A Life Worth Living

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FOREWORD

When I retired as a professor of philosophy in 1989, I planned a number of projects. Among them was writing this book. The prospect of publishing it, although not dismissed, was not a primary consideration. Writing it was. I would decide later whether to cast it upon the waters. Did I dare be so bold? Presumptuous? Consequently, when I finished it in 1998, I placed it in a desk drawer, where it has resided peacefully until now, 2013.

For a number of reasons, I have, at this late date, decided to put it in publishable form and to make it available to some readers other than myself, especially my wife Geraldine and my three sons, Bob, Jr., Sherwood, and Bill. But how to proceed? Unfortunately, I did not know how to go about that. Fortunately, Leslie Dare did. Leslie, who, to my everlasting gratitude, is Sherwood's wife, has brought to bear on the enterprise her vast expertise, limitless generosity, and gentle prodding. And (Lo*!) fait accompli*.

PREFACE

While I was having dinner at a restaurant not long ago, a fortyish-looking man came to my table and introduced himself. He wanted to let me know that as a student he had taken my introductory philosophy course twenty years earlier and to tell me what he could not bring himself to tell me back then, namely, that that course had had a profound effect on his life. "In fact," he said, "I cite you in rearing my children."

I was flabbergasted.

Over the years, other students have graciously expressed their appreciation and gratitude and have said nice things to me even after their grades were already in. But I was especially moved by the comments of this man, who twenty years later remembered not just that he had had an interesting intellectual experience or believed that he may have cultivated some valuable forms of thought, even perhaps that he had undergone a change in attitude. I would have been enormously gratified had he reported any of those benefits. No, more than any of those, he had, as a result of studying philosophy in my introductory course, adopted principles of conduct that he could articulate and in fact did in rearing his children. Now, that's something.

Our conversation was brief. He said what he wanted to say, and I hadn't finished my Szechwan shrimp. I did not remember him as a student. I do now.

I took very seriously the course in which he had been enrolled. I realized that for almost all of the students who took it, it would be the only formal study of philosophy, and especially of ethical theory, they would ever do. I intended, among other things, to acquaint them with rational procedures for examining, evaluating, and, I fondly hoped, directing their lives.

In the *Republic* Plato had Socrates say: "We have shown that

the just are superior in character and intelligence and more able in action than the unjust. . . . We must now examine whether the just also live a better life than the unjust and are happier, a question which we also proposed to consider. I think it is already clear that they are, but we ought to consider more carefully, for no light matter is at stake, no less than the right way to live."

That's the way I felt about the introductory philosophy course that students had paid tuition to take and that the university paid my salary to teach. No light matter was at stake, "no less than the right way to live."

I realize that most people who live successful and fruitful lives have somehow managed to do so without the assistance of ethical theory. They plan their lives well, have good judgment, and are honorable human beings. But some people also wonder about the justification for the way they're living or ought to live, about the suitability of their goals and purposes. They wonder about the limits, even the substance, of their moral duties and obligations and why they ought to act on them. They wonder whether they have things straight and whether they count for anything. They wonder about God. And then from time to time they ask the "meaning" question. So at the heart of my introductory course was an inquiry into "the right way to live."

Then the other day a middle-aged man approached me in a Chinese restaurant to tell me that for him that inquiry had a decisive influence on the way he conducted his life and subsequently the way he raised his children. As a student I was myself introduced to Plato and Aristotle and Immanuel Kant and a number of astute contemporary philosophers who significantly shaped and continue to shape my own conception about what's right and good, rooted always in the continuing experience of my own life. My anonymous former student unknowingly prompted me to want to pass on that conception and its genesis to a wider clientele, especially in an age when increasingly people are seeking advice through trance-channeling. Even great and enduring concepts -- eternal truths -- must be reexamined and reinterpreted in current, evolving contexts. I decided it was time to recapitulate the bidding.

Obviously no one life fits all. But Plato thought, and so do I, that the theoretical contours of a life worth living can be traced. Theory of right and good does not have the exactness of scientific theory, but it shares with scientific theory the practice of rational asking and answering, and that practice can take us a long way.

Let me hasten to say that this book is not Philosophy 101 revisited. It's not a course. There are no lectures, no quizzes, no assigned reading. I never did take the roll. And I'm going to have considerably more to say about the concrete joy, excitement, discovery, puzzlement, day-to-dayness, and occasional terror of living in the world at the turn of the current millennium than one finds in the structured arguments of ethical theory. It's not a conversation either, unfortunately, because I'll do all the talking. But I'm going to pretend that it's a conversation and hope that I'll have rightly anticipated comments you might make, objections you might raise, questions you might ask. I'll be appealing to your reason and your best intuitions. If you just categorically disagree with me, then you know how to bring this quasi-conversation to a halt.

It's also important for me to state that this book is therefore not a technical treatise written for the scrutiny of professional philosophers. If it were, I would offer interminable qualifications, cite innumerable sources, let no tittle go unattended, scrupulously attempt to protect myself against avoidable gaffs. Professional philosophers can be an ornery lot, and I hope my colleagues will forgive me this informal chat.

