

Excerpts from Notes of an Underground Humanist

On value.— One reason I’ll never be truly happy is that there isn’t a God. There isn’t a “Truth” in matters of value (moral value, aesthetic value, personal value).¹ No such thing as greatness or genius, because these concepts are, implicitly, values made into objective truths, which is impossible. Predicating greatness of someone is not like predicating some value-neutral quality like “featherless biped”-ness of him, predications that can be simply *true*. But that’s what I unconsciously strive for, greatness and genius. So I’m plagued by this cognitive dissonance, this contradiction between my more primitive ambitious side, which can’t be reasoned with, and my knowledgeable side, my reason (which tells me that my desire to be “objectively valuable” is impossible because the notion of objective value is meaningless). If there were a God I could strive for his approval, which would be approval from Reality and would thus objectively confirm my value. But because there isn’t, I’m destined to be restless and unsatisfied. Similarly, the absence of God, or of objective truth in matters of value, means that there is no point in seeking fame if it’s done for the sake of confirming your value to yourself (which, of course, it is). Recognition (or fame) proves nothing, because there is nothing to prove. In short, there is nothing outside of self-respect, no “reality” that one’s self-respect can correspond to or be justified by. One’s belief in one’s value is neither true nor false. But we all think it’s true or want it to be and act accordingly, trying so very hard to prove our worth, or bolster or confirm our self-esteem by bringing our self-image in line with notions of the ideal human being. Value-talk is an illusion, but it’s a psychologically inescapable one: hence the “Wise Man’s” cognitive dissonance.

All there is is people respecting you or you respecting yourself and so on. There is only subjectivity here, no objectivity. There are only *attitudes*—attitudes and more attitudes, no firm ground anywhere, just a floating around in the fog of attitudes, a bottomless pit. It’s maddening! I have to *stand* somewhere—I can’t keep hovering here my whole life, it takes too much effort—but there’s no ground anywhere! And I’m going to keep living my life trying to achieve certainty (repose) in this one area like everyone else but there can be no repose because we humans are irrelevant and superfluous like everything else in the universe. There is no meaning, it’s all accidental.

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Cognitive dissonance.— Here’s the paradox: people say and do things that make you, e.g., contemptuous of them, but you say and do those things yourself—or you *could* do

¹ To say it in an illustrative way: no scientist will ever discover by investigating nature that murder is wrong. In philosophical jargon, “realism” about values is mistaken. See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977).

them while remaining essentially the same person you are. If a driver on the highway cuts you off you think “Jerk!”, and you’re convinced of your judgment. But you could do and probably have done the same thing, even though you know you’re not a jerk. So why is *he* a jerk and you’re not? Maybe you’ll retort, “My opinion that he’s a jerk is an outgrowth of anger, and I don’t really mean it.” But no, you do mean it. In the moment when you think it, you’re sure of it. You’re disgusted and dismissive of him. “He’s a jerk!”: *that’s what he is*, that and nothing else. He doesn’t merit further thought because he is inferior. You’re wrong, though, as you recognize when your anger has subsided.

Similarly, in thinking that, say, George W. Bush is a bad person because of his actions and beliefs, you’re making a kind of mistake. Aside from the fact that “bad person” and “evil man” have little meaning—because they’re value-judgments, or *subjective reactions* that project themselves into supposed *objective facts*—you’re writing him off as “*this, and only this.*” You’re ignoring his individuality, his humanity, treating him as a *thing*, before trying to understand his position or the experiences that have led him to it. You’re *wrong*. To understand is, in some sense, to “forgive.” –And yet I, more often than most people, feel palpable contempt for political conservatives. That implies that I’m treating them as “things,” as *fixed, immoveable*, as though it is of their *essence* to be contemptible. In order to live in truth you cannot pass value-judgments on people, or at least you have to recognize the conditionality and relativity of such judgments.

But, damn it, it’s fun to despise conservatives! Like Karl Rove! What a repugnant man! Seriously, part of me can’t understand how such people are *not* “bad,” bad in their essence. –I’m trapped between these two extreme positions. It’s distressing. I fluctuate from one to the other and never attain certainty.

