."

TRUTH THERAPY

Note also that the oracle calls directly for knowledge, not greater unselfishness, virtue, love, or other commendable qualities. Bent human beings are to be straightened out, if at all, by a more assiduous and penetrating use of their reason. Apparently only a healthy dose of reality and truth will liberate them from their self-made prison of untruths. But the truths to be discovered aren't some arcane, ethereally subtle truths accessible only to some initiated gnostics, gurus, or geniuses. There's no talk of rarefied metaphysics or ascetical austerity or theosophy or revelations or mysticism whose secrets can be disclosed only to a privileged elite, who in turn mediate the access of all others.

No, something much more common and democratic and non-institutional and personal is afoot, something independent of rare, limited, external opportunities or chance encounters or temporal and geographical vicissitudes, something likewise unrelated to age or sex or IQ or skills or state in life. It's something that every man, woman, and child can conceivably do, at any time, where privilege and advantage need no longer count, with no wiggle room for rationalizations. That's not to say, however, that this introspection comes easily. It may just be the most demanding toil we'll ever undergo. But without it there is no touchstone, no sympathetic vibration, for recognizing truth. As Julius Caesar once observed, "Men willingly believe what they wish."

Self-knowledge is simply a matter of turning one's mental gaze on oneself: to sit down and belatedly make one's own acquaintance. Much as we might want, how are we to befriend someone who amounts to a total stranger? But that's it; that's all. In no more (and no fewer) than two words may be the whole solution to all of life's problems and conundrums.

The oracle also seems to imply that self-knowing is a game where there are only relative winners. Apparently, to seek is to find, and to seek more is to find more. We need only to move from sterile *je m'excuse* to *je m'accuse*. Note besides that the oracle does *not* say that this self-probing is popular or makes for popularity. Reflecting on self will doubtless deflate illusions about ourselves and disclose damning evidence of sloth, willfulness, and shallowness, not to mention hypocrisy and vindictiveness. It's never easy to turn on oneself as the sole culprit for one's misery. But that way alone lie truth and emancipation.

Those unwilling simply to admit, "I'm to blame," will surely scorn and scoff at Delphi. With their privileged intellects overflowing with superior knowledge and worldly wisdom, some raise up complicated, esoteric systems of philosophical and theological speculation to disprove the long-silent oracle and justify themselves. Others claim there's nothing wrong with man that improved circumstances and the inexorable march of progress can't cure. Or, a variant, still others preach the gospel of self-acceptance, wherein all human problems originate in our futile efforts to strive for impossible objectives; we'll all be content if we but reject taboos and reduce any remaining principles to the level of our undistinguished practice. These rationalizations seem little more than adult variations on the childish alibi: "I didn't do it!" Perhaps the oracle's pithy message provides us with a yardstick wherewith to measure any and all programs for happiness and fulfillment. Highly suspect are all those not grounded in the rock-bottom confession: "I wronged myself, but I too can right myself, starting with my reason, while gladly welcoming any outside assistance there may be."

TRUE AND FALSE SELFISHNESS

Yet even subscribers to common-sense realism tend to think that most, if not all, of our benighted failings stem from selfishness. Their prescription, then, is to escape the ego-trap by suppressing our self-love or otherwise converting it into other-love. Selfless

dedication is, for them, the adequate answer. But is this what the oracular voice is really saying? It may be faulting not so much self-interest or self-love itself, as the unenlightened unwise, unreasonable self-interest that falsifies reality because it refuses to conform to it. We may love ourselves not too much, but unwisely, in a less than truthful fashion, in ways departing from, or even contrary to, genuine fulfillment. Shakespeare's Othello seems to agree, when just before dying he says, "Remember me as one who loved, not wisely, but too well."

Might we be called by our very being to graduate from unenlightened to ever more enlightened degrees of self-interest? This would seem to square with Delphi's betting everything on ever better knowing one's personal truth. We may be thereby summoned to love ourselves more—instead of less. This may even lead to the paradoxical conclusion that the highest self-loving is the fullest self-giving. While this conclusion may exceed the oracle's terms, it certainly dovetails with its prime insistence. Only progressive self-knowing makes possible ever more enlightened self-loving. This personal knowledge may not be a sufficient condition for fully ratifying human nature, but it is an indispensable prerequisite.

Most schemes for happiness, especially the do-it-yourself varieties, collapse in their failure to analyze what has gone wrong in our behavior. Our job is to dig for the double truth of the human condition. We need to admit we wrong ourselves by not living in accord with the way we're constructed. Only then can we begin to right ourselves by developing and nourishing our personality. And that's a requirement for getting anything else right. It's that simple, yet profound. Truth—not wishful thinking—is the only possible formula for the happiness that is part of our human heritage. Without such a map, life is pure accident, mere helter-skelter. How otherwise can we know our destination or how to get there or even what pitfalls to avoid? We could even bypass what alone may deliver bliss—and not even realize it.

Now this self-knowledge comes with labor pains. We all wince and can barely believe our senses whenever we hear our recorded voice or see ourselves in photos or videos. Likewise, we all hate tests, because they expose our ignorance, laziness, and fuzzy-headedness. We're experts at bending the truth around to what only seems to be our advantage. We tend to kid ourselves, without ever stopping to realize that in the process we may be defrauding ourselves. That's why, as if obeying a reflex, we almost automatically flee people or things or situations that threaten to expose us, to make us look bad. That's also why we tend to surround ourselves with acquaintances or ideas which are non-threatening crutches for our unexamined selves. We all tend to play the ostrich, which, since it can't fly away, reputedly reacts to danger by sticking its head in the sand.

On the other hand, let's not exaggerate the trouble of trying to see ourselves objectively, the way others more readily tend to see us. Exaggerating hardships out of all proportion is another universal failing. This automatic, immature, pain-avoiding mechanism can slow us down and even leave us in knots, perhaps permanently. If you're suffering from a deadly disease, isn't the worst thing to stay away from the discerning physician, lest the prescription be painful surgery or other onerous remedies? Here too—maybe above all here—the maxim "no pain, no gain" is true.

Chastening experiences invite us to admit progressively some uncomfortable personal truths and some underlying defects. Prospectors must be patient and open-minded; we're to concentrate, use our noggin, listen. This is hard work. As someone once wrote: "Thinking is the hardest work in the world, and the most repugnant to our [undisciplined] nature." Also let's distance ourselves from those who would reduce us to our glands, who view us only as recent émigrés from the jungle. We may stand to lose only our misery.

Now there's at least one area of human endeavor where we all acknowledge that "no one is a good judge in his own cause," and

so we seek and submit ourselves to outside help, in order to improve. Any athletic coach worth his salt must get his players to see themselves as they truly are, so that they can take the steps to get to be as good as they mistakenly think they already are. But why is it that players heed their coach's advice? If they put it into practice over time, they see that it works, gives good results—that's one source of motivation. But the main reason why people obey their coaches (and seek ever better and more demanding coaches) is that they're sick and tired of being mediocre also-rans. They refuse to settle for second- or third-best; they're committed to being the very best they can possibly be. Can we afford to do less when our fulfillment is at stake?

THREE ATTITUDES

Who are likely to get the most out of this ethical program? The least defensive, the most prone to take risks, who have the guts to admit in their heart of hearts they're not really happy, despite all their efforts. Nor are any of their cock-eyed schemes likely to make them so, certainly not leave them so. So, if you haven't found joy, either personally or vicariously, in a bottle, can, joint, bed, romance, bank account, commitment, or even in glowing achievements, you've come to the right place. Especially if you can admit you may be mostly to blame for all your hollowness and frustration.

This program will make no sense to any who think that the only thing standing between them and all the happiness they need is just a set of more favorable external circumstances: better luck, more money and freedom, a little more of this and a little less of that, a blonde instead of a brunette. . . . Such people are too busy dreaming about the future and betting everything on it: "Next time, for sure." They've yet to realize that a vacation or trip or new job or new husband or new car never measures up to our bloated expectations. Such perpetual adolescents have never learned to

curb their exorbitant desires for what can never slake their thirst for bliss. They blow totally out of proportion what are actually quite minor and relative goods. These forty- and fifty-year-old teens are reluctant to learn from their misery-generating mistakes. They deceive themselves, shelling out big bucks for breast enlargement, hair transplants, cosmetic surgery (not to mention the zillion-dollar cosmetics market), fashions, jewelry, diet fads, and related pills and potions.

There's still a third type: those who are relatively good and content with things as they are. These achievers are well-rounded and busy; they usually stay out of mischief. They're not likely to be nabbed for speeding; they keep their lawns mown. They steer clear of most compulsions and addictions; their act so far sticks together. So, they ask, "Where's the beef? What's all the fury about? I have my friends, good ones too. I get on well with my family; parents and spouse give me lots of support. I've got enough engrossing interests and hobbies and sports to keep me occupied and thriving. My job (or studies) is under control, certainly good enough to get ahead. Sure, like everybody else, I have my share of foibles and weaknesses that will probably shrink, if not disappear, with time and a little more effort. . . . So, why all the huffing and puffing?"

