

Chapter Eight Decisions and Socialization

When you come to a fork in the
road, take it.

Yogi Berra

If we can rein in our desires and calm some of our emotions we can gain more control over our actions and our lives. When anger, fear, and greed no longer distort our perceptions, our choices will be more informed and we will almost certainly be happy with the results. But how do we make this happen? The first step, obviously, is to figure out what role those desires and emotions actually play in our decisions, and the second is to figure out what to do about it. Making a decision is a complicated and mysterious process in which many elements other than desires and emotions play a part. We do have the ability to change the ways we react to events, but we will be handicapped if we buy into some simplistic account of motivation like the claim that we are all completely selfish, or if we overestimate the role of conscious deliberation in our actual choices.

1. Making Decisions. We know from first hand experience that we sometimes act selfishly, satisfying our own desires and interests at some cost to others. Some of us are more selfish than others, and some of us are very selfish, but no one is completely and self-consciously selfish. This, however, is not the way Thomas Hobbes saw it when he declared that “no man giveth but with intention of good to himself, because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good.” (*Leviathan*, Chapter 15) Joseph Butler, who devised the classical argument against psychological egoism, the belief that we are always and only motivated by self-

interest, said that our problem is not that we think of our welfare too much, but that we don't think of it more often. Whether or not that is right, we certainly don't think of it *all of the time*. We all have desires and try to satisfy them, but even if we were clear about our ends (which we aren't), we rarely have enough time, information, or imagination to determine which of our options would best serve those ends. Introspection tells us that we don't always try to maximize the good for ourselves, and common sense tells us that it would be counter-productive (or insane) to make this the goal of each of our actions.

When Hobbes wrote of the "intention of good" to ourselves he may not have meant "conscious" intention. We can get a different kind of egoism by giving up the belief in all-out *conscious* deliberation. Perhaps we have an unconscious mechanism that is dedicated to maximizing our interests, a powerful program that overrides impulses to altruism and sacrifice, and that lies to us about our own motivations. If the pursuit of selfish ends is automatic and inevitable, then any belief in our own unselfishness must be dismissed as the result of self-deception and rationalization. So, of course, must our belief that we are free to choose what to do, not that Hobbes would have a problem with that.

It could be that people are tempted by this belief that we are robotically selfish whether we know it or not because it is fun to be cynical, and because it is really easy to make up a story that turns any candidate for an unselfish act into a quest for our own good. It is child's play to put a selfish spin on everything from taking the smaller piece of cake to throwing ourselves on a grenade. According to these stories we are always seeking to win some kind of advantage or glory for ourselves. But these stories prove nothing beyond our own ingenuity. Common sense and research into brains and

behavior tell us that our unconscious springs of action are as varied as our conscious ones, and that we have far more on our minds than our own welfare.

If we can abandon both deliberate and unconscious forms of psychological egoism, we can move on to a more adequate understanding of how decisions emerge. Of course we look after our own interests, but sometimes we factor in the interests of others, or we consult some moral principle, personal policy, or bit of friendly advice. Many think that the way to make decisions is to use all these items to construct arguments that can help us determine what to do. But when we are on the brink of action, the only relevant “conclusion” would be a decision, and decisions do not show up as conclusions of arguments. The best even the *moralist* can hope for from an argument is a (question-begging) conclusion of the form “I ought to do A,” and that is a long way from a decision to do A. Not only are we not going to get decisions from syllogisms, any episode of argument-construction is but one of many factors and events that can have a bearing on what we decide to do. What is worse (at least for those who hope to rely on arguments) is that our reasoning itself is conditioned in more ways than we know. We tend to emphasize facts that support what we already believe and want, and we instinctively and skillfully avoid those that point in the other direction. In Chapter One we saw how this works when the arguments are about morality, but the same tricks and moves show up whatever the subject

2. Our Decider. When we come to a fork in the road, our desires, goals, impulses, reservations, prejudices, and beliefs are fed, like various tracks of music, into a device, the output of which is a decision. This device, our “decider,” has an input for selfish advice, another for moral principles, and one that monitors chains of reasoning

and accepts some conclusions as beliefs. Selfish impulses, beliefs about the world, and moral principles all influence what we do, but their contributions are shaped by, and blended with, elements of radically different kinds—things we believe but haven't stated, even to ourselves, chemical and hormonal pressures, a genetic contribution, fears, desires, slogans, biases, unconscious habits, bad hair days, too many losses by our favorite team, pain, hunger, gout, and fatigue. We can discover how some of these elements push us around, but others are not only beyond our control, they are beyond our potential awareness.

Does this mean that we must resign ourselves to the fact that behavior will just happen, and that we have no real control over what we do? Well, if the sufficient causes for an outburst of anger are present, it will happen, and there is nothing we can do but ride it out. But after the storm we can, *if we wish*, get busy and try to prevent or minimize future outbursts. If our “decider” is like a mixing device then there will be (metaphorical) knobs and levers that control the input. We can learn how to shut off or turn down some of our desires, mute our dangerous emotions, dampen our impatience, delay our responses, and open the listening channel to allow some sounds (the words of others) to come in more clearly. We can't observe the actual process of resolving all those forces, but we can discover what happens when we fiddle with some of the knobs, and especially when we finally learn how to give instructions to our decider. We *can* take control of our lives and change the way we do things, but only by participating in the causal matrix, not by going outside it.

The sages discussed in the last chapter understood that they needed to find some way to deal with the disturbances triggered by out-of-control desires and

emotions. Stoics and Epicureans found ways to modify their reactions to difficulties that usually trouble people, and they had many useful things to say about tyrannical emotions and the struggle to overcome excessive desires. The Epicureans realized how easily happiness can be lost, so they simplified their external circumstances and diminished their desires in order to make happiness easier to attain and to maintain. Their maxims and pleasant surroundings helped them maintain their tranquility, but compared to the Buddhists, they and the Stoics and Sceptics of the ancient world were amateurs. The Buddhists went through years of discipline, study, and training in meditation in order to attain astonishing levels of awareness, calmness, and self-control. But the lesson they *all* learned was to settle their minds, to pay attention, and to distance themselves from harmful desires and emotions. We can learn to do this too, and then, with resolution and attention, we can head off some of the feelings, thoughts, and responses that are proven sources of suffering. Unless we manage to “purify” our minds in this way, at least to some degree, our “decider” is likely to be a fearful, ignorant, and dangerous ally.