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The Dalai Lama as role-model.— The source of fanatical inhumanity is certainty in value-judgments. The cure to such inhumanity is to recognize that value-judgments are basically meaningless—reifications of attitudes of approval or disapproval—and relative to some set of standards, not “absolute.” Compassion and tolerance are not only humane but *true*;² hatred and intolerance are not only horrible but *false*.

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The greatest error.— Human life revolves around the illusion of objectivity.

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² Strictly speaking, the attitudes themselves are not “true,” since attitudes aren’t the sort of things that have truth-values. Rather, compassion is more compatible with a recognition of the relative unfoundedness of value-judgments than hate is, because hate is premised on impassioned belief in someone’s “badness.”

Value-judgments are always relative to something, not absolutely true (not just “true, period”). A person is not intelligent, period. He is intelligent relative to someone or to some standard.³ It's half-meaningless to say simply, as we are wont to, that Hitler was *bad* or *evil*; rather, he was bad relative to certain standards.⁴ A value-judgment not made in relation to some set of standards is not really meaningful. The desire to help people is good...not “in itself” or “objectively” but given other values. The problem is that when we make value-judgments, the form of the assertion is categorical or “absolute” or “objective” in the way I’m criticizing, which means that the assertion is not wholly meaningful. “It’s good to help people”: that statement seems to have a very determinate meaning when you first look at it, but the more you think about it, the more elusive its meaning becomes. Insofar as the meaning is unanalyzable, it doesn’t exist. Only if you give reasons for the statement, i.e., justify it on the basis of other values, does it acquire a concrete meaning. So, why is it good to help people? Because, e.g., that reduces suffering, and you value a reduction in suffering. Thus, helping people is good inasmuch as it brings about the realization of some further end—and *this* statement is wholly meaningful. It isn’t a categorical claim ascribing “intrinsic value” (or intrinsic evil) to something, a notion that makes no sense.

There is no such thing as intrinsic value. Not even happiness is “intrinsically valuable,” at least in the sense I’m discussing. What would it *mean* to say, “Happiness is intrinsically good”? Or “Beauty has intrinsic value”? Every value is such in relation to a preference (i.e., an act of valuing). A masochistic person might deny that pleasure or happiness is valuable, and this is a perfectly coherent thing to do.⁵ Why do I think happiness is good? Just because I prefer it to unhappiness. It isn’t good in itself; it’s good because of (or “relative to”) my set of preferences.

On another understanding, though, there *are* intrinsic goods. Virtue is intrinsically good, in that it’s good by definition. Vice is intrinsically bad. But specific vices are not “intrinsically bad”—except insofar as they’re classified as vices. For instance, lying is not intrinsically, objectively, *essentially* “bad”; it’s just a way of behaving, like any other

³ Actually, “intelligent” may be more descriptive (value-neutral) than evaluative. I’ll leave aside such terms.

⁴ Contrast “This patch is yellow” with “This painting is beautiful.” The former is “objective” and non-relational in a way that the latter is not, however much it appears to be. The painting is beautiful *to me*, or relative to my preferences. Hitler was bad relative to my values, not “objectively” or “essentially,” whatever that would mean. But that meaningless ‘objectivist’ value-judgment is what we’re implicitly and mistakenly committed to when we recoil in horror from him, as an (“objectively”) *evil man*.

⁵ The only way it would be incoherent is if happiness is *defined* (emptily) as that which a person desires or values. But the common definition is that it’s a pleasurable, conflict-free state of mind—and it’s coherent for one to prefer pain and conflict.

way. But insofar as it's classified as a vice, it *is* bad, because vices are defined that way. Of course, this is really just saying that "insofar as it's bad (a vice), it's bad."