One more thing. After all these years of thinking about and talking philosophy, I am not sure which, of some of the ideas I'll be sharing with you, are original to me. Some ideas that I knew were my own when they first occurred to me I later discovered in the literature. Other ideas I know are not original to me, but I no longer know where they came from. When I do know, I'll let you know. Like everybody else, my beliefs and attitudes have been formed by the sheer fact of living the life I have lived from the cradle on. I am too deeply in debt to the genius and insight of others to make boastful claims. Wherever my ideas have come from, a former student of mine recently told me that I have ended

up saying something instructive about a life worth living. I'm going to try to say it, amplified, diversified, and somewhat personalized, again.

1 - ORIGINS

UNTIL NOT LONG AGO, every weekday morning for twenty-three years, not including holidays and vacations, I said to myself at some point while driving to work, "Bryan, do you realize that you are totally free of pain?" I would then remind myself that I was remarkably fortunate, that I would not always be this fortunate, that I must be both humble and grateful, and that it was somehow incumbent upon me to make something of myself.

Now, nobody goes through life totally free of even minor pain. If I and you too, I shall assume, live as long as the actuarial tables suggest, and even if we're exceedingly lucky, we are nevertheless going to feel lousy from time to time, especially toward the end. And then, of course, there's dying.

By no means do I make a fetish of exploring, analyzing, let alone fretting about how I feel. I pay no attention to my pleasure-pain state unless I am experiencing some particular, attention-demanding pleasure or pain. Which is the reason I made it a point -- a ritual actually -- to remind myself every morning that I was free of pain and to bask gratefully in that unmerited dispensation. Being free of pain is so wonderful that taking it for granted is, I submit, immoral. There are people who live stoically through pain, I know, some of whom become better persons for it. But in itself pain is bad. It's debilitating. Interfering. And it hurts. Sometimes intensely. It diminishes our lives, even when it's modest. If we fear eternal damnation, we do so because we are terrified by the prospect of eternal pain.

Even so, being free of pain is not itself a positive condition. The expression "free of pain" doesn't describe anything. Not being in pain is a non-state-of-affairs rather like not being in Madagascar. Nevertheless, for most of us, unlike not being in Madagascar, not being in pain is critical to the conduct and enjoyment of our lives. Although we are not tempted to say that we are free of being in Madagascar, we sometimes say with deep passion that we are free of pain, especially when we have just been

relieved of it. In a way it constitutes the ratification of our lives. To be sure, life is not grand just because of the absence of something, specifically pain, but that matchless non-state-of-affairs may be the logical starting place, a defining gratuity, a necessary condition for living as well as possible. Accordingly, a case can be made that, when the cosmos has been generous to us, granting us not only existence but sufficiently pain-free existence to make a go of things, we have a duty to treat our lives and those of others with utmost respect -- to live nobly, skillfully, tastefully. And joyfully.

In a way I was implicitly affirming all this each morning. I was acknowledging the astonishing beneficence of my existence, the odds against the occurrence of which are literally astronomical, and the ghastly brevity of which dawned on me not long after puberty. I was also confirming my duty to honor this incredible largesse. Of course, recognizing a duty is not to be confused with acting on it. But each morning I set myself, within my meager capacities and fragile will, to try.

So, it seems to me, must each of us.

Consider first the extreme unlikelihood that you and I came to exist at all. We did so because a particular sperm, out of millions on any occasion of natural conception, united with a particular egg, following which all went sufficiently well for us to make our opportune appearance. And our parents -- what a splendid accident that they happened to meet -- came into existence against the same odds. And so with their parents. How many thousands -- millions -- of years would you like to take this back? It's not as if we're entitled to our existence. Yet here we are. We would have a much better chance of winning the lottery than we did of getting born.

Then we're going to die. Even if you believe that somehow or other you're going to live again -- and we'll talk about that later -- the organism that bears your name and has walked this earth and may have produced the egg or sperm that ignited yet another life, that first-person organism, that unique, DNA-formed you, will die and be forever gone, just as your childhood is gone, never to be recovered. The difference is that you can remember your childhood, or some of it. I don't know how you feel about all that,

but in me it induces a deep sadness. Think about it if you dare. When we die, it's all over. Kaput. No more opportunity for putting off; no more there's-always-tomorrow; no more possibilities; no more joie de vivre. Can you conceive of absolute nothing?

Don't try, at least not right now, since what we want to talk about are the nows that still remain to us. The present now and whatever few tomorrows gratuitously transpose into future nows are inescapably all we have. Here we are, somewhere between the improbable event of having been born and the inevitable event of dying after so short a time. What are we going to do?

