

Visions and Values: Western and Islamic Heritages*

By Maury Seldin[†]

Ethics and Religion

Just as peoples and societies differ throughout the world, so do views on the moral values that shape societies. Do moral values come from humans alone, or are they transcendent (i.e., beyond human experience)? There is a lot of debate on that matter, so just make your choice. For many cultures, and many people, believing in a superior being or God leads to a belief in the transcendental nature of moral values. But the choice of transcendental does not necessarily imply belief in God. Consider Edward O. Wilson's opening paragraph on the chapter "Ethics and Religion" in *Consilience* (1998):

"Centuries of debate on the origin of ethics come down to this: Either ethical precepts, such as justice and human rights, are independent of human experience or else they are human inventions. The distinction is more than an exercise for academic philosophers. The choice between the assumptions makes all the difference in the way we view ourselves as species. It measures the authority of religion and determines the conduct of moral reasoning [Page 260]."

Wilson concludes that "In short, transcendentalism is fundamentally the same whether God is invoked or not" [Page 261]. Then he comes up with a powerful statement on our American civil religion:

"For example, when Thomas Jefferson, following John Locke, derived the

* The context of this essay is the 2005 Seminar on Improving Decisions at the Academy of Senior Professionals at Eckerd (ASPEC), which, in turn, is in the context of the book in progress, *Improving Decisions: Toward a New Age of Enlightenment*, available on the ASPEC Center for Scholarly Enterprise (ACSE) site, <http://www.spicequest.com/acse/index.htm>. Click on "Improving Strategic Decisions."

The first part of that book has been published by the Homer Hoyt Institute as a monograph, *The Challenge to Our Thought Leaders*. It is available online at www.hoyt.org.

[†] Dr. Seldin, a chair professor emeritus from the American University, Washington, DC, is leading a seminar at ASPEC that relates to his work at the Homer Hoyt Advanced Studies in Real Estate and Land Economics, where he is President and Chairman of the Board of Directors.

doctrine of natural rights from natural law, he was more concerned with the power of transcendental statements than in their divine or secular origin. In the Declaration of Independence he blended secular and religious presumptions in one transcendental sentence, thus covering all bets: ‘We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ That assertion became the cardinal premise of America’s civil religion, the righteous sword wielded by Lincoln and Martin Luther King, and it endures as the central ethic binding together the diverse peoples of the United States” [Page 261].

In the Islamic world, it’s probably fair to say that the majority of Muslims take the transcendental view. Understanding their choices, and the basis upon which they make decisions, requires a closer look at the diversity that prevails in American society. Understanding the diversity of views, transcendental and otherwise, within our own society may help us understand the values that shape other societies.

The commonality in our diversity is the civil religion prevalent in the United States. According to Robert N. Bellah, in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (1992), civil religion is “...that religious dimension, found...in the life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality” [Page 3]. Bellah also discusses myth that “seeks...to transfigure reality so that it provides moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or societies.”

Moral Sentiments

Whether or not we believe that moral sentiments are transcendent, we are still faced with forecasting outcomes of choices by those who believe in a transcendent source, whether or not they believe in the existence of a deity. It is important to realize that if moral values come from humans alone, then those who deal with the change in these values can get a better understanding through consilience. One critical point to note relates to what we do in our society. A second point is that if we are dealing with another society, one which believes that moral values comes from a transcendent source, such as a deity that sets fundamental precepts, then, logic is not a tool for changing reasoning. The conclusion here is that one is wise to forecast behavior on belief, even though it is only the behavior which is our concern.

The implication is that we should explore the dimensions of belief as they relate to behavior. In so doing, there are four moral sentiments that are especially helpful in forecasting choice. Different interpretations, transcendental or not, may bring different choices.

1) Truth. We are accustomed to the view that truth is that which conforms to reality. In the words of Abraham Kaplan [*In Pursuit of Wisdom: The Scope of Philosophy* (1977), page 174]:

“A true proposition is one that corresponds to the facts, represents them, states them as they are. This is the ‘semantical conception’ of truth, or the *correspondence* theory.”

Kaplan continues in the next paragraph:

“This connection is central to the *pragmatic* theory of the truth. The truth about something may not be limited to what we know about it, but, at best, this is only a matter of some abstract theory; truth as known is all that has any practical significance to us. The truth is what we are justified in believing, what is useful for us to believe. Correspondence is nothing other than the capacity to make itself useful” [Pages 174-175].

It seems to me that this perception of the truth, the correspondence with facts, is what has been driving academic research since the Enlightenment. The usefulness may be initially limited to simply enhancing understanding of the system, but at some later point in time this enhanced understanding can be reasonably expected to lead to improved decisions, and an improved quality of life.