Well, to any who see themselves in the preceding paragraph, the suggestion is this: Be patient with the program and a little impatient with yourself. It may take some digging, but if you really confront yourself, you'll sooner or later discover you're built for more, much more, than Brownie points or merit badges. Don't settle for the trappings of achievement, which, in some workaholics, can become almost as addictive as a narcotic. You may be content, or think you are, at least for now. Anything else may seem just "too good to be true." But what if the invitation may be for something "too good *not* to be true?" In any case, let's get down to this business of getting better acquainted with ourselves.

MORALITY'S TEN PRINCIPLES

Without, perhaps, your having noticed it, we've already covered quite a bit of ground. What follows are ten observations or principles, most of them alluded to earlier, which sum up what our efforts at knowing ourselves should uncover. We're seeking clues to how our behavior backfires and how we might right it. Those who ignore their past, wrote George Santayana, "are condemned to repeat it."

1. We noted that we easily go wrong and mess ourselves up. Why? Because we act thoughtlessly, with neither malice nor goodness aforethought. Until I admit that I fool myself regularly, I'll never be able to discover the steps I need to right and fulfill myself.

2. One of the ways we go wrong is the tendency to foresee, exaggerate, and therefore cunningly sidestep such negatives as pain, suffering, annoyance, and effort, which never prove in fact to be so bad as we had feared.

3. We similarly distort reality when we habitually inflate and thus excessively desire an upcoming pleasure or good. Again, when we actually experience these longed-for prizes, we discover that they're not all we naively made them out to be.

In sum, we unconsciously deprive ourselves whenever in anticipation we exaggerate the truth about things, both good and bad. If we're to be true to ourselves and to see the broader world for what it really is, we must exercise realism by using our mind better.

4. We need, therefore, something like a "reality check" to set ourselves right. Experience can be "the best teacher," if we honestly want to learn from it and not merely to embellish it.

The counterproductive behavior we cannot foresee will have to be discovered after the fact by candidly sifting through our not-so-fulfilling experiences with a fine-tooth comb.

5. Active within us are various appetites or drives, instincts or passions, whatever you want to call them, that tug and pull on us and may explain, at least in part, how we distort reality. Most of our vital mistakes—painting things in false colors, either better or worse—arises when these drives start interfering with one another, each refusing to confine itself to its own bailiwick. Note that of these appetites only some are shared with animals.

6. Whatever else we may come endowed with, we definitely share with other animals a corporeal nature, with its built-in, definite needs, appetites, tendencies, and aversions. We can, however, control our instincts, at least theoretically. Even when we apparently resist or transcend our instincts, we must, however, be on our honest guard.

Our instincts are quite adroit at camouflaging themselves. It may seem to us that we control them, when in fact they may still determine our behavior. Yet where we come closest to falling under the imperious command of instinct is the case of raging sexual passion. Its near-irresistibility, however, suggests that we may be made for real, lasting bliss. While too fleeting, orgasm at least may whet the appetite for whatever can definitively satisfy us, if anything can. This sets us up to understand better what our higher appetite may be, one that is specifically and exclusively human.

7. What leads us to short-circuit, to deceive ourselves and fall for all kinds of inadequate "puppy loves" is our restless, meddling, roving will, especially in complicity with an unfettered imagination. This apparently bottomless hunger has no immediately identifiable object whose possession will tranquilize the will (or heart) and call at least a temporary halt to its floundering quest for happiness.

The slightest reflection shows that whatever humans do (or omit), we always do it because we at least *think* it will make us happy, either directly or indirectly. We cannot *not* want happiness, our strongest drive, identical with our self-interest. Yet this craving for happiness, if we're not careful, can land us, paradoxically, in deepest despair.

It's absurd to think we can do evil to ourselves (though that may well be the upshot of our actions). Even suicides think their self-willed death (and in their eyes whatever, if anything, follows therefrom) is better than their present hellish condition. Yet, as experience abundantly and sadly documents, what we think will fulfill us usually doesn't work or at least last. Thus we tend mistakenly to identify happiness with maximizing sensual pleasures and minimizing sources of bodily discomfort or pain. In effect we try to satisfy a non-corporeal appetite by satisfying merely physical appetites. This mistake points to a misjudgment: the conclusion (in which the imagination always has a hand) that this or that good will make us happy. For this mistake, the will is ultimately to blame, because it alone can force the mind to seek the deepest causes. The mind can only do what the will commands it to do.

8. We cannot choose or love what we don't know. In other words, the will in itself is not only restless and dissatisfied but blind as well.

The knowledge reported by our mind need not be fully true to reality. The mind might offer the will only apparent goods, exaggerated or minimized to the point of falsehood. Does this distortion mean that the mind has erred? Yes, but only indirectly. It does mean that the mind functions well, truthfully, only so long as it is allowed to do its natural probing, only so long as it is not deflected by some interfering outside agent, which leads to a ninth self-evident moral and psychological principle.

9. To deliver truth, our reason must become wholly voluntary, will-directed and -defined, as distinguished from the half-thinking that is only partially voluntary.

Often our mind is filled with a seemingly incessant, internal dialogue of sentence fragments, reflecting a welter of desires and aversions that are often contradictory because we have acknowledged no hierarchy among them. We don't bother to reason fully, unless doing so somehow seems to promise more happiness than not. Yet how much we reason, what we reason about, and when we reason are all calls made by the often impatient and even desperate will in its craving for bliss, often spurred on by pulsating lower appetites.

The all too human reality is that hardly ever do men and women sufficiently reason so as to minimize and even perhaps eliminate wrong assessments—something the mind is fully capable of doing if given its head and spared the haste that invariably makes waste. Thus the usual scenario for all this intellectual and moral erring born of our own interference is as follows: the lower instincts, when left undomesticated by the will, tend to divorce sensual pleasure from biological need and, with their incessant clamor, to bully the insufficiently independent will. The will in turn tends to bully the truth-finding and -telling mind into malfunctioning. A rushed, partial judgment sets us up for bad or wrong choices: we don't stop, look, and listen enough before we leap. There, in summary, is how humans go wrong. When the appetite of the will, through its own faulty, blameworthy stewardship, is not fed an object that at least comes close to satisfying its instinctive craving for happiness, it tends to go haywire, to avenge itself, to cheat itself of what alone can tranquilize it into fulfillment.

The problem is not selfishness by itself, or even the feverish pursuit of pleasure, but the failure to heed the objective inadequacy of quite limited goods to slake our seemingly endless appetite for bliss. But does reinforcing the very neglected truth-finding mind

set us free? Will it rein in our blind appetite for bliss? After all, to know truth is not necessarily to will it, to do it automatically. And that leads us to at least a preliminary conclusion as to *how* we're to comport ourselves if we're to aspire effectively to the enlightened, satisfying life that ratifies our being.

10. Through a combination of both foresight (careful scrutiny of options) and hindsight (studying both positive and negative feedback), we are supposed to discover, via a certain amount of experimentation, what works and what doesn't, what steps lead to enriching our life and what missteps deprive us of the bliss we seem to be made for.

The mind must be allowed to do its job of reading reality; the will must submit itself to the mind's findings, while instructing it to find, again somewhat experientially, which are less and less inadequate objects to love. To do so, the will must stop exaggerating the pleasurable worth of the objects of our physical appetites. The will, instead, must exercise its native sovereignty by working toward the submission of mind, will, imagination, and corporeal appetites to objective reality. It must impose the tandem of reason and reality on our bodily needs and cravings; this imposition goes by the name of moral virtues, especially the so-called cardinal virtues.

These good moral habits give us, as it were, a "second nature" (or, perhaps better, develop and give firm shape to what was before only a very rudimentary nature). They steer us away from the two extremes of compulsive, unthinking excess (too much) or defect (too little) and towards just enough. Virtue represents a "golden mean," a pinnacle between undesirable valleys on either side. By thus domesticating our bodily drives, both the undeceived mind and the disinfatuated will are progressively freed to explore for their respective objects: truth and goodness. And as they do so, the joint quest proves successful in part and thus progressively more rewarding. It may not yet be euphoric bliss, but this growing

happiness is certainly deeper and longer-lasting than any we were able to patch together or improvise during our pell-mell days of unenlightened self-interest.

4

Own Yourself

Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.
– Francis Bacon, *Novum organum*, 1620

Than self-restraint there is nothing better.
– Lao-Tzu, *The Simple Way*, *circa* 604-531 B.C.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'own yourself'? If I don't own myself, who does?" Interestingly enough, the same freedom-brandishing inquirer, in practically the next breath can claim, and often does, "The devil [or genes, nurture, whatever] made me do it." Behind this common inconsistency may lie more than just self-serving convenience or the mistaken confusion of political liberty with interior freedom or self-possession.