Some of our best moves are spontaneous ones—unrehearsed, unplanned, and free of deliberation. When we find ourselves acting with unconscious grace, or when we feel that our creativity has surpassed our ability, we may look for the source of our success outside ourselves, in our muse, or in some other supernatural coach or backer. But there are other explanations. The ability to make instinctive, rapid, and healthy decisions is a valuable one for a predator in a world of predators. We have been rewarded for trusting our sense of danger and opportunity and for acting without reflection or deliberation, and the rewards are even greater for those who know when,

and when not, to trust that sense. The predators are mostly gone, but our physical and social environments have become so complex and challenging that if we did not outsource some work to our automatic systems, we would be drowned in details. So, like our ancestors, we make snap judgments and jump to conclusions, and sometimes (but not always) that saves us.

In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell explores our ability to act without reflection, and argues that the success of “snap” judgments, which often do turn out to be more effective than calculated ones, has a perfectly natural explanation. He says that we have developed “thin slicing,” which happens when the unconscious finds and reacts to patterns we have not consciously noticed. The deliverances of our “decider,” behind what Gladwell refers to as the “locked door” of our mind, are the products of processing that is beyond our conscious ability to monitor, but not to appreciate. “If we are to learn to improve the quality of the decisions we make, we need to accept the mysterious nature of our snap judgments.” (p. 53) He describes our “unconscious” as a kind of “mental valet” that “keeps tabs” on what is going on and on what needs attention. The “ventromedial area” of the brain “works out contingencies and relationships and sorts through the mountain of information we get from the outside world, prioritizing it and putting flags on things that demand our immediate attention.” (p. 59) When this area is damaged we are forced to work things out consciously, and our decision making is impaired beyond belief. We pile up useless information and displace natural common sense with inept and information-heavy calculations.

Snap decisions are not just useful, they are indispensable. But there are many ways they can lead us astray. In a section called “The Dark Side of Thin-slicing,” Gladwell refers to what he calls the “Warren Harding Error.” Warren G. Harding was the picture of a great leader, tall, dignified, and commanding, but he apparently lacked both the intellect and the character to match his looks. Voters, misled by appearances, elected him, which was a bad mistake because he may have been the second worst president in the history of his country. Those who commit the Warren Harding Error form an impression on the basis of one item (physical appearance, race, gender, pedigree, etc.), and they let that “first impression drown out every other piece of information they manage to gather in that first instant.” (p. 91) Gladwell’s point is that there is much information to be gained from even a very brief encounter, but not if we glom onto one item and ignore everything else. This blunder, the Warren Harding Error, can unleash a cascade of projections and misapprehensions. Many things that the victim of the error subsequently says and does will be interpreted in the light of that first mistaken impression, and, so interpreted, will appear as evidence for the erroneous assessment.

Gladwell calls the ability to figure out what others are up to from their expressions and body language “mind-reading.” Everyone does it, and some people are very good at it, but it is an ability that abandons us when we are incapacitated by fear or stress, or are seriously pressed for time. Under those circumstances we can become “mind-blind,” which is a state of “temporary autism” in which we are incapable of understanding even the obvious things about others that we usually pick up just from looking and listening. Gladwell suggests that mind blindness may explain how, in 1999,

four officers of the “Street Crime Unit” of the NYPD shot the unarmed Amadou Diallo in the hall of his apartment in the Bronx. The police were looking for criminal activity and so were primed to interpret what they saw in that way. They saw a black man, and when they approached him he ran into his building. Perhaps he realized they were police, for he reached for his wallet. They thought he was reaching for a gun and shot him 41 times. The whole incident took seven seconds.

We may sometimes need to act quickly, but never before spending a few microseconds taking in the situation. “Our powers of thin-slicing and snap judgments are extraordinary,” Gladwell says, but “even the giant computer in our unconscious needs a moment to do its work.” When it is working well we can only back off in amazement at what it, what *we*, can do. Gladwell tells of art historians who can recognize fakes at a glance, psychologists who are adept at predicting marital difficulties after a few seconds of observation, and skillful food tasters, warriors, athletes, salesmen, and ornithologists. Similar, if less spectacular, feats of thin slicing are performed countless times every day in our own lives.

It is hardly controversial that undistorted information and dedicated practice can work miracles on our snap judgments and our spontaneous acts. More information is usually better, but with practice we learn which information matters, and we also learn when to forget about information and just jump. But we do not learn this unless we pay attention to what is going on, and look deeply into the causes and conditions of our successes and failures. Buddhists call this ability to pay attention “mindfulness,” and it is a skill they have been practicing for 2500 years. They not only pay attention to what

is going on in the world outside, they also pay attention to what is going on inside, and to the connections between the two.

Sometimes it is said that the teachings of the Buddha can be boiled down to his views about causality. To understand causality is not to have looked into the hidden depths of the universe and found the secret causes of things, it is just to comprehend, in more detail than people normally do, the causes and effects of the mental and physical events that make up the world. It is to understand how things develop. In the words of the Buddha, it is to know:

When this is present, that comes to be;

From the arising of this, that arises.

When this is absent, that does not come to be;

On the cessation of this, that ceases. (Kalupahana [1], 90)

If, for example, we want to diminish our anger, we need first to admit to ourselves (and inform our decider) that that is what we want to do. Then we need to start watching the times when anger invades our consciousness. What thoughts precede it? What beliefs come into play? What does it feel like? What makes it go away? How is our anger affecting those at whom it is directed? How strongly are we motivated to come up with reasons that justify our angry actions? How much is our anger really under our control?

After we have learned to observe our anger coming and going, we can turn our attention to its causes, and the causes of its causes. “I was angry because she said X, and she said X because I did Y, and I did Y because . . .” When we have learned to spot earlier signs and stages of anger, and become familiar with the situations and

conditions that summon them, we are ready to begin our reconstruction. If we can provide our decider with thoughts of compassion for the victims of our anger, memories of past woes caused by giving in to anger, and repetitions of our favorite slogans, we may actually short circuit the anger, or at least manage to keep a lid on it.

When we have learned to notice anger starting to arise, and learned to defuse it before it explodes, we can certainly pat ourselves on the back. The results of this major accomplishment may be sufficiently rewarding to convince our decider to maintain the adjustments that brought about the change. But we are not home free because the roots of our anger may still be in place, so there remains a final stage, which is both the result of and the reward for all the previous work. We have reached this final stage when the uncomfortable physical feelings and the ugly thoughts and impulses that make up anger just don't show up. But can we really reach that stage? Yes we can. We can change the ways we think and feel, break long-standing habits, and reduce our suffering and the suffering we cause to others, but it will take a conscious commitment to change, an appreciation of causality in the Buddhist sense, and enough calmness and emotional distance to make the conscientious monitoring of our mental and physical states possible.