Philosophers have long debated the nature of truth, generally based on the relation to thinkers. Literature, too, often delves into the nature of truth. An interesting perspective is provided in the accompanying box.

The quote that follows is two paragraphs from Tolstoy’s novel, War and Peace (in the “Epilogue, pages 1295-1296” of the translation by Constance Garnett, Modern Library Edition, 2002).

“A bee settling on a flower has stung a child. And the child dreads bees, and says the object of the bee is to sting people. The poet admires the bee, sipping honey from the cup of the

flower, and says the object of the bee is to sip the nectar of the flower. A beekeeper, noticing that the bee gathers pollen and brings it to the hive, says that the object of the bee is to gather honey. Another beekeeper, who has studied the life of the swarm more closely, says the bee gathers honey to feed the young ones, and to rear a queen, that the object of the bee is the perpetuation of its race. The botanist observes the bee flying with the pollen fertilises the pistil, and in this he sees the object of the bee. Another, watching the hybridisation of plants, sees the bee contributes to that end also, and may say that the bee's object is that. But the final aim of the bee is not exhausted by one or another, or a third aim, which the human intellect is capable of discovering. The higher the human intellect rises in the discovery of such aims, the more obvious it becomes that the final aim is beyond its reach.

All that is within reach of man is the observation of the analogy of the life of the bee with other manifestations of life. And the same is true with the final aims of historical persons and nations.”

Those with different perspectives may see the truth differently. The facts are there, but the inference of purpose influences perspective. And if the belief of purpose is based on belief in divine purpose, then it is the divine purpose that is the truth.

There are numerous other classifications of the perceptions of truth. But, for our purposes, the following quote from Kaplan's opening chapter of his book, *In Pursuit of Wisdom*, makes the point,

“A man who seems to be indifferent to the truth may, in reality, only care nothing for *my* truth – because he sees it as falsehood or, at best as trivial or irrelevant. *His* truth remains central to his being; it is in coming to know that truth that he becomes the man he is” [Page 2].

That point is that someone else's truth may not be the same as ours. This is particularly relevant in dealing with followers of virtually any fundamentalist religion, as divine revelation is truth, in their eyes. Truth, as rooted in a Middle Eastern view, may be “...primarily an ethical notion: it describes not what is but what ought to be.” [See the end of Chapter 5, *Improving Decisions: Toward a New Age of Enlightenment*, available on the ASPEC Center for Scholarly Enterprise website, <http://www.spicequest.com/asce/index.htm>.]

2) Justice. Justice may also be seen as an ethical notion rooted in what ought to be, at least in a political context from a traditional Muslim perspective. Consider the following quote from the 2001 Bernard Lewis book, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact*

and Middle Eastern Response:

“For traditional Muslims, the converse of tyranny was not liberty, but justice. Justice in this context meant essentially two things, that the ruler was there by just right and not by usurpation, and that he governed according to God’s law, or at least according to recognizable moral and legal principles” [Page 54].

Different branches of the Muslim faith have different interpretations of the Koran. Karen Armstrong writes in her book, *History of God* (1993), that theological debates inspired by political questions include interpretations that,

“The Koran has a very strong conception of God’s absolute omnipotence and omniscience, and many texts could be used to support this view of predestination. But, the Koran is equally emphatic about human responsibility: ‘Verily, God does not change men’s conditions unless they change their inner selves’” [Page 161].

The paragraph then concludes:

“Like the Shiis, the Mutazilis declared that justice was the essence of God: he *could* not wrong anybody; he could not *enjoin* anything contrary to reason.”

Also in a political context, earlier in this same chapter, Armstrong writes,

“Muslims regard themselves as committed to implementing a just society in accord with God’s will. The *ummah* has sacramental importance, as a ‘sign’ that God has blessed this endeavor to redeem humanity from oppression and injustice; its political health holds much the same place in a Muslim’s spirituality as a particular theological option (Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, Baptist) in the life of a Christian” [Page 159].

This transcendent view of justice is reflected as an element in Christian lives as well as in the lives of Muslims. Chris Rohmann, in *A World of Ideas* (1999), offers a succinct statement:

“The goal of Christian life may be distilled in Jesus’ injunctions to his disciples to treat others with charity, mercy, justice, and most important love, and to work toward a perfect faith and obedience to God and his law” [Page 62].

