

# Life Choices: Living in a Humanistic Framework

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## Introduction

It's Thursday, and I am sitting in my office, making myself available to the 122 students taking my course in Human Physiology. It has been an extremely illuminating experience so far; this course I am teaching is new, and has attracted both undergraduate and graduate students from practically every department at Rensselaer who are interested in careers in health care. I have just finished answering the questions of several students who drifted in, and am contemplating the very different points with which each one has had some difficulty. The most educational aspect of this entire experience has been my own continuing realization of the incredibly different world view, as well as intellectual background, that each of these students is bringing to the subject of human physiology. One would think that all of us in this enterprise are united by our common physiology, our shared interest in the subject, and our ultimate goal (realized in my case) of working in an area directly related to this material. For many of the students who come to my office hours, however, the situation is much more complex. Some understand each of the bits and pieces without being able to string them together into a process, rather like looking at individual frames of a movie scene without the equipment to animate them. Others cannot get beyond the surface complexity to the underlying simplicity, or beyond the apparent paradoxes to the fundamental logic.

In a previous essay in this series ["Work as Meaning: A Passion for Science," *Humanism Today* (1991),6:121-134, I tried to describe the many satisfactions I get from my work, not least of which was-and continues to be-a deep and aesthetic appreciation of the world around me. This appreciation arises in large part

from a sense of connectedness, a feeling of balance or rightness in the many varieties of interrelatedness encountered both in my work and in "real life." In the study of physiology, the single most important underlying principle is that of homeostasis, a dynamic and everchanging weighting of opposing forces that leads to the maintenance of a constant internal environment. In a very real sense, one's individual growth and development is like homeostasis; it is a process of exploring a variety of opposing and often contradictory experiences in search of one's fundamental center, and then learning how to balance around that center, if one is lucky enough to find it.

### **Life's Little Lessons, or The Compulsion of Serendipity**

While many of us like to think of ourselves as masters/mistresses of our fate, our passage through life owes as much to chance as intent. Our lives are shaped by decisions that we avoided making as well as decisions that we made, by random encounters as well as planned schedules, by others as well as ourselves. "What if" and "if only" are two of the most poignant phrases in our language, as we attempt to examine and re-examine each critical nexus of decision and opportunity in our lives, trying to figure out how we got to where we are and how it happened the way it did. The complex interplay of conscious and unconscious intent, family influence, social ethos, and the randomness of the universe contributes more than we perhaps wish to acknowledge to the direction of our lives.

For example, I have wanted to do/be something scientific—a nurse initially, then a doctor when my mother pointed out that women CAN be physicians, and then a biomedical scientist when I discovered my deep-seated squeamishness-for as long as I can remember. I remember my very first scientific experiment. I was only a few years old, but I wanted to see whether it was really true that a watched pot never boiled. (The premise, I discovered, was false; it only SEEMED like it would never boil!) And I remember my second scientific experiment. I was in elementary school, the

first or second grade, and I was introduced by my friends to the concept of God and the concept of prayer, with the childhood connection that God was someone who gave you what you wanted if you prayed to him. I didn't know about this God thing, but I wanted a dog very much, so I tried it. I was prepared to strike a bargain with God: I would believe in him if I got the dog. I didn't, so...

But mixed in with this desire and my parents' encouragement was a fear of the consequences for myself as a female. I went to primary school in the 1950s and secondary school in the early 1960s, and the combination of societal stereotypes, social pressures from my peers, and negative reinforcement from some school authority figures both tempered my enthusiasm and, at the same time, spurred me to rebellion. This internal conflict was made even worse, in the socially conscious milieu of the mid- and late-60s, by a strong sense that going into science was an essentially selfish and hedonistic choice that would benefit no one except myself. I wish I could say that my subsequent path was inner-directed and straight, but in fact it was a continual attempt to keep other, non-scientific, options open for the future. I must confess to (1) wimping out by going to Swarthmore instead of MIT; (2) almost wimping out of going to graduate school, and almost wimping out of graduate school once I got there; (3) applying for only one post-doctoral fellowship ("If I don't get it, I'll get out of science"); and (4) severely restricting the amount of time I gave myself to find an academic position ("If I don't get a job by the end of the year, I'll get out of science"). Even the type of work that I do now, which I love and in which I have made major contributions, came to me accidentally, the result of a conversation with another scientist whose ideas I misunderstood!

