“Dialectic and Desiderata” first appeared in the *Journal for Value Inquiry* 18:139-144 (1984)

In a previous issue of this journal I began a sketch of an ethical theory.[1](#bookmark84) This ethical theory is broadly pragmaticist in spirit, in that it emphasizes the social nature of moral judgments and decision-making. Specifically, I outlined a theory of the right (a theory of moral obligation)

that was deontological in nature, i.e., one that does *not* tie the moral rightness of acts to either the moral nature of the motives of their agents or else to the desirability of their consequences.

Instead, my theory of the right ties the rightness of an act to the approval in the indefinite long run by the set of ideal researchers. By "the set of ideal researchers" I mean the set of counterparts to the human race, imaginary persons who are like actual persons except that they have unlimited time to engage in moral research, are motivated solely by the desire to reach true judgments, and live forever with memory intact.

I then argued that one could be reasonably secure in the correctness of his moral decisions if he made sure to involve as many other people in the dialogues regarding his choices as possible, and made sure to obey the rules of logic and dialectic. The more numerous the participants and the more diverse their backgrounds, the more secure the decision-maker can be that his act is objectively morally correct. All this is governed in practice, of course, by what Peirce called "the economics of research": one simply doesn't have the resources or time to seek out all kinds of people to aid in the dialectical rendering of a judgment about trivial matters.

An important feature of my theory of the right, then, is the equation of practical reasoning with dialectic. (As I indicated in my earlier article, by "dialectic" I only mean the study of information-seeking dialogues such as arise in interactive scientific research.) I equate the two

because they have identical goals and character. Practical reasoning is like research reasoning in having truth as its goal, albeit truth about morals rather than about physical nature. They are alike in character because both are interactive rather than solitary. You learn and you judge (decide) only with the help and guidance of others, bringing to bear their relevant experiences on the issue at hand, and using their idiosyncrasies to counterbalance your own.

In this article I want to extend this pragmaticist approach to ethical theory by developing a theory of non-moral worth.

A theory of non-moral worth is a theory about what things a person should desire in life

— desire intrinsically rather than merely extrinsically, as ends rather than mere means. A theory of non-moral worth is an answer to the question, "What is happiness?"

Much confusion can be avoided if we reflect upon what sort of state the term "happiness" denotes. I daresay most writers take it to refer to a single mental state (typically, pleasure). But such a view has problems with it. First, it automatically stacks the deck in favor of hedonism, where in fact hedonism is a dubious theory that needs to be argued for. Worse, it seems phenomenologically implausible to suggest that the happy new mother, the happy musician, the happy politician and the happy mystic all share the selfsame mental state.

So what does the term "happiness" refer to? I suggest it denotes a single *behavioral* state—the state of not seeking to change one's life fundamentally even when free to do so. It is that which the happy mother, politician, mystic and so on share. (The clause about being free to change is important, since we wouldn't want to say of a prisoner in a slave-labor camp who despairs of escape that he is happy.)

1. "Deontologism and Dialectic," *Journal of Value Inquiry,* Vol. 17, No. 2 (1983):119—131.

Viewing happiness as a behavioral state allows us to seriously consider the hypothesis that several quite different mental states can give rise to this single behavioral state, much as several quite different disease organisms (allergens, flu viruses and pneumococcal bacteria) can give rise to the same disease symptoms (coughing, fever and so on).

Let's consider now the most common theory of nonmoral worth, hedonism. *Hedonism* is the view that the only mental state which can give rise to happiness is the sensation of pleasure. While there are many different kinds of experiences that are pleasurable, it is the pleasure- sensation and that alone which makes them intrinsically worthwhile.

The difficulties this view faces can be seen by looking at a problem hedonist theorists themselves debate. If pleasurable experiences are all desirable only because of the attendant pleasure-sensations they create, and if pleasure-sensation is one single determinate mental state, then it follows that the desirability of quite different activities (pushpin and poetry, swilling beer and doing theoretical physics) differ only in the quantity of pleasure-sensation produced. But some hedonists (most notably Mill) feel uneasy about this hardline hedonism, and try to float a softer version of it by distinguishing "qualities" of pleasure.

What such soft-line hedonism amounts to is unclear. We can of course distinguish between the *moral* worth of various pleasure-experiences (saying for instance that sado- masochistic sexual acts are immoral even if pleasurable), but so what? That is not the issue. The hard-line hedonists can reply that the pleasur*e-sensation* is the same irrespective of the moral quality of the pleasure-experience.

The only alternative open to the soft-line hedonist is to distinguish between pleasure- sensations as being irreducibly different types of mental states. And it does seem phenomenologically correct to do so. The pleasure-sensation gotten from sensual experiences (food, drink, perhaps sex) is simply a different mental state from the aesthetic pleasure-sensation involved in (say) listening to music. Indeed, even more phenomenologically accurate is to view

sensual-sensations as being a family of more or less closely related mental states. Similarly, we ought to view aesthetic pleasure-sensations as a family of mental states.