This doesn't mean we have to rush or panic. On the contrary, doing so would be counterproductive. It does mean that we must treat ourselves and our lives with respect. Allowing without remorse or anger that we are, for all sorts of reasons, simply not up to living perfect lives -- even if we were, there are too many contingencies in the world that work against our interests -- it would nevertheless be unseemly, indeed reprehensible, not, within reasonable expectations, to try to do so. On judgment day, however conceived, we who have not been ravaged by misfortune, ought to be judged on our efforts to live lives worthy of having been here.

Regrettably, heart-rendingly, there are people whose lives are largely characterized by misfortune, people in pain, some in constant pain, even excruciating pain, many, many people in unremitting despair, people the substance of whose lives consists in the hollow effort merely to survive, people with every right to resent privileged talk about living nobly and joyfully. How can we say to those whose existence is anything but a boon that they have a duty to live in a way worthy of having been born? Is it shamefully egocentric, in the face of massive suffering, to attach such importance to the integrity of our own dear but limited lives?

First of all, let's be clear about the point here. The reason we are concerned about people whose lives are deprived is the very fact that their lives are deprived. We want the lives of all human beings to be rich and full and joyful. It is precisely because pain thwarts the very possibility of such a life that we despise it. In

even the most primitive conception of a worthwhile life, pain is clearly seen as intrinsically bad.

What counts as good for any human being is another matter, which happens to be the subject of this book. But whatever a good life turns out to be for any given person, its moral authority is what generates our concern for suffering in the world.

So when we contemplate the nature of a life worth living with the intent to pursue it, we are not ignorant of or indifferent to the fact that a great many lives, through no fault of their possessors, are scarcely bearable and give little or no promise of being otherwise. And if we have any decency about us, we weep and share Job's indignation. Nevertheless, not only is there nothing indecent about attempting to ascertain the nature of a life worthwhile, it is on the contrary incumbent upon us, for moral as well as self-interested reasons, to do so, at least in a fundamental way.

What must we do about those in need? That's a tough question. Whether we are entitled to spend even a few dollars on a movie, for example, when a few dollars would feed a starving child, is a question concerning which philosophers who spend their professional lives puzzling about such things are of different and wavering opinions. We shall have to discuss later our duties and obligations to one another.

But let's return to the question at hand: How, if the world is at all hospitable, do we go about living lives worthy of who we are?

Well, not impulsively by some kind of random selection, or by acting on the strongest desire or urge of the moment. Nor, I contend -- and I shall later undertake an analysis of putative non-standard forms of cognition -- by consulting a psychic hotline or our horoscope or our dead grandmother. Not without some, however vague, conception of and commitment to what's worth pursuing in life.

A final comment on how to proceed.

There are some natural conditions and some principles of conduct that I take to be universal. Natural laws that apply to any specific human being apply to all human beings, no matter what their circumstances. Sulfuric acid, for example, will not slake the

thirst of anyone, no matter who. Certain principles of diet and exercise, however they may apply in individual cases, apply in general to all human organisms. The force of gravity affects all of us. Indeed, scientists have good reason to believe that the same physical laws apply throughout the universe. The more we know about ourselves as constituents in nature the better we'll be able to cope.

Principles of conduct are a bit trickier. Some of them, I shall argue, especially basic moral principles, apply to all responsible agents. Anyone who believes that it is morally acceptable to mutilate little children just for the fun of it is, to say the least, just wrong. Much more about this later.

On the other hand many general principles of conduct, both personal and social, vary in application depending on time, place, and culture. This is true not just of manners and mores. Some of the same general principles of human fulfillment, for example, would be expressed differently in the life of someone living in a Tibetan village from the way they would be expressed in the life of someone living in New York. Even some moral principles would be implemented differently.

Knowing very little about Tibetan villages and expecting scant readership there, I shall direct my remarks to Americans living circa 2000 A.D. Nevertheless, given corrections for time, place, and cultural differences, the fundamental principles of good and right living, I humbly maintain, apply to all of us.

In my junior year in college I experienced a kind of epiphany that ever since has determined my beliefs about how I -- or anyone -- ought to structure my life. I realize that for me it came at just the right, searching moment and that different words enlighten different people. But what is true is true, and what Plato said to me back in the first philosophy course I ever took I believe to be true. Or on target. You may find what he had to say a truism. If so, all the better.

Not altogether unlike Newton under the apple tree or Archimedes in the bathtub, I was struck by the following sentence in Plato's *Republic*: "In the conflict of the soul, the spirit is arrayed in the pursuit of good on the side of reason."

Eureka!

When as an adolescent I was told of an ancient Greek philosopher named Plato -- "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy Plato," Emerson once proclaimed -- I knew that, if I should ever be privileged to read him, I would learn some great secret of life. It was true.

The human spirit -- what the colossal Greek called the anger in the soul, the will, the enactor of decision, the driving force in a human being -- arrayed in the pursuit of good on the side of reason.

This was his way of articulating a principle that has been endorsed, I came to learn, by the philosophers I have most admired from Aristotle to John Rawls, contemporary author of a book of seminal importance, *A Theory of Justice*, about which I'll have much to say.