The freedom from external restraints or coercion, a birthright recognized and upheld by most legitimate civil governments, is one thing. Quite another is the absence of internal or internalized restraints—the topic that concerns us now. The former is freedom *from*, the latter freedom *for*. By freedom we mean the greater or

less power of self-determination that rises above both corporeal tugs and psychological fears. Literally millions of people in this century alone have given their lives to keep tyranny and oppression at bay. Yet perhaps even more have busied themselves with the futile and ironic—but no less deadly—task of avoiding the onus of personal freedom and (especially) responsibility.

We all tend to dig in our heels when the time comes "to pay the price," to "sacrifice for your liberty," as a once-popular ballad put it. We seek refuge in the anonymous, amorphous, acephalous crowd. We exaggerate influences on our behavior, allowing them to turn into mandates or compulsions. Our body, the crowd, maxims, personal whims, and phobias bite into our behavioral choices. We somewhat knowingly and freely (though barely) consent to misdeeds that become, thanks to prior dalliance and foreplay, psychologically overpowering. "I can resist everything," as Oscar Wilde was wont to complain, "but temptation." Tired of choosing and having to answer for our choices, we can desperately want to be emotionally overwhelmed, say, by fervent rage or libido. We anxiously reassure ourselves that "we can't help ourselves"; so "let's stop berating ourselves." We gullibly fall for the apparent "deliverance" of determinism (and similar "-isms"). We recklessly or naively, sometimes even deliberately, welcome circumstances or companions that prey on our weaknesses, inflaming our passions into an immoral juggernaut.

Eking out Freedom

Yet, for all those pressures, there remains at bottom a smidgen of freedom and choice—so our still-not-totally gagged conscience tells us. However habitual and even compulsive misdeeds become, there nevertheless is (or *was*, at the very least) a point when we could have abstained or, more positively, gone in a virtuous direction. There's usually just enough of us—foreknowledge and volition—in

the various deeds we author to merit either censure or praise (though certainly not very much of either). Willy-nilly, all our deeds fall somewhere on the spectrum between freedom and compulsion. Naturally we're loathe to admit that we're often not our own master, that we seldom serve our own best interests. But, in a rare access of honesty and bravery, we are led to admit that we do own ourselves, though only partially. What would seem to be even more culpable is the willful reluctance to face and do something about this moral ambiguity. Isn't it a bit perverse—or just childish—to revel in remaining mini-men and mini-women? We're so busy mouthing exculpatory incantations ("we're only human" or "to err is human") that we fail to see we are barely human. It's our semi-conscious, semi-voluntary failure to mature into personhood that makes continued erring so easy and likely, and we have plenty of company. As hard as it might be today to bring people around to acknowledging that they're sick and therefore stand in need of some sort of cure, it's much more challenging to get them to accept the diagnosis of their maladies: the admission that their ills and crippled freedom are self-inflicted.

"Till we have faces," till we take virtuous charge of our lives, till we define who we are and are called to become (on the basis of what at root we know ourselves objectively to be), we'll keep on getting pushed around, but principally by our brain-dead, runted selves. We may be constitutionally forgetful or clumsy, but none of us can claim to be necessarily errant. Ours is usually a dwelling divided against itself, unless and until we commit ourselves to making of our lives something noble and beautiful. When we're not energized by an overarching, challenging purpose, our almost good will or our nearly good intentions so often get caught off-guard, side-tracked, pushed out of shape. Moral mediocrity reigns by default.

To understand better our episodic but major moral failures, we must understand what has subtly been happening to us. How has our character been developing; what habits of mind have taken

root in us? This exploration should be carried out on two fronts. Let's scrutinize our ultimate motives, especially when our deeds tend toward being exemplary (and complacency, if not worse, can set in). Then let's track down any possible imbalances that have crept into our doing even good, right, necessary deeds. Often we fail to heed the due limits that ought to have circumscribed the doing of them. Being affectionate, making money, resting, eating, educating ourselves, enjoying beauty, and taking interest in cultural matters—these are all good things. But when we disregard measure and proportion in our enjoyment of them, we quite unknowingly arrest our moral growth and even begin to shrink. Yet we won't grow very far if we merely try to yank out the weeds. Negative habits, concur most moral guides, are best crowded out with an abundance of positive deeds.

At the very least, don't we all harbor inconsistencies between long-range objectives and immediate goals, between ends and means, between our deep-seated appetite for happiness and our craving for mere gratification? It is this split personality that healthy introspection is supposed to uncover in support of some overdue housecleaning and greater self-possession. Before we can successfully address our happiness deficit, we must firmly ensconce ourselves in the driver's seat by trying to free both mind and will from assorted untruths and puppy loves. Otherwise "the closing of the American mind" (the title of Allan Bloom's 1987 best-selling cultural critique) may become permanent.

A step-by-step program of liberating virtue would thus seem to be in order. First we're to muzzle and discipline our merely corporeal appetites and thus graduate from unenlightened self-interest. That goal, though perhaps intermediate, will necessarily entail an arduous program of acquiring key moral virtues. But, thanks to these virtuous exertions, we can hoist ourselves from the first moral stage (self-knowledge) to the second (self-possession). At its most basic, the project consists in at least deferring those gratifications that would otherwise hinder the pursuit of certain

personal objectives. This self-discipline leads to integrity, to a more unified character. It points to dominion over a once splintered and contradictory moral landscape.

A self-owning person is (or at least can be) a self-directing one. A lack of moral virtue lies at the root of many contemporary identity crises and tortuous mental hells. Without it, each of us is a jumble of impulses, glands, platitudes, thoughtless reactions, and various fears, especially fear of rejection. Those who don't or won't define, affirm, and commit themselves are in fact bereft of a self to discover, however much they might probe themselves on Paris's left bank or amid the vales of Vail or Aspen. Let's start this inquiry into the need for self-conquest where it all began.

ANCIENT GREECE: BIRTHPLACE OF ETHICS

Why did Western civilization dawn in Greece midway through the last millennium B.C.? A number of factors, many even physical, converged to make this cultural birth possible. A benign, largely temperate climate reigned over a number of relatively independent Hellenic port cities, many of them islands, involved in shipping and trade in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean. Their maritime commerce, with ships transporting goods to and fro, exposed Greeks to various cultures. Along with growing affluence, there also arose a division of labor among citizens that allowed these small cities to become largely self-sufficient city-states. Education could then take off and outgrow mere hand-me-downs within the family and its branches. Slaves provided their masters the leisure indispensable to cultural development.

Now this slowly accumulating freedom, wealth, and education also spelled the gradual obsolescence of the Greeks' old natural religion and their former ways of austere life. Moreover, as these Hellenes came to see how the world worked, they began to discover

natural causes to replace gods and goddesses, thus giving rise to both science and philosophy. So long as theirs had been a hand-to-mouth existence, ancient Greeks disposed of little leisure. What good qualities they seemingly had were not so much virtues (habits freely chosen and interiorized) as circumstantial impositions (diminished opportunities to go wrong). But with the decline of the gods (and their threats of retribution hereafter, if not here) and the proliferation of gratifications, Greeks began to grow soft and to indulge themselves—why not? They thus forfeited their manliness, courage, and diligence in their shortsighted pursuits. (This decay occurred also in late-republican Rome and throughout the Western world in the second half of this century.)

Now, the more thoughtful, Greeks were not pleased with what they saw about them: social decay and personal lives unraveling. Augmenting pleasures and sparing themselves pains, though apparently the formula for fulfillment, were proving costly to justice and the common good, not to mention to individuals. Whetted appetites clamored for ever more entertainment, when not for genuine perversions. As reasonableness and virtue declined, an infantile paralysis of mind and will began to set in. The merely rationalist and rhetorical game of sophistry was taking over, displacing the search for and love of wisdom that defines philosophy.

Athenians in particular, of whom we know more, seemed to be heeding less and less the prescription "know thyself." Then, along about 2,500 years ago there came on the scene a man who stood out because of his claim to know nothing. With his ceaseless questioning, of himself no less than of his interlocutors, he tried to get all parties to think, to reflect, to analyze, especially on moral matters. This self-dubbed "gadfly" was Socrates, Plato's mentor, who was later put to death on the trumped-up charge of undermining the gods and unsettling Athens's young men. But perhaps the most subversive utterance of Socrates was his immortal claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

For him self-scrutiny would disclose that various appetites were engaged in a civil war. Socrates could see that contemporaries were semi-consciously and semi-voluntarily surrendering to their whims and wants. Thus for him the classical definition of humans as "reasonable animals" was more a goal than a given, more a point of arrival than of departure.