I look back on all this now with a tolerant amusement and sympathy for my younger selves, who wasted a lot of time and energy and emotion fighting what now seems an inevitable and natural result. I have become my own worst nightmare—a dedicated biomedical scientist who is not only good at what she does, but

defines herself in terms of her work-and the worst of it is that it does not bother me a bit; happily, however, I have managed to avoid the worst excesses of the old stereotype of the woman scientist-the horn-rimmed glasses and orthopedic shoes, the tightly pulled back hair in a bun, the humorlessness, the crisp and perfectly starched white coat-and hope that I am helping to establish a new one. But the major lesson here is that, at anyone of the decision points listed above, as well as at more minor decision points that need not be described, my life could have taken a completely different direction-psychology, Russian studies, home-making-or my area of scientific specialization could have been far different from what it is-skeletal muscle biochemistry, protein structure analysis, Boolean algebra. That it did not was only partially under my own control and volition; certainly I made choices (or avoided making choices, which is the same thing), but the very nature of the alternatives among which I chose (or did not choose) was outside my control. I chose, for example, to do my graduate work in the Department of Biophysics at The University of Chicago with Ed Taylor because Ed worked on microtubules (which I found endlessly fascinating). Ed's choice to leave that field and concentrate on skeletal muscle biochemistry was made while he was on sabbatical my first year there, and on his return left me with the choices of either finding another thesis advisor and project in the department, staying with him and working on the new project, switching graduate departments and/or universities, or dropping out of graduate school. My decision to stay with him led eventually to living and working in London for four years as a graduate student and post-doctoral fellow, which led to difficulties in searching for a job in the U.S., which led to a one-year stint as a research associate in the States while I looked around, which led to my introduction to the problem of how the human eye focuses, which led to my current research direction and status within my field, as well as my current position at Rensselaer.

I have mentioned the effects of choices that I made, as well as the effect of choices that others made that affected my own

range of choice. However, the direction of my life, or of anyone's, is even less predictable or controllable. Entering into all of this and affecting both the environment within which choices are made and the range of choices themselves are cultural factors such as political events, the societal milieu and socioeconomic class within that milieu, and one's own family and personal background. At the time I was in high school, college, and graduate school, I lived in a world where nuclear annihilation was more than a remote possibility, where societal values were in ferment due to the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the free love movement, and beginning of the women's liberation movement, and where career choices were also political choices. In addition, as a woman, albeit one from a middle-class background with well-educated parents who encouraged me to flout externally-imposed limits, I knew that any choice I made outside of then-standard career paths would have implications far beyond those simply of ability and affinity for that career. It is difficult to evaluate the relative influences of these factors on the decisions that I made about my future at that time, but they can be generally classed as negative, i.e. working against my decision-and the effects of these factors on the shape of that future thus had to be factored into my choice.

There is one final aspect of choice that is at once the most trivial and the most fundamental-recognizing that a choice is there to be made. For many of us, there is a set of boundaries, implicit or explicit? within which we dwell. Recognizing and questioning these boundaries, considering alternatives outside of these boundaries, and having the courage to transcend these boundaries are all aspects of our lives that, too often, are ignored or treated as inconceivable. Such choices need not be as drastic as the major changes in lifestyle and career involved in so-called mid-life crises (in fact, I would consider such crises the inevitable consequence of an unquestioned, unexamined set of boundaries), but they generally raise issue with assumptions that may be inappropriate (as when my mother pointed out to the very young Jane that women can be doctors as well as nurses). I well remember, for example, the shame shown by

an internationally known colleague of mine when admitting that his brilliant son was an auto mechanic; the fact that his son was extremely happy as an auto mechanic, extremely good at what he did, and extremely successful in running his business did not even begin to compensate in his mind for the fact that his son had refused to go to college and did not want a white-collar career or academic position. Assumptions such as my colleague made and imposed on his family, or that other members of his family accepted without question, or that our culture and social milieu defines provide only some of the limits within which we live. We also set these limits for ourselves, and far too seldom examine them to evaluate whether they are appropriate or constrictive.

### **Natural and Nurtural Choice**

While the examples I have used relating to choice primarily come out of the sometimes painful process by which I ended up in academia, the processes, types, and limitations I described are generally applicable to all choices, be they professional, relational, or ethical. But, although choices are only partly under our control, it is nevertheless essential to go back a further step and ask why we make the choices we do from the alternatives we have. Considering that some choices are there only if we recognize them as such, how do we know that there are choices to make? When we make a choice and later regret it, how do we know that it was a bad decision? What is the wellspring or touchstone or center, the ultimate set of personal values against which everything else is evaluated, that underlies all of our interactions with the world? What factors contribute to its development and unique, individual shape?

In a previous draft of this essay, I spent a great deal of time, both happy and sad, exploring compelling memories-interactions with significant people in my life, significant experiences and decision points-that popped into my head with a freshness and immediacy that directly indicated their importance in my development as an individual. It was an illuminating, if grueling, exercise, a sort of auto-psychotherapy that was ultimately much too

personal to share. But I recognize, and wish to emphasize, that most of what I wrote and remembered had to do with people and my interactions with them rather than with events. All of these people are or were very special, whether positively or negatively, in their influence on the direction my life has taken and on the development of my character and personal values.

