

COMMENTARY

# Conflicting Motives for Human Conduct: Pleasure or Virtue

by Benjamin Franklin

\* A DIALOGUE BETWEEN PHILOCLES AND HORATIO, \*  
MEETING ACCIDENTALLY IN THE FIELDS,  
CONCERNING VIRTUE AND PLEASURE

*The Pennsylvania Gazette,*  
June 23, 1730

PHILOCLES. My friend Horatio! I am very glad to see you; prithee, how came such a man alone? And musing too? What misfortune in your pleasures has sent you to philosophy for relief?

HORATIO. You guess very right, my dear Philocles! We pleasure-hunters are never without them; and yet, so enchanting is the game, we can't quit the chase! How calm and undisturbed is your life! How free from present embarrassments and future cares! I know you love me, and look with compassion upon my conduct; show me then the path which leads up to that constant and invariable good, which I have heard you so beautifully describe, and which you seem so fully to possess.

PHIL. There are few men in the world I value more than you, Horatio! for, amidst all your foibles and painful pursuits of pleasure, I have oft observed in you an honest heart, and a mind strongly bent toward virtue. I wish, from my soul, I could assist you in acting steadily the part of a reasonable creature; for, if you would not think it a paradox, I should tell you I love you better than you do yourself.

HOR. A paradox indeed! Better than I do myself! When I love my dear self so well that I love everything else for my own sake.

PHIL. He only loves himself well, who rightly and judiciously loves himself.

HOR. What do you mean by that, Philocles! You men of reason and virtue are always dealing in mysteries, though you laugh at them when the church makes them. I think he loves himself very well and very judiciously too, as you call it, who allows himself to do whatever he pleases.

PHIL. What, though it be to the ruin and destruction of that very self which he loves so well! That man alone loves himself rightly, who procures the greatest possible good to himself through the whole of his existence; and so pursues pleasure as not to give for it more than 'tis worth.

HOR. That depends all upon opinion. Who shall judge what the pleasure is worth? Supposing a pleasing form of the fair kind strikes me so much that I can enjoy nothing without the enjoyment of that one object. Or, that pleasure in general is so favorite a mistress that I will take her as men do their wives, for better, for worse; mind no consequences, nor regarding what's to come. Why should I not do it?

PHIL. Suppose, Horatio, that a friend of yours entered into the world, about two-and-twenty, with a healthful vigorous body, and a fair plentiful estate of about five hundred pounds a year; and yet, before he had reached thirty, should, by following his pleasures, and not, as you say, duly regarding

consequences, have run out of his estate, and disabled his body to that degree that he had neither the means nor capacity of enjoyment left, nor anything else to do but wisely shoot himself though the head to be at rest; what would you say to this unfortunate man's conduct? Is it wrong by opinion or fancy only? Or is there really a right and wrong in the case? Is not one opinion of life and action juster than another? Or, one sort of conduct preferable to another? Or, does that miserable son of pleasure appear as reasonable and lovely a being in your eyes, as a man who, by prudently and rightly gratifying his natural passions, had preserved his body in full health, and his estate entire, and enjoyed both to a good old age, and then died with a thankful heart for the good things he had received, and with an entire submission to the will of him who first called him into being? Say, Horatio! are these men equally wise and happy? And is everything to be measured by a mere fancy and opinion, without considering whether that fancy or opinion be right?

HOR. Hardly so neither, I think; yet sure the wise and good author of nature could never make us to plague us. He could never give us passions, on purpose to subdue and conquer them; nor produce this self of mine, or any other self, only that it may be denied; for that is denying the works of the great Creator himself. Self-denial, then,

which is what I suppose you mean by prudence, seems to me not only absurd, but very dishonorable to that Supreme wisdom and goodness, which is supposed to make so ridiculous and contradictious a creature, that must be always fighting with himself in order to be at rest, and undergo voluntary hardships in order to be happy. Are we created sick, only to be commanded to be sound? Are we born under one law, our passions, and yet bound to another, that of reason? Answer me, Philocles, for I am warmly concerned for the honor of nature, the Mother of us all.