The transcendent view of justice is also reflected in Jewish life with specific biblical reference as noted in the book in progress. [See the box in Chapter 4, under the section “Ethics at the Heart of it All.”] Part of the referenced material is rephrased here:

One biblical passage... contains the following: “Justice, justice shall ye pursue.” The commentary in the 1997 text (*Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, edited by J. H. Hertz), is as follows:

“...The duplication of the word “justice” brings out with the greatest possible emphasis the supreme duty of even-handed justice to all” [Page 821].

On the next page [822], the commentary continues,

“It must be noted that the idea of justice in Hebrew thought stands for something quite other than in Greek. In Plato’s *Republic*, for example it implies a harmonious arrangement of society, by which every human peg is put into its appropriate hole, so that those who perform humble functions shall be content to perform them in due subservience to their superiors. It stresses the inequalities of human nature; whereas in the Hebrew conception of justice, the equality is stressed....”

The secular views, as reflected in the literature of philosophy, are complex. One approach is to use the classifications by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, which distinguish between the idea of universal or lawful justice as compared to particular or fair and equal justice. Universal justice refers to obeying the law as being just. Lawful justice is divided into distributive and rectificatory justice. [*Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (1998), as translated by David Ross with revision by J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Ursmon, pages 106-122.]

The fair and equal justice sub-classification of rectificatory refers to correcting a situation, which may involve seeking a balance by shifting towards the middle ground. Note that “Justice is a kind of mean...” [Page 123] and it is part of the doctrine of the mean in which Aristotle saw moderation as an ideal virtue. This is a view of balance, one of the fundamental principles discussed in the same chapter of the book in progress.

The distributive justice is based on a proportional concept that has merit in some sense. Aristotle uses geometric proportion as the explanatory concept, but there are other explanations. Another explanation is in the approach that uses the classifications of commutative, distributive, and social. In Kaplan’s words,

“*Distributive justice* is the adherence to moral norms of both form and content in the allocation of resources and products. [Page 418]

Commutative justice is the allocation to each person of neither more nor less than

he deserves. [Page 418]

Social justice is a comprehensive category comprising a certain degree of equality and security, as well as distributive and commutative justice.” [Page 418]

What do these classifications suggest about specific cultures or societies? Even a relativist might hold that some societies are not just when it comes to the special case of social justice. Consider the following paragraph from the chapter on “Relativism and Reflection in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), by Bernard Williams [Page 165]:

“The legitimations hierarchy offered in past societies, and the ways in which we now see them, are relevant to what we say about the justice or injustice of those societies. This is important for the relativism distance. ‘Just’ and ‘unjust’ are central terms that can be applied to societies as a whole, and in principle, at least, they can be applied to societies concretely and realistically conceived. Moreover, an assessment in terms of justice can, more obviously than others, be conducted, without involving the unhelpful question of whether anyone was to blame. The combination of these features makes social justice a special case in relation to relativism. Justice and injustice are certainly ethical notions, and arguably can be applied to past societies as a whole, even when we understand a good deal about them” [Page 165].

Relativism may be defined as

“Philosophical doctrine that no truths or values are absolute, but are related to our own personal, cultural, and historical perspective” [Page 338 of *A World of Ideas*].

Relativism attempts to explain away conflict.

The paragraph quoted from *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* follows a discussion of the options available to earlier societies. The idea of distance in the relativism relates to our grasp of their perspective. The “special case in relation to relativism” is in some measure based on the following insight:

“They may not have been wrong in thinking that their social order was necessary for them. It is rather the way in which they saw it as necessary – as religiously or metaphysically – that we cannot now accept. Where we see them as wrong in the myths that legitimated their hierarchies...” [Page 165].

An alternative to the view of relativism is incommensurability, which relates to differences in concepts so great that they cannot be integrated into a consistent view. While these differences may not contradict each other, they do exclude each other. Relativism may be considered as related to the discussion of pluralism. Berlin continued on this road with the following comparison of pluralism and relativism:

“Relativism is something different: I take it to mean a doctrine according to which the judgment of man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or an emotional attitude or outlook, is simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its truth or falsehood.”

Certainly there are many elements in the concepts of justice that are common to both Islamic and Western views, especially as manifested in civil religion. It is the differences that are of concern. Of particular concern are the rights of the individual and the source of power for determination and administration of justice. This brings us to the infinite value of the individual, with individual liberty. This is in the context of the freedom in a free society.

3) Freedom. The terms “freedom” and “liberty” are used here to mean the same thing. The roots of our American heritage, as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, denote liberty as an inalienable right. After all, liberty ranks high in the values of our society, right up there with life and the pursuit of happiness. There are, however, issues of interpretation of the nature of liberty.

