Idealism and Realism

Spanish artist Pablo Picasso was speaking with an American soldier in Paris when the GI expressed the view that modern painting was inferior because it was not realistic enough. Picasso let the remark pass, but when the soldier later showed him a photo of his girlfriend, the artist exclaimed, “My! Is she really that small?”

One of the most important human distinctions we can draw is between idealists and realists. Idealists believe that our thought and conduct should be shaped above all by ideals, our conception of how things would be at their best. According to idealists, models of excellence, ultimate goals, and worthy aims are the stars by which we should steer. A realist, by contrast, holds that practical considerations are paramount and that we should focus less on how things ought to be than on what we can reasonably hope to achieve in daily practice. An extreme form of realism is cynicism, the view that distrust is the only reasonable attitude toward the integrity and lofty professed motives of others.

An idealist might assert that academic radiology departments and schools of medicine should pursue their missions of education, research, professional and community service, and patient care with balanced vigor, encouraging faculty members to allocate their time and effort accordingly. A realist might respond that although such sentiments are laudable, in point of fact it is patient care that pays the bills, including the faculty members’ salaries, arguing instead that faculty members should focus their attention on those clinical service lines with the most favorable revenue profiles. Realists would accuse idealists of operating with their heads in the clouds, whereas idealists would say that realists are eroding excellence by allowing practice to descend to the lowest common denominator.

The tug of war in ethics and politics between idealism and realism has a long history. Aristotle (384-322 BC), though in some ways more realistic than his teacher Plato, represents one of the great idealists. Aristotle thought that the community—whether a radiology department, a hospital, or a city—should be founded on friendship and trust. Each such organization should be conceived as a partnership for the common good. Communities can be good only if they are populated by good people, and it is very difficult to raise and educate good people except in good communities. Aristotle believed that we share common interests and that it is by working together to bring out the best in one another that we can each lead the fullest and best possible lives [1].

Aristotle, in short, thought that human beings are perfectible creatures. This does not mean that any one of us could ever achieve absolute perfection. It does mean, however, that each of us has the potential to become better than we are, to realize more and more fully our natural excellences. Ethically speaking, each of us can become more courageous, more self-disciplined, and more generous. Intellectually, each of us can become more discerning, more imaginative, and wiser. Likewise, our families, workplaces, and communities can become more challenging and nurturing environments that help us perform closer to our full potential. In charting our courses in life, we are better off shooting for the stars. Even if we fall short, we will become far better people than we would have been had we started with subterranean aspirations.

On the end of the idealism-realism spectrum opposite Aristotle is Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Author of The Prince [2], one of the best-known examples of ethical and political realism in world literature, Machiavelli argued that communities are founded not on trust born of shared purposes but on fear and the threat of coercion. Machiavelli did not believe that we are political animals whose happiness depends on the cultivation of genuine friendships and the common pursuit of excellence. Whereas Aristotle began his philosophy with the judgment “All human beings naturally seek to know,” Machiavelli judged the vast majority of people “ungrateful, disloyal, insincere, deceitful, timid of danger, and avid of profit.” Human beings are not trusting and loyal, but “scoundrels” who will betray one another “whenever it serves their advantage to do so.”

Aristotle thought that each of us should aim higher and thereby rise as close as possible to the full range and measure of excellence of which we are capable. When possible, we should assume the best of others, for in so doing, we help them become the people they are meant to be. By contrast, Machiavelli counseled leaders to aim lower. To aim high is not only to consign oneself to repeated disappointment but also to guarantee perpetual failure. Only by expecting the worst from others can we maximize our probability of success. The best system of government, whether of departments or cities, is one founded on fear, in which the threat of punish-
ment keeps people in line with the leader’s wishes. Aristotle thought that leaders should aim to bring out the best in others, whereas Machiavelli thought that leaders’ principal aim is simply to remain in power.

To understand the wide chasm separating Aristotle’s and Machiavelli’s views of good government, we must understand their different views of good character. Aristotle argued that things were good and bad in themselves. For example, acts that spring from a generous disposition are good, because generosity is one of the patterns of conduct that promote the flourishing of human beings, both benefactors and beneficiaries. Generous people are able to part with their money, and in fact want to share it with others, precisely because they recognize more important ends in life than wealth. To cling above all to wealth is to reveal a skewed sense of priorities, a disordered soul. By contrast, Machiavelli thought that there is no such thing as good or bad apart from our desires, and good is simply the word we use to describe what we want. When Aristotle looked at human beings, he saw great potential for good. When Machiavelli made the same inspection, he saw would-be tyrants.