Two things in the sentence especially struck me at that questing time of my young life. The first was that the defining end of a human life is not pleasure, as I had been impetuously tempted to believe it is, not even sophisticated, tasteful, even gloriously passionate pleasure, intolerably vapid though life would be without it and essential though it obviously is to a life worth living. No, not the defining end. It is good, the concept of which will have to be analyzed, the nature of which sedulously explored, that is the proper and desirable end of a human life. That may sound platitudinous, but it is anything but.

The other thing, reasonable by definition, was that in this pursuit the human will or spirit, in a context of sometimes wildly conflicting urges and appetites, desires, impulses, and soaring fantasies, is arrayed by its natural human function on the side of reason -- rational procedures, rational ends.

I remember saying to myself in a vague, immature way something like this: If I can understand what, according to my best judgment and for whatever reason, I ought to do, what it is good or right or fulfilling or lovely to do or to be, and then am able to choose to do it, then I am free; I am a genuine person. If I can deliberate about possible courses of action and then act on the conclusion of my deliberations, then I am free. I am not Pavlov's dog. In a world of natural limitations and a relentless flow of

events, I am free; I am, in the best, unmitigated sense, a person. Sort of like God.

I had rejected the notion, espoused by David Hume in the eighteenth century, that reason is the slave of the passions, let alone the pawn of base purposes. I was prepared to seek what's good. After all, "No one is satisfied with the appearance of good," Plato declared in the *Republic*. "The reality is what they seek; in the case of the good, appearance is despised by everyone. Of this, then, which every soul of man pursues and makes the end of all his actions, having a presentiment that there is such an end . . . must every soul be enlightened."

I had a presentiment. I wanted to be enlightened.

Here was the great one assuring me that I dared to extrapolate from my own pitiable longings to "every soul," dared to universalize my own youthful gropings and yearning for meaning, my own quest for vision, my own wish to be good. I should have realized that as soon as human beings evolved sufficiently to begin thinking about what I, a late-comer, was amorphously thinking about, some genius would observe that "in the conflict of the soul, the spirit is arrayed on the side of reason," and we need not be satisfied with merely the appearance of good. I wished I could read Greek.

Note that Plato speaks to what he calls conflict in the soul, that is, situations when one is faced with conflicting values or desires or purposes which need adjudication; then "the spirit" of any rational person is "arrayed on the side of reason." Note also that reason is a form of thinking. In a vacuum it tells us nothing about what is good and what is not. That's important. My Webster's desk dictionary says it is "the ability to think, form judgments, draw conclusions, etc.; sound thought or judgment; good sense; sanity." Sanity is what we're after. We don't want people believing that in the wake of an enormous comet that recently passed this way was hovering a very large spaceship that would transport a chosen few to eternal bliss. Deliver us from hocus-pocus.

The concept of a reasonable person is a perfectly familiar one, familiar in legal deliberations as well as in ordinary human affairs.

In the notorious lawsuit brought by Paula Corbin Jones against the President of the United States, Judge Susan Webber Wright ruled, among other things, that the President's alleged conduct "did not result in distress so severe that no reasonable person could be expected to endure it."

I shall assume, not unreasonably I hope, that you understand what Judge Wright had in mind. But reasonableness implies rationality, and if we are to understand what we are about as human beings, we shall have to examine what that critical concept entails. Which brings us to Plato's protégé, Aristotle.

It's amazing that two of the greatest minds in human history should live contemporaneously in the same town and that one should tutor the other. So it was with Plato and Aristotle.

In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, which he wrote for the instruction of his son, the eminently sensible Aristotle argued that "the good," not as some kind of abstract entity, not Plato's eternal "Idea of the Good," but as the object of justifiable human purposes, is happiness, which he was quick to "identify . . . with living well and doing well." And this we can talk about in the concrete. He did not mean by happiness pleasure or how one happens to feel at some time or other, although feeling good is undoubtedly part of it. Rather, he made it a point to assert that happiness is the condition of "a complete life" lived well. "For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy." He then devoted the thrust of the *Nichomachean Ethics* to explicating the terms of such a life.

For purposes of this essay, however, in order to avoid inevitably conflicting prior notions of happiness -- and we all bring some concept to the table -- I shall more often use more comprehensive expressions like "a good life" or "a worthwhile life" or "a life worth living" to refer to what I take Aristotle to mean by human happiness, namely, a full, rich, morally satisfying, and meaningful existence.

Aristotle went on to emphasize that it is as human beings, with a unique human nature, that we shall live well if we're going to live well at all. And it is our nature as Homo sapiens (the wise

species), having moved beyond Homo erectus, to be rational, even if we are sometimes irrational. It is as rational beings, he observed, that we are able to rise above whims, foibles, impulses, and the passions of the moment; to reject superstition, pseudo-science, and the varieties of babble; to subject our wishes to critical scrutiny; to plan a life and to revise our plans when there are reasons to do so. It is rationality that generates science, the rules of ethical conduct, benign social and political institutions, and the procedures for legislating and executing a fruitful life. It is rationality that monitors even whatever belief we may have in God.

