

2. BEING SMART

Like anyone else, I sometimes find myself being critical of some other people's ideas or behavior. After all, I have to decide for myself what I think is right and wrong. Having decided, it seems natural to view other people in the light of the same criteria. But I am often met with the objection that this is a land of freedom, and that freedom means that everyone can think and live however one pleases. It's nobody else's business how you think or live or how I think or live. That argument is good, up to a point. But sometimes it stems from a philosophy that has implications we may not have thought about sufficiently. That is what I ask you to examine with me.

Freedom is a great thing. The important question is how do we use it. How smart are we? What is the smart thing to do? Is it to decide whatever we want in life, and then go after it, not letting anyone get in the way if we can help it? Some people would put it that way, sort of bragging about their freedom and independence, and warning others not to mess with them. Other people might think it sounds a little bit too belligerent to actually put it that way, but would agree that the really smart thing to do in life is to get all one can out of it at each point, and give up as little as one has to give up in order to get what one wants. For anyone who objects that this is too selfish, the answer is that it is only human nature to look out for number one, and anyone who doesn't do so is stupid. Of course it does make sense to look out for one's own interest, partly to make sure someone does, because perhaps no one else will.

But the questions are what is one's interest, and will the above approach be the best way to protect and promote it? There are a number of things to ponder in this respect, some of which may not be entirely obvious, else the above attitude would not be very easily held.

Our economy has been said to have been built on a work ethic, that is, built by people who took pride in doing an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. There is something to that. Conscientious workers do good work. Some did good work even though they were not always well paid. It is obvious what would happen to productivity if everybody, or even very many, in the productive process did as little work as they had to in order to get by on the job, and cared only about drawing their pay. If the standard of living in a country is to rise, there must not be too many people who act like that. Of course, some people can get by without pulling their weight, but they are not likely to earn the respect of their fellow workers even if they get their pay just the same. But perhaps they don't care about having such respect. They may not care about anyone's opinion. They think they are smart. They

don't know that life would feel better to them if they had the respect of their comrades. They don't seem to know that human nature is such that they would actually respect themselves more if they worked conscientiously.

It is perhaps ironic that the ideology that has come to dominate the life of our economic system stresses, without any qualification, the individual virtue and the social benefits of the pursuit of economic self-interest by everybody. Adam Smith is quoted selectively to that effect. He argued that self interest would lead, as by an invisible hand, to the maximum social benefit. There is a large element of truth in that. But it is not entirely true.

It is obvious now that self-interest can also lead in many ways to anti-social activities through which some individuals benefit at the expense of other individuals or even at the expense of society as a whole. So one question is, when does the pursuit of self-interest produce social benefit and when does it not. And when it does not, could and should it be regulated? Adam Smith said that business would hatch schemes to exploit consumers when possible, so he advocated the maintenance of competition among businesses as a way to protect consumers.

And he had a fuller analysis of human nature than that it was all just self-interest. He paid attention to the role of other aspects of human nature and human feelings. He emphasized our natural human empathy and our desire to have the approval of our fellow humans. Self-interest might now be said to include such approval. But that is not included in self-interest as often conceived in one of today's philosophies, the philosophy that one can get everything one wants while giving only what is absolutely necessary. I call this the "smart guy ethic".

The question becomes what is really self-interest. If people generally took self-interest to mean being smart by doing as little as needed to get as much as possible, the result would be that everybody would lose, because the work ethic would be destroyed. And the productivity of the economy would decline substantially. There would not be enough supervisors to make sure that all laborers were producing conscientiously, and what if supervisors were also "smart guys"--how would they behave?

The bigger problem is that the attitude being considered here carries over into all aspects of life. With that attitude one is essentially trying to exploit life for one's own benefit. One is being smart. Get what one can everywhere, and give as little as one has to, and one gets the most of whatever one wants out of life.

The trouble is that this "smart guy" attitude is subversive of every social relationship. Since we are unavoidably interdependent, it is self-defeating. One is unlikely to be able to maintain a marriage relationship this

way, certainly not one which can yield the full range of satisfactions possible in marriage. If each partner, or even if either partner, looks upon a marriage only in terms of whether they are getting as much as possible out of it, and whether they are getting enough more than they give, the marriage, even if it lasts somehow, which is unlikely, will certainly be unable to be very satisfactory to either partner.

