

Mission Statement

The Fellowship of Reason® is an open, benevolent, and vital rational moral community in which we celebrate our lives, our freedoms, and our philosophy of reason.

Creating a New Morality

The effort to find a new morality for humankind is centuries old. The search might be dated to the 18th century and the philosophes of France, among them Condorcet.

I'm reading a fascinating book entitled *A Preface to Morals* by Walter Lippmann, published in 1929. Lippmann's book interests me because what he tried to do is very similar to our efforts here at the beginning of the 21st century to create the world's first reason-based moral community. Lippmann recounts in the first part of his book how the "acids of modernity" have dissolved belief in religions and all authority. He describes in the last of the book his new humanistic philosophy.

By examining his philosophy we can understand why he failed to create a successful new morality, though some of his premises were very close to ours—specifically, morality is, for him, a means to achieve life and happiness. Lippmann was a proto-Eudaimonist.

His error is in finding value in the *disinterestedness* of Buddha, Jesus, Socrates, and other great moral leaders. Disinterestedness! I speculate that the embracing of disinterestedness—a lack of interest in the things of this world—is a root of existentialism. No wonder his philosophy didn't catch on. A morality with disinterestedness as its center piece, is, well, uninteresting.

Some among us went to see the new Coen brothers' movie *The Man Who Wasn't There*. This movie is not for everyone—definitely *film noir*. So be forewarned. Billy Bob Thornton is the lead and delivers an Oscar winning performance. Billy Bob is a barber who watches life go by from behind

meticulous grooming and a ubiquitous cigarette. And what a life it is! I won't spoil the movie for you, but Billy Bob is a quintessential existentialist utterly disinterested in the mundane things of this world. If you want to understand the angst of the existentialist, see this movie (at Tara).

Lippmann's solution to the moral problem (essentially the conflict among desires within the individual and among individuals) is *maturity*. Lippmann advises that the individual must be educated to understand the various stages of life and the particular needs and desires of each stage. He must evaluate his own desires and adapt them to reality. Dispassion, disengagement, self-denial, and resignation are elements of his morality.

A key difference between Lippmann and our philosophy is this. It is true that one needs to be educated in the ways of man. It is true that one needs to be aware of one's needs and desires and to adapt them to reality. But it is not true that one should be disinterested in those needs and desires and disengage from them. For us, engagement with life is crucial.

A problem with looking to Buddha, Jesus, and Socrates for comprehensive moral guidance in the 20th or the 21st century—that is, after the Industrial Revolution—is that they knew nothing about the scientific method or invention or the entrepreneur. Human beings are no longer victims of fate. We have a degree of control over our destinies. We can act to achieve our needs and desires. We can become *heroically engaged* in life. Buddha said that life is suffering. We hold that life is heroic engagement.

In our philosophy deep experiences of being alive *is* the meaning of life. The means of achieving deep experiences of being alive is heroic engagement. Full engagement with life is absolutely necessary to achieve happiness. Eudaimonists agree with Aristotle (he was the first Eudaimonist and he taught us most of what we know) that happiness is a function of the full use of one's faculties in accordance with virtue.

Billy Bob Thornton's character is disengaged from life. He meticulously avoids deep experiences of

being alive. He suffers, as a consequence, existential angst—a resigned lack of meaning.

Reason—that acid of modernity that has destroyed modern man's belief in religion and all authority—*should* be disinterested. The law has long recognized bias as impediment to the discovery of the truth. But the only possible long-ranged and integrated *goal* of reason is life and happiness or, as we Eudaimonists like to say, flourishing. (Integrated reason would make short work of death as a goal by slitting the throat of its host.) With flourishing as its goal, reason necessarily recognizes the satisfaction of human needs and desires as the means to achieving happiness.

So the advocacy of disengagement is a flaw in Lippmann's humanism, in existentialism, and in the character played by Billy Bob Thornton. Heroic engagement with life guided by reason is the only way to achieve happiness.

What you should know:

Your desires are the raw material of happiness. Reason is the means by which one evaluates a particular desire, learns its root, its worth, and the means of its achievement.

Heroic engagement is the process of realizing worthy desires. Reason guides heroic engagement.

A happy life is one lived in the heroic pursuit of worthy desires utilizing all of one's faculties in accordance with reason and virtue.

December 2001 Celebration:

Welcome
Celebration of Freedom—?
Celebration of Visitors
Celebration of Each Other
Celebratory Announcements
Celebration of Personal Mission—Randy
Celebration of Heroes—?
Celebration of Literature—Ellen
Celebration of Art—Chris
Celebration of Talent—?
Oratory—"Heroic Engagement" by Martin Cowen
Closing Quotation

Bring your Personal Mission Notebook to Celebration.

FOR's Thanksgiving Day Dinner

Martin and Linda are hosting a potluck Thanksgiving dinner at their house on Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 22, 2001 from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Everybody is welcome, but R.S.V.P.s are requested for this special event. 770-471-9800.

FOR's Café Conversation

Not scheduled for this month.

FOR's Philosophy Tapes

FOR's free taped philosophy course resumes on Thursday, November 29, 2001 at 7:30 p.m. Nietzsche is the subject of this series of tapes. The location, within the perimeter, is to be announced.

Contact information:

To talk to somebody about FOR call Martin at 770-471-9800. To receive e-mail notice of FOR's activities send you e-mail address to mlcowen@mindspring.com

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