I concede that, if we are to pull it off, we have to be lucky, a concession I'll repeatedly make. Of that I used to remind myself on the way to work each morning. Were our parents genetically generous, and did they raise us well? Are circumstances favorable, opportunities available? Are we free of pain? And debilitating shame? Do we love somebody, and does somebody love us?

Whatever the case, we naturally desire, out of the insistence of our genes, to be happy in Aristotle's sense; we wish to live and do well, to be worthy of our existence. Our Greek forebears, who gave form and incentive to Western civilization, have bequeathed to us the structure of a life well lived. Now, what is it?

2 - FIRST PRINCIPLES

HYPERBOLICALLY NO DOUBT, Plato claimed that the unexamined life is not worth living, from which it follows that a necessary, though hardly sufficient, condition of a life that is worth living is that it be examined. He argued that a life whose bearer lacks some idea of who he or she is and what it is worthwhile to be and to do cannot be a life very well lived. This doesn't mean that one must engage in endless introspection or that one make all of Plato's *Dialogues* required reading. But if he is only modestly right, it does mean that one ought to have some insight, even if very general, into the substance of one's life with a view to shaping it into worthwhile form.

Philosophers -- that is, all of us in our philosophical moments -- have speculated about the nature of the good life ever since Plato's mentor Socrates, acknowledged as the wisest man in Athens, hung around the agora inquiring about it and, as one might expect, getting himself in trouble with the establishment. Obviously there is no single way of life that could accommodate the varied interests, predilections, and talents of each of us individually, but we do have a common nature after all, or else we might as well close down all the hospitals, and we therefore have some needs and goals in common. We're all human beings. More or less. And it is for human beings with a generic nature and individual differences that Socrates and Plato and Aristotle and philosophers in that tradition ever since have grappled with the concept of a worthwhile life.

On one point they have emphatically agreed over the centuries, namely, that such a life, whatever else may be true of it, has to be rationally conducted.

Aristotle, the man of consummate good sense, put the matter succinctly and unequivocally. He said in effect that if we are to live even marginally well -- for that matter, if we are even to survive, let alone to enjoy life – we must satisfy the conditions of living well set for us, demanded of us, by the nature of things. The

lilies of the field may not have to take any thought of tomorrow, but we ambulatory rational types had better do so and had better have a pretty good idea how to proceed.

If we were lilies of the field, the matter would be out of our hands. We would just stand there and hope, in whatever way a lily hopes, that we have enough to eat and that the elements will be kind to us. Or even if we were chimpanzees, very close to us on the evolutionary scale, we would simply rely on our natural wiles and instincts and on good fortune to enjoy whatever pleasures the world was generous enough to provide. We would accordingly eat, scratch, and have sex as our appetites and fortuitous circumstances disposed us to do -- worthwhile though rather limited activities, considering the numerous felicities offered by a life featuring human sense and sensibility. No chimpanzee ever read a good book.

We are, however, neither lilies of the field nor chimpanzees. We are, said Aristotle citing the obvious, rational beings, rational animals in fact, thereby distinguishing us from God and the angels and apparently from other primates, highly evolved organisms in the same natural environment with lilies and chimpanzees, amazingly conscious beings with feelings, emotions, desires, and passions, but with a capacity to reason.

I would like to believe that the view bequeathed to us by the Greeks concerning the critical role of rationality in our lives is self-evident. I believe that in general it's right. It's certainly rational. Abandon rationality, and the charlatans and fanatics will inherit the earth. Abandon rationality, and we shall surely destroy the earth, with or without Saddam Hussein, as we have persistently attempted to do in the course of our spotted history, lacking only the wherewithal to succeed, and as we continue to do in a variety of subtle and not so subtle ways. Witness, to mention just one, the destruction of rain forests.

But just what is rationality, this crowning attribute of our nature? If it is the distinguishing characteristic of our species, if rational choice is, as it purports to be, a necessary condition of preserving the earth and securing our own well-being, then we would do well to have an idea what it is and how to recognize it.

We ought to be able to discern in most instances when we're being rational and when we're not, especially if we're to ward off ubiquitous and insidious or even misguided interlopers. It would therefore behoove us to undertake an examination, if but a brief one, of the complex concept of rationality.

Ironically it's not so easy to say what it is, even superficially. Rather like Justice Potter Stewart's conception of pornography, you know it when you see it, at least in clear-cut cases. That's one of the perquisites of being rational. Plainly enough, it's to have reasons for what we believe and do. But what are reasons? After all, there are good reasons and bad reasons. And reasons count as reasons only if they honor certain principles of thought and action, which themselves must be rational. And how do we decide whether our principles are rational? You understand that you can't even follow any of this reasoning unless you're rational. In a way, rationality is self-confirming.