YOU CAN'T LIVE CROOKED AND THINK STRAIGHT

While both more mystical *and* systematic, Plato duly filled the shoes of his master. He saw that most humans were living in a shadow world of self-deceit, failing to reason their way to dominion over their unruly appetites and instincts. Despite vocal contrary claims, this uncritical commitment to self-indulgence was not working. Its practitioners found themselves duped again and again. How to get off the self-defeating treadmill? As laid down by Plato in his *Republic*, the benighted stand in need of both philosopher-kings and philosopher-rescuers.

In his memorable parable of the cave, humanity finds itself trapped in a huge cavern on the back wall of which are reflected shadows from the world outside. The imprisoned inmates cannot distinguish between the real objects and their shadows because they can't turn their heads around. They can only rid themselves of the deception if former inmates return to the cave. The latter, through both honesty and growth in virtue, have managed to escape singly and to saturate their minds and hearts with the real world. They are consequently eager to share their discoveries. Yet even then those habituated to the shadow world don't readily assent to second-hand truth. They can only take it on faith, until they, too, escape to the sun-drenched world outside.

Now there might never be a cavern if society were radically to restructure itself along the best educational lines and to adopt a

wise philosopher-king. The parable is doubtless autobiographical. Plato was frustrated in his untiring efforts to get his peers to take charge of their lives by corrective habits of reflection, virtue, and meditation.

It fell to Aristotle, Plato's disciple, to develop and systematize ancient Greece's moral philosophy in his landmark *Nichomachean Ethics*. He managed to come forth with a map to, and rationale for, enlightened human behavior. Less successful were his tutorial efforts to raise up a philosopher-king in the person of Alexander, son and heir of King Philip of Macedonia. Let's attempt an overview of Aristotle's ethical system.

Where do we tend to go wrong? Aristotle pointed out four main areas: (1) we magnify pleasures; (2) we do likewise with pains and fears, especially when pursuing longer-range, harder challenges; (3) we tend to defraud others, not giving them their due; (4) we usually do not think well; not even afterwards, when faced with unforeseen negative consequences, do we sufficiently study our mistaken moves. "I count him braver," wrote Aristotle, "who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies, for the hardest victory is the victory over self." By practicing self-discipline in these four areas through better reasoning, we free ourselves from the impositions of blind appetite, of compulsive, instinctive behavior. The resulting golden mean of virtue represents a peak between two contrary extremes: courage, for example, towers over both cowardice (irrational exaggeration of risk) and recklessness (irrational disregard of hazards). Thus was born the doctrine of the so-called four cardinal virtues, traditionally called temperance (or moderation), fortitude, justice, and prudence (or practical wisdom). They're so called, not because cardinals, be they men or birds, come already equipped with them. Rather, in Latin, *cardo* means hinge. Thus on these good, acquired habits rests and swings the whole moral enterprise. A synonym would be "pivotal."

For Aristotle virtue *is* truth: living according to reality, rectifying one's life. By living more reflectively and virtuously, humans'

capacity to reason would disentangle and assert itself. Men and women could then engage in more specifically human pursuits, such as art, intellectual discourse, contemplation, friendship, family, governance. Seeing how shortsighted hedonism backfired, Aristotle taught any receptive fellow Greeks that a life of enlightened self-interest would solve the nagging human problem of how to attain character, fulfillment, and happiness. These good habits would form a second nature, heeding which would make people fully reasonable.

Aristotle also taught that to know the truth of how humans are best to behave was virtually to ensure that they do so. For him, perhaps because he always generously followed the lead of reason, there was no distinction between knowing and desiring the truth. Vice was simply ignorance. Thus it fell to later philosophers to discover the broader appetite of our will, its native indeterminacy or freedom and the consequent ability either to do ill to ourselves or to raise ourselves to unsuspected heights of generous self-giving.

NOT ENLIGHTENED ENOUGH?

But this ethical program didn't work out quite as Aristotle and other assorted sages had thought and hoped. They had generalized from their own commendable but particular cases of identifying knowledge of the truth with loving and pursuing it. They thus had oversold their ethical program, promising more than it could deliver. They, or at least their disciples, were left confused and depressed by failures—personal or vicarious—to follow the moral map. Where did this erring come from, since the disciple had been shown what was clearly the best, maybe the only, way to live?

Had the Aristotle, however, analyzed how other humans err, they would have discovered both free will and with it the possibility for a third moral stage. He and his partners in virtue should have continued to heed Delphi. For their followers as for us, weakness

and infidelities intervene between the theoretical ideal and practice. We tire of all this thinking and forethought and measuring. Even enlightened love of self doesn't necessarily eliminate inconsistencies and thoughtless impulses or reactions. The virtuous life, if indeed cultivated, helps prevent us from getting pushed around by embroidered attractions or aversions. It also can lessen our short-changing others. But is virtue its own reward?

To the extent one has struggled to own and domesticate oneself, to that degree one can decide what to do with the rest of one's life. For many ancient sages, excluding Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, good habits didn't usher in definitive, lasting bliss. If anything, virtues tended to make their possessors priggish in their ivory-tower righteousness, smugly superior to the self-gratifying masses. Enlightened self-love alone proved an insufficient motive to be faithful to the program. In moments of weakness, the sirens of fake blisses could still cast their spell. As a result, the cardinal virtues didn't spread throughout society as hoped. Social decadence continued to take its ever broader toll. Gradually a cloud of pessimism and melancholy spread throughout the upper, learned classes, first in Greece and then in Imperial Rome.

The Renaissance and the Enlightenment were periods that represented rebirths of classical studies and ideals, of humanism and virtuous self-cultivation. But, truth to tell, they were probably more a tool of liberation from conventional, organized religion than an honest commitment to reason and virtue. Consequently, they failed to restore the ancients' map to human felicity. Ethics or morality as an objective instruction manual for the human machine fell on hard times, leaving many skeptical as to its viability. People also lost faith in the mind's ability to read reality aright. Skepticism, relativism, materialism soon occupied the vacuum. Today, how we are to live is, apparently, anybody's guess.

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Nevertheless, the original challenge still stands. We need to rectify our behavior: to see things (both appetites and their due, adequate objects) as they objectively are and to manage them accordingly. To be ruled by reason, we need to exit the platonic cavern of our shadow world. If we know the best ways to live, but inconsistently depart from them, our impatient, desperate heart will overpower foot-dragging reason, leaving us confused and miserable. But even then a distinction drawn by Aristotle can point to the way out. People can abjure misdeeds born of weakness and lack of reflection and remedy them with a belated return to reason. But if we rape reason by claiming that behavior that frustrates our appetite for happiness is working fine, that in effect our misdeeds are fulfilling us, there's nothing to be done, until this lie is acknowledged.

The moral challenge, in sum, is twofold: to get both thought and desires, however slight, to conform to reality. Only then does experiential reward confirm theoretical persuasion. Classical ethics cannot be faulted for advancing only as far as it did. But it need not have stopped where it did. If a third moral stage, higher than enlightened self-interest, is to be reached, it must rest on that second moral stage.

When we don't earnestly cultivate the cardinal virtues (which is the same as saying husband ourselves), we run the risk of never finding out whether or not we are built in a definite way, to which structure we must answer. In the absence of that discovery, we can easily conclude we can live any which way with impunity, since ours, presumably, is an utterly clean slate. But if we reflectively act on our primal hunger for happiness, we can find out, if we're truthful to ourselves, which behaviors contribute to fulfillment and which detract from it. In this sorting process, we come to trust our unhampered mind's ability to know reality. How else could we possibly ascertain how we're built and how we're called

to foster and more sharply delineate that constitution? Morality is nothing else than the largely practical science of determining which deeds satisfy and which thwart our appetite for authentic bliss.

But when ethics is not grounded in at least a subjectively verified notion of what it means to be human—inferring how humans are built and even, one hopes, for what—it has no foundation, no touchstone, no justifying theory. When that occurs, many people pattern their comportment on what everybody else is doing or thinking. But since when has the crowd proved all that infallible? Or, conversely, how one is to live can easily become a strictly private affair (valid only for its unique author). But what will stop that moral project from becoming an arbitrary, self-serving whim?

Here as elsewhere is confirmed Aristotle's observation that, while truth may be one, like a circle's center, there are many ways —360, for starters—to go wrong. When people begin to doubt common sense or the mind's ability to know reality (or, usually an accompanying movement, to distrust authority and tradition reflexively), the effect is blindness. And in the kingdom of the blind, as bitter experience shows, how persuasive is the one-eyed demagogue! So, when the ancients' commonsensical realism (or, a reflective step or two beyond, their philosophical realism) is jettisoned, morality cannot help but become a patchwork (and needless to add, the less demanding, the better). This moral groundlessness is visible in today's five most commonly held answers to the nagging question "What will make me happy?"

