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## Zero Sum or Principles?<sup>1</sup>

*A sound bite response:* If we refuse to accept materialistic reductionism that makes our social lives exhaustively the product of capricious genetics, the amygdala, and chemicals in the brain like oxytocin, we are the species that can ask what we *should* do. By playing a zero sum game, one knows who “won” whereas acting on principle gives one the satisfaction that one tried to do more than “win.” However, the alternative they represent is not an exclusive dyad as if one can pursue one of the options only by exclusion of the other. Both are symptomatic of humanity’s “radical” evil and “radical” goodness. We can pursue one or the other only because we have the capacity to do both.

One formulation of the question raised by the Trump victory and all of the injustice reflected in “Black Lives Matter” asks why the unjust thrive whereas the just suffer? Or why should we pursue justice when we will only be victims of the unjust? Are the virtuous losers?

### Job

Representative of a dominant answer to this set of questions is found in the Judeo-Christian tradition in the story of Job, a massively materially successful man who was punctilious in his adhering to Torah (religious law). The Evil One challenges the Master of the Universe’s pride over Job by pointing out that Job fulfilled the law only because he was prosperous. The Master of the Universe accepts the Evil One’s challenge, and so Job loses all his family and possessions. To be sure, Job’s confidence in Torah is deeply shaken, but he is persistent and is able to re-acquire his possessions and a new family. The moral as told in the story is that humanity’s “reason” is too limited to grasp the intent of the Master of the Universe so that it is not our place to question what the Master of the Universe does or doesn’t allow. We should silently and patiently pursue the ethical demands of the Master of the Universe found in Torah regardless of our life-circumstance.

This is a powerful story that calls humanity to humility until we consider: 1) that the Master of the Universe has conspired with the Evil One to prove a point, which is a nefarious way to demonstrate omniscience and omnipotence; 2) that the wager between the Evil One and the Master of the Universe accepts the loss of life by Job’s first family not to speak of the disruption in the lives of Job’s employees/serfs and those economically connected to Job’s success; 3) that the story emphasizes humanity’s rational limits when it comes to discernment of the intention of the Master of the Universe, but it leaves unquestioned the status of Torah that one can view as a heteronomous set of socially relative ethical laws able to be written on “tablets” that, in turn, are taken to be a system of absolute moral principles; and 4) that the lesson – to silence questioning

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reflection – cuts the tap root of human creativity, which *requires* looking beyond the obvious appearances to discern the physical and whatever moral laws there might or might not be that make us human and responsible beings, in the first place.

## Plato

Plato offers a different assessment of the human condition in the *Republic*. He reminds his young readers in Book I that all of those hormones are going to decline as one grows older and that one should not do anything that would lead one to deep and lasting regrets that will haunt one as one ages. In Book II he addresses the issue of the virtuous losing out to the unjust, and he introduces the social nature of the individual that drives the remainder of the dialog: the unjust person is at war with her-/himself whereas the just person experiences internal tranquility because of the power of personal insight to rule over the three internal elements that seek to control the self: 1) our animality that demands food, clothing, shelter, and reproduction; 2) our rage (θύμος, *thymos*, sometimes translated as “passion”) that can/does blind us; and 3) our rational insight. Plato embraces all three elements in the self. Importantly, he does not say that reason should reject animality or rage/passion!, but he calls for the supervision of animality and rage by rational insight. The remainder of the dialog is an attempt to employ a model for grasping an understanding of the struggle among social classes for dominance over humanity’s affairs as an analogy for grasping the internal, “social” struggle of the individual to achieve a balance among her/his internal elements. Particularly, in Book IX, Plato describes the tyrant as the individual who has totally lost rational insight and is driven exclusively by animality and rage to her/his own self-destruction – no matter how successful socially. S/he may *appear* to be successful, but her/his life is a catastrophic mess.

This is a powerful story that calls humanity to cultivate its rational insight until we consider: 1) that reason as the ability to calculate, predict, manipulate, and control provides us with no dependable criteria for insight because reason is limited to appearances without access to the way things “really are;” 2) that we can only imagine that the tyrant’s internal life is a mess whereas we experience concretely that her/his actions lead to obvious suffering on the part of others; 3) that if one gets one’s “internal house” in order it will somehow, Plato assumes, magically bring about “social justice” in the world; and 4) if moral principles are a social product, then our efforts to guide our actions by them can result in extremely destructive behavior under the illusion that we are exercising rational insight.