It is in looking back and reviewing these memories, laid out for easy reference rather than jumbled together in my head, that I realize that I cannot write directly to the topic of this symposium, since my sense of myself as a humanist is a consequence of my development as an individual, rather than an active cause or impetus that informs my actions and beliefs. A memory that surfaces in this context is of a long philosophical discussion I had with a good friend of mine who is a Marxist. He said to me at one point, "Jane, your heart is in the right place. What you need now is a framework for organizing what you believe." Of course, the framework he was offering was Marxism, but I would, on the whole, consider the summa of everything that impels me and informs me and guides me to be more humanistic and personal. Humanism is thus the "framework" upon which I can choose to organize my already-formed beliefs, rather than the fountainhead from which I obtain them.

This is not a trivial distinction. The agglomeration of values and experiences and sensitivities that provides the basis for choice-when to act and when not to act, the imperative to act, and the nature of the action taken-would, I contend, be the same whether or not I labeled myself a Humanist. The label is a shorthand to knowledgeable others as to where I [probably] stand in issues relating to human dignity and potential and to the nature of my interactions with others, but I would be demonstrating these stances over and over again in my daily life, as indeed I do, whatever label I choose to attach to myself. By my behavior toward others and the areas where I am willing to fight for change I define what I believe in and value~ others' views of my behavior might lead them in turn to believe that I am a good Marxist or Christian

or Jew or Taoist, living up to the ethical and moral creeds of those religions or philosophies as filtered through their own senses of values and priorities for action.

I suppose, then, that in essence if I have to give myself a label I am not a Humanist at all, but merely an old-fashioned Ethical Culturist, being guided in the way I live my life by Felix Adler's catchphrase, "diversity in creed, unanimity in deed" or, more bluntly, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating". This pragmatic aspect of the original basis of Ethical Culture is extremely attractive, in that it explicitly requires action irrespective of the impulses driving one to that action, and implicitly excoriates those for whom statements of belief and/or expressions of moral certitude are sufficient. But I want to emphasize again that labels provide only a shorthand, and are therefore misleading. I am no more an Ethical Culturist in the contemporary sense than I am a Humanist, though I hope I am both an ethical culturist and a humanist. I find the narrow complacency and self-proclaimed sense of moral superiority of many Ethical Culturists and Humanists as distasteful as I do the narrow complacency and self-proclaimed sense of moral superiority of many Christian Fundamentalists; in both extremes, it would seem, salvation depends directly on right belief rather than right action. Certainly this uncoupling between belief and action is a predominant characteristic of our increasingly selfish, uncompassionate, and hypocritical society, but one cannot help holding people who proclaim their own moral superiority to a higher standard of behavior.

And, in the end, being disappointed in them and disillusioned by them.

If, as I have suggested, the description of values comes after the value development itself, especially for philosophies of life as intellectually complex as humanism, then the question of why one is or does or values in a particular manner is driven back to the more fundamental concern of how one develops into the person one is as an adult. Ultimately, of course, this is the battleground for

the continuing controversy over nature versus nurture whether who we are is a result of our genetic composition or the environment within which we were raised. It has become an increasingly popular notion that we are primarily a product of our genes, and that our genes determine predispositions toward particular modes of behavior (e.g., altruism) as well as physical characteristics and mental capacities. Such a reductionist approach has the apparent virtues of simplifying human complexities, providing a semi-scientific rationale for differential classification, and justifying differential treatment of groups; its drawbacks are precisely the same as its virtues, particularly when used in relation to classification by ethnic group, economic and/or educational status, or sex. It is interesting in this respect that the "nature" approach reappears in the United States whenever there is a turn toward a more conservative political viewpoint (e.g., the recent publication of three books on this subject, the best known of which is *The Bell Curve*). Clearly, if one's abilities and personality are primarily shaped by genetic composition, there is little increased value in the expenditure of vast sums for social programs; interventions will ultimately have little or no effect on what has already been determined.

The "nurture" approach places primary emphasis on the environment(s) the individual experiences as part of the growth and development process. This more nebulous approach implies an intrinsic plasticity in an individual's developing potential that can be affected and/or directed through implementation of social policies; the Head Start program is often cited in this respect. If indeed "nurture" is a stronger element in development than "nature", then this provides a strong justification-indeed, a strong imperative to ensure adequate levels of nutrition, intellectual stimulation, etc. for everyone. Such social programs are generally the jewel in the crown of more "liberal" political agendas, and the most vulnerable in more "conservative" times.