If an intrinsic good is something that is desired or valued for its own sake, then there are intrinsic goods. Pleasure is usually desired for its own sake. So is happiness. So is recognition, or self-confirmation. These aren't good in themselves; they're good insofar as they're valued, and they're intrinsically good insofar as they're valued for their own sake. But it is worth noting that specific instances of these general goods are not valued for themselves: for instance, a massage is valued not for its own sake (what would that even mean?) but for its pleasurable quality. So, a massage is extrinsically good, good on account of something else (conceptually distinct from it) which is realized through it.

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Value characterizes a relation between a subject and an object. It is incoherent to say that an object (or a person) is valuable in itself, i.e., with no reference to a subject (a subject's purposes, attitudes, etc.), because this contradicts the nature of value. But this is basically what one is doing when one makes a value-judgment. The statement "That painting is beautiful," by virtue of its form, ascribes intrinsic value to an object, i.e., considers it valuable "in itself"—without reference to a subject—which is incoherent. The meaningful way of expressing the same sentiment is to say something like "*I find that painting beautiful,*" or to list the criteria by which one judges aesthetic merit and then say that that painting fulfills the criteria.

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The meaning of life?— Life is not totally "meaningless." People's commitment to their work, to relationships, and to life itself proves that. However, it is hard to deny that life is not as meaningful as we'd like. It is the evolutionary product of "meaningless" random variation and natural selection, not meaningful teleology or some kind of cosmic purpose. The course of a person's life is molded to a great extent by accidents; his very existence is an utterly improbable accident. No one is as special or valuable as he thinks he is. Whether he is popular or unpopular does not mean what he tends to think it does, that he is (respectively) valuable or not valuable. There is little justice in the world. A person's basic existential project of objectively confirming his self-regard, or his value—which is ultimately what the desire for "meaning" is all about—is unrealizable. He implicitly wants to be remembered by the world forever, or at least for a very long time, because he thinks that that kind of recognition would make his life more consequential, but he will not be. And even if he were it would not matter, because he'd be dead. His life is organized around illusions, such as that of the durable, "permanent" substantial self, and of the special value of loved ones, and of the "necessity" of his own existence. His place in the universe is not what he likes to think it

is. In the long run and on a broad scale, his achievements are inconsequential. All this is not *meaninglessness*, but it is *insufficient meaningfulness*.

Another way to say it is that in wanting life to be “meaningful” in some deep sense, people want the world to have value “in itself.” *Intrinsic* value. Their desire for some kind of recognition from the world (i.e., for self-confirmation)—which is inseparable from their desire to have a meaningful life—is also inseparable from their implicit belief that the world has value. (We want recognition, love, etc., only from things or people to which/whom we attribute some sort of value.) But it doesn’t. Nothing has value in itself; its value comes from the subject, in other words from us. We give things value by adopting a certain orientation to them. The world and life itself have *no* “intrinsic value,” whatever that means, which is to say they are essentially meaningless. Thus, the human project, viz., the urge for self-confirmation, is, from at least one perspective (in fact several), fundamentally deluded. It presupposes that there is some *value* in “confirming” oneself, in objectifying one’s self-love, in making it a part of reality so to speak, which itself presupposes that reality or the world has some sort of “objective value,” which it doesn’t. In any case, the notion of objectifying one’s self-love is nonsensical, because freedom and value are necessarily *subjective* things.⁶

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“Meaning.”— A purpose, a goal, a project, self-transcendence, community, recognition, self-confirmation in the world, the realization of self-ideals, purposive self-projection into the world, making a contribution, changing something, making lasting change, devoting oneself to something “other,” love, commitment, faith, hope, spiritual “ordering,” “centering” oneself, awareness of *connection*, transcendence of atomizing self-consciousness, transcendence in various ways of the merely “given,” immersion in the other, passion, truth, authenticity, spontaneity, affirmation.