TRUTH'S TOUCHSTONE

1. While religion, with its ostensible "good news," addresses the same craving for happiness, it does so obliquely, remotely and, if at all, paradoxically: not so much here as hereafter. Moreover, with its otherworldly emphasis on deferring and self-denial, religion, at least the Judeo-Christian amalgam, seems to go

contrary to the ways most people explore for whatever happiness they can glean from this life. This perceived conflict explains much of today's lukewarmness among, and attrition from, the dwindling ranks of church, synagogue, and mosque. God or his envoys do not seem to answer convincingly the all-too-human challenge: "What's in it for me here and now?" Religion seems to drain this life of meaning ("just avoid pitfalls"). Proponents of religion or at least tradition tell us: "You can't see or understand, at least for now. So, take it on faith: trust those who have your best interests uppermost." Authoritative religion or tradition is much better at saying what not to do than what, positively, to do. Then it comes across as an onerous, arbitrary, extrinsic, legalistic imposition guided by its promoters' own interests.

2. If not the West's organized religion, what about Eastern mysticism in all its variants and "New Age" embodiments? Isn't transcendental meditation the key to unlock peace and contentment? Granted, humans generate precious little reflection and meditation. Granted also that our benighted desires often spell distress. But is the solution to strip ourselves of all personality, suppressing both mind and will, while letting ourselves be re-absorbed into the all-pervasive deity whence we came? Besides turning their backs on the "evil," encompassing body and an equally perverse society, pantheistic Eastern mystics, with their self-absorption and incantations, strike many as seeking something not unlike suspended animation.

3. So, if neither Western nor Eastern religion, what about the psychological healing arts, which for many today serve as a substitute religion? Under their tutelage many are able to disinter irrational phobias and thus more or less undo psychic abysses and compulsions. Who, moreover, does not appreciate the opportunity to unburden oneself to a sympathetic ear, even if a well-paid one? So far, so good. But in psychologists'

commitment to drain off guilt almost at any cost, might not these soul doctors consent to "anything goes"? When we don't elevate deeds to the level of ethical principles, we invariably lower those standards to the level of actual practice.

If we frustrate our happiness appetite by not feeding it what it really craves, ought not we to feel some reflex guilt or shame to warn us back to reality, similar to how the hint of a painful burn elicits an automatic withdrawal of the hand? Many psychiatric practitioners seem to imply that, since there's no way we can change or improve, the best thing is to accept and love ourselves the way we are—and get rid of all those nasty taboos and neurotically impossible goals. But can we really live any old way, scot-free, and still pretend to address our wearying hunger for happiness?

4. These three "technical" answers have attracted zealous adherents, but surely they account for less than a quarter of the American population. The vast majority of us are unreflective, bungling moral amateurs most of the time. Positive emotions garnished with rose-colored dreams often conspire to dupe us into thinking we can morally soar at will, that we can change overnight, if we really want to, if for once we can summon enough of that hitherto elusive will power. Actually there's everything right with these common dreams, with our homespun scenarios for fulfillment. When thoroughly sifted, our untried answers to the nagging happiness question probably boil down to "love," "commitment," "honesty," "authenticity," "unselfishness. . . ." Not a bad list, but all too often these desirable qualities remain a dreamy wish list, honored about as often and as long as New Year's resolutions. The goals are fine; it's the steps thereto that prove woefully unrealistic.

Most of us can see, both personally and vicariously, that selfishness backfires and generosity fulfills, but try as we might,

unenlightened selfishness usually ends up ruling the roost. We see what would make ourselves and others happy, but we somehow lack the wherewithal to redeem those dreams. However many Hallmark cards or do-gooding *Reader's Digest* sermonettes we may ingest, moral and spiritual inconsistency and frustration reign in the humdrum, workaday world. So, at least, all those country-western ballads remind us with their tales of broken hearts and vows. It's almost enough to make happiness skeptics of us all.

5. As if that were not bad enough, we fickle humans also have to put up with the supercilious sneers and condescending cynicism of our intellectual, professional, financial, artistic, and even moral betters. Driven by ambition, pride, rivalry, plus uncommon mental dexterity and intellectual acuity, these "superior" men and women have usually mastered the stuff of deferred gratification, at least enough to get where they are. Theirs is a veneer of fragmented virtues, both intellectual and moral, wherewith these prigs or snobs or simply nabobs can look down upon the lowly, bungling, tippling, largely "illiterate" mob. Such titans on stilts may not be manifestly happy (if anything, it's probable they are interiorly contorted and bitter), but at least they are high enough to see through others' thoughtless schemes.

By way of summary: First, religion tends to favor the "narrow path" here, while promising bliss only hereafter: not exactly a formula for broad acceptance. Second, renouncing the moral struggle, Eastern religionists claim to have landed beyond good and evil—and maybe even beyond humanity. Third, psychiatry (and psychologized liberal religion) tries to get rid of guilt (or sin) by getting rid of any behavioral norms (or commandments); thus does it bequeath us, "I'm OK, you're OK, [and even] God's OK." Fourth, the vast crowd of frustrated, ordinary men and women see a succession of ineffectual dreams slip through their fingers,

even with the best of intentions and the truest of aims. And, finally, the proud and powerful elite may avoid some of the pitfalls that swallow up others, but in the process they often grow embittered high up on their lofty perches. How easy it is to come up with inadequate, unsatisfactory answers to the elusive happiness question! All one has to do is to ignore that at our being's core there is an objective orientation to genuine happiness.

REFUSAL TO GROW STILL MORE

It was the fifth, proud moral stance that infested classical moral theory, giving the whole ethical project a bad name. That's why Augustine referred to the ancient sages' virtues as "splendid vices." There's nothing wrong with the cardinal virtues, in theory or practice, that can't be cured by a combination of generosity and humility. The self-possession earned by virtue, you see, can go either way. It can be deployed as self-giving or, as readily, for self-getting. Thanks to virtuous striving, we can find ourselves, maybe for the first time, as part of an elite. Aren't practitioners of enlightened self-interest almost as rare as Lamborghinis?

Interestingly enough, the word "virtue" stems from the Latin *vis*, which means strength, power. Virtuous persons can do more and reach farther, thanks to heightened abilities to concentrate both their mind and efforts. Compared with more lowly peers, men and women strengthened by some virtues can be, if they wish, more immune to both padded pleasures or pains. Further, they can, if they so desire, more readily give others their due, while giving themselves the reflective fruits of the deliberation they owe themselves. All in all, thanks to the self-dominion that liberates both mind and will, they can be more thoughtful and deliberate, more dispassionate and free, certainly less hassled.

What actually happens, however, is that people tend to pick and choose among the cardinal virtues, cultivating only those

required to achieve their ultimate goal. The most common scenario is to limit the intake of certain pleasures (moderation) and to steel oneself in face of hardship, tedium, and fears (fortitude). This is often done solely to succeed professionally, artistically, or athletically. By not cultivating simultaneously both counterbalancing fairness (justice) and practical wisdom (prudence), one easily ends up shortchanging, but now more shrewdly and powerfully, both others and oneself. The same selective imbalance, for example, lies behind obsequiousness (exaggerating one's debts to others) or paralyzing scrupulosity (prudence's inflated caricature in cahoots with cowardice).

When one does not strive to live *all* the cardinal virtues together, there is no true passage from unenlightened to enlightened self-interest. The former only becomes more cunning and artful in its unacknowledged self-deceptions and self-privations. Lesser, baser, commoner pleasures are scorned in the throes of a more sophisticated hedonism. Hardships are only borne to catapult one to a higher pedestal. In any case, such pretenders to moderation and fortitude can harness their humanity, less distractedly and fitfully, to long-term goals and often log no few accomplishments. Their superior acquisitions and attainments, forged amid uncommon self-discipline, set them apart from the more bungling mass of humanity.

CHARACTER'S CANCER

Behold the worst of all vices, more subtle and deadly than the more conspicuous and therefore humbling vices or just occasional misdeeds born of an untamed nature. Conceit can cunningly hide behind a veneer of virtues; actually it is often the generating force behind them. Many are the proud, self-respecting persons who overcome lust, dishonesty, or a bad temper by thinking such failings are beneath their dignity. As C.S. Lewis wrote: "Pride is spiritual

cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense." When this second moral stage of enlightened behavior does not go beyond itself, it paradoxically turns rancid, transforming the proud, complacent possessor of something approximating virtue into a veritable misanthrope.

It is this proud, exaggerated sense of self-worth and its craving for recognition, repulsively obvious to all except the "worthy," that arrested the noble attempt to develop a moral science of how humans are to conduct themselves. The ancient sages stopped short in their self-knowing and self-owning and thus turned bad. Had classical ethics really delivered authentic happiness, its popularity would have known no bounds. As it was, we can imagine moral outsiders opining, "If that's the repulsive result of ethics, we want no part of it." Thus truncated, ethics was dismissed as a mere hobby or curio of ancient pagans.