PHIL. I find, Horatio, my two characters have affrighted you; so that you decline the trial of what is good, by reason: And had rather make a bold attack upon Providence; the usual way of you gentlemen of fashion, who, when by living in defiance of the eternal rules of reason, you have plunged yourselves into a thousand difficulties, endeavor to make yourselves easy by throwing the burden upon nature. You are, Horatio, in a very miserable condition indeed; for you say you can't be happy if you control your passions; and you feel yourself miserable by an unrestrained gratification of them; so that here's evil, irremediable evil, either way.

HOR. That is very true, at least it appears so to me. Pray, what have you to say, Philocles, in honor of nature or providence? Methinks I'm in pain for her. How do you rescue her poor lady!

PHIL. This, my dear Horatio, I have to say: that what you find fault with and clamor against, as the most terrible evil in the world, self-denial, is really the greatest good, and the highest self-gratification: if, indeed, you use the word in the sense of some weak and sour moralists, and how much weaker Divines, you'll have just reason to laugh at it; but if you take it, as understood by philosophers and men of sense, you will presently see her charms, and fly to her embrace, notwithstanding her demure looks, as

absolutely necessary to produce even you own darling sole good, pleasure: for, self-denial is never a duty, or a reasonable action, but as it is a natural means of procuring more pleasure than you can taste without it so that this grave, saintlike guide to happiness, as rough and dreadful as she has been make to appear, is in truth the kindest and most beautiful mistress in the world.



HOR. Prithee, Philocles! do not wrap yourself in allegory and metaphor. Why do you tease me thus? I long to be satisfied, what this philosophical self-denial is; the necessity and reason of it; I'm impatient, and all on fire; explain, therefore, in your beautiful, natural easy way of reasoning, what I'm to understand by this grave lady of yours, with so forbidding, down-cast looks, and yet so absolutely necessary to my pleasures. I stand ready to embrace her; for you know, pleasure I court under all shapes and forms.

PHIL. Attend then, and you'll see the reason of this philosophical self-denial. There can be no absolute perfection in any creature; because every creature is derived, and dependent. No created being can be all-wise, all-good, and all-powerful, because his powers and capacities are finite and limited; consequently, whatever is created must in its own nature be subject to error, irregularity, excess, and

disorder. All intelligent, rational agents find in themselves a power of judging what kind of beings they are; what actions are proper to preserve them, and what consequences will generally attend them, what pleasures they are formed for, and to what degree their natures are capable of receiving them. All we have to do then, Horatio, is to consider, when we are surprised with a new object, and passionately desire to enjoy it, whether gratifying that passion be consistent with the gratifying other passions and appetites, equal if not more necessary to us. And whether it consists with our happiness tomorrow, next week, or next year; for, as we all wish to live, we are obliged by reason to take as much care for our future as our present happiness, and not build one upon the ruins of the other. But if, through the strength and consequences, we have erred and exceeded the bounds which nature or reason have set us, we are then, for our sakes, to refrain, or deny ourselves a present momentary pleasure for a future, constant, and durable one: so that this philosophical self-denial is only refusing to do an action which you strongly desire, because it is inconsistent with your health, fortunes, or circumstances in the world; or, in other words, because it would cost you more than it was worth. You would lose by it, as a man of pleasure. Thus you see, Horatio! that self-denial is not only the most reasonable, but the most pleasant, thing in the world.

HOR. We are just coming into town, so that we can't pursue this argument any further at present; you have said a great deal for nature, providence, and reason: Happy are they who can follow such divine guides.

PHIL. Horatio! good night; I wish you wise in your pleasures.

HOR. I wish, Philocles! I could be as wise in my pleasures as you are pleasantly wise; your wisdom is agreeable, your virtue is amiable, and your philosophy the highest luxury. Adieu! thou enchanting reasoner!

\* A SECOND DIALOGUE BETWEEN PHILOCLES AND HORATIO, \*  
CONCERNING VIRTUE AND PLEASURE

*The Pennsylvania Gazette,*  
July 9, 1730

PHILOCLES. Dear Horatio! where hast thou been these three or four months? What new adventures have you fallen upon since I met you in these delightful, all-inspiring fields, and wondered how such a pleasure-hunter as you could bear being alone?