Over the years a great many esoteric books and articles have been devoted to analyzing and exfoliating its nature. The daunting task of trying to develop a full-blown theory is not, however, the purpose of my essay. Describing the essential role that rationality, together with other vital factors, plays in a life worth living is. So allow me just a few very general words about the astonishing capacity we human beings have in virtue of which I'm able to write this book and you're able to read it, and we can survey a field, bake a cherry pie, conquer smallpox, send people to the moon, and perhaps one day study war no more. Please do not become impatient. If I am to describe and to justify to you the way I think we all ought to live, I must try to make clear what I take to be the prerequisite of living that way.

Consider first our principles of thought. Generally they are rational if they yield or are likely to yield true or theoretically fruitful propositions. Effective principles of evidence and probability, for example, are paradigmatic principles of thought. Based on those principles we rightly (rationally) believe that the sun will rise tomorrow. At a more abstract level we are able to construct highly complicated theories that explain large bodies of fact, including our experience of the rising and setting sun. The

Ptolemaic theory, consistent though it was, fell into disrepute because Copernicus's theory was more reasonable. As a result no rational, appropriately informed person any longer believes that the earth is the center of the universe.

The grand theories of physics -- atomic theory, quantum theory, the theory of relativity -- we hold because they elegantly and coherently explain the physical universe and because they have withstood thousands of empirical tests, have been refined to accommodate all discovered data, and have amazing predictive power. Consequently we casually speak of atomic energy these days with the same assurance of fact as when we speak of the inevitability of crabgrass.

Because we're capable of rational thought, it is even easier to see when a belief is irrational. We knew it was irrational to believe that the moon is made of green cheese even before the astronauts verified that it's not. And while at one time it was not irrational to believe that the world is flat, for reasonably informed people it is now.

It was Aristotle -- who else? -- who first came up with the fundamental theory of rational thought. He called it logic. By its rules, if you're going to affirm that all men are mortal and that Socrates is a man, then you're going to have to affirm, upon penalty of being irrational, or maybe just pretty dumb, that Socrates is mortal. If someone can't see that, if someone's intuitions reject it, then that person is just out of luck, and probably dangerous, because it's nevertheless true. Deductive logic, by the way, has come a long way since Aristotle. Transformed by the German mathematician Gottlob Frege in the late nineteenth century, it has systematically developed into a rich and elaborate discipline expressing the formal rules and structure of all rational thought and discourse.

But deductive logic, insofar as it is strictly formal, constitutes only one dimension of rationality. In the formation of our beliefs, it is our rationality that enables us to link series of events and their consequences, separating out what's essential from what's accidental, to make successful predictions and inferences, to form invaluable rules of confirmation and evidence. Rationality

demands consistency and coherence in both thought and action. It sets the parameters of the conceivable. It instructs us in the formulation of our theories and hypotheses, in the construction of abstract models, in the postulation of explanatory entities. In our curiosity it beckons us to the realms of mathematics and science with their spectacular successes. By its imaginative exercise we have recently developed powerful and sophisticated theories of action: decision theory, statistics, probability theory, game theory.

Rationality imposes inescapable form on our deliberations, or they don't count as deliberations at all. It establishes the standards of explanation. It defines objectivity. It is the keeper of our shared beliefs.

Let's turn to principles of conduct. Generally they are rational when they serve or are likely to serve our interests, our goals and purposes, or, on moral grounds, the interests of others. If we have thought rationally about our lives, we have attempted to find out what will likely make them meaningful, fulfilling, and secure. (Leave our duties to others aside for the moment.) Our conduct then is rational when we act in such a way as to satisfy rather than to frustrate those interests. It's pretty clear that it would be irrational deliberately to dally over breakfast and to show up late on the first day in a new job that we desperately desire and worked very hard to get. We don't drink sulfuric acid to slake our thirst; we don't make a diet of chocolate; we don't leap from the Golden Gate Bridge expecting to soar like a bird.

Theoretically, to make a rational decision to do anything at all, from the most significant to the most trivial, is to invoke principles we have freely selected in the justified belief that doing so will lead or will probably lead to effects, including moral effects, that we deem to be desirable. If, for example, you should decide to carry an umbrella as you leave the house, you do so because you hold the principle, "When it looks like rain, carry an umbrella," and the fact of the matter is that it looks like rain. Hence, unless you abandon the principle or become deranged or impeded in some way, you will choose to carry an umbrella.

Of course most decisions of any importance are considerably more complex than this. In the first place, you may be and often

are faced with competing principles, not to mention conflicting assessments of the facts. You may make it a principle not, if you can help it, to take an umbrella to the movies, because you invariably forget it when you do. Now, because you're headed for the theater and it looks as though it's going to pour, you have to decide which principle takes priority. In this case, in order to accommodate the "if-you-can-help-it" proviso -- most of our principles of conduct contain implicit provisos -- you may have a third principle, which tells you to waive the theater principle if a downpour appears inevitable. On the other hand, if the friend with whom you're going to the theater will surely carry a nice big umbrella sufficient for two, you may invoke the principle having to do with friends with big umbrellas. And so forth. The point is, if you have made a rational decision, you had a reason for that decision. And the reason is always some desired effect, in this case to keep dry.