One cannot even maintain a real friendship with the attitude in question. If one tries merely to use others' friendship for some sort of personal gain, and the only question is how much more one is getting than one is giving, one's effort will be self-defeating. As soon as a person discovers that a supposed friend is merely trying to exploit the friendship for their own gain, the friendship is likely to end. One will kill friendships and be a loser instead of the smart gainer one thought one was.

If one goes the limit, one does not give a damn about anyone else. One has thereby denied one's self one of the the best things in life, which is indeed free, the uncalculating mutuality that can arise between individuals in friendship, some of which can even deepen into mutual love.

Life is not an economic problem of finding how to get the most of whatever one wants for the least cost. The initial and most important question has to do with what we want. Life presents us an enormous array of things which we might want, and our complex inner natures are such that we latch on to many of these things and make them our wants, with or without much careful thought.

We are much aided in this by all sorts of pressures. Some come from advertising which is the self-interest of others disguised as interest in us.

Some pressures come from friends or peer groups, some from various other groups or institutions including the family. It is obvious that children develop wants that are not good for them in various degrees. It may be less obvious that adults do the same. However some measure of wisdom regarding what to want ought to be the fruit of more mature reflection, as well as of the school of experience and its hard knocks. Sometimes the worst thing that could happen to people would be to have some of their wants fully satisfied.

What is smart is not simply knowing how to get what we want, but knowing what we ought to want. What we ought to want is partly a matter of knowing enough about human nature and the world to know what is good for us and what is not. We need to learn what will give us the most fundamental satisfactions.

To be sure, some human natures could get some types of satisfaction out of almost anything. Evidently sadistic behavior yields some

satisfaction to some people. But most people would conclude from any consideration of such matters that it is not worthy of human beings to obtain their satisfactions in some ways, while obtaining it in a variety of other ways is worthy of them.

And there is a question of whether achieving satisfaction in some forms does not preclude obtaining other satisfactions. Where sadistic impulses are satisfied in a relationship, one cannot achieve other types of satisfactions in the relationship; they are mutually exclusive. Life presents us with choices among wants. Some are compatible with one another, and some are not compatible with some others.

It is contended here that greater and more fundamental satisfactions in life arise from a pattern of wants that are harmonious internally. Wants must also be in harmony with similar want patterns in the other people with whom we live or work or with whom we are interdependent in less direct ways.

The critical question in life is what we ought to want. What should we seek our satisfactions from? Of course what is appropriate to one stage of life will not be appropriate at another stage. We can make mistakes at one stage in life, but we get another chance to mature in our judgment at each successive stage as to what we should then want at the successive stages.

Life is really a matter of learning how to live. It seems as though it would take each of us more than one lifetime to achieve the wisdom to know and live according to it. But some people clearly do better than others. Some use well what is our one chance to learn quickly enough how to do ourselves and those around us the most good. The basic problem in life is not to get whatever we happen to want, but to learn to want what we ought to try to get at each stage of life. Life involves, or it should, a quest for how to live.

What do we want to get out of life, and what should we want to get out of life? What would we consider success in life, and what does our civilization tell us success is? Do we appreciate our chance to have a try at it? Do we appreciate the privilege of living, of being a part of a vast mysterious mind-boggling universe, and can we enjoy being aware of its vastness and mystery? Do we know how to use the opportunity of life? Do we ask how we ought to use it? Do we ponder possible answers?

Is the answer of our civilization that success is to be measured in economic terms, in terms of how much money we make? Almost everyone would answer that that is not a proper end of life. They would say that is not what they live for, that money is only a means toward other higher things. But to all appearances, the money measure of success is what many

people are measured by. They often measure themselves by it in actual day to day decisions. And some want their success to be measured by it.

But what about those who reject this criterion of success? Ask them what are the higher things by which they otherwise judge success, what they really live for, what they really want out of life. The answers tend to be in terms of what we vaguely but meaningfully call the quality of human life, and especially the quality of interpersonal relationships.