HORATIO. O Philocles, thou best of friends, because a friend to reason and virtue, I am very glad to see you. Don't you remember, I told you then that some misfortunes in my pleasure had sent me to philosophy for relief? But now I do assure you, I can, without a sigh, leave other pleasures for those of philosophy; I can hear the word *Reason* mentioned, and virtue praised, without laughing. Don't I bid fair for conversion, think you?

PHIL. Very fair, Horatio! for I remember the time when reason, virtue, and pleasure, were the same thing with you: when you counted nothing good but what pleased, nor any thing reasonable but what you got by; when you made a jest of a mind, and the pleasures of reflection, and elegantly placed your sole happiness, like the rest of the animal creation, in the gratifications of sense.

HOR. I did so. But in our last conversation, when walking upon the brow of this hill, and looking down on that broad, rapid river, and yon widely extended beautifully varied plain, you taught me another doctrine. You showed me that self-denial, which above all things I abhorred, was really the greatest good, and the highest self-gratification, and absolutely necessary to produce even my own darling sole good, pleasure.

PHIL. True, I told you that self-denial was never a duty but when it was a natural means of procuring more pleasure than we could taste without it; that as we all

strongly desire to live, and to live only to enjoy, we should take as much care about our future as our present happiness, and not build one upon the ruins of the other; that we should look to the end, and regard consequences; and if, through want of attention, we had erred, and exceeded the bounds which nature had set us, we were then obliged, for our own sakes, to refrain or deny ourselves a momentary pleasure for a future, constant, and durable good.

HOR. You have shown, Philocles, that self-denial, which weak or interested



men have rendered the most forbidding, is really the most delightful and amiable, the most reasonable and pleasant thing in the world. In a word, if I understand you aright, self-denial is in truth, self-recognising, self-acknowledging, or self-owning. But now, my friend! you are to perform another promise, and show me the path which leads up to that constant, durable, and invariable good, which I have heard you so beautifully describe, and which you seem so fully to possess: Is not this good of yours a mere chimera? Can anything be constant in a world which is eternally changing and which appears to exist by an everlasting revolution of one thing into

another, and where everything without us, and everything within us, is in perpetual motion? What is this constant, durable good, then, of yours? Prithee, satisfy my soul, for I'm all on fire and impatient to enjoy her. Produce this eternal blooming Goddess with never-fading charms, and see whether I won't embrace her with as much eagerness and rapture as you.

PHIL. You seem enthusiastically warm, Horatio; I will wait till you are cool enough to attend to the sober, dispassionate voice of reason.

HOR. You mistake me, my dear Philocles! my warmth is not so great as to run away with my reason; it is only just raised enough to open my faculties and fit them to receive those eternal truths, and that durable good, which you so triumphantly boasted of. Begin, then; I'm prepared.

PHIL. I will. I believe, Horatio, with all your skepticism about you, you will allow that good to be constant which is never absent from you, and that to be durable, which never ends but with your being.

HOR. Yes, go on.

PHIL. That can never be the good of a creature, which, when present, the creature may be miserable, and when absent, is certainly so.

HOR. I think not; but pray explain what you mean; for I am not much used to this abstract way of reasoning.

PHIL. I mean all the pleasures of sense. The good of man cannot consist in the mere pleasures of sense; because, when any one of those objects which you love is absent, or can't be come at, you are certainly miserable; and if the faculty be impaired, though the object be present, you can't enjoy it. So that this sensual good depends upon a thousand things without and within you, and all out of your power. Can this then be the good of man? Say, Horatio! what

think you, Is not this a chequered, fleeting, fantastical good? Can that, in any propriety of speech, be called the good of man which even, while he is tasting, he may be miserable, and which, when he cannot taste, he is necessarily so? Can that be our good, which costs us a great deal of pains to obtain; which cloy in possessing; for which we must wait the return of appetite before we can enjoy again? Or, is that our good which we can come at without difficulty; which is heightened by possession; which never ends in weariness and disappointment; and which, the more we enjoy, the better qualified we are to enjoy on?

HOR. The latter, I think; but why do you torment me thus? Philocles! show me this good immediately.