If we can manage to gain a better understanding of the flow of causes and effects, and if we can restrict or eliminate greed, anger, biases, and stereotypes, we can begin to trust our "rapid cognition" (to figure out what is going on) and our "decider" (to figure out what to do). Gladwell mentions the policy of offering "blind auditions" to musicians trying out for a place in an orchestra. This is indeed a way of correcting for unconscious prejudices, and doing so has apparently improved the quality of a small

class of snap judgments; but most of the auditions we give and face in the world cannot be blind. This means that if we wish to avoid mistakes we need to learn to track and neutralize the forces that pervert our rapid cognitions and that lead to Warren Harding errors and to other failures of judgment.

The next section contains an inventory of a few of the factors that condition our decisions. If we have made even a little progress in self-observation, we will be able to identify and monitor some of the beliefs, desires, and goals that urge us on. We will discover that we have been taught false things, given bad advice, and tricked into making decisions that are not in our own interest or in the interest of anyone we care about. If we really want to neutralize the unwelcome influence of some of these factors, then our first step must be to start paying serious attention to those chains of events that lead to suffering.

The best way to start changing is to tell ourselves (our decider) in simple terms that (and how) we want to change. We do this by making an explicit statement of our desire and intention to change, if only to ourselves. As we walk through the door to the party we might repeat (in our minds or even under our breath) words like “Give John a break—he’s having a bad year.” We simply need to remind and encourage ourselves (as we would a good friend). Does it ever do any good just to say to our selves “Cheer up,” or “Pay attention” or “Stop making everything about yourself”? Well, change happens when the causes of different behavior are present. Our words to ourselves will join with all the other potential causes flowing into our decider. Sometimes they will make a difference, but, as we are about to see, they have a lot of competition.

3. Socialization. Things are complicated, and the antecedents of our actions are everywhere. If we ignore the complexity and subscribe to inadequate conceptualizations of what we are—selfish computers, altruistic hominids, rational paragons, or lumbering gene machines—we will overlook features that do not fit those conceptualizations. It would be better to say that we are all four, and other things as well, if only to indicate that selfishness, altruism, reasoning, genetic factors, and who knows what else, contribute to who we are and to what we do. We may never learn all that goes into any of our decisions, but we can identify some of the factors that may be playing a part. What follows are some remarks about some of the elements we ourselves introduce into the causal stream—ways we have of influencing our own decisions as well as the decisions of others. Occasionally I will ask how we can escape these influences, or replace them with different ones, if and when we determine that we would like to do so. Not all influences are harmful, but even when they are benign, it is useful to be aware of what is moving us and to be clear about how that is being done.

Punishment and Reward. The word ‘punishment’ is one of those words that refuses to hold still. Not every deliberate hurt or slight is a punishment, but paranoia or guilt can make us see things as punishments which were never intended in that way. What makes something punishment is not the quantity of hurt inflicted, for punishments can be mild, but some combination of intention and convention. What is important is that the damage administered be a reaction to something that, according to some rule or custom or policy, merits it. Sometimes the hurt is administered in order to bring about some future good, like a change of behavior, and sometimes because we think it is what the perpetrator deserves. Like most concepts, the idea of punishment has fuzzy

boundaries, but the clear cases are unmistakable. The same goes for the idea of reward.

When the Chinese philosopher Han Fei Zi told his emperor to grasp the “two handles of control,” he was talking about punishment and reward, but primarily punishment. Threats of punishment are used by parents, friends, enemies, bullies, nations, and the legal systems of all societies. We do many things because we believe we will be made to suffer if we fail to comply with the wishes of those who can harm us. Physical punishment is an effective thing to threaten because almost nobody wants to be hurt, but there are as many possible threats as there are desires and aversions. We can take property or liberty away from people (if they have it), or eject them from our house, club, or country. At the personal level, when people fail to conform to our requirements, we can withdraw our attention, support, or affection. This is no small thing because there are many who would rather be punished physically than ignored.

Plenty of threats are backed by utterly implausible mythical stories, but many are genuine. Threats of punishment for breaking laws are real and useful if the laws are fair and fairly applied, but often they are not. Our prisons contain between 100,000 and 200,000 innocent Americans, and one out of every one-hundred Americans is incarcerated—a larger proportion than in any other country on earth.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/us/23prison.html?scp=1&sq=incarceration&st=nyt>

No one would deny that serious changes are needed. One change often suggested is that we rethink the idea that the point of incarceration is punishment. The practice of punishing “wrongdoers” is based on the moralistic idea that “justice requires” a hurt that is appropriate to (that “fits”) the offence. That is reasonable and very neat, but when we

try to go beyond “an eye for an eye” or “a life for a life,” the math gets difficult. Justice understood in this way sounds like some grumpy accountant’s revenge fantasy. There is, of course, no objective measure of how much or what kind of pain a person deserves for annoying another, or damaging them or their interests, but we can be sure that few people ever think that their punishment was just, or the reparation fair.

Because we are a society of punishers, our first impulse is often to lash out with some negative word, or frown, or blow at those who displease or disobey us. We habitually use various forms of negative reinforcement to discipline and control animals, children, co-workers, spouses, and even strangers on the street. Feeling anger when things do not go our way is natural but, if we become more aware of how our anger arises and departs, we will see that it is manipulative and optional. There are gentler and more enlightened ways to deal with those who have hurt or disappointed us or broken our laws than punishing them, but there is no way to deny that legal, social, and personal threats of harm are remarkably effective

Some compassionate amoralists might hope to introduce more positive reinforcement into the system. It is clear that both positive and negative reinforcement can have an effect, but the fan of negative reinforcement will point out that it is more expensive to reward the many who conform to our requirements than to punish the few who do not, especially if our threats are believable enough to deter. That may be true, but when we calculate expenses, we must remember that not all rewards are material. Affordable rewards can range from smiles and kind words to medals, trophies, and other inexpensive symbols. But the proponent of negative reinforcement can reply that frowns, curses, and demerits are also quite affordable and easy to distribute. On the

other hand, when we calculate the relative costs of rewards and punishments, we should remember to add in the damage that punishment does to the person or to the society that relies on it. It is far more pleasant (at least for most of us), and perhaps more healthy, to distribute rewards.