When we do not know what is really important in life, or mistake what is really important, we do not really know much about how to live. The quality of life suffers as a result.

We may get what we want, but we may not get what we need. Yet what we all need most, what can alone make possible the finest types of satisfaction in life, is a certain attitude toward life itself that is available free to anyone and everyone. It cannot of itself guarantee that we will be economically well off and have many things that money can buy. But happiness is a product of that attitude, not of external circumstances, as has been said by the wise many times. The attitude is defined variously and inadequately by many. The above comments try to help you ponder some of its attributes. The important wisdom about life is not a matter of formal schooling or degrees. It is something that is available to anyone who seeks it. It is sought by asking over and over throughout life what is important. One must ask what is truly good in that it can enrich life for everyone. One needs to ask how can we do ever better in embodying and promoting the truly good. We can redeem ourselves by new efforts in that respect even as we often fall short of what we should be able to do. And that is how to try to live.

Fortunately, there is something that draws all of us inwardly toward the truly good, toward bettering our own lives and our relations with all others, and toward learning and doing what is necessary to make the world better. How fine the quality of life can be if only we give that inward something enough chance. Building a better world starts with bettering ourselves but it does not end there as other essays here will show.

Adam Smith's book A Theory of Moral Sentiments speaks of our natural human empathy and our desire to be well regarded by other people. Empathy is evident in the outpouring of sentiment for people who are the victims of any natural or human disaster. We are sorry for them, and there are often many offers of help from those who can help. As for the regard of other people, all of us want to deserve to be respected, and want to deserve to be thought well of by other people. That requires that we treat them well.

We must ourselves be people of good will rather than being hostile

toward others. Our hostility usually arises only in response to hostility from others. But we cannot overcome hostility by returning it. Only a different response has any chance of overcoming hostility.

We are naturally friendly and what we want is friendship. So we desire good relations with other people and have a natural desire which leads us to promote such relations. This of itself improves the quality of life and helps make the world a little better. It is at least a good start. There is no reason to give it up any time it doesn't produce good immediate results.

Some people are aware of the fact that behind the everyday activities of life there is a human yearning for something not clearly identified and perhaps undefinable. We should stop more often to think about it. We need to try to formulate what is the source of the yearning, and what it is for which we have this yearning. Even though people might give somewhat different formulations, there would likely be one common element, namely, a yearning for a better world. They yearn for a world in which people are always kindly toward one another, in which they enjoy each other unreservedly, in which there is no violence and in which the many hardships of life are absent. We naturally think of an after-life in such terms, and we know it would be better if this life were made more like that.

The press of daily life may crowd out most or all consideration of such matters. Apart from those whose days are too hectic and those whose hardships drown their spirits, preoccupation with the matters at hand each day can have its own satisfactions. Indeed it is in the enjoyments of the immediate that much happiness is found. But some yearning remains in the background. Can it come at times into the foreground sufficiently to have an important effect on what we do?

The quality of the immediate is in part of our own making. It is determined in no small measure by what we actually put our faith in in this life. Do we put our trust in goodwill to improve the quality of life? Or do we put our faith in power, hostility and violence to remove any obstacles to our individual or national will? In terms of human impulses, both would be natural, and our choice of faith tends to increase the related impulse. That for which we really yearn is a quality of life that can only be promoted by the right choice in this respect. Can anyone really think that the quality of life can be improved by resort to power, hostility and violence, even if some short run gains can be produced by them? Goodwill and efforts to improve the lot of other people will not always yield short run successes, but over the longer run only reliance on them can improve the quality of life that violence can only destroy.

The better world is partly ours to make in the enjoyment of what is already at hand, in actions that show a faith in goodwill rather than in power,

and in efforts to correct the shortcomings of human institutions. Such efforts can be inspired by the yearning for a better world, but the yearning will always exceed our accomplishments. Both the unsatisfied yearning and the efforts are of supreme importance.

Many religions are said to recommend something like what we call The Golden Rule: Do unto others what you would have them do unto you. That is an old alternative to the “smart guy ethic” and has much more to recommend it.