This rather exaggerated description of the two "sides" clearly demonstrates not only political and social ramifications, but also significant philosophical and religious ones about what it

means to be human, about the realization of human potential, and about the ability of people to change and "improve." A discussion of the nature vs. nurture question is really a much more fundamental discussion of issues relating to one's view of human nature and human perfectibility, and as such is a minefield of potentially explosive dissension. Perhaps my friend was right when he said that, in my heart, I was a Marxist, because for me the only truly sensible opinion on this question was expressed by the Marxist population biologist Richard Lewontin, who noted that ANY comparative weighting of the effects of nature and nurture, no matter what the ratios, was by definition deterministic and reductionist. Lewontin instead believes that nature and nurture are factors that continually interact with each other in a synergistic, inextricable, and perhaps unquantifiable fashion, so that the whole is greater than a simple sum of its parts.

I have tried to examine my life, and in particular the earliest part of it, as well as I could, and the only conclusion I can reach about the development of the person I know best is that Lewontin is right. Both of my parents are extremely intelligent, though in very different ways, and have, in addition, other abilities and traits that have never been adequately defined (and thus never been the subject of "objective" metrics); it is probable that much of what I am today comes genetically to me from them both, along with physical characteristics such as early graying of the hair (my father) and slim hips (my mother). As a baby and toddler and small child, my behavior and values and interests were shaped primarily by them; since my behavior and values are very similar to theirs, who can say how much of this is inherited and how much absorbed through interaction with them? How can I accurately apportion the influence of my parents and other important people in my development to nature or nurture? How can I even explain why someone was, in fact, important to me, but not to others who had similar access to and interactions with them?

While it could be said that Lewontin, in his answer, is avoiding the question, it may well be more appropriate to consider

the question itself unreasonable. Stephen Jay Gould has noted that, if the entire human race were wiped out tomorrow except for a single remote tribe in New Guinea which repopulated the world, the future humanity would not have lost any of its traits and characteristics; another way of saying the same thing is to note that humanity as a species has not been around long enough for the development of genetically distinct varieties. Others have pointed out that we differ from chimpanzees by only a very small percentage of our genetic complement (on the order of 1%), indicating that our genetic differences from each other are essentially infinitesimal. These points diminish the significance of our genetic differences, but without addressing the complementary question of the importance of nurture. From a pragmatic point of view, I would suggest that we should seek to improve those aspects of human development and human experience that we CAN do something about, and put the question of the genetic component into the same category as the question of God(dess)'s existence-an interesting subject for debate, but essentially irrelevant in terms of one's actions. "Diversity in creed, unanimity in deed [indeed!]."

In the final analysis, the most important question has nothing to do with the labels or the source of one's personality traits and abilities, but rather whether one is living up to one's potential, in relation both to oneself and to others-the human personality's equivalent of their body's striving for homeostasis. I do not believe that people can live happy and personally fulfilling lives without insight into who and what they are (irrespective of how they got to that point), but such self-knowledge involves a level of ruthless and clear-sighted personal honesty that transcends the easy excuses and rationalizations with which most of us manage to limp through the days and months and years. I also do not believe that this process can successfully occur in a vacuum-a solipsistic universe of one-or in the absence of an equally clear-sighted and honest appraisal of the significant others in one's life; a well-developed and continually employed sense of empathy-seeing others as people and not objects-is also essential. I

strongly believe that if a person can be truly honest in this fashion-centered, if you will-then everything else falls into place, be it relationships with others, fulfilling and meaningful work, or obligations outside of the immediate personal circle. Finding this center, this balance point, is the most important task we will ever undertake, because that center is the true wellspring of both being and action. But recognizing the importance of this center and searching for it is the beginning of maturity.

### **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank my parents for my existence, and for doing a great job of raising me, often without my cooperation. (I would also thank them for the genetic component of my being, except I know damn well that they had no control over that, other than simply being who and what they were and are.) I also want to thank all the people, places, things, and events-both positive and negative-that synergistically led to my becoming who I am and gave me the sensibilities to appreciate, if not quantify, their contributions. I am especially grateful to the universe and people for being so very complex and challenging and indeterminate; that's what makes life worth living!

### **Further Reading**

There are more than enough books on the "nature" aspect of human development, extending back from *The Bell Curve* through various books on sociobiology (e.g., Wilson, Dawkins) to the works of Shockley and others in the early 1970s, to the post-war (falsified) work of Cyril Burt, to the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century, to Social Darwinism in the nineteenth century and its religious predecessors (e.g., predestination). The non-"nature" school is much more diverse, including such authors as Stephen Jay Gould (*The Mismeasure of Man*), Richard Lewontin et al. (*Not in our Genes*), and Philip Kitcher (*Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature*).

John Dewey's *A Common Faith* had a profound influence on me, as did Howard Radest's *On Life and Meaning* and Howard himself. I recommend all three to the reader...