The real question, however, is not whether rewards or punishments are more expensive, or even more effective, it is whether we really want to promote a system in which people are routinely motivated by the fear of punishment and the hope of reward. Wouldn't we prefer our friends and neighbors to be motivated by something other than the fear of what we might do to them or the hope of what we might do for them? Even if our society needs punishment to control some of its citizens, we do not have to carry this over to our personal lives, where there are many more alternatives.

Alleged Natural Consequences. Everyone can make predictions, dire or rosy, as the situation demands. Since decisions often depend on beliefs about the future, an inexpensive way to influence people is to convince them that if they do things *our* way the result will be something *they* want. These predictions are often self-serving fantasies, but even the best predictors are often wrong because the future is shaped by surprising discoveries, unexpected events, bizarre fads, and "acts of God." This is not to deny that we should try to base our decisions on what we think is likely, but it is always a gamble. So when we turn our attention to important social issues like world poverty and disease, global warming, immigration, and nuclear proliferation, we will find that what people believe about the likely outcomes of courses of action is often a function of their political position, and not vice versa.

The exploitation of predicted consequences was a milestone in the history of behavior modification. If I give you a physical threat, I have to be able to supply the force. If I threaten you with disapproval, I will fail utterly if you don't care what I think. But if I tell you that certain actions will kill you, result in great sorrow for those you love, or make your hair fall out, then, if you believe me, you will have a strong reason to avoid those actions. Your decisions, of course, flow from *your* beliefs, but those beliefs include the ones I and others have imparted to you, and some of them are quite mistaken. Your best protection is to be wary when someone tells you something that is both unlikely and in their interest for you to believe.

Leaders always emphasize the glorious results to be expected from the wars they intend to launch. The anticipated results have to be glorious to outweigh the sacrifices, which the same leaders always minimize. The optimism of the Bush administration at the start of the Second Iraq war is a good example. It turned out that Iraqi oil revenues did not pay for the war and reconstruction, and that far more bombs than flowers were tossed at American soldiers. Unfortunately the damage that results from believing and acting on incorrect predictions always shows up too late to be prevented.

Over the millennia we have developed techniques for figuring out what is likely to happen and what is not, but we sometimes trick ourselves into not bringing our A-game to the inquiry. We can make good decisions without knowing what is going to happen in the future, but not without knowing what is happening in the present, and not without recalling what has happened in the past. Desires and emotions are ever ready to undermine our good sense, and bogus predictions of clever propagandists lead us to do

things we would never do if we were not under their spell. Politicians will always find ways to argue that the thing that is hurting us is really, in the long run, for our own good. Sometimes it is, but often it isn't, so it is wise to be suspicious when the hurt is present and palpable and the predicted benefits are remote and uncertain. It also helps in such situations keep reminding ourselves of the "law of unintended consequences."

Supernatural Encouragement. We have to admire those "doomsayers" who sit up with their flocks waiting for God to put an end to the world at the moment they have predicted. So far they have all been disappointed, but at least they were not afraid to go out on a limb. If we threaten or promise the end of the world, or fire from the sky at midnight, we had better have some trick up our sleeve, or we will be completely discredited when nothing happens at the appointed time. It makes more sense to promise rewards and punishments at unexpected times or, better yet, after death.

We have already discussed this sort of motivation in Chapter Three, where we saw how widespread and varied the belief in divine reward and punishment was (and still is). And yet it is hard to say how much credit these threats and promises of supernatural justice should get for the peace and order we enjoy. Is it really only a fear of divine punishment that keeps my fundamentalist friend from stealing my spare change? We hope not. But even if the threat of divine retribution keeps some people under control, we might wonder why it doesn't do a better job than it does. How can people bring themselves to do things they sincerely believe will earn them an eternity of torture that is worse than anything experienced on earth?

The idea that punishment is provided by supernatural beings and in other mysterious ways taps into so many beliefs and fears it is difficult for any reformer to

neglect it. Plato eventually encouraged the use of it in the *Republic*, after proving to his own satisfaction that justice is its own reward.

[T]he gods . . . favor the just and hate the unjust. And the favorite of Heaven may expect, in the fullest measure, all the blessings that heaven can give, save perhaps for some suffering entailed by offences in a former life. (Plato [4], 347)

In Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague*, the town priest delivers a sermon early in the book, before experiencing the full horror of the disaster. At this stage, like contemporary fundamentalists reacting to 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, he is content to see the plague as God's punishment.

Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it. . . . If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world his threshing floor, and implacably he will thresh out his harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff." (Camus [1], 81-82)

Later, after months of suffering racked the people of his city, he developed doubts about this sort of punishment, and about the kind of being willing to administer it. And so should we. Those who try to control us by warning us about Satan's torture chambers or the delights of Heaven rarely balance any security that results from this method of control against the ignorance, superstition, and fear its use requires and promotes.

A more imaginative approach than treating God as lawgiver, judge, and executioner is suggested by some Christians, who, when confronting temptation or difficulty, ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?" Other faiths might replace Jesus with the Buddha or some other respected and extraordinary being like Gandhi or Oprah. Two things are wrong with this. First, we don't really know what any of these beings would do in our circumstances. It would be absurd to ask yourself what Jesus, or Gandhi, or the Buddha would do in a traffic jam on a freeway at rush hour when the temperature was over 95 degrees and nobody would let him in the exit lane. To know the answer we would need to be divine or enlightened, in which case we wouldn't need to ask the question (and we probably wouldn't be driving under those conditions).

The second thing wrong with asking what some honored being might do in our circumstances is that, as we all know, gods (and human big shots) have done some pretty strange and horrible things that we would not urge anyone to imitate. The god of the Old Testament is a singularly inappropriate model, and while Jesus is closer to what we want, his behavior (leaving home, attacking usury, starting a cult, and being friendly to thieves and prostitutes) is usually not what Christians encourage their children to do. The question is not what some other being did or might do, but what shall I do? Perhaps our holy figures do exhibit what we call virtues, but if we know this, then we can just embrace those virtues.

Lies and Deception. Many who appeal to the commands of a divine being actually believe in such a being; others do not. In matters of religion, as in the affairs of everyday life, a simple and cost-effective way to control people is to deceive them about the facts. Often our deception will not be discovered, and even when it is, we can try to

justify it by pointing out the good it was expected to do. This is, by the way, the justification the moral fictionalist gives for pretending to believe in moral objectivity.

