

7. Do What You Do

7.01 What are you doing?

I am sure you have watched the behaviour of others, from time to time, and been critical. “What an idiot”. “Stupid driver”! How is it that you are somehow able to distinguish idiotic behaviour from non-idiotic behaviour? Where did that little internal voice that provides you with a sense of what is acceptable and what is not come from?

This is a tough question for most to answer. In part because:

- You are the product of a very long cultural history;
- You are the product of your own personal history; and,
- You are, in theory anyway, a thinking being who is able to mull over your situation, take in new information from others, and change your own behaviour and the way you are thinking to suit your immediate circumstances and desires.

In this section, we will consider these postulates. My intent here is not to provide a comprehensive discussion on morality or the development of any sort of moral code. Instead, it is rather simply to get you to think. With some luck the ensuing discussion will enable you to remain flexible about your own motivations and be sympathetic to the motivations and desires of others.

As an experimentalist, I tend to observe with a deliberately neutral sense of judgement. That’s the way you are supposed to do experiments. If you pre-judge the outcome of an experiment, then likely you will only see what you want to see and seeing is not always believing. Over some years of practice, I think I have become pretty good at suspending judgement when it comes to taking measurements and processing data. When it comes to observing myself and other people, however, that is tougher. I have lived a life influenced by parents, friends, colleagues and strangers in a culture that has a long history of traditions. When it comes to judging people, I have a lot of baggage that influences how I feel. What motivates me, what are my default reactions? Where did my reactions and attitudes come from anyway?

The first thing to do, when trying to determine what your own moral motivations are, is to start with the idea that you are an automaton. That is someone who is essentially reacting to the world as an unconscious being would. We are just animals after all and many of our behaviours come from that animal legacy.

In one part of your brain you are simply an automaton. You just react. You don’t think. This is the perfect state to be in to do experimental observations. You don’t have motivations. You don’t have intent. You just live for “the now”.

In another part of your brain you need to become an impartial observer. That is, you need to self-observe without judgement. Just examine what you do. Look at yourself as an outsider would and note your reactions to life's little obstacles.

Now you are set. Go.

Drive around. Did you run that orange light? Stop at that stop sign? Swear at that guy in the right lane who turned left? Idiot! Get grumpy? Receive a call from a friend and get happy? Remember that that friend owes you money and start thinking nasty thoughts. See some people over there and for some reason, that neither the automaton-you nor the observer-you can figure out, you start having almost sub-conscious, negative thoughts about them? What the heck!

What's going on? Who is that thinking those grumpy thoughts? Is that me? Where did all these judgements about the world and the people in it come from?

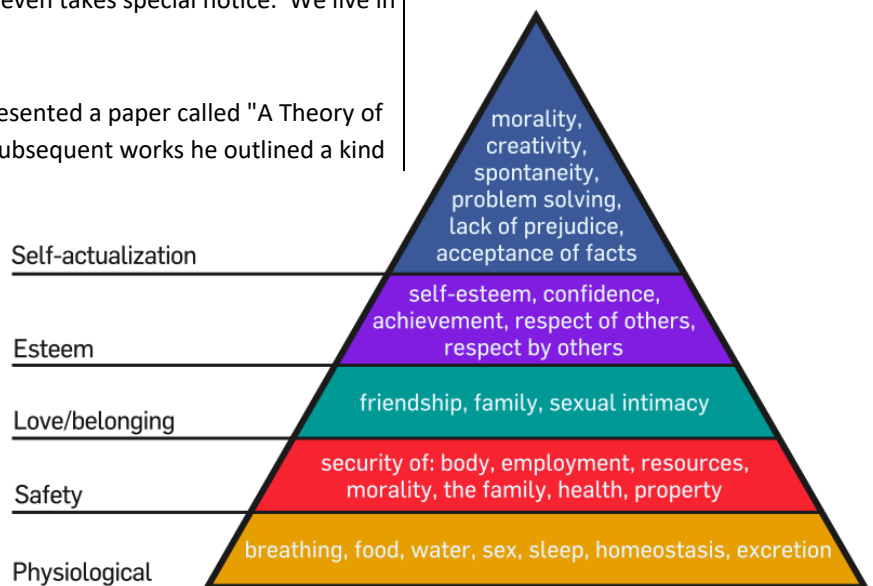
7.02 Freedom

At no time in the past has there been such freedom as now. Not only do we have everything that we could physically need, but you are free to say and do some seriously nasty things before anyone even takes special notice. We live in a golden age of freedom.

In 1943 Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970) presented a paper called "A Theory of Human Motivation." In that paper and in subsequent works he outlined a kind of personal and cultural check list.