## Critical Idealism

Critical Idealism portrays a third option for addressing the question whether or not the human condition is a zero sum game or a project grounded in principles. It begins with a different assessment of “reason.” Reason is not merely “instrumental,” a tool for calculating, predicting, manipulating, and controlling things and others in life. Far more, reason is the label for all that is supersensible (not available in the senses) that is *necessary* for us to experience a physical world in which we can either play the zero sum game or seek to act on principles in the first place. An indication of the kinds of *necessary*, supersensible elements upon which our experience and (more importantly) our understanding of a world of appearances depends are: 1) physical laws and their predictable concepts to understand the world (i.e., theoretical reason) as well as 2) our creative capacity to be able intentionally to do things that physical laws and predictable concepts cannot achieve on their own (i.e., practical reason). Given that, as far as we have ever *experienced*, we can do or think nothing without a physical body in the physical world, and given that the physical world in our experience conforms to laws and predictable concepts (even if we can’t prove or

disprove that to be the case at all times and in all places), we as a species have discovered that our understanding of events is enhanced if we employ our grasp of physical laws and predictable concepts to *make sense of experience*. Here Critical Idealism employs its own analogy to claim that, just as it is *necessary* for us to engage physical phenomena on the basis of physical laws and predictable concepts, it is also *necessary* for us to supervise our creative capacity by means of universal moral principles rather than act merely out of self-interest. The claim of Critical Idealism is that our understanding of the world and ourselves is profoundly enhanced if we embrace both physical and moral laws as governing our lives.

This is a powerful approach to life that calls humanity to cultivate its rational and moral insight without discouraging the questioning its own conclusions and does not employ imperceptible elements as a slight of hand that can lead to those who play the zero sum game to laugh at the virtuous losers. However, frequently the story loses its appeal when we realize that it requires individuals to commit to imperceptible, moral principles. This seems to be a threshold that introduces a heteronomous, divine code that condemns us for not living up to it and leaves us, like Job, having to silence reflective reason before an omniscient and omnipotent Master of the Universe.

Yet, here Critical Idealism reminds us that the moral law is analogous to the physical law. Neither law is “written on tablets” or found in the physical appearances to which they are applied. How do we know that we have the “right” physical or moral law? A physical law is “right” not because we can prove it but because it fits into an ever-expanding, coherent system of laws that enhance our ability to understand and act on the basis of those physical laws. A moral law is “right” not because we can prove it to be right but because it is not driven exclusively by particular self-interest alone (whether personal, familial, communal, tribal, national, whatever) and seeks to rein in destructive behavior by asking in advance of its application: Can I want this moral principle not only to be universal (i.e., beyond particular interest, *not* a heteronomous, authoritarian universal), but also, does this moral principle allow me to grasp and assess the perspective of the other (physical objects and persons) as well as treat the other as an “end” in her/himself and not as a “mere means” to my personal agenda?

Both the physical law and moral principles require a wager – to be sure, a wager of faith that they are valid – but this is a wager that the individual as well as the society committed to the imperceptible reality of those physical and moral laws makes as *necessary* to understand and to act responsibly in the world. This wager requires effort on the part of everyone to understand and to act on the basis of those laws for her-/himself – not because one will be rewarded materially for one’s efforts but because understanding and justice are possible only if we, the human species, make that effort. The claim of Critical Idealism is that theoretical and practical reason are both *necessary* for understanding and acting in the world – not because an anthropomorphic deity demands that we adhere to them but because we are capable of adhering to them. We are a moral species not because we always act “good” or because we “must be moral.” Rather, we are a moral species because we are capable of assuming responsibility for our own understanding and actions – to a degree that is like no other species. To be accountable for the highest of which we are capable is our challenge.

As in the case of Job, a taproot is cut here, but it is the taproot of materialism and of defining success merely in terms of material things. Critical Idealism’s far broader understanding of reason enables us to be hopeful in the midst of the greatest disappointments, exploitation, oppression, and persecution. This is no pie-in-the-sky optimism that says that its efforts are going to

lead, one day, to material success for ourselves and/or for all. It is the optimism that votes for humanity's *universal* (present in every one of us without exception), inalienable, and indelible capacities to change the world on the basis of insight into "things unseen." It is an optimism based upon human dignity!

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