Many would lay the blame for natural morality's derailment on such as Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, their intellectual heirs, assorted existentialists, and sundry deconstructionists. Such savants certainly provide an intellectual justification for deriding and even abandoning the quest for ethics. But their corrosive effect would have been much less had there not been abroad a wholesale fulfillment deficit, which they artfully exploited. Had, instead, a complete ethical program been developed and spread, one that effectively feeds the deep-seated human longing for bliss, there simply would not have been much demand for contrary views.

But it is vice—not virtue—that has given ethics a bad name, even though it is virtue that makes vicious conceit possible. Pride precisely feeds on the competitive edges that deferred gratification sires. But what a different world ours would be if its self-knowers and self-owners were to occupy themselves in helpfully raising others to their superior level—and beyond. Then virtue and the generosity it makes possible would be seen for the liberating and fulfilling things that they truly are. Instead, instinctive aversion to priggish pride has spilled over onto the acquired moral qualities that alone

feed human happiness and form character. But, now wary of termite-like pride and its confusions, let's press forward in our quest for a fully reliable moral program.

A THIRD MORAL STAGE?

The two failures of counterproductive virtue without love and ineffectual love without virtue are very instructive for the whole ethical enterprise. They don't disprove the viability of a moral science. If anything, they show the need for a moral map by documenting the damage wrought by straying from the plan. They also reveal the danger of not living all the cardinal virtues. There's nothing wrong with these two failures except their incompleteness—something that can be cured by uniting one to the other. They imply the need to press on to yet a third moral stage. Ours, apparently, is to be a loving self-discipline, a toughened love. The cardinal virtues represent an indispensable condition—the wherewithal of self-ownership—for authentic love. Truly loving others is the only motive that can save moral virtues from degenerating into self-defeating conceit.

We're closer now to being able to answer the whole, hoary question of whether there can be an objective guide to happiness that may be universally valid for everybody. Upon observing which ways of behaving developed human nature and which did not, the ancient Greek and Roman sages thought they had discovered the successful formula for ethics—for happiness, finally—in their program of virtuous, enlightened self-interest. Yet in the end, the result was only an apparent (or temporary) fulfillment, though certainly a giant step beyond indiscriminate hedonism. In reality, it was insuficient because it did not adequately feed our specifically human appetite for bliss. The ancient sages ended up cynically superior or bewilderingly sad, eventually tossing in the ethical towel. For all practical purposes, their pessimism and skepticism have

dogged all subsequent generations and ethical projects down to our day.

But even if those venerable thinkers abandoned the moral task half-finished, let's try to see how the classical Greeks and Romans arrested both their intellectual and ethical growth by mistaking a necessary, intermediate goal for the final end. In the next chapter we'll ask how these philosophers might have discovered, on their own, what may well be life's ultimate aim or purpose. We might be, after all, on the threshold of *the* virtue that is its own reward.

5

GIVE YOURSELF

Love sought is good, but given unsought is better.
– William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 1601-02

LET'S INQUIRE as to whether humans find their highest fulfillment in disinterestedly loving and serving others. Before doing so, however, we do well to ask why our ancient Greek moralists did not take this step, at least theoretically, into the third moral stage.

Enlightened and virtuous self-interest represented a huge ethical step above and beyond rank hedonism, as we just saw. But it did not sustain itself, historically, as a viable philosophy of life, however much subsequent sages have tried to resurrect this noble experiment, at least for themselves individually, if not for others.

A century or so, however, after the city-state's golden age, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and other moralists did not apparently experience any inadequacy of the second moral stage. These original lovers of, and seekers after, wisdom did not, ostensibly, experience any vital dissatisfaction—at least there are no historical clues that they did. Consequently they saw no need to revise and complete

their moral system. For them it was whole and viable, satisfying and fulfilling. Why hanker after anything more, if what you already have gives good results?

Note, however, that this trio of Athenians didn't revel alone in their moral discoveries, hoarding them for themselves. All three were teachers, thinkers, writers, tutors, gadflies, doubtless moved by the experience and conviction that their moral system had objective validity for one and all. Perhaps theirs were simply fortunate circumstances, to which were added honest personal effort, both moral and intellectual, and a greater willingness to heed the Delphic oracle and thus to know themselves truthfully. In any event the three sages did manage to escape from the shadow world of mere opinion and uncertainties (Plato's cave) into a solid, real world. Such a breakthrough was so rewarding and superior that they couldn't keep it to themselves, however resistant and scoffing their shadows-satisfied audiences might prove to be. Out of gratitude for this liberating enlightenment, they could not *not* teach.

ENLIGHTENING OTHERS

In fact, they saw educating or illuminating their more or less benighted peers in the arguments for reality as the only way to help them. Many ancient thinkers, especially this threesome, basing themselves on their own experience, believed that to know the truth was to live it, abide by it, keep it (as they in fact did). Conversely, immorality was for them only ignorance of how to live. So, if they were to help others to live enlightened lives and to forsake self-defeating pleasure-grasping, their grateful task boiled down to teaching, discussing, and arguing with them. Once disciples *saw* what the enlightened life consisted of, they would necessarily adopt and heed it in their comportment.

Now, you might quickly object that our three philosophers were extraordinarily wrong (or inhabited quite an ivory tower, far

removed from incessant calls to human weakness). How else could they claim that to know what ought to be done almost automatically ensures our doing it? "Why," you might add, "I spend most of my time *not* doing what I very well know I ought to be doing. So, what gives here, anyway?" That's not only a good question, but a telling one, too. All of us are generally so weak or unmotivated that our deeds often contradict the moral principles we at least pay lip service to. You see, neither Socrates nor Plato nor Aristotle had discovered the human will, our broader appetite for goodness, our innate power of self-determination (and self-frustration, one might add), our free will, in a word. You would be less surprised at this glaring omission and more forgiving of the overlooking trio if you tried harder to put yourselves in their shoes.

The three philosophers did not explicitly describe a moral stage beyond enlightened self-interest. Yet the reason can only be because they were already living it as part of their undifferentiated search and love for wisdom, without realizing that they had gone beyond enlightened self-interest. For them, to know the truth of the human condition was not only the same as living in accord with that truth, but also the same as wanting to share it as teachers with others. For them, existentially, the way they experi-enced the vital process, to know, to live, and to share were inseparable aspects of the very same reality. It wasn't so much that they inhabited a temptationless ivory tower, so much as that they found themselves generously acting out the answer to the question, "Now that I morally possess myself, what am I do about it?" They were so busily and joyfully dedicated to teaching others the liberating truth that they had already discovered through experience the ultimate goal of life, what we might call the third and final moral stage.

THE TRIO'S MORAL PROGRESSION

Thanks to their honesty and generosity, Socrates and his disciple Plato, and the latter's disciple Aristotle, had courageously looked

within themselves. There they discovered that much of their own behavior was inconsistent, unthinking, and plagued by questionable motives. They admitted to themselves in their growing self-acquaintance that they were short-changing themselves and consequently were their own worst enemies (though probably much less so than many of their peers). This acknowledgment moved them to renounce what remained of hedonistic attachments (equally mind-dulling and will-binding) and thus to move fairly early out of the first moral stage into the second.

You see, their increasing self-knowledge was not merely negative. They were also reflectively discovering the general contours of the human condition. In the light of these findings, they were coming to identify which deeds are humanly concordant, developing, fulfilling good deeds and which are the opposite. Thus was born the ethical theory of the moral virtues, especially those called "cardinal" (and their opposite vices). They were to cultivate these good habits by filtering their appetites through reason, lest in haste they unduly inflate or deflate the worth of the objects of those appetites. They imposed reality on their desires.

While the trio realized that building virtue and razing vices would require no little personal effort and self-discipline, it must have been a thrill to these pioneers to realize that they had midwifed an incalculable boon for all humanity. Heeding the oracle had disclosed to them—and whoever wanted to listen—the secret to human happiness in the form of an objective moral science valid for everyone. Living these virtues was also liberating their mind from the appetites' interference that led to intellectual erring. They were thus empowered not only to map how humans are to live (moral philosophy), but also to delineate the non-manifest causes of all reality (metaphysical philosophy). At their virtuous hands the mind was free to discover answers to the ultimate questions that had long gnawed at human consciousness. Much more than their own private pursuit of fulfillment, consequently, was at stake. They were to lead others to both practical and theoretical truth.

That social mission must have also reinforced their commitment to personal virtue.

LIVING TRUTH LED TO SHARING IT

Since for these men knowing themselves was equivalent to owning themselves virtuously, their pursuit of virtue must have been relatively unwavering and uncommonly rewarding. They were probably spared the temporizing and backfiring that characterize the moral ambiguities and weaknesses afflicting most people's lives. This speculation is further borne out by the fact that their owning themselves and thus appropriating deep insights into reality led them almost automatically to the desire to share their insights with their contemporaries. Their progression from self-knowledge to self-discipline and thence to self-giving was a seamless escalation: moral stages two and three followed almost inexorably from their having taken the first step. Might not the same happen to us if we were less wavering and calculating?