We ought to cleave off the family of recreational pleasure-sensations as well. This family consists of the more or less closely related mental states occurring in sports of various sorts; and perhaps the pleasure-sensations involved in solving problems belong in this category.

But now the wall has been breached. For if we come to say (with the soft-line hedonist) that many quite different mental states can give rise to the same behavioral state, why stop with just sensations? After all, there is a doctrine — no less true because of its antiquity — of the tripartite division of the human soul. We have "feelings" in the sense of *sensations*, but we also have "feelings" in the sense of *emotions* and also in the sense of *thoughts.* ("What are your feelings about Reagan's economic policies?")

In accordance with this ancient doctrine, we should ask whether other types of mental states besides sensations play a role in happiness.

Consider first the emotional aspect of man. Could a person be happy who never felt loved? I seriously doubt it. The emotion of love (as contrasted with the sensation of sex) both for others and by others seems clearly to be an intrinsically desirable mental state, i.e., one of those mental states that helps (in a sense explained shortly) create happiness. And we ought to view love as a whole category of intrinsically desirable emotions. The mental states of romantic love for another, nonromantic love for friends, family, and God, as well as the feelings of being loved in various ways by various people, are all slightly different mental states that bear a strong enough family resemblance to each other that they form a category which ought to be distinguished from the other categories of intrinsically desirable feelings delineated earlier (sensual, aesthetic, and recreational pleasure-sensations).

But there are yet other categories of intrinsically desirable emotions as well. Besides desiring love, we also desire some degree of *control.* We naturally seek power over others, responsibility for certain tasks, mastery of certain skills and subjects and so on. To see this, just ask yourself whether a person could really be fully happy as a pampered slave. Again, I doubt it. Eating well, listening to good music, loving and being loved can't suffice to make a slave happy (or more precisely, shouldn't make him happy). He needs to feel free, to feel control over his life and to feel he has some measure of power over others and over his society.

On the other hand, we ought not, in rejecting hedonism, to go to Nietzschean extremes of declaring power to be the only good. The emotion of feeling in control is just one feeling among many that are intrinsically worthwhile.

Again, we should note that "the" emotion of control is really a family of mental states: control of self, power over others, a voice in government, practical mastery of the physical world around us, and such like.

Another category of intrinsically desirable emotions is the category of *recognition.* The rational man should want to include in his life a measure of recognition, admiration and respect by his fellows. (Respect and love are by no means the same emotion.) No child can be happy who is ignored — the reader may verify this for himself by ignoring a small child and observing the result. It is acutely distressing to one's sense of self not to have others recognize him and pay him at least some respect.

Of course, we ought again to avoid philosophic extremism, and resist the view (held by many performers and politicians) that fame is the only desideratum. It is but one among many.

Turning now from the sensational and emotional aspects of the mind to the rational or cognitive, we can again delineate several quite distinct categories of inherently good feelings. (I

shall use the term "joy" to mean any intrinsically desirable cognitive mental state, however quaint that term may be.) There are the joys of learning, a family of good feelings of understanding, learning, contemplating, achieving insight, and meditation. A totally unexamined life, we would all agree, wouldn't be worth living, no matter how full it was of pleasure, love, fame and power. (To see this, imagine a pampered prince who had all those yet could not understand any features of the world and himself or others.)

The desire for understanding is what leads scientists and philosophers to forgo pleasure in order to inquire into theoretical matters—even without *any* assurance that engineers will eventually find profitable applications for the theories discovered.

Once again, I ask you to avoid the extremist view that knowledge is the sole thing a person should be after in life. A person influenced by Aristotle might argue that we *should* hold such a view, because the only thing that makes man unique among the animals is his rationality. Let us not (as is usually done) focus upon the logical inadequacy of such an argument. What is striking is precisely the factual inaccuracy. Animals differ from men no less in their emotional and sensual limitations than in their cognitive ones.

Consider sex. Even the highest nonhuman primates engage in coitis only when the female is in estrus. Humans are able and generally willing to engage in sex at virtually all times. Similarly, no animal matches man's intense focus on the taste of food, much less has any animal applied even its limited rationality to mixing foods to improve taste.

A similar point can be made regarding emotions. Konrad Lorenz's graylag geese notwithstanding, no animal can match man's ability to love deeply. And few animals are concerned with fame.

The joy of understanding, then, is not the sole desideratum.