Deception can be involved in any of the forms of control we have already mentioned or are about to mention, but it need not be. We may intend to carry out our threats, dole out the rewards we have promised, believe in divine justice, and accept the world-views, slogans, and moral principles we promote—or we may not. When we do not believe the story we are telling we join the paternalistic propagandists who try to control people with noble (and ignoble) lies and convenient fictions. This reaches its nadir in totalitarian countries like China, Myanmar, North Korea, and others (you know who you are), where only “information” sanctioned by the government is allowed to be heard. As Hitler once noted, people more easily believe a big lie than a little one, “since they themselves lie in little things, but would be ashamed of lies that were too big. Such a falsehood will never enter their heads, and they will not be able to believe in the possibility of such monstrous effrontery and infamous representation in others.” (231)

Controlling others by manipulating their picture of the world is not uniquely human—many animals have their own forms of camouflage and deception—but we have raised the practice to an art, and to consciousness. Our systems of linguistic and non-linguistic conventions give us an almost unlimited capacity to improve our situation by managing the beliefs of others. Since we know how vulnerable we are to deception by those we trust, truthfulness and non-duplicity are very important to us, and we feel particularly troubled when we are deceived by someone we thought we could rely on.

As effective as straightforward lies may be, we have many other ways to generate false beliefs. We can speak the truth with omissions, or with a certain tone that

misleads. Or we can act in ways that deceive others, a procedure Kant called “pretence,” and declared morally unproblematic. We can even mislead by telling the truth to someone we know will not believe us. We are very clever. But even if everyone lies, and even if social life would be impossible without a variety of duplicitous habits and techniques, the norm is to say things that are true, and duplicity is the exception.

Perhaps deception is (like many other things) healthy in small doses but toxic as the dosage is increased. To pursue the metaphor, one problem with deception is that everyone’s a doctor, and prescribes (for themselves) one or another form of duplicity at the first sign of discomfort. Another problem is that those who deceive are usually forced to come up with more duplicity to cover up their original deception. Deception may on occasion be necessary, but it is not a healthy general policy, and even those who emphasize the importance of the well-chosen lie, or the “varnished truth,” warn us that an overuse of deception undermines trust, upon which the ability to deceive, and to believe, is based.

Most of us want as much truth as we can get, or at least as much as we can take, but to get the truth we have to be willing to hear it without punishing the teller. It also helps to reward honesty with honesty. Finding a solution to the problem of communicating with others is one of our most important ongoing projects. We start life with an unquestioning credulity, and later, if we are healthy, we outgrow our naivety and set out on the project of making sense of the world for ourselves. This growth requires us to develop an ability to detect liars and con-artists, and we are reasonably skilled at this, as long as some desperate hope, foolish fear, or smooth-talking charlatan has not caused us to abandon what we know about how the world works. At the beginning of the

day, our best strategy is probably to start off listening to and accepting what others have to say, but not if it goes against our experience and not if we detect any hint of evasion or duplicity. Perhaps we should adopt one of Ronald Reagan's favorite slogans: "Trust, but verify." Or maybe the rule should be: "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me."

World-views. When Marcus Aurelius told himself that the world was designed, or when he thought of himself as a scattered fragment of a great mind that pervades the universe, he was pushing himself into a fundamental gestalt that promotes cooperation, acceptance, and self-effacing responsibility. ("O world, I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony!") Stoic and Hindu pantheists, Christians who believe in innumerable souls, and atomists who believe only in matter and the void, see things with very different eyes. Even when their actions are similar, and this is more often than one might expect, their justifications, rationalizations, and explanations differ predictably. They all live in the same world, but tell wildly different stories about it, or at least about that part of it that no one can check.

Thanks to a world-view that includes reincarnation, Buddhists have a curious argument for universal compassion. In his introduction to Tsong-ka-pa's *Illumination of the Thought*, a commentary on Chandrakirti's *Supplement to the Middle Way*, Kentsur Lekden (1900-1971), a Tantric abbot from Tibet, concludes that given infinite time, a finite number of souls, and reincarnation, it follows that in some former existence, every present enemy was a friend, a loved one, perhaps even a mother. Consequently, he reasons, it is appropriate to love everyone as if they were our closest relative because in some former existence they actually were. (Hopkins, 77-78) It is easy for non-

Buddhists to wonder how much influence this argument would have on a Buddhist confronting the person who put his family to death; but since Buddhists already believe in reincarnation, this argument might work with a few angry Buddhist logicians.

One of the most interesting world-views to an amoralist is Zoroastrianism, according to which everything that happens is an event in the battle between good and evil. This is a view shared by Millennial Christians and by Muslims, all of whom believe (and hope) that there will be a final struggle between good and evil and that those on the side of the good will win and be taken to heaven. Zarathustra preached that good will eventually triumph over evil, and that the world will be “transfigured” by this victory. The fire that ends civilization as we know it will consume the wicked and purify the earth. This partition between good and evil (which often coincides with the distinction between us and them) has been with us for so long it probably doesn’t need a religious rationalization, though it usually gets one.

Because no amoralist will be tempted by any world view built on an opposition between good and evil, amoralism emerges as a relatively tolerant and peaceful way of thinking about the beliefs and acts of others. Amoralists might dislike you, dislike what you have done, or think that your opinions are naïve or even absurd, but they will not judge you to be evil. This actually makes quite a difference because when we can brand a person, or all the members of some race, sect, or country as evil, it is easier to think that our disdain for, or exploitation of, them is justified, or even called for.

When shopping for a world-view, simplicity is to be prized. The fewer answers to the big questions one embraces, the less likely one is to be mistaken. In fact, we are not required to come up with an answer to any of those questions, which is just as well

because most of the available answers (and their related questions) incorporate elements of supernatural beliefs only a cave man (or someone with the scientific understanding of a cave man) would accept. I won't be able to prove this right now, but I do believe that only a world-view that combines naturalism in science, atheism in religion, and an error theory in morality is free of the need to make room for revered bits of ancient folly.

This austere world-view may seem cold and unfriendly, boring, or even fearfully bleak to theists, mystics, artists, and moralists, who will find it hard to imagine how anyone could buy into a world-view with no god, no goodness, no divine justice, no answer to the ultimate questions. There are two things to say about this. First, any scientist will tell you that the study of the natural world is anything but boring, and that the world thus discovered and explained is anything but bleak. To them, it is a joy to have a set of questions with actual answers, and a set of proven techniques for finding out what is happening and how things work.