The smart guy ethic is an outgrowth of the excessive individualism that has grown to grotesque proportions in our culture, aided unfortunately by the effort of economics to try to keep ethics out of the subject. Business is taught to maximize profit, without regard to ethical considerations. More will be said about this later.

Hitherto most cultures recognized the importance of community. Of course we are all unique individuals, so we are all naturally individualists. But we are not only individualists, we are born into a family group and into community groups small and large. We are born entirely helpless and depend upon others to keep us alive, to care for us, and depend upon a community to teach us all we then know. We need to find how to fit into those communities of interdependent individuals so we support them and they support us. The quality of our lives together depends on how well this is done. American culture is losing this sense of community. Many “haves” seem not to care about the “have-nots” and try to deny that the system is rigged in favor of economic power.

Freedom means we can all do whatever we may choose to do, but none of us can determine that the consequences will be just whatever we want them to be--the nature of reality determines that. We can ignore the law of gravity, but not the consequences. We can eat whatever we want, but cannot determine the consequences on our health. We can ignore the Golden Rule and embrace the “smart guy ethic” and the consequences will be different. Human groups can all have mutually beneficial relationships or violent conflicts, with quite different consequences.

It behooves humans, as individuals and as groups in all their relationships, to learn as much as possible about the reality that determines the consequences of different attitudes and different actions. What is then really smart is to harmonize their attitudes and actions with those realities so that desirable rather than undesirable consequences result. This concept of harmonizing underlies many of these essays, so a little more may need to be said about it here.

Life is activity of body and mind. At every point in life, this activity may be wise or unwise in various ways and to various degrees. What is wise

is not simply a matter of personal taste, something about which there can be no argument, one alternative being as good as another. It is a matter of learning about the nature of human nature, inter-personal relations, society, and the world of nature and harmonizing with these realities.

The clue can be found in the connection with the conception of the health of the human body. It is safe to assume that good health is better than poor health insofar at least as the former is attainable. We do not know all there is to be known about how to promote good health, and some of what we think we know sometimes turns out to be wrong. Yet the fact is that it is not a matter of our tastes or preferences to decide what will improve our health. It is a matter of biology and bodily physiology. Some things do conduce to better health and others are either indifferent or actually work against our health. We often are not very smart and deliberately do things that we know are not good for our health. But that is another matter about which more can be said. We recognize that the effect of things on health is an objectively determined matter, not something we can ourselves determine. This provides the clue to a whole host of other matters of what is wise action and what is not.

We know by common experience that we individually are sometimes a bundle of somewhat conflicting impulses and desires. We have to choose among them, giving vent to some rather than others. We learn by experience of ourselves and others which ones are mutually compatible or even reinforcing, and which are incompatible with others. We must choose actions that can be combined. We can think of our actions as our creativity. If we fail to learn how to harmonize our creativities, it will be like failing to learn what will do the job of improving our health. Life involves a lot of learning from others and from our own experience how to harmonize our creativities. Our personality depends on how well we go about it. We learn partly from mistakes, but there are many mistakes that the lives of others can enable us to escape. We learn that making a mistake can make the same or other mistakes easier to make again, but also that wise decisions usually make it easier to make more wise decisions in the future. Indeed we individually build our characters by learning and doing wisely and well.

Then there is the area of inter-personal relations on which much of the pain or pleasure and the quality of human life depends. Again we are not able to determine the consequences of our actions, we can only choose those actions which harmonize our creativities with the separate creativities of other individuals. The quality of life is better or worse for us depending upon how well we are able to do this. To some extent we can avoid those with whom we cannot develop harmonized creativities, but to some extent we are

obliged to do the best we can, because they cannot be avoided.

The problem for society as a whole, or any sub-society, is the same: how to arrange its ideologies and institutions so as to help in harmonizing the creativities of its constituents.

And there is the further problem for human society and human groups as to how their creativities are harmonized with the nature of the universe of which they and we are all a small part. Nature does not bend to correspond with human tastes or demands. We must accommodate ourselves to its physical and spiritual nature. How wisely we do that will determine how well we prosper.