Furthermore, their generous giving of themselves as disinterested and unflagging teachers of the Athenians (with Socrates's even assenting to being put to death by their authorities) must have so filled them with joy that their cup of happiness contained little room for anything more. They found their all-consuming and all-rewarding mission and vocation in spiritual paternity: fathering their peers in truth and virtue. Since they didn't abuse reality or their freedom by dalliances with lesser truths and goods, they had no reason or, better, occasion to discover the higher appetite for bliss that is the will. It is we—not they—who are to be faulted for failing to act on the truth once acquainted with it.

Would that all of us were to follow suit, to yield actively to the development from self-knowledge to self-ownership, and from self-ownership to self-giving, for it is in this development that human fulfillment apparently lies, especially the kind that seeks to help

others to undeceive themselves, if we are to believe Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They may not have explicitly articulated) the fact that their enlightened self-interest had spilled over onto super-enlightened self-interest, but that it in fact did so is hard to deny. That is one clue that humans are called by their make-up to discover that the best, most fulfilling way to love oneself is freely, fully, lovingly to give oneself to others. This truth of the human condition highlights the contradiction between the centripetality of self-interest and the centrifugality of other-love. At first glance it doesn't make sense. Confronting us, therefore, may be a paradox that can be understood through only experience. Yet once experienced, one may not necessarily realize that the second moral stage, honestly and hotly pursued, has evolved into the third stage. For the motive of self-love underlies both, though an ever more enlightened, purified self-love.

TWO LEAPS IN THE DARK

Oddly enough, the same transformation of self-interest had already taken place in the graduation from the first moral stage to the second, from unenlightened indulgence to an illuminated life of virtue. To the besotted and sated, surely, the second moral stage must also represent a contradiction, no small threat to their program of maximizing pleasure. Openness to this hypothesis usually takes the form of growing disbelief in one's failed schemes for happiness.

Genuine self-love had already led from instant gratification to deferred gratification, from thoughtlessness to self-liberating reflection. Why should not an even more enlightened self-interest set one up psychologically, given the shortcomings of the second moral stage, for a further but analogous happiness hypothesis? The same disbelief and distrust in self that led from the first to the second stage also seems to lead from the second to the third. Even though this second leap in the dark comes across as more

obscure and demanding than the first, it seems likely that the mind is to lead from the second stage to the third, as it did from the first to the second.

Are there any other clues that humans are made for the gratuitous, disinterested service that flows from genuine love? Yes, but keep in mind that all further clues will largely fall on deaf ears until one personally admits to dissatisfaction with one's current style of life. Vital truths usually won't be adopted on the strength of vicarious evidence; they must be discovered through experience and confirmed personally.

By trying to leapfrog over the second stage into the third or, on the other hand, by refusing to go beyond the second, we create problems for ourselves. Those who attempt the latter, thanks to deferred gratification, have usually scaled peaks of superior achievement, while often disdaining those left behind. They may have scintillating minds and even a scintilla of virtue, but they lack the generosity and desire to lead that would empower them to use their acquisitions to better others. When one does not deploy one's virtuous self-ownership and resulting attainments in the service of others, it quite manifestly and almost necessarily turns bad. Then it serves but to feed one's competitive pride and leads to the forfeiture of one's brotherhood and humanity. Such is the case of many professors, who cunningly cloak their intellectual "deflowering" of youth behind specious efforts at illuminating them with sophisticated and sophistic reductionism.

Then there's the more interesting and common case of those who, perhaps overly sentimentally or emotionally, want to put forth love, romance, and dedication (or perhaps more truthfully, want to be on the receiving end of others' love, romance, and dedication). They, nevertheless, find that their grasp exceeds their moral reach. They lack the wherewithal to redeem their rose-colored daydreaming, however truthful and noble their dreams may be. Because they only barely know and own themselves, sooner or later they find it impossible to give of themselves completely, with

no strings attached, especially when flooded with a welter of negative feelings.

These unwitting emotional sluggards confuse the death of "liking" with the demise of loving. They thus shun the voluntary, deliberate, self-forgetting services that alone express and develop true love or dedication. What such people lack is sufficient self-acquaintance and mind-directed virtue. They run up against the metaphysical impossibility of wanting and trying to give what they don't really possess. Their hearts may be in the right place, but their minds and habits are not. Their deficit is the opposite of the superior achievers.

We seem made for ecstatic self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness. Somehow, there must be a more refined, higher form of enlightened self-interest that lifts us, however temporarily, to something approaching this bliss, euphoria, or ecstasy. Are there circumstances, psychological or emotional, that the ancient sages overlooked, in which we can catch glimpses of any super-enlightened self-interest?

SOME CLUES

Here are some telling "highs" that point to our being made for self-giving:

1. SOLDIERS IN WAR: a soldier or sailor doesn't take serious risks or expose himself to death for a cause or his country, but rather, quite uncharacteristically, for his "buddy." He finds himself doing heroic things quite beyond himself. (This may be why veterans like to congregate and relive by recalling their joint, surprisingly "happy" ventures.)

2. UNLIKELY HEROES: What happens to men at war can also overtake quite ordinary people who stumble upon accidents and are instantly transformed by those dire circumstances. Remember

that commercial flight in our nation's capital during a cold spell that crashed through ice on the Potomac River? There was at least one driver on a nearby bridge who repeatedly dove through the hole to rescue passengers, struggling visibly beneath the ice, which was too thick for them to crack their way to freedom. After fetching three or four, the man tried again, only this time to succumb to the same hypothermia and asphyxiation that took the lives of those unrescued.

3. REAL ROMANTIC LOVE: it lifts the couple beyond themselves and prompts their instinctively doing the most atypically unselfish things. They move about "on cloud nine," oblivious to all but their beloved.

4. THE MOTHER OF A SICK CHILD: she so unstintingly and not fully consciously sacrifices herself for her all-needing child.

5. *Franny and Zooey*: In this J. D. Salinger novella, a formerly self-centered brother surprisingly puts himself out to get his sister out of herself and thus helps her to avoid a nervous breakdown.

Now, you may object that these "highs" are brought about by adrenaline (1 & 2), sexual attraction (3), maternal instinct (4), sibling empathy or compassion (5). They are, admittedly, rather unusual emotional conditions brought on by passing circumstances and thus don't and can't last. But while they last, the person so visited finds himself uncalculatingly engaging in self-forgetting, self-sacrificing other-love, and loves it. There are many other such emotional peaks: breaking a sports record, response to unadulterated beauty in music, the synergism that takes place when voices come together in song, the inspired cooperation that allows a team to perform far beyond its ability (as in the U.S. hockey victory over the U.S.S.R. at the Olympics in Lake Placid in 1980).

Are we euphoric because we're totally caught up in the other and his or her needs; or are we generously obsessed with the other because of our emotional state? But does it really matter? Surely

these peaks provide enough teasing evidence to suggest that we are made for free, disinterested self-giving. Maybe these fleeting, emotional, almost compulsive highs are intended to show us how generous we can be and how beneficial such generosity is for others no less than for ourselves. And doesn't that strong hint point to a third and final moral stage, wherein we would freely and virtuously commit ourselves to loving and serving others? And in this super-enlightened self-interest might we not find, paradoxically, our ultimate fulfillment? It may just be that we're never happier than when making others authentically happy themselves.

LOVE SO RARE

Why did the classical thinkers miss the point? There was not much romantic love abroad, for one thing; there was, on the other hand, lots of male chauvinism. Obviously J. D. Salinger hadn't come on the scene; they were keen on heroic honor and glory, but didn't exactly draw the full conclusion. Except for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, there's nothing in the historical record to indicate that the rest of humanity discovered that they're made for self-giving. There may have been individual exceptions, who kept it to themselves or didn't have the means to get the message much beyond a narrow social circle. In any event, for over two thousand years men and women have been without a complete, objective map to human felicity valid for everyone.

But if enlightened self-interest (the second moral stage) is scarce, much more so is the super-enlightened kind (the third moral stage). True, absolute love for others is very likely something we have neither generated nor even received, though we may think otherwise. Our usual loves are still too contractual and reciprocal. However much we might give of ourselves to others, we still hold on to the hope of some repayment, even if only from an approving conscience. For a time at least virtue makes us feel good about

ourselves; it seems to be its own reward. Authentic friendship (a rarity indeed) is the closest most of us get to disinterested self-giving. But even at friendship's highest reaches, we still find mutual expectations and reciprocities at work. To such an extent is this true that we cannot conceive of a totally one-sided friendship. Such might, however, come close to being the no-strings-attached gift of self.