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More thoughts on values.— I don’t understand how a criticism or a compliment of me can be true—or, more accurately, I don’t understand what it would *mean* for a criticism

⁶ More exactly, from *one* perspective it is nonsensical to “objectify” or “confirm” your self-love. From another perspective, though, it isn’t; we do it constantly. We project our self-love into, and through, our activities and interactions with others, thereby in some sense actualizing it or objectifying it. But the goal of putting your self-love, your *self*, into the world so that it stays there, so to speak, i.e., so that the world from then on necessarily reflects to everyone “John’s value!” or something like that—something that can be *read into* the world—is nonsensical, though we all desire it (implicitly). What we desire, in other words, is to overcome the boundaries between self and world, self and other. That’s what it all boils down to, the desire for meaning and everything else. But it is impossible, indeed meaningless.

or compliment to be “true.” I am who I am; to say that certain things I do are, for instance, “weak” or “petty” is ultimately meaningless. What does it mean to class a person or some aspect of him under some evaluative property? “He’s arrogant.” Okay...he thinks he’s better than other people and acts like it. So what? What is really being said? The implication is that, insofar as he’s arrogant, he is unpleasant or bad. Arrogance is a flaw. But flaws or strengths are such only from an external viewpoint, an “otherly” viewpoint. From the perspective of the subject, the interior, they have no significance. I can think of people who might call me selfish or generous or whatever. But from my own “internal” perspective, these words wash over me. They can’t stick, they can’t have much meaning; and to say they’re *true* would be a nearly empty statement. I’m just living, just a thing in the world changing from moment to moment, experiencing myself and others, acting and reacting; whether I or my acts “have value” is a whole other kind of thing divorced from me, an artificial, static, other-imposed label, a way of simplifying and categorizing the experiencing of me. This applies to everyone.

Thoughts like these are hard to pin down. All you can do is grope towards them.

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It’s hard for me to take seriously people’s responses to me, whether positive or negative, because in different circumstances they would have responded in the opposite way. It is never just *you* to whom people respond, but *you in such and such conditions*. An indefinite number of external factors enters into people’s attitudes toward each other. (It’s true that these attitudes are rarely groundless. They are merely not as grounded as they pretend to be.)

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Admiration.— To admire is to misunderstand. It means to pick out and simplify certain traits or acts, abstracting them from the person’s living totality—which, after all, incorporates other things you wouldn’t admire. All people are merely people, “good” and “bad” in different ways, determined largely by innumerable factors outside their control.

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It makes no sense to praise someone for something over which he has no control. Since people have very little control over who they are, it makes little sense to praise someone for his personality or his “noble mind” or his wit or his talent or his natural propensity to work hard or any such quality. And insofar as his acts express his propensities, it is senseless to praise or condemn him for them. In fact, similar reasoning probably leads to the conclusion that *any* act of condemnation or praise is, in a sense, misguided. (Other chains of reasoning also lead to that conclusion. For example, if the

principle is that an act ought to be praised insofar as it is motivated by concern for others, then no act ought to be unreservedly praised, since all acts are motivated by at least as much self-regard as other-regard. Or, rather, they—at best—implicitly express both self-love and other-love. There is no “purely unselfish,” or “purely unself-ish,” act.) The paradigm for all these value-judgments, their “form” and real meaning, is revealed in something silly like the implicit approval that people project towards a good-looking person. It is a cognitively senseless⁷ emotional reaction. Properly speaking, it has the form “I like” or “I am impressed,” not “You deserve” (even though *for the admirer*—i.e., in the phenomenology of his mental state—the form is the latter, the objective statement, not the former, the subjective statement). When we judge people’s worth we’re trying to say something about *them*, but, ultimately, the more meaningful—and *sensible*—thing is what we’re saying about ourselves, such as the implicit statement “I don’t like him” or “I am in awe of him” or whatever.⁸

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Having finished reading Albert Camus’s *The Fall*, I feel obligated to myself to make a few observations on the book’s relation to me.