In the pyramid diagram of Needs (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs) you must satisfy the lower levels before you can move onto the next level up. For example, the lower most need is that of breathing, eating, and propagating the species. In the worst of times, that is all that an individual in a society can accomplish. Fundamentally that's all that evolution needs to have any species

do to produce future generations. As food becomes more plentiful the pressure to find food is relieved and people become more concerned with the needs in the next level, namely security and safety. The dividing line between any two levels is blurred and a progression from one level to the next is gradual



and continuous but Maslow's hierarchy of needs does help to detail what is fundamentally important: air before discussions of morality.

From the perspective of freedom, Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps gain some perspective on what limits personal and social freedom. For example, if you and your family are living in a war-ravaged country you no doubt will hold safety as a primary concern. That doesn't mean that you won't have friends but it might mean that you limit the depth of your friendship as a means of psychologically protecting yourself from the depths of grief you might feel if they are killed. Not only that, you may lack a universal respect for others and have quite a repertoire of prejudices to draw upon, should the need arise. Your physical freedom would be curtailed in that you could not travel anywhere and associate with anyone you so choose. In addition, your mental freedom would be curtailed because your internal prejudices and concerns about safety would inhibit you from thinking any thought you wanted.

Your circumstances limit your freedom: both physical and psychological.

7.03 Cultural Baggage

Oh yes, you have parents who learned from their parents, etc., etc., but what I really want to get to is what provides the moral foundation of our society - I mean beneath the laws and present day philosophies manifested as religions and capitalistic corporations. When did some of the ideas that create our sense of moral behaviour start to emerge?

Note: Before I start this section I want to point out what is likely obvious. I am no expert on moral codes or history of philosophy. I am simply an engineer with a curiosity for such things. The little bit of reading and talking to people that I have done has allowed certain ideas to come together in my mind but they are likely far from correct or comprehensive. My objective here is simply to get you to think broadly about history and your place in it. That being said I will now plunge into my effort to corrupt young minds.

Do you have a natural code of ethics? I have heard people say that life would be so much better if everyone took their lessons from nature. Espousing a natural code of ethics is brought about by an unrealistic, romantic view of nature where all is flowers and sunshine. The real natural moral code is stated simply as survival of the fittest. Most animals end up as dinner for other animals. If it looks good, you are hungry and you can catch it, eat it.

This code has led to some interesting adaptations: armor, living underground, big teeth, etc. One of the most successful survival strategies has been to learn to live in groups. Species who live in groups have adapted to a kind of binary view of the world in that there are two kinds of animals – those in my group and those that are not. The animals in my group are not often seen or used as food

while all others are potential sources of dinner. These social adaptations have been so successful that certain species have emerged such that they can gradually move upward on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We are one of those species.

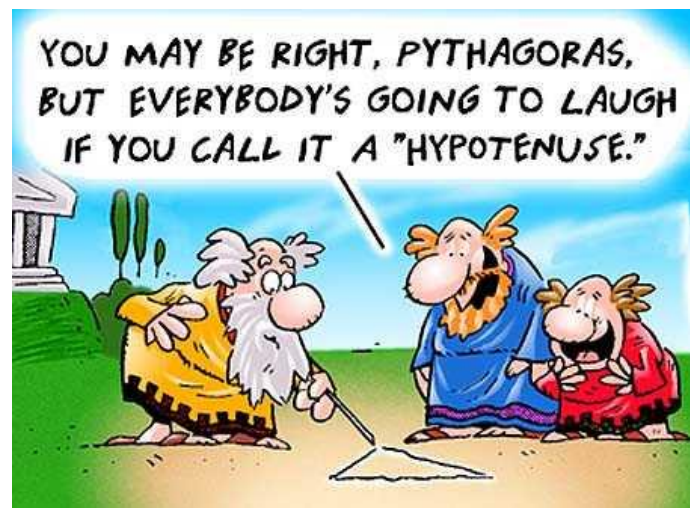
When sufficient social infrastructure has been produced that there is excess, there becomes a situation where people have free time and simultaneously, conditions of security. Under these conditions people start to think.

Occasionally there comes along a thinker who influences the way people behave and live for generations to come. One of the earliest of these individuals that I have run across is Pythagoras.

You know Pythagoras by his most famous theorem 'The sum of the squares of the sides of a right angle triangle equals the square of the hypotenuse', but he did way, way more than that. He, his followers and his successors set an influential foundation for many of the religions and philosophies that were to follow.

