

July 7, 2002

LEVEL: 7

[Chapter 3]

***The World Is Imperfect, but That's Just the Way It Is: No One Is to Blame***

[URL: NoOneToBlame]

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"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and then transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."

— Karl Marx *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Not every conflict is necessarily neurotic; some amount of conflict is normal and healthy. In a similar sense suffering is not always a pathological phenomenon; rather than being a symptom of neurosis, suffering may well be a human achievement, especially if the suffering grows out of existential frustration.... Existential frustration is in itself neither pathological nor pathogenic. A man's concern, even his despair, over the worthwhileness of his life is an *existential distress* but by no means a *mental disease*.

— Viktor E. Frankl (1984). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Pp.124-125.

Accept disgrace willingly.  
Accept misfortune as the human condition.

What do you mean by “Accept disgrace willingly”?  
Accept being unimportant.  
Do not be concerned with loss or gain.  
This is called “accepting disgrace willingly.”

What do you mean by “Accept misfortune as the human condition”?  
Misfortune comes from having a body.  
Without a body, how could there be misfortune?

Surrender yourself humbly: then you can be trusted to care for all things.  
Love the world as your own self; then you can truly care for all things.  
— Lao Tsu *Tao Te Ching*, §13

The people aren't the problem; the problem is the problem.  
— Fisher et al. (1991). *Getting to Yes*. P.xx (and many other places).<sup>1</sup>

## **I Introduction / Synopsis**

This essay is almost the same as Chapter 2's essay on evil. Both have to do with understanding the nature of conflict; both argue for regarding all people as sharing a moral universe with us. The difference between the two is that this regarding takes place at different time. The essay on evil asked whether we can or should engage all people in moral discourse; this essay asks whether we can continue to see ourselves as sharing a moral universe when discourse has ended and decisions are made and actions are taken without one's consent. In the next section I argue that we do (or at least can and ought to) continue to see ourselves as sharing a moral universe even when decisions don't go our way. Our problems arise from the nature of human existence,

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<sup>1</sup>Xx I am no longer able to find the source of the quote. Fisher et al. say something like it (“Separate the PEOPLE from the Problem”, e.g., p. xv), but I heard the quote more specifically – as given above. Perhaps it comes from the first edition. I'll check.

not from the others' wickedness. In the subsequent section I distinguish between seeing the other as part of a shared moral universe, on the one hand, and agreeing with the decision, on the other. I use as an example-in-reverse Jimmy Carter's words, which he used to justify cutting a welfare budget while increasing other spending: "Life is not fair." In the final section I lay out some of the problems that we cause ourselves and others when we assume we can be (or reasonably aspire to being) perfect.

## **II Imperfection As an Existential Condition**

The [essay on evil](#) in Chapter 2 concerns conflict in the first moment, that is, why we have conflict at all. Why must we enter the forum of the ISS in the first place? Why aren't norms simply apparent to us (even if they are not to people who are evil)? That essay asks us to recognize the inevitability of conflict with others and thus accept it. Well, what I really mean to say, but lack the skill to communicate straightforwardly, is that no one can prove that there can be, is, or will be a shared view of the Good. And even if people were to share one at one time, we cannot prove that they will continue to agree. And thus one is left with the necessity of accepting other senses of the Good, not meaning that one must agree with them but rather meaning that one must accept others as members of a shared moral universe. We may have to reconcile the demands of the different senses of the Good, but we don't have to be angry at each other at the necessity.

This acceptance of each other in the first moment only requires that we be willing to open up to each other and hold a mutual therapeutic discourse over our differing senses of the Good. I say "only" requires this, not because it is easy – I see much double-talk and game-playing and little honest discourse these days – but rather because it is easier than the acceptance of each other

when actual decisions must be made instead of mere talk about decisions. The point of the Agreement Problem – the reason we call it a problem – is the possibility or even likelihood that we must make decisions in the absence of agreement. This is where acceptance of the other becomes really difficult, because one’s sense of the Good – one’s sense of oneself – is about to be violated. It is no exaggeration to call this a rape. Physical rape is one form of this, perhaps the worst form, but it shares with all the other situations the fact that actions are taken regardless of your agreement with them. In such circumstances it is easy to see the problem as caused the other person’s wilfulness, stubbornness, irrationality, mental and moral failure, or even outright evil. It’s one thing to toy with alien senses of the Good; it is quite another to submit to them. And yet the existence of the Agreement Problem says that we cannot prevent this situation from occurring. My point, then, is that our acceptance of each other as members of a shared moral universe need not cease even when decisions are made regardless of our desires.

### **III This Is Not the Same As Ignoring Imperfection**

I know well that this is an inflammatory position, so let me set out some defenses at least against being misunderstood. First, our attitude toward others and our attitude toward the decisions made and the actions taken – these are two separate things. I am not saying that one must agree with or even acquiesce to a decision made without your agreement. I am not saying that one must accept mistreatment, even less that one must agree to it, and least of all that one must like it. You can certainly choose to do these things, but you don’t have to. Even though getting angry at others for the decision may be inappropriate, as I argue above, you don’t have to pretend you like

it.<sup>2</sup>

Second, there are guidelines to come in [a subsequent essay](#).

Third, we can try to avoid such situations proactively. [etc.]