The narrator’s successful, happy, easy life was interrupted one day when he realized that he was not as virtuous as he pretended to be. —On second thought, no, I don’t feel like laying it all out for you. The point is that the narrator experienced a crisis when he realized he was not “an innocent man” but a guilty one, and that everyone is fundamentally guilty. The problem was, how could he live his life under the glare of this knowledge? How could he live in an unhyprocritical way, in such a way that he could go on judging people as always, as everyone must (in order to justify his implicit self-love), without deserving to be judged by them at the same time and for basically the same reasons that he judged them? He wanted to have a clear conscience, to believe he was superior, as he always had, but by rights he couldn’t. For a while he struggled with this problem, until finally the solution came to him: if he judged himself with sufficient severity (“*J’accuse—moi!*”), he could go on judging others and dominating them with a good conscience. If, from time to time, he “profess[ed] vociferously [his] own infamy,” he could go on permitting himself everything (for example, the duplicity that he couldn’t help practicing, being a modern man). The point seems to be that by repenting periodically, accusing himself, he salvages the craved conviction of his superiority (presumably because he knows that other people *don’t* accuse *themselves*,

⁷ As in both “meaningless” and “not sensible.”

⁸ Insofar as our judgment, however, incorporates a *description* as opposed to an *evaluation*, it is meaningful. For example, the statement “He’s an idiot” is meaningful insofar as it gives, or half-gives, a value-neutral description of his intelligence.

and so to that extent at least he is better, or more honest and insightful, than them). “The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you.”

This is all very similar to what I’ve said many times. All these paradoxes, all these ironical self-justifications, are classic me. The difference between us is that we adopt different “solutions.” (Mine, needless to say, is better.) While the narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, judges himself mercilessly, thereby giving himself the right to judge others, I say that we simply have to go on living our lives as before, judging and so on, while remembering in the back of our minds that our judgments are ultimately superficial and often hypocritical. Indeed, the very act of judging is virtually meaningless. And yet at the same time I recognize something that Clamence doesn’t, and which at least apparently can justify certain judgments: taking ordinary values as our yardstick—perhaps even clarifying them a little, making them more honest, etc.—some people, after all, have more worth than others. Some are worse, some are better. Dick Cheney is worse, Albert Schweitzer is better (*relative to particular standards*, not “objectively” or “in his essence,” as though one could list his qualities and include “goodness” in them). It isn’t as though everyone is simply “guilty” (as Clamence thinks) and nothing else can be said on the matter. There are subtleties, there are gradations in worth. If all goes well, I myself am one of the good ones—and so to that extent I’m justified in putting myself on a (low) pedestal and criticizing others. My solution is the better one because it’s more subtle and insightful, less self-deluding, and more ironical.

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Reading Hannah Arendt’s classic *On Revolution* (1963). In her analysis of Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, she remarks insightfully that “The sin of the Grand Inquisitor was that he, like [the French revolutionary] Robespierre, was ‘attracted toward *les hommes faibles*,’ not only because such attraction was indistinguishable from lust for power, but also because he had depersonalized the sufferers, lumped them together into an aggregate—the people *toujours malheureux*, the suffering masses, etc. To Dostoyevsky, the sign of Jesus’s divinity was his ability to have compassion with all men in their singularity, that is, without lumping them together into some such entity as one suffering mankind.” Yes, reification, depersonalization, is really the origin of “evil,” and to the extent that even “good” people reify others they’re not far removed from “bad” people. So, in a way, the hero of Camus’s *The Fall* was right: in modern society everyone is guilty, because everyone necessarily reifies “humanity.” Goodness is compassion, and compassion is concrete, not abstract. Nevertheless, it is psychologically impossible for us not to posit abstract entities like humankind or “the poor” or “the rich” and act with them in mind; the best we can do is to try to keep in mind the interests of *real* people when acting on behalf of abstract concepts or ideologies.

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It's paradoxical that what makes us human, the ability to abstract from concrete things, from the concrete "other" (a capacity that accounts for self-consciousness), is what makes possible not only the concept of morality but also the horrors of Nazism, of hating an abstract thing called "the Jew" and wanting to kill everyone who instantiates this thing. Gandhi and Hitler are made possible by the same human capacity of *mediation*, of abstracting from the immediate and subsuming people under categories.