For our purposes, it is useful to consider the distinctions offered by Isaiah Berlin in his essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” [*Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), pages 121-122.] The first concept, using the label of negative liberty, is

“What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?”

The second concept, using the label of positive liberty, is

“What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?”

Berlin sees a conflict in these two perspectives of liberty in that they are different values,

even though they are related, and there may be some overlap in the answers. There is one long paragraph by John Gray in his 1996 book, *Isaiah Berlin*, which is especially enlightening on the comparison and contrast:

“It will readily be seen that, if negative freedom as Berlin understands it presupposes the capacity for choice among alternatives, it shares a common root with positive freedom. Unlike negative freedom, which is freedom from interference by others, positive freedom is the freedom of self-mastery, of rational control of one’s life. It is plain that, as with negative freedom, positive freedom is impaired or diminished as the capacity or power of choice is impaired or diminished, but in different ways. An agent may be unobstructed in the choice of alternatives by other agents, and yet lack the ability or power to act. This may be because of negative factors, lacks or absences – of knowledge, money or other resources – or may be because there are internal constraints, within the agent himself, preventing him from conceiving or perceiving alternatives as such, or else, even if they are so perceived, from acting on them. Such conditions as phobias or neurotic inhibitions may close off an agent’s options, even to the point that they remain unknown to him, or else he may be constrained by irrational and invincible anxiety from acting so as to take advantage of them. In this case the power of choice has been sabotaged or compromised from within. An agent may possess very considerable negative freedom and yet, because he is incapacitated for choice among alternatives that other have not closed off from him, be positively unfree to an extreme degree. What both forms of unfreedom have in common is the restriction or incapacitation of the powers of choice” [Page 16].

An additional explanation, according to Michael Ignatieff in his book, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (1999), offers some further insights:

“Until Rousseau, liberty had always been understood negatively, as the absence of obstacles to courses of thought and action. With Rousseau, and then with the Romantics, came the idea of liberty being achieved only when men are able to realise their innermost natures. Liberty became synonymous with self-creation and self-expression. A person who enjoyed negative liberty – freedom of action or thought – might none the less lack positive liberty, the capacity to develop his or her innermost nature to the full” [Page 202].

These concepts of freedom or liberty are substantially different from those of freedom in the world of Islam. [See discussion in the last section of Chapter 6, “Toward an Interdisciplinary Model of Development,” of the book in progress.]

Many values may conflict. Berlin writes of this conflict in his book, *Crooked Timber of Humanity*, particularly noting liberty and equality, along with justice and mercy:

“What is clear is that values can clash – that is why civilisations are incompatible. They can be incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me...Justice, rigorous justice, is for some people an absolute value, but it is not compatible with what may be no less ultimate values for them – mercy, compassion – as arises in concrete cases.

...An artist, in order to create a masterpiece, may lead a life which plunges his family into misery and squalor to which he is indifferent. We may condemn him and declare that the masterpiece should be sacrificed to human needs, or we may take his side – but both attitudes embody values which for some men or women are ultimate, and which are intelligible to us all if we have any sympathy or imagination or understanding of human beings. Equality may demand the restraint of liberty of those who wish to dominate; liberty...may have to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to leave room for the liberty of others, to allow justice or fairness to be exercised.

...We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual and temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or who have by their own methods arrived at clear and unbreakable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogmas are victims of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human” [Pages 12-14].

Somehow, parts of the quotes bring to mind fundamentalism and Islam.

Our present interest is in the determination of the characteristics of liberty required by our view of a free society, a democratic society. We can see aspects of both of the concepts of liberty in what we have, or aspire to have, as the American way.

The heart of the thinking being developed here is that our society emerged out of an assimilation of knowledge, which, coupled with reason, enables us to make wider choices than would be possible under the systems prevailing in Europe before the Enlightenment.

This range of choices goes beyond consent to the extent to which we are to be governed. Indeed, it goes to the issue of by whom we are to be governed.

All of this is further rooted in the idea of individual rights. To quote Berlin again,

“But if, as Kant held, all values are made so by the free acts of men, and called values only so far as they are this, there is no value higher than the individual”
[Page 137].

We are further concerned with the conditions under which liberty is to be exercised. As Berlin writes [Page liii],

“There is one further point which may be worth reiterating. It is important to discriminate between liberty and the conditions of its exercise. If a man is too poor or too ignorant or too feeble to make use of his legal rights, the liberty that those rights confer upon him is nothing to him, but it is not thereby annihilated. The obligation to promote education, health, justice, to raise standards of living, to provide opportunity for growth of the arts and sciences, to prevent reactionary political or social or legal policies or arbitrary inequalities, is not made less stringent because it is not necessarily directed to the promotion of liberty itself, but to conditions in which alone its position is of value, or to values which may be independent of it. And still, liberty is one thing, and the conditions for it are another.”