Now this discussion has been simplified by not indicating that harmonizing in each case involves many dimensions and many matters of degree. It is not true that there is only one style of life that can be healthy. There is not a single life pattern or a single straight and narrow way that is alone healthy. There are many life patterns that will be equally healthy, so we have choices & some find one more suitable to them than others. But not all patterns are equally healthful, and some actually ruin health slowly and some more quickly, as everyone knows or should know. We usually fail to one degree in some one respect and to other degrees in each of many other respects. So we fail to reach that plateau of fine health to which we might aspire if we were wise enough and wanted to do so.

So in inter-personal relations, there is no single pattern of harmonization which alone works, but many would work equally well if achieved. But we are apt to fail to various degrees in each of the many dimensions of any single inter-personal relationship. Perfection is not really to be expected, but neither does it make sense to deliberately choose not to try to make a relationship better in any respect when we know how.

Societies unfortunately have not yet become sufficiently self conscious so as to conceive their problem as that of harmonizing the creativities of their constituents. But the problems they will have to face in the future may make them more conscious of the problem. Insofar as they become conscious of it collectively, the question will be how fast they can learn what they need to learn about it, and how much can they do collectively that will be wise and how much unwisdom will they exhibit.

The ability to enjoy life depends in part on what might be called our philosophy of life, the attitudes we take toward life itself and toward our experiences in life, as well as upon the wisdom we develop in how to live. How easy it is to enjoy life and how much we can easily enjoy life depends also upon our health. Sometimes people do not realize the importance of health until they are ill.

My minor illnesses did not suffice, for I regarded them as simply temporary annoyances that would soon be gone and would not affect my future prospects. But then a major illness hit me. It created so much discomfort and so much pain that I experienced a great relief when it was over. It felt really good to be healthy again. It is nicer to have such appreciation of health without having to suffer in order to realize the value of health.

If we are healthy, we may indeed enjoy our health, in the literal sense of the word enjoy, without having to suffer illness first to appreciate our health. Like any healthy animal that seems to enjoy exercising its physical powers, it just feels good to do so ourselves. One feels good just to be alive and active. One's outlook upon the world tends to be flavored by this feeling of physical fitness and vigor. One feels that life is good. When we are not in top physical form, the natural exhilaration we have when we are healthy may not be present, but just being fairly healthy is something that we should not fail to appreciate and enjoy.

Even if we take care of our bodies, these mobile homes that contain us and get us around about in the world, homes that do indeed require proper care, are subject to the danger of periodic breakdown. Of course they eventually breakdown no matter what we do. But how long they function well for us, and how well they function can be very important to our enjoyment of life. And all that depends in part upon how well we take care of them. It is smart to take care of them well.

One would suppose therefore that taking care of one's health would have a high priority for everyone. One might easily gain the impression that it is so from several types of evidence. There is a lot of advertising focused upon selling things alleged to contribute to our health and selling remedies to help overcome or relieve discomfort of minor ailments. To be aware of how much such advertising there is one would almost think that we were all paranoid about losing our health. We appear to be a bunch of health nuts subject to one health fad after another.

Yet at the same time many people quite obviously ignore their health, some to the point of continuing habits they know full well are injurious to their health. It is an example of getting one's satisfactions in life partly in self-defeating ways. This can become quite serious for the individual when one becomes a slave to something addictive and harmful. And in such cases one often becomes a threat to other people in one way or another, and hence one becomes a social problem as well as a personal problem.

It is not difficult for anyone to learn the simple things that can easily be done that are clearly helpful in promoting good health. However, it is not

easy to keep up with all the new dietary recommendations from time to time, or to know exactly how well one is doing or could do according to them. But it is often easy to know when one's diet is far from promoting one's health in the short run or in the long run.

It is smart to be as wise as we can be!

For some people the lack of good health is unavoidable, not just the result of bad choices in life or mere failure to do the simple things to maintain health. We are all subject to the breakdown of health late in life. But some people have health handicaps they have to learn to live with for many years. It is hard to handle the problems of poor health. It reduces or even removes one of the joys we can get out of just being alive. It makes us more dependent upon both the physical help and the emotional support of others.

If we ponder all this, perhaps we can appreciate and protect our health more and have more feeling for those whose health is less good than our own, sometimes even due to no failing on their part but to their genes.