PHIL. I have showed you what it is not; it is not sensual, but it is rational and moral good. It is doing all the good we can to others, by acts of humanity, friendship, generosity, and benevolence. This is that constant and durable good, which will afford contentment and satisfaction always alike, without variation or diminution. I speak to your experience now, Horatio! Did you ever find yourself wearying of relieving the miserable, or of raising the distressed into life or happiness? Or rather, don't you find the pleasure grow upon you by repetition, and that it is greater in the reflection than in the act itself? Is there a pleasure upon earth to be compared with that which arises from the sense of making others happy? Can this pleasure ever be absent, or ever end but with your being? Does it not always accompany you? Doth not it lie down and rise with you, live as long as you live, give you consolation in the article of death, and remain with you in that gloomy hour when all other things are going to forsake you, or you them?

HOR. How glowingly you paint, Philocles! Methinks Horatio is amongst the enthusiasts. I feel the passion: I am enchantingly convinced, but I don't know why; overborn by something stronger than reason. Sure some Divinity speaks within me; but prithee, Philocles, give me coolly the

cause, why this rational and moral good so infinitely excels the mere natural or sensual.

PHIL. I think, Horatio, that I have clearly shown you the difference between merely natural or sensual good, and rational or moral good. Natural or sensual pleasure continues no longer than the action itself; but this divine or moral pleasure continues when the action is over, and swells and grows upon your hand by reflection. The one is inconstant, unsatisfying, of short duration, and attended with numberless ills; the other is constant, yields full satisfaction, is durable, and no evils preceding, accompanying, or following it. But, if you enquire further into the cause of this difference, and would know why the moral pleasures are greater than the sensual, perhaps the reason is the same as in all other creatures, that their happiness or chief good consists in acting up to their chief faculty, or that faculty which distinguishes them from all creatures of a different species. The chief faculty in a man is his reason; and consequently his chief good, or that which may be justly called his good, consists not merely in action, but in reasonable action. By reasonable actions, we understand those actions which are preservative of the human kind, and naturally tend to produce real and unmixed happiness; and these actions, by way of distinction, we call actions morally good.

HOR. You speak very clearly, Philocles; but, that no difficulty may remain upon my mind, pray tell me what is the real difference between natural good and ill, and moral good and ill, for I know several people who use the terms without ideas.

PHIL. That may be. The difference lies only in this: that natural good and ill is pleasure and pain; moral good and ill is pleasure or pain produced with intention and design; for it is the intention only that makes the agent morally good or bad.

HOR. But may not a man, with a very good intention, do an ill action?

PHIL. Yes, but, then he errs in his judgment, though his design be good. If his

error is inevitable, or such as, all things considered, he could not help, he is inculpable; but if it arose through want of diligence in forming his judgment about the nature of human actions, he is immoral and culpable.

HOR. I find, then, that in order to please ourselves rightly, or to do good to others morally, we should take great care of our opinions.

PHIL. Nothing concerns you more; for, as the happiness or real good of men consists in right action, and right action cannot be produced without right opinion, it behooves us, above all things in this world, to take care that our opinions of things be according to the nature of things. The foundation of all virtue and happiness is thinking rightly. He who sees an action is right, that is, naturally tending to good, and does it because of that tendency, he only is a moral man; and he alone is capable of that constant, durable, and invariable good, which has been the subject of this conversation.

HOR. How, my dear philosophical guide, shall I be able to know, and determine certainly, what is right and wrong in life?

PHIL. As easily as you distinguish a circle from a square, or light from darkness. Look, Horatio, into the sacred book of nature; read your own nature, and view the relation which other men stand in to you, and you to them; and you'll immediately see what constitutes human happiness, and consequently what is right.

HOR. We are just coming into town, and can say no more at present. You are my good genius, Philocles. You have shown me what is good. You have redeemed me from the slavery and misery of folly and vice, and made me a free and happy being.

PHIL. Then I am the happiest man in the world. Be steady, Horatio! Never depart from reason and virtue.

HOR. Sooner will I lose my existence. Good night, Philocles.

PHIL. Adieu! dear Horatio!