The second thing to say is that it is a naïve oversimplification to think that we "buy into" a world-view. We are given a starter world-view, and we take it from there. Those who develop a naturalistic, atheistic, amoralist understanding of the world do not set out to arrive there. But something, perhaps an inquisitive nature or a suspicious mind, has freed them from the prevailing superstitions of the day, and has prevented them from taking too seriously the fantastic world-views dreamed up by poets, priests, and philosophers. This leaves them more time to deal with questions to which there are real answers. As Sextus reminded us, unanswerable questions are a pain and a waste of time. We really do not need to know what was going on before the creation of time,

or why there is something rather than nothing. What we do need, for our brief life here on earth, are natural explanations of natural phenomena. World-views are fine, but they should not be so imaginative and in conflict with common sense that they take all our time to comprehend, explain, and defend. If we have a satisfying causal story of what happened, we do not need another causal story of how the first causal story came to be.

Slogans and aphorisms. It takes a considerable investment of time and energy to promote a general view of reality. It is far easier, and sometimes just as effective, to produce a memorable slogan. Great changes have been brought about, and countless people have been influenced and inspired by powerful maxims and slogans such as: “Never take anything not freely given,” “Love thy neighbor,” “No man is an island,” “Sí, se puede,” “You deserve a break today,” “Where’s the beef?” and “Just do it!” Wikipedia nicely defines a slogan as “a memorable motto or phrase used in political, commercial, religious, and other contexts as a repetitive expression of an idea or purpose.” We are also treated to a list of hundreds of memorable slogans and the news that “the word ‘slogan’ comes from *sluagh-ghairm* (pronounced *slogorm*), which is Gaelic for ‘battle-cry’.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slogan>)

If short and apt maxims and slogans are repeated often enough, they become part of our public and personal dogma, and they definitely influence the way we act. They float about in our semi-consciousness, rising at appropriate and inappropriate times to nudge our decider in one direction or another. Some promote harmony and kindness, but others (“It’s a dog eat dog world” or “All’s fair in love and war”) encourage competition and strife. A political advisor in India once formulated “the law of the

fishes,” which is this: “The big ones eat the little ones.” We have been told that “God helps those who help themselves,” advised to “Look out for number one,” and have heard a judgment that no moral abolitionist would make: “Greed is good.” If people repeat and applaud these sayings they will become more aggressive, and they will be more successful whenever ruthlessness brings success. Such sayings erase guilt and can be flung at scruples and critics to rationalize neglect and exploitation.

In Maoist China slogans could be found on every wall. Some promoted communist ideals and the joy of serving the people, and others, like “Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts,” promoted Chairman Mao. Today, no respectable rally in any country would lack slogan-sporting signs. Political campaigns with effective slogans thrive, and a good slogan is very likely to have more effect than a thoughtful editorial.

It is disturbing to realize how many commercials we are exposed to every day. We are repeatedly hammered by slogans like “the pause that refreshes,” or “good to the last drop,” or “Yo quiero Taco Bell,” or “do the Dew,” or “See what Brown can do for you,” or “Got milk?” These phrases can be worth millions. Why? Because they capture our attention and often show up, unbidden, at the moment of decision.

In fact, the danger with slogans is that they work too well. They bypass reflection and deliberation, and sometimes almost single-handedly generate decisions. They have no place in arguments, nor even in calm discussions about what to do or support, but still we may be moved to vote primarily because our decider has been awed by an effective slogan like “No new taxes,” or “Its time for a change.” Slogans are indeed battle cries, and it might be important and empowering to chant them with the throng in

the public square, but when we are trying to make up our minds what to think, or to do, or to support, perhaps our slogan should be: “Down with slogans!”

Guilt and Shame. One kind of guilt is legal. To be guilty is to be judged guilty after an official hearing. More often, guilt is personal, a discomfort we feel when we believe we have hurt someone or failed to live up to what we believe to be their demands. *Moral* guilt, as it would be characterized by the moralist, is discomfort we ought to feel when we have done what we ought not to have done, or when we have neglected to do what we ought to have done. Amoralists and moral abolitionists can also feel guilty about what they have done, but when they do, it will be because they have violated their own *ethical* standards. They might say “I wish I had not done that,” or “I regret causing so much pain,” but we will not find them suffering from moral guilt, which would involve them thinking that it was morally wrong of them to have done what they did.

The desire to avoid the complex of feelings and thoughts we call guilt is a very powerful motivation. If I get tired enough of the way I feel when I look at my unanswered emails or uncompleted tasks, I may be moved to do something about them. One way to avoid feeling bad for letting someone down is not to let them down, so the capacity to feel guilt is not necessarily harmful, and neither is the tendency to act in order to avoid feeling it. There is nothing wrong with refraining from saying something cruel because you know *you* would feel guilty about hurting the target of your remark—but there are other motivations for the same restraint that might be more friendly and welcome. For example, we may refrain from a cruel remark because we

know it will hurt someone's feelings and we don't want to do that, or, best of all, because such remarks don't even occur to us.

So there are uses for guilt, but when parents, spouses, friends, and enemies use it as a technique of control, they capitalize on the desires of their victims not to cause suffering. If this form of compassion is called upon too often, it goes away or becomes distorted. Guilt used relentlessly to control us can displace or destroy our healthier reasons for acting.

Guilt is usually contrasted with shame, and one way to oversimplify the discussion is to say that we feel guilt for letting someone else down and shame for letting ourselves down. If we take our principles and standards seriously, then we don't have to be moralists to feel shame if we don't live up to them. But if we take them too seriously, we can drive ourselves insane by worrying about setbacks and lapses others would consider insignificant. Both guilt and shame are used as forms of control, and both cause psychological damage if used to excess, but of course the question is, as ever, how much is too much? We should know by now that there is no objective answer to this. Somewhere between blaming ourselves for everything that went wrong and refusing all responsibility there is a place where we can stand and reconstruct a relatively accurate version of the antecedents of some disaster, including an accurate assessment of our own contribution.

The problem with both shame and guilt as motivators is that they work by engaging our desire to avoid experiencing a feeling. If you write me a friendly letter, I would rather your main motivation not be the desire to avoid the feeling of guilt for not writing. If you deal fairly with me, I hope it is not just to avoid feeling bad for having

defrauded me. If that is your motive, I'll take it, but I would worry about doing business with you. If over-the-counter anti-guilt or anti-shame drugs show up (and I suspect they have) then you would be able to attain your goal (of not feeling guilt or shame) more efficiently by taking them than by helping someone who depends on you. Someone who has been conditioned to act in order to avoid shame or guilt is working with a defective decider that has been taught to jump through one hoop and to ignore the many other places and ways to travel.