Clearly you don't go through this line of reasoning whenever you decide whether or not to take an umbrella. You certainly don't run sentences through your mind. It is not necessary to move your lips in order to act rationally. In the commonplace decisions that we make in the course of a day, we rarely consciously cite principles to ourselves, although at one time we may have done so. It is reasons that we consider, the effects of invoking principles already in place. We wonder therefore whether it's really going to rain or whether the clouds will just pass by or how hard it's likely to rain if it does, or how big a nuisance it will be to take an umbrella, and so on. If we are called upon to justify our principles and the actions based upon them, we explain that they accommodate our interests and purposes.

To be rational, therefore, is to have principles and reasons for what we believe and do. It is not necessary, by the way, always to be able to articulate our principles, let alone to enunciate them every time we invoke them. Perfectly capable speakers of English, for example, would have difficulty stating the principles governing the use of the various prepositions in the language. In the best of circumstances, most of our important principles have been converted into habits and dispositions -- like the principles of

honesty and arithmetic and those governing an effective backhand, once learned and now part of our game. Nobody can teach anybody how to whistle Dixie, unless you believe that Betty Bacall was actually giving Bogey instructions -- we can't even teach ourselves -- but that's all right. Our standards of rationality are far from perfect. We're still working on them. People are still writing books. But we understand the basics.

Can rational people disagree? They can and do, for all sorts of reasons, including conflicting values, the uncertainty of events, and simply misperception of the facts. And that's just the point. Rational people can have genuine disagreement because they are playing by the same rules. Irrational people aren't even in the game. Irrational people are frightening. Then, of course, some people are just smarter than others.

I have heard it suggested, somewhat to my bewilderment, that rationality is cold and calculating. How dull and stodgy to be determined in one's actions always by considerations of rationality. Where is the fun? Where is the adventure, the spontaneity? How awful to abandon our feelings and emotions, our intuitions.

Good heavens! It is precisely because we have feelings and longings and aspirations and attachments and emotions and appetites and desires, often random, and a passion to live well that we need to make enlightened choices. In the pursuit of good, we rationally pick and choose from the welter of desires that present themselves to our consciousness, cultivating some, banishing others. We do not act on every whim or impulse. If we have our wits about us, we reject impulses that are counterproductive. We cultivate the skills needed to achieve our purposes. We not only enjoy today but prepare for tomorrow.

Adventure? Spontaneity? Our lives would be dreary without them. A spontaneous action is one not already built into our plans, but plans can be changed when there are good reasons to do so. Let's go to the beach this weekend, you suggest to yourself late on a Friday afternoon. You suggest it because you realize that going to the beach is the most life-enhancing thing you can do right then, something you could not have foreseen earlier. You don't suggest

critical judgment, to construct coherent theories publicly testable in fact, to be constrained by proven categories of thought, to adopt forms of knowledge rooted in experience and according to which experience can be structured and rendered intelligible, to be wary of outlandish hypothesis, to be consistent in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes. Rationality channels our aspirations and directs the narrative of our lives. It separates us from the brutes.

Would it were always easy. Alas, we know better. Some decisions are exceedingly difficult, even when we are fairly clear about our own ends and values and have the will to act. The facts of the case may be uncertain. The probability of outcome may be uncertain. Our options may evenly balance one another. We may simply be uncertain about what we really want. And of course the values gained by virtually any course of action will be experienced at the cost of values lost or foregone. Then, there are situations in which the very values between which we must choose are themselves in conflict, sometimes in moral conflict.

Let me emphasize that rational beliefs and actions are by no means exclusively the consequence of deliberation. I believe that the cat is on the mat because I see it. And when faced with uncertainty or ambiguity or when principles collide, we appeal to our good sense, our cultivated intuitions, our conception of who we are and our chosen way of life. Sometimes we appeal to what Aristotle called practical wisdom.

Doing so is hardly to suggest that our decision is not justified. It simply means that we are complex beings, and it is sometimes difficult to say why we chose one way rather than another. It does not follow that we have not chosen correctly, wisely, rationally. Practical wisdom, as American philosopher Thomas Nagel has observed, "can be relied on to take up the slack that remains beyond the limits of explicit rational argument." (*Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 125) Sometimes we rely on our intuitions, which we experience without the aid of conscious reasoning and which are frequently based on forgotten or barely noticed clues or perhaps on an unconscious analogy. They are rooted in our native intelligence and private sentiments. They are formed by our experience of the ways of the

And what this amounts to is giving a complete account of the way of life, coherent and holistic, that is served by the individual decisions we make, including the decision to carry an umbrella. This of course is impossible to do. But suppose it were possible, and we were asked to justify that way of life, what could we say? The answer is nothing. We will already have said everything there is to say, except perhaps to make explicit what is already implied, namely, that it is reasonable to believe that such a life is the most worthwhile we could conceivably live. If the inquirer cannot see that, then the conversation is over.