Another family of rational joys is the group of feelings of creative expression, those mental states that occur with the act of creating anything beautiful. The feeling of the artist, musician or mathematician when he creates a new form is not the same as the feeling the observer gets when he appreciates the work, the first feeling being a rational joy, the second feeling being an aesthetic sensation. Although nothing prevents the artist from feeling both joy in his act of creation and pleasure from contemplating what he has created, nothing guarantees the artist will feel both—one can, after all, readily imagine a blind artist.

The usual cautions apply here: "the" joy of creation/accomplishment really denotes a family of related feelings, and one ought to avoid the extremist view that all there is to being happy is being creative.

It seems to me that there is one other category of intellectual good feeling: feelings of moral worth. Part of leading a maximally happy life is feeling good about yourself, feeling that you are a basically decent person. Even those most inclined to neglect this aspect of happiness— to wit, businessmen—often adhere to an ideology (libertarianism) which helps them retain their positive moral self-image while maximizing their power, prestige and pleasure. That even businessmen try mightily to maintain their picture of themselves as moral individuals indicates that that feeling is necessary for happiness.

Of course, there are those who carry the search for moral distinction to extremes. Susan Wolf has pointed out that life of a moral saint is not something that a person should seek to lead.[2](#bookmark85) From my view the reason is clear: a maximally moral person will likely have a life high in feelings of moral self-esteem, but (since such a life would almost certainly focus on helping others) be noticeably lacking in pleasures, feelings of powers and creativity. We may admire

saints in one sense (i.e., view them as leading morally good lives), but we wouldn't want to see anyone we love become one, because when you love someone you want that person to be happy.

I have delineated nine categories of mental states which contribute to happiness, which any rational person should desire intrinsically. But I want to emphasize that there is nothing sacred about the number nine, and that this plan for a theory of non-moral worth can only be implemented by carrying out a detailed phenomenological mapping of the many mental states which people desire intrinsically. Such a detailed map may uncover a number of other broad categories of good feelings beside the nine mentioned above.

More important for us now is the question, how does practical reasoning enter in? It's pretty clear that it has to do with the satisfaction of those nine needs, but in what way?

Practical reasoning enters into choosing personal courses of action aimed at satisfying all nine desiderata first because those desiderata are in principle impossible to reconcile completely, and second because social and psychological conditions constrain the decisions.

That the nine desiderata are theoretically at tension is fairly obvious. To the extent that one seeks power over others, to that extent he will be drawn away from creative accomplishment and moral worth. To the extent he tries to perfect his moral persona, to that extent will he forgo power and pleasure. One of the main reasons for the existence of practical reasoning is to find a course of action which best satisfies desiderata which are inherently mutually at odds.

The second reason for the existence of practical reasoning is the constraints reality imposes upon us in deciding what will make us happiest. It may well be that the life of a successful theoretical physicist is the happiest of all, combining as it does the elements of financial reward (allowing sensual pleasure), close friendships, recreational and aesthetic pleasure in constructing and contemplating theories, the joy of understanding, and the admiration of society. But not everybody has the opportunity to be a theoretical physicist. Most lack the brains, most who have the brains are born into unfavorable social and financial surroundings, and many of those favored by genes and circumstance are hobbled by psychological problems. (Thus while one feels strongly that Einstein must have led a supremely happy life, Newton—an

1. "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 79, No. 8 (1982):449-439.

extremely solitary and mentally troubled man—was probably quite unhappy even in his glory.)

So even more than balancing goals that are mutually at tension, practical reasoning involves trying to achieve those goals in the face of (sometimes shifting) constraints: inopportunity, inabilities, social impediments and psychological flaws.

How can we here employ the insight that practical reasoning is interactive dialectic? It is simple enough. We come to realize that the way people should (and usually do) choose courses of action in their unceasing attempt to find happiness is by working with others. We need the help of others for several reasons.

To begin, the essence of practical reasoning—in science, ordinary life or a court of law— is the comparison of the present problem-situation with past precedent. In choosing a course of action (a career, "a lifestyle," or whatever), we want to know of comparable choices made by others and how they turned out (whether the agent was happy afterwards). As an example, many people—myself included—have been influenced in their career choice by observing representatives of various professions, "role-models" in the argot of the psychologist.

Moreover, we need other people to help us see our limitations and come to grips with time. We need the mentor who assures us of our exceptional ability in a field and gives us the confidence to proceed. But we need as well the honest counselor who tells us what we either don't know or won't face—that we are in the wrong line of work, that our abilities are not powerful enough to garner a fair measure of success.

Finally, we need others to point out and (to the extent possible) help correct the psychic impediments to happiness. In matters of the soul no less then the body, self-diagnosis and self- treatment are not likely to succeed.

In the final analysis, our judgments about non-moral worth—like our judgments about moral rightness—must be arbitrated by the set of thinking people in the indefinite long run.

Indeed, we ourselves—whether we achieve happiness or fail miserably in the attempt—provide precedents for others, becoming (as it were) grist for the mill of human decision-making.