Ritual. Confucius (551 – 479 BC) lived in a society deranged by war, greed, and corruption, and he developed his ideas about government and society in the hope of setting things right. He saw the distant past as a Golden Age in which conduct was regulated by the “rules of propriety” (the *li*), so he urged contemporary rulers and their subjects to follow these rules. These “ways of the ancient Kings” determined who should obey whom, so this advice was far-reaching. One of Confucius’s main ideas was that names should be “rectified.” This is explained by one of his slogans, which was “Let a father be a father, a son be a son, and a wife be a wife.” What he meant by this was that fathers, sons, and wives, should, without complaint or deviation, conform to the conventions of behavior, speech, and even dress established in antiquity. He believed that much trouble could be avoided if everyone would follow these rules in their daily interactions. He urged rulers to deal with their people as if they were officiating at a great religious ritual, and promoted deference and ceremonious behavior for everyone. Fung Yu Lan, a famous historian of Chinese philosophy, characterized the *li* as “all the rules for everything pertaining to human conduct.” In the following centuries

Confucian scholars codified the *li*, but the kind of rules they attributed to their ancient kings are in no way unusual:

A son, when he is going abroad, must inform (his parents where he is going); when he returns, he must present himself before them.

When two men are sitting or standing together, do not join them as a third. When two are standing together, another should not pass between them. (*The Book of Rites*, in Legge [2], Vol I, 67-68 and 77)

The prescriptions in the *Book of Rites* were not put forward as moral requirements, but as ancient practices that, if followed, would save society. Confucius always hoped to find a ruler with the authority and the will to promote the courteous but authoritarian system he favored. He never found one, but his students were more successful and his “way” has dominated the East for millennia. But there are costs when we push the ritualization of life to extremes. First, there is the ever-present danger that some of the feelings repressed by very polite Confucians will explode with cataclysmic fury. And second, as behavior becomes ritualized there is a loss of spontaneity, and with it a loss of creativity and innovation.

We in the West probably underestimate the extent of rituals in our lives. We indulge in rituals when we shake hands, bow, wave, or do any of a thousand things that have become too automatic to notice. Whether it is a high mass or a high five, rituals bind individuals to groups and to one another. This is true if the ritual is a well-

understood gesture of greeting, or an elaborate hour-long set of prescribed words and actions. The rituals we share show that we belong to the same group, and any observant student of our behavior will find that many of the things we now do are or involve rituals, just as Confucius recommended. As long as we know what we are doing, there is no harm in sharing in the rituals of our group. It would be most inconvenient to have to think up new ways to say hello and goodbye, and our rituals of passage have helped millions of people get through difficult times. But, as with all the other elements that feed into our decisions, it is well to see our rituals for the evolved performances they are, and to understand the part they play in our lives. Then we can use them with awareness and increasing skill. Otherwise they may use us and displace authentic human interactions.

“Moral” Fiction. “Moral fiction” is the name sometimes given to fiction intended to send a moral message by providing moving examples of virtues and vices in action. The category includes fables, stories, novels, plays, and films. Children’s books have always been crafted to teach morality and it would be hard to find a drama or a comedy on TV that doesn’t have some predictable message. Sometimes the message is a moral one, and sometimes it is not. It would be a mistake to presume that the great and influential writers have always been moralists. Their stories have “morals,” as did Aesop’s fables, but the morals are not always moral—sometimes they are just lessons about life. What we learn from “The Hare and the Tortoise” is that “slow and steady wins the race,” and from “The Boy who cried Wolf” is that “even when liars tell the truth, they are never believed.” Another meaning for ‘moral fiction’, then, is fiction with a moral.

Homer's *Iliad* is the story of how greed and insensitivity led Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, to deprive Achilles of a prize he had been given as his share of the spoils, and of how the anger or "wrath" of Achilles played out to no one's advantage. The war itself was set in motion when Paris, a Trojan, in another act of irresponsible passion, kidnapped Helen, the wife of the King of Sparta, and took her to Troy, an act which launched the thousand ships and led to the fall of that impregnable city. Aeschylus, in the three plays that make up the *Oresteia*, shows how Agamemnon, upon returning from Troy, was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, who could not forgive him for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to secure fair winds for the raid on Troy. The trilogy continues when Orestes murders Clytemnestra, his mother, for killing Agamemnon, his father. For this crime Orestes is pursued relentlessly by the furies of guilt, but the play ends hopefully, when Athena introduces the possibility putting on a trial as an alternative to an endless chain of acts of retribution. The epics, histories, and plays these Greeks wrote show us, again and again, how decisions made in the face of the conflicting forces of tradition and personal passions are capable of destroying our lives, and the lives of those we love. These lessons are not necessarily *moral* lessons, and the message of the *Oresteia* is not that revenge killings are morally wrong, but that sometimes the demands that tradition and our own wishes place on us create agonizing difficulties and tragic outcomes.

Fiction shows us how events can unfold by helping us understand the inner lives of complicated individuals and the mysterious workings of cause and effect. It shows us how others might think, and it strengthens our imagination. Reading a novel can influence the rest of our lives, for better or worse. "Truths" gained from fiction can have

an immense influence on how we live our lives, but fiction with a moral does not always promote behavior a moralist would call moral. Perhaps we should call fiction that tries to do that “moralistic fiction.”

Humor. Fiction with a moral may strive to teach a lesson by showing us how greed, stupidity, or anger often bring disaster—how “we reap what we sow” or how “what goes around comes around.” We enjoy seeing “the bad guys get what they deserve” and if we see it happen on TV enough, we might start to believe in it, and our decider might be inclined to factor in the possible “wages of sin.” This could keep us out of some trouble. On a lighter note, we are also deterred from various ill-advised ventures by the great comedians, who stand ready to remind us of our foolishness. Our vices (and our virtues) have been mocked and satirized since antiquity. Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, Voltaire, Swift, and Twain, and political cartoonists and artists like Goya, Daumier, Nast, and Herblock made fun of much that needed to be criticized. In the 20th Century, humor on the radio was gentle, naïve, and domestic rather than harsh or political. The same was the case with early TV, though eventually political humor with some bite showed up late at night. With the advent of cable TV political humor has fewer constraints, and late talk shows came to include a segment that included some gentle mocking. Finally, with the advent of Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report,” political humor on TV has come of age.