As members of Homo sapiens we can deliberate about the kind of person we want to be and the kind of life we want to lead. Based on our experience of ourselves and of the world in which we find ourselves, we are able to select from the options available to us the way of life that seems on all counts most desirable. The way of life we pursue generates the narrative that is distinctively our own, satisfying our natural and cultivated needs. It directs our history. It gives us our identity. Our history is not human history, but it is a part of human history and is subject to the principles of decency and to the laws of nature. If our decisions are good decisions, often made on our best intuitions, they serve the way of life we have chosen. They express our priorities. They capture what we value, or more precisely, what we value most. Sometimes we make wrong decisions; sometimes we act out of weakness. More's the pity. And sometimes, in situations of severe conflict, we cast our loyalty one way or another because we cannot be loyal to all things and all persons. We do the best we can.

None of any of this is possible without language, I feel compelled to say. We humans are framers and speakers of language. We are able to abstract, to construct grammar, syntax, and semantics and thus to create sentences and paragraphs and to write books. And talk to one another. Amazingly we can invent science and art and create delicate human relationships. We must therefore treat language with the awe and reverence it deserves. Not that we can't play with it, make it perform tricks. That is, we can do things with it if we have secured its favor, for proud language will not suffer disrespectful or slovenly invocation.

Language is a patron whose favor we must earn but whose favor, when it is bestowed, is beyond price. Perhaps language is sacred, having freed us from the primordial slime. Perhaps we shall be struck down somehow if we do not enlist it with some rigor and grace, if we do not grant it the honor owed to logic and the tenderness owed to art. It is the soul of our rationality.

So!

How is your life?

Has fortune smiled?

Have you developed a sense of who you are and ought to be, and have you some idea of how to proceed, some plan, not necessarily etched in granite and much of it open-ended?

Have you chosen wisely, or at least not foolishly, often enough that you have gotten pretty good at it and you're not embarrassed about, actually take some pride in, the way you've handled things?

Has fortune smiled?

Are you without pain or enough without pain and sorrow that they do not debilitate your life?

Are you about as decent a person as anyone has a right to expect you to be?

Do you love somebody, and does somebody love you?

And, of course, has fortune smiled?

Fortune does not always smile, you may already have noticed, even upon the most fortunate among us. Necessary for a good life therefore are the ability to anticipate and to cope and the moral equilibrium not to be decimated when things go badly. How much misfortune can the most courageous of us bear? I don't know. Who was this Job person?

Are you ready for the peroration?

A life worth living: What does it come to?

A life whose bearer can be identified as one of the good guys. A life in which loving is considered a natural state of affairs and in which one is loved, and not altogether in spite of oneself. A life that includes worthwhile causes and serious purposes. A life in which one is doing things one likes to do and is suited to do and, all things considered, doing them well. A life that is a benefit to someone besides oneself. A life in which one's developed sensual

and sensuous needs and predilections are joyously realized. A life with something to eat come meal time and a warm place to sleep come night. An active, optimistic, forgiving life. A moral, but not rigidly moral, life. A life from which misfortune and failure have not gutted its meaning. A convivial life. A passionate life.

Crucially a life of passion.

It may be too strong to define a life worth living as a life of rational passion. A life devoid of peace, comfort, and tranquility would be intolerable. We need quiet times, and we cannot bear to be unceasingly harried. But passion need not be frenetic. It just needs to express our fervor, our devotion and commitment to cherished people and projects, our quest for a life we can be proud of. It is Hegel who is usually credited with saying that "nothing great is ever accomplished without enthusiasm." Passion is active. To make the most of our all-too-brief sojourn on this small planet we need some sense of urgency.

The passion I have in mind is not to be construed just as fleeting emotions, although emotions are dynamically involved, but rather as a deeply ingrained attitude, a sustained buoyancy in the way we go about what we do. Love, friendship, loyalty, devotion to one's values, all of which may be lifelong, entail passion. People living in Green Bay, Wisconsin, during football season understand passion.

Rational passion, by the way, is not an oxymoron. Not all passions are desirable, and it's not as though we are unable to control our destructive or unseemly ones. To be human is both to be capable of passion and to be able to direct it.

I like the notion of the good life as life abundant, a cup running over. Possessors of such a life cannot help giving themselves freely to worthwhile ventures. They are generous of spirit. How can they not love all things good and beautiful? How can they not be passionate?

Perhaps what I am emphasizing here is the erotic strain in our lives, where Eros is by no means restricted to its powerful manifestation in sex or even to its paradigm of erotic love but may be expanded to Plato's conception of it as desire for the Good. For "no one is satisfied with the appearance of good . . . The reality is

what they seek . . . this . . . which every soul of man pursues and makes the end of all of his actions, having a presentiment that there is such an end."

And every soul of woman too.

"[B]y my love and hope I entreat you: do not reject the hero in your soul! Keep holy your highest hope!

"Thus spoke Zarathustra."

Cheers!