### **A. Case study: “Love the sinner; hate the sin”**

My stance superficially resembles (or at least seems consistent with) the slogan, “Love the sinner; hate the sin”, which is heard in conservative Christian circles to define the proper relationship with gays. However, the two positions are quite different. Without getting into a long discussion, I’ll just say that I don’t see any justification for labeling people as “sinners”, at least in the absolutist way the concept is used in the slogan. Recognizing the contingency of any position I might take toward other senses of the Good and the Right, I might legitimately say, “This is what I think is Good, and I think you do yourself harm by not sharing it, and I invite you to share it, and I invite you to talk with me about our different perspectives.”<sup>3</sup> To assert that you are a sinner short-circuits this contingency and treats you disrespectfully by invalidating out of hand your sense of the Good and the Right. Furthermore, I don’t think that one ought to invite “hate” as a response. Even to invite “opposition” is unsustainable, in my view, because one cannot distinguish the actor from the act. From my pragmatist’s viewpoint, one is what one does. So what the doctrine implicitly promotes is a dissociation within the sinner so that s/he is prompted to deny the parts of h/herself that *want* to act in such-and-such a manner. Even though those who hold this position

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<sup>2</sup>Alas, I too often fall prey to both these: getting angry, and pretending I like what I don’t.

<sup>3</sup>I would not in fact say this, since that doesn’t represent my sense of the Good or the Right.

claim that they seek to restore gays to authenticity, they are acting to deny them this very authenticity. In saying this, I'm not taking the position that people claiming to be gay are all genuinely, authentically gay. Maybe for some self-identified gays, it is liberating to hear that they really aren't gay. But this is like saying that the clock that doesn't run is still right twice a day. The issue isn't whether people "really" are or aren't gay; the issue isn't whether the anti-gay activists can point to this or that person as "cured".<sup>4</sup> the issue is whether their authenticity arises from themselves. As I said in [Chapter 1's essay on authenticity](#), it is self-contradictory to say, "What's authentic for you is what I tell you is authentic."

#### **B. Case study: "Life is not fair"**

Saying "life is not fair" certainly seems factually correct – at least I'm not going to dispute it here – but it does not justify dismissing people's claims. This would have been a better response: "I recognize that poverty is a serious problem and that poor people are hurting. Right now, unfortunately, there are many needs of our country, and real constraints on our budget."

### **IV The Perfection Problem: The Illusions of Blameworthiness and Perfectability: A**

#### **Social-environmentalist Critique of Pursuing Personal Perfection**

In this section I want to present another way of seeing and accepting our fallibility. My argument is by contradiction, as follows. If we don't, then this results in two paired but, I believe, mistaken

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<sup>4</sup>There is a whole book to be written here on the empirical validity of such claims. But my argument is concerned the separate issue of who determines authenticity.

beliefs: that we can become perfect and that there is such a thing as blameworthiness.<sup>5</sup> What happens when, in the inevitable imperfection of the world and ourselves, we pursue perfection and try to avoid blame? Since we cannot avoid being imperfect, we have to try to excuse our imperfection by blaming others. Internally, we can't accept that we did something wrong. Perfection is an ideal which, the closer you come to it (or think you've come to it), the more difficult it is to achieve and the more horrible the imperfections appear and so the higher your rationalizations have to be and the worse things you have to do to others to maintain the illusion.

The analogous thing happens with the environment. A couple of years ago, as I looked at the mess that was my house and yard, I found myself fantasizing about having enough money to have the place really cleaned up. I would hire someone to repair the driveway, weed the vegetation from the cracks in the sidewalk, paint the house, and so on. It then occurred to me in the midst of this fantasy that all this work would produce bunches of weeds, old paint scrapings, and all the other flotsam & jetsam that a cleaning would produce. I'd have to have someone remove *all* the weeds, even those few leaves left behind or dropped by accident, and remove them. But then that person would be leaving his own pile of garbage elsewhere while s/he devoted h/herself to cleaning up my place. Hmm. I'd have to have someone comb through the lawn to find all the paint chips that fell from the walls as they were being scraped, and *that* person would be creating garbage elsewhere – in fact, far more than the few cups-ful of the paint chips s/he found. Hmm. All I would be accomplishing, I then realized, is transferring disorder from my patch to another patch – and not a one-for-one trade, either. As every physicist knows from the

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<sup>5</sup>I need to think out the exact nature of blame, because people will naturally be mystified by how I cannot be blamed for something I do. I guess this goes back to the problem of evil.

Second Law of Thermodynamics, the more orderly you make one part of the Universe, the more disorderly the system as a whole becomes. This is true even for such non-physics tasks like cleaning up my house. The more we strive to live in perfection, the more debris and disorder we create outside our little patch. And the closer my little patch comes to perfection, the more external harm it requires to maintain it thus. I suppose that if (i) I were really so anal that I devoted so much attention to cleaning up, and if (ii) I were to have the resources necessary for all these workers, and if (iii) the area outside my patch were an infinite sink of disorder, then my obsessive passion for cleanliness wouldn't matter. But at least the last of these three conditions is false (not to mention the first and, alas, the second). The ecological movement has succeeded in making us recognize that the world outside is not an infinite dumping ground, and that there are people who have to live there and suffer from what gets dumped on them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>This reminds me of a factory I once visited – never mind where or why. The building was made of uninsulated corrugated metal, and it got extremely hot in the summer – a big, hot, airless box of a place. The supervisors had offices with windows overlooking the factory floor, so that they could direct the work but need not actually be a part of it. Each of those offices had an air-conditioner, and that air-conditioner exhausted its heat into ... you guessed it, the workers' area. It reminded me of the old cartoon of a two-story outhouse, with the upper door marked "management" and the lower door marked "labor".