Some of the best comedies (on stage, screen, or TV) show us how absurd we might actually look if we go just a little further along some path of anger, greed, or foolishness we are already traveling. The Jerry Seinfeld Show was very good at this and Larry David’s HBO series “Curb Your Enthusiasm” is even better. Since we rarely

enjoy being the butt of a joke, the threat of mockery is another powerful form of control. Since most of us would not want to identify with Moliere's miser or hypochondriac, with Inspector Jacques Clouseau from the "The Pink Panther," or with the George Costanza character of "Seinfeld," we may well be led to temper our greed, whining, avarice, duplicity, self-importance, or insensitivity. How can we watch these characters behaving so foolishly and not resolve not to imitate them?

Mockery often deters the behavior mocked, be it foolish or wise. It also binds the mockers together. Since we do not mock those we consider superior, the joker exhibits dominance over the "butt" of the joke. Laughing at someone for breaking a glass, tripping on a step, or bumping into a door, is a bit cruel, but much comedy is based on just such accidents. By laughing at someone who has blundered we raise ourselves above that person, at least temporarily, and at the same time we bond with those others who share the joke. Humor evolves, and some kinds of jokes are past their prime, especially the ones based on prejudice and delight in the suffering of others. But the impulses that lead us to laugh at the discomfort of others are deep, and may have a function that is useful in some way. Perhaps the capacity to find everything from pratfalls and flatulence to personal meltdowns funny gives us a little "comic distance" from the problems of others, and maybe we need that. And maybe we don't.

Music. Music elicits, shapes, mirrors, and intensifies emotions, and it fortifies beliefs by enabling us to repeat them with emphasis, enthusiasm, rhythm, and resolve. Protest songs, fight songs, work songs, love songs, anthems, hymns, and jingles can be unforgettable and infectious. Like a powerful slogan, a song can get stuck in our heads, or played on our iPods, where it can function as an energizer, a relaxant, a teacher, and

a companion. But the influence of music is not, in itself, moral. All the feelings (love and hate, courage and fear, joy and sorrow) can be amplified and celebrated by music. Any subject can be sung about and any policy can be supported by a song. Both sides in a war have their “battle hymns.”

Some of the most moving examples of music can be found in religious choral music. Music has evolved to illuminate our thoughts about life and death, redemption, God’s love, and immortality, and it can express the various modes of adoration, praise, and triumph found in religions. Even an atheist can be moved by the great choruses of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, as well as by some simple hymns from the past. Secular music also deals with love, joy, and loss, but it will probably never match the splendor and intensity of the great choruses of the *B Minor Mass*, the *Missa Solemnis*, and *The German Requiem*. This is not intended to minimize the power and place of popular music. The great songs of the last 70 years have seen us through love and loss, war and strife, momentous social changes, bad leaders and dead heroes. Now that boom boxes have evolved to Walkmen and Walkmen have evolved to iPods, we can expect the music to continue, but with far greater fidelity, variety, and convenience.

We can call on the power of music to influence ourselves or others. When feeling sad we can try to change our mood by listening to upbeat music, or we can inhabit our sadness, in which case we might listen to the blues or country music. Plato was convinced that the state should use music to control the behavior of its citizens, and we all know of the way various malls and stores treat their customers to music calculated to stimulate their impulses to buy. Musicians are sometimes disturbed by the uses made of their songs, and grownups are troubled by the influence music seems to

have over younger fans. But it would more disturbing if music suddenly lost its power to move us.

A few fanatics want to remove music from everyone's lives, but most people think that music (of one kind or another) is a valuable and natural part of life. It might be difficult to establish Shakespeare's thought that "the man that hath no music in himself, nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils," but it is not an implausible idea to someone who understands what a positive influence music can be. (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 1)

It is true that music (like morality) can show up to support both sides of any conflict, but the overwhelming importance of music does not rest in its power to motivate people, to enhance our propaganda, or to promote war, or even peace. The greatest contribution music can make to our lives only appears when we approach it as an art, a practice, or a study. If we take up an instrument, or learn to play or sing in a group, we will learn to listen, to cooperate, and to practice. Could any set of lessons be more important? Even just listening to music can expand our minds and provide a unique kind of pleasure. The music program is one of the last programs I would slash from any school's budget. This is not because music is "intrinsically valuable," it is because it provides an occasion when we are forced to listen to each other, and in which we are richly rewarded for doing so.

Morality. Morality itself must be included in the list of devices we use to influence each other. In the world according to the moralist, some things are objectively good and some ways of acting are firmly forbidden by whatever moral authority there might be. Moralists who say that some act is a duty, or that it is morally required, are

telling us that, apart from rewards and punishments, apart from our desires and plans, that act is something we ought to do, something we deserve to be blamed for not doing, something anyone in similar circumstances is also required to do. We have seen how difficult (or impossible) it is to explain and defend this view, but that does not hold moralists back. Most of them are so convinced that the world must have objective values and rules that they do not even hesitate before demanding our respect for, and our obedience to, the “Moral Law.”

We now know that it is an open question how much sense moral objectivity makes. The emotivists thought it made none, and error theorists think it makes enough sense for us to be able to deny it. We also know that it is not clear how much effect morality actually has on conduct. It does not literally compel us, because we are free to do what is “morally wrong,” but it is quite capable of being exploited by those who think (or pretend to think) they know what is really valuable and what is morally required and forbidden.

Words are not merely sounds that signify objects. They have a dynamic life and almost magical powers that we would be foolish to ignore. Words being used in moral discussions and debates are brimming with hidden meanings and veiled implications that can always be denied but usually recognized. When we are arguing about morality, lucidity does not serve both sides equally. This is why the question “What do you mean” is so important, so often asked by the amoralist, and so feared by those who are trying to put something over on people.

Many of the methods of control we have been discussing would be impossible without language, and morality itself, false though it may be, is built into our very words

and woven out of powerful systems of metaphor. As George Orwell impressed upon us, if we can control the language we can control the thoughts of its users. Scientists and technicians are at work around the clock figuring out ways to bamboozle us with words. What can we possibly do to protect ourselves? Silence is not a genuine option, even if some sages seem to be advising it. Nor is it reasonable to stop listening, even if that seems to be the policy of far too many speakers. Since we are stuck with language, we are just going to have to make do. It will help if we really do understand how easily words can be used to control us, and how difficult it can be to for us to see this as it is happening. Language is a tool, and we don't like to think about our tools, we like to use them. But the time to think is upon us. By using language in less than straightforward ways, skillful manipulators have learned how to make us disapprove of harmless behavior, buy their products, jump through their hoops, and vote against our own interests. The topic of the use and abuse of language, and the possibility of saving ourselves by attending carefully to words, is important enough to deserve its own chapter.