Machiavelli took goodness out of the equation for evaluating leaders. In his view, it does not matter whether a ruler is morally good or bad. It does not even matter whether rules and laws are good or bad. All that matters is that leaders have sufficient power, actual coercive force and the threat of force, to make people do as they say. “If everything is considered carefully,” Machiavelli wrote, “it will be found that something that looks like virtue, if followed, would be the prince’s ruin; and something else, which looks like vice, if followed, will bring him security and well-being.” He redefined virtue, so that the virtuous leader is not the one who deserves to rule by virtue of superior moral character but rather the one who is capable of doing whatever is necessary to sustain rule, including evil acts.

The history of the 20th century was marked by both idealists and realists. Among the idealists we would count Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), who never held political office yet cast off the fetters of colonialism and founded the largest democracy on the face of the earth, India, through entirely nonviolent means. Another idealist was Martin Luther King, Jr (1929-1968), who also eschewed both violence and politics yet engineered one of the greatest social transformations in the history of American life. Both Gandhi and King were repeatedly told that they were too idealistic. King’s famous “Letter From Birmingham Jail” [3] was drafted in response to a letter from 8 Alabama clergymen urging him to abandon his “unwise and untimely” demonstrations and adopt a more moderate and realistic approach. King responded with a refusal to scale back his pursuit of brotherhood and justice, famously arguing that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Among the most notorious of 20th-century realists was Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin (1878-1953). Many of Stalin’s most famous sayings sound as though they had been uttered by Machiavelli, evincing a complete lack of respect for human dignity and a brutal realpolitik grounded in the view that politics is about nothing more than acquiring and sustaining power. For example: “The pope? How many divisions has he got?” “Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach”; and “The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of a million is a statistic.” Stalin’s approach to political dissidents was equally pragmatic in the worst sense of the term: “Death solves all problems—no man, no problem” [4].

To Stalin, men such as Gandhi and King would have seemed mad prophets, puny ideologues to be locked away in a gulag and quietly erased from the pages of history.

What are we to make of the tension between idealism and realism? It is undeniable that people do not always live up to our expectations. In fact, we do not always live up to our own expectations. Are we to conclude that insulating ourselves against all disappointment—expecting nothing—is the only reasonable strategy? Is it truly more profitable to think the worst of people?

Before we cast our lot with the realists, we should pause to recall that people sometimes rise above our expectations. In my own experience, one of the greatest gifts we can share with others is the trust that they are capable of more than they think. Reflecting back over our own lives, how important was it that people sometimes believed in us more than we believed in ourselves? When we expect the best of others, we help them become the people they are meant to be. When people claim that hospitals have little interest in supporting the academic missions on which the future of radiology hinges, we should remind them that deep down inside, hospital administrators want to do the right thing. Our job is to educate them, to help them better understand the right thing.

One of the most enduring portraits of an idealist is found in perhaps the greatest work of fiction ever composed, Don Quixote, by Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) [5]. Don Quixote is the quintessential idealist, forever attempting to
apply his simple notions of chivalry and knightly virtue to a world in which others see far greater moral complexity and much baser motives. For example, when Don Quixote encounters a band of galley slaves being mistreated by their guards, he immediately accepts their protestations of innocence and frees them from their captors. Once released, they turn on their liberator, ridiculing his summons that they join him in honoring his lady Dulcinea and pelting him with stones. What distinguishes Don Quixote among idealists is not the magnitude of his natural gifts, which are paltry, but his utter refusal to give in to despair or cynicism and his dogged determination to continue seeking out possibilities for nobility in the world.

The word *quixotic* has become synonymous with excessive idealism. The phrase “tilting at windmills” is derived from Don Quixote’s habit of charging, lance in hand, at buildings he has mistaken for ferocious giants. Yet is he insane? He sees goatherds, whom others would dismiss for their ignorance and poverty, as fellow human beings. His trusty sidekick, Sancho Panza, the embodiment of realism, initially regards him as hopelessly bereft of sense. Where Don Quixote sees a world striving to realize poetry and goodness, Sancho sees clearly its shortcomings and compromises. Eventually, however, Sancho learns to share his master’s worldview, summoning him on his deathbed to give up the nonsense of dying when there are so many deeds of valor still to be done. Even the worldly wise Sancho realizes his master’s genius, that “good actions ennable us, and we are the sons of our deeds.” What sort of offspring are we seeking to create? Don Quixote is not only an idealist but an apostle of idealism, and this is not such a bad calling in life.

**REFERENCES**


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