In the essay he writes that liberty is not equality or fairness or justice:

“To avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom: I may do so willingly and freely: but it is freedom that I am giving up for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men. I should be guilt-stricken, and rightly so, if I were not, in some circumstances, ready to make this sacrifice. But a sacrifice is not an increase in what is being sacrificed, namely freedom, however great the moral need or the compensation for it. Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience” [Page 125].

This speaks to a quality of life which may be deemed to be a manifestation of other values.

4) Quality of Life. The pursuit of happiness infers to the pursuit of a quality of

life that will bring happiness. There is a wide range in the composition and dimensions of the attributes that make up the quality of life for the diversity of individuals in our American society. The composition and dimensions of the attributes for our society certainly range far wider than those in an observant Muslim society, or indeed any single observant sect. That is, there is more diversity in life styles and vastly different interpretations of quality of life.

These attributes of quality of life are rooted in a variety of values, built in some measure upon the desire to fulfill a variety of basic needs. Aside from physical needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, there are psychological needs, including a purpose for living, and respect or status.

Ethics speaks to the ways in which people lead their lives in pursuit of whatever goals they are pursuing. These ways are heavily dependent upon the environment in which they live. Please note that the earlier discussion of human natures attributes a great deal of human behavior to the environment. [See the book in progress, Chapter 4, side heading “Toward an Understanding of What Were They Thinking,” then, Habit as a Point of Departure, Habits of the Heart, Differences Emerge.]

A critical aspect of this environment is the mechanism by which progress is made. The Enlightenment provided a significant change in this process by increasing the role of reason. Out of that institutional change, and the changes made possible by the advances in the sciences, organizational structures were altered. Today, we operate our society through a variety of managed institutions. In the words of management expert Peter F. Drucker, “The managed institution is society’s way of getting things done these days” [See “Management’s New Paradigms, *Forbes*, October 5, 1988, page 176].

Managed institutions help fix troubled companies. But isn’t it possible to see how managed institutions can make progress in global efforts to repair the world. Different institutions may focus on different aspects of the quality of life, such as taking on the task of ameliorating hardship among the underprivileged, or providing access to highly valued amenities such as artistic culture. Other institutions are in the business of preventing problems, taking a curative or preventive approach. Another approach, which is further discussed in the final chapter of the book in progress and in a later essay in this series [*Developing a Strategy to Change Academic Behavior*], is known as the perfective approach. This approach attempts to achieve goals through the natural operation of the system, and

modifies the operation of the system to that purpose. In the example of health, curative measures involve taking medicine after the fact. Preventative measures would call for inoculations to ward off potential disease. The perfective approach, in contrast, utilizes the proper foods, exercise, and healthy habits so that the natural systems of the body can function better, thereby avoiding many would-be illnesses.

The issue here for quality of life is the design, development, operation, and modifications of managed institutions. But these institutions may not be generating the changes from internal forces. The source of the force is the changing environment and the change taking place in how individuals see what it is that they cherish most. That is what value is all about – what one will give up for something else.

At the root of these values in our society is the individual and his or her views on truth, justice, and liberty. Values may change over time, but change in behavior is more likely to come through a better understanding of the system so that individuals and society can better manage their affairs within whatever values they choose.

Relevance

The lead-in line of a later essay in this series is, “What we don’t know doesn’t get us in as much trouble as what we know that is not so.” It is from the essay titled “Education - The Notion Potion.” The major point in this essay on visions and values is that we make a great mistake in forecasting outcomes if we believe that others will behave based upon what we see as true and just values, even if we believe that they will do the right thing. Their “right thing” may be different than ours. This is abundantly clear in moving across societies, but is equally relevant within our own culture.

While we can apply this concept domestically, and it is relevant to our domestic national policy, it is absolutely critical in global policies. With institutional real estate investment yearning for more opportunities and, increasingly, seeking opportunities to invest abroad, we would do well to better understand the differences as well as the similarities in visions and values. In summary, consider that the word “*Islam*” means submission to the will of God, and that the foundation of our society is based upon the rights of the individual with government derived from the individuals.

This global situation is so critical, not only for national security, but for economic

opportunity, including real estate investment, that I have written a two-part essay on our institutional reform to reflect our values. It is designed to follow this essay. The “Education - The Notion Potion.” essay will then follow, and the series will wind up with an effort to change academic behavior – an effort that will advance the state of the art with improved results from our policies.