Leonard Mlodinow's, in his interesting history of geometry called "Euclid's Window", outlines aspects of Pythagoras's life. Pythagoras (570 BC – 495 BC, 75 years) was born on the island of Samos in Greece and was identified early in his life as a bright fellow. At the age of eighteen he travelled to nearby islands and spent time with other greats such as Pherecydes (600 B.C. to 550 B.C.) and Thales (620 B.C to 547 B.C). Pherecydes, for example had studied the secret books of the Phoenicians and introduced Greece to the belief of immortality. Thales was more down to earth and asserted that via observation and reasoning we should be able to explain all that happens in nature. He eventually came to the revolutionary conclusion that nature follows regular laws. Pythagoras was greatly influenced by both men but had a great curiosity so he travelled to Egypt. There he learned Egyptian geometry and became the first Greek to learn Egyptian hieroglyphics. He eventually became an Egyptian priest, initiated into their sacred rites. This gave him access to all their mysteries, even to the secret rooms in their temples. He remained in Egypt for at least thirteen years. Forced to leave Egypt because of a Persian invasion, Pythagoras went to Babylon where he gained a thorough knowledge of Babylonian mathematics. He finally returned to Samos, his island of birth, at the age of fifty. By that time Pythagoras had synthesized the philosophy of space and mathematics.

Pythagoras was a charismatic figure and a self-promoter. At the age of fifty he was very much interested in preaching his ideas to groups that would listen. His knowledge of hieroglyphics led many Greeks to believe he had special powers. He encouraged tales that set him apart from normal citizens. Pythagoras had a golden birthmark on his thigh, which he displayed as a sign of



divinity. The people of Samos did not prove susceptible to his preaching so he traveled to the less sophisticated city of Croton, an Italian city colonized by Greeks (south-east coast on the Italian peninsula). It was there that he established his “society” of followers and the legend of Pythagoras was realized. Many aspects of his life parallel that of another, much later, charismatic leader and it is thought that some of the legends and stories of Pythagoras were adopted and adapted to enhance the persona of future leaders. For instance:

- Pythagoras was believed by many to be the son of God (in this case, Apollo);
- His mother was called Parthenis, which means “virgin”;
- Before traveling to Egypt, he lived the life of a hermit on Mount Carmel;
- There is a myth that Pythagoras returned from the dead (although the story also says he faked this by hiding for a few days in an underground chamber);
- He was said to have appeared in two places at once;
- He could calm waters and control winds;
- He was once greeted by a divine voice; and,
- He was believed to have the ability to walk on water.

His philosophy also has a familiar ring to it. For instance:

- He preached that you should love your enemies (Christianity);
- He believed in reincarnation, possibility as an animal, so even an animal could be inhabited by what was once a human soul (Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, 560 BC to 480 BC)
- Pythagoras felt that possessions got in the way of the pursuit of divine truth;
- He rejected luxury and banned his followers from any clothing except that made from simple white linen;
- His followers earned no money, but relied on the charity of the Croton populace;
- Pythagoreans lived in a communal lifestyle.

The first Pythagorean society eventually disbanded but the Pythagorean philosophy persisted until about 300 BC but then was revived by the Romans in the first century before Christ and became a dominating force within the Roman Empire. Pythagoreanism became an influence in many religions of that time, such as Alexandrian Judaism, the aging ancient Egyptian religion, and, Christianity. In the second century A.D., Pythagorean mathematics, in association with the School of Plato, received new impetus. Eventually, in the fourth century A.D. the Romans closed the Pythagorean Academy and forbade the teaching of the philosophy. The Romans hated their long hair and beards, their use of drugs such as opium, not to mention their un-Christian way (Hmmm, like the 1960’s hippie movement? Strange how history appears to

repeat itself and seems to get reused by future generations.) Pythagoreanism flickered for a few more centuries then disappeared into the Dark Ages around 600 A.D.

When I read the about the Pythagoreans many years ago I was struck by how similar many of their ideas are to philosophies of today. Knowing that Pythagoras was a contemporary of Buddha and that his ideas pre-date Christ by 500 years and the more modern Christianity by 800 years (Constantine's formalization of Christianity in 325 A.D), was illuminating for me. Even the stories of the Romans closing the academy of long haired, drug using radicles rang some bells. I guess philosophical ideas and ideals get recycled like so much else.

7.04 Toward a Personal Code of Ethics

What is a code of ETHICS?

Well, once again our friends at Wikipedia have done a fine job at providing a nice definition. They say:

“Ethics, also known as *moral philosophy*, is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior.”

You already have a personal code. All you have to do is observe yourself, define for yourself what that code is and then think. No, I mean really think.

Do you like what you are?

If not, then change yourself.

You **can** you know.

You have the power!

You are, after all, what you think.