Now, can anyone claim that such one-sided, loving service of others doesn't work or spell fulfillment? It might just be the case that we, however advanced in age, have never authored such generous deeds ever. It's not that we've tried such a heroic life and found it wanting. Rather, we must shamefacedly admit, we may never have tried it.

The progressive discovery that we're made for others should manifest itself in ever greater fulfillment: we're more and more acting in accord with how we're built, and we're rewarded accordingly. In turn the discovery of how beneficial to oneself is self-sacrificing love undoes most of the reservations we might have about God and organized religion. Are not the rejection of and reservations about the Christian religion largely protests against the personal sacrifices it eventually requires of its followers? But if, for the sake of their own ethical fulfillment, people are already freely eliminating from their behavior whatever is counter-productive, are they likely to balk at any talk of further forgetting and thereby transcending themselves?

Now a commitment to live on this higher plane will not prevent our occasionally backsliding into merely enlightened self-interest or even into hedonism. We are weak and inconstant and easily duped. But the more we succeed in living up to this commitment of utmost generosity, the more fulfilled, happy, constant we'll be. Ours will be more like a slow-burn ecstasy, bliss on the installment plan.

HERE WE CONCLUDE the theoretical part of this ethical program. The following chapters are intended to show how we might grow in self-knowing, self-owning, and self-giving in the thick of our ordinary occupations. In each I generally heed what has proved to be a helpful sequence. First comes an attempt to document "how things are" in the hopes of uncovering pockets of unexamined, self-defeating behavior in most major areas of our routine life. The next section is devoted to "how things should be," showing how the triple program of knowing, owning, and giving oneself can be achieved amid the various haunts of ordinary life. The third section gets practical: "how to get there."

Many are those who think (self-servingly?) that to grow in truth and virtue, one must, at least temporarily but for a fairly major chunk of time, absent oneself from the usual rat race and betake oneself somewhere akin to a cloister or an ivory tower. And since this is an almost utopian prospect, given the pressures and commitments of most established adult lives ("we're trapped"), one can but muddle through with only very rare stabs at anything approximating the good, virtuous life. Thus, many mistakenly think that life's myriad but mundane trifles hinder authentic fulfillment. Let's hope such skeptics have more than just a pleasant surprise coming.

INTERLUDE:
A MORAL MAP

THE FOLLOWING CHART aims to serve three purposes. First, it represents an attempt to synthesize the book's ethical program. Second, it tries to show how interconnected are all our moral commissions and omissions, plus the penalties that ensue from being selective. Third, it seeks to compensate for a rhetorical tendency in the text to assume that erring is universally human. As a statement of fact over the long haul, that is doubtless true. But we should not therefore conclude that we cannot not err. Were we to read and heed correctly the three levels of "pre-moral conditions," ours could be, with enough interest and struggle, the "positive response," though the "negative response" accords more with our relative undevelopment.

That our being, with its various principles, does not come knit together in a harmonious whole should come as no surprise—nor need we ascribe the consequent proneness to err to some primal catastrophe that somehow bent or wounded our nature. Physically, emotionally, intellectually, we're to grow during at least the first two decades of life—why should our ethical growth be any different? Why blame original sin for our culpable moral irresponsibility and indolence? The more positive responses we put forth, the more developed and fulfilled we become; and the more clearly etched we see our natural constitution to be, the easier the moral struggle becomes. If we so continue to choose, we can take (as indeed some undoubtedly have) "the road less traveled" at each successive fork.

UNENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST
(FIRST MORAL STAGE)

PRE-MORAL CONDITION	POSITIVE RESPONSE	NEGATIVE RESPONSE
Early on, moral ambiguity and immaturity hold sway: a jumble of minor attractions and aversions; little reflection; hope rests largely in prospective goods; minor good deeds and misdeeds mainly cancel each other out. With age, experience, and puberty, awareness of more subtle goods, plus onset of venereal and other mega-pleasures; recognition of social nature: claims and counterclaims; happiness deficit rising; fears grow as attachments grow; learning from moral hits and misses, personal and vicarious, arises; possibility of divorcing pleasure from instinctive function makes itself known; fewer prospective goods left unsampled, thus shrinking hopes.	Some vital dissatisfaction and conflicting moral directions noted; need for priorities; learning to sacrifice short-term goodies to long-range goals; some recognition of others' moral claims; some minor fears and aversions overcome. Reflection leads to discovery of instincts (preserving self and species) shared with brutes and a specifically human appetite for bliss as source of moral tension; proper roles delineated for imagination, mind, and will; unless mind and will assert themselves, behavior is barely reasonable, voluntary, and beneficial; proneness to err stems from desperate will, bullied by whetted instincts, plus wild imagination; they override truth-seeking mind; when instinctive objects are not needed, stimuli are shunned, lest self-dominion be lost.	To the extent unhappiness is admitted, other people or circumstances are blamed; search for pleasures and flight from pains intensify; claims on others are inflated; reflection crowded out by noise and busyness. Above trends wax; with diminished returns, keener, even kinky, stimuli needed to stay even with earlier indulgence; more excuses spun to explain away bliss deficit; "entitlement" to maximizing pleasures and to minimizing pains; temptation sought as "proof" for determinism, or responsibility-lessening pantheism resorted to; reason pressed into shrewd servicing of laziness, pride, hedonism, self-pity; others are exploited for same ends; some paranoia; tendency to live in and for future.

ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST
(SECOND MORAL STAGE)

PRE-MORAL CONDITION

As a result of self-knowing, the need is faced for deeds consistent with our basic orientation (how we're built) and vice versa; we can easily dupe and deprive ourselves by falling short or going overboard in 4 major dimensions: a) pleasures; b) pains or fears; c) others' moral claims; and d) assessing moral choices; still fewer manifest goods left to try (though more subtle); most facile hopes have been unmasked.

POSITIVE RESPONSE

Self-owning is added to self-knowing, whereby appetites, will, and mind submit to reality; these habits (moderation, fortitude, justice, and practical wisdom) grow by repeating like deeds; facilitate doing good and hinder vice; the 4 virtues integrate animal and human needs and powers into an autonomous whole, fulfilling our definition; establishes character, personhood; frees from subhuman reactions and reflexes; opens mind to reality, to rewards received from disinterested love (family), thus curbing self-centeredness; self-dominion also makes possible the quest for a non-manifest object to satisfy specifically human appetite; contrary to conventional wisdom, usual occupations, tasks and duties offer excellent occasions to grow in self-knowing and self-owning; also virtue veterans become responsive to goodness, beauty, true culture and hopeful of ever higher, lasting goods.

NEGATIVE RESPONSE

Above trends continue to wax; reluctant deferral of instant gratification and resignation to some self-imposed privations—for sole goal of concrete advancement; minimal legal debts are paid, barely any moral claims; mind turns into shrewder prospector for competitive advantages; these tendencies often accompany and hone superior natural gifts; such persons, empowered by quasi-virtue, often turn into single-minded achievers: the proud stuff of superiority; uncommon achievements, aptitudes, leave behind also-rans and barely-rans; the fulfillment scheme of such depends on prowess (academic, professional, financial, athletic, artistic) and the likely adulation it will draw; throughout, a tendency to use others, however subtly, breeding misunderstandings and resentments.

SUPER-ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST
(THIRD MORAL STAGE)

PRE-MORAL CONDITION

To the degree a self-knower and self-owner has united and enriched his/her being with virtues and knowledge, skills and achievements, a new option becomes available: whether to put those endowments and acquisitions at the service of beleaguered others.

POSITIVE RESPONSE

Self-knowing and -possessing underwrite self-giving, finding ultimate purpose; sublimation experienced; subject and object of self-giving are enriched, undoing tension between altruism and self-love; self-givers transform all relations; no more moral trifles or dead-ends, thanks to alchemy of love; to maintain this pitch of dedication, self-givers need guidance and fellowship; this habit can weather all tragedies, setbacks and unrequited loves; self-givers desire to live it to the full for others' sake and to teach this fundamental truth of the human condition to their peers; mind can now undistractedly prosecute search for bliss; relative self-givers can now recognize any absolute self-giver; self-forgetting and -sacrificing brings about, paradoxically, the fullest development, fulfillment and happiness, short of discovering who or what can satiate our appetite for ecstatic bliss.

NEGATIVE RESPONSE

By refusing to go beyond the call of duty (justly recognizing one has received others' beneficence), one become love-impotent, however astutely this sterility is camouflaged; moreover, when proud feats prove unfulfilling, non-givers turn skeptics and cynics, taking perverse delight in a negative proselytism that draws the "naive" away from the rewards and demands of reality, above all of human nature; life is seen as "no exit," only mirages; having abandoned all hope, such deflate their expectations to spare themselves more disappointments; supremely lonely, they are left with a cancerous pride that guts all their achievements; hence, they seek to drag others down to their misery.