

BETWEEN TRUTH AND ILLUSION

A Dualistic Philosophy

John O'Loughlin



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CDM Philosophy

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

PART ONE: ESSAYS ON A DUALISTIC PHILOSOPHY

The Interdependence of Opposites

The Conflict of Opposites

The Necessary Illusion

The Legitimacy of Stupidity

More Positive than Negative

Both Positive and Negative

Neither Angel nor Demon

No Good without Evil

Only Part Wise

Perfect or Imperfect

Perfect and Imperfect

A Necessary Doubt

No Sham Wisdom

Only Absurd Sometimes

Not Entirely Sane

Not Entirely Insane

No Happiness without Sadness

Nothing Superfluous

Between Day and Night

Plutarch's Mistake

PART TWO: LESSONS ON A DUALISTIC PHILOSOPHY

Wisdom and Folly

Truth and Illusion

Good and Evil

Happiness and Sadness

Profundity and Superficiality

Certainty and Doubt

Reasonableness and Unreasonableness
Cleverness and Stupidity
Success and Failure
Pleasure and Pain
Love and Hate
Virtue and Vice
Strength and Weakness
Interest and Disinterest

PART THREE: DIALOGUE ON A DUALISTIC PHILOSOPHY

A Dualistic Integrity

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

INTRODUCTION

Between Truth and Illusion signifies an attempt by me to return to basics in philosophy and understand the connections and indeed interrelations of antitheses, polarities, opposites, and other such neat philosophical categories in relation to the relativity of everyday life. It is not an express attempt to expound the Truth ... in respect of metaphysical knowledge ... but, rather, a modest undertaking on my part to comprehend the paradoxes of the world in which we happen to live, and seek to unveil some of the illusions and superstitions which make the pursuit of Truth such a difficult, not to say protracted, task. Hopefully the result of this undertaking is a franker and maturer approach to those very paradoxes which were the inspiration for this work and which led to some of its most striking contentions.

If *Between Truth and Illusion* cannot, by dint of its paradoxical nature, lay claims to being *the* Truth, it can at least be seen as the basis for a more realistic appraisal of the terms by which the pursuit of Truth is made possible.

John O'Loughlin, London 1977 (Revised 2022)

PART ONE

ESSAYS ON A DUALISTIC PHILOSOPHY

The Interdependence of Opposites:

Work and play, love and hate, day and night, up and down, north and south, big and small, high and low, pleasure and pain, man and woman, sun and moon, yes and no, right and wrong, good and evil, health and sickness, in and out, hard and soft, hot and cold, old and new, war and peace, quick and slow, young and old, life and death, awake and asleep, rich and poor, tragic and comic, for and against, truth and illusion, etc.

The duality of life would seem to be an indisputable fact, a condition not permitting any serious refutation. For what happens when we isolate the word 'big', say, from the existence of its antithesis, 'small'? – Simply that the word in question ceases to be meaningful. By itself and totally isolated from the word 'small', our adjective is reduced to a sound, the simple basis of a new word. We could speak of a *big* bird, a *big* house, or a *big* garden but, not knowing what 'big' meant, we would be none the wiser.

Thus we can see how absolutely interdependent the words 'big' and 'small' really are, how they can only serve a useful function when used in a mutual relationship. Once the polarities have been established, however, it is then possible to conclude a bird 'big' in relation to a speck of dust but 'small' in relation to a man; 'small' in relation to a house but 'big' in relation to a moth, and so on.

It should therefore follow that unless we accept the dualities of life as being interrelated, part of a larger whole, and even, in a limited sense, the key to the metaphysical nature of reality, we shall be perpetually deluding ourselves. In other words, without hate there can be no love, without death no life, without sadness no happiness, without pain no pleasure, without evil no good, without illusion no truth, without realism no naturalism, and without materialism no idealism.

Thus it can be assumed that a society which strives to remove what it regards as a detrimental or undesirable antithesis to a given ideal condition or concept ... is inevitably letting itself in for a lot of futile and pointless labour. A tolerable world isn't a place where things don't go wrong or where conditions are always pleasant, people happy, work agreeable, and

health unimpaired; for that, believe it or not, would soon prove to be quite an intolerable one. But in order that people *may* experience pleasant conditions, a degree of happiness, a sense of purpose, and the joys of good health, a tolerable world will also include correlative experience of unpleasant conditions, sadness, absurdity, and sickness – to name but a handful of possibilities.

Hence when a person is feeling sad, he ought to face-up to the reality of his situation by accepting its rightful place and thereby bearing with it as a sort of passport to the possibility of subsequent happiness. Indeed, if he is something of a philosopher, and can sufficiently detach himself from his immediate sadness for a few seconds, he may even think along such lines as: 'Without this moment or hour of sadness, what happiness could I possibly expect today?' In doing so, he will be acknowledging the validity of what might popularly be described as a means to a desirable end.

Naturally, I don't mean to imply that people *should* think like this when inflicted with depressing circumstances, but simply that they should learn to acquiesce in their various uncongenial moods without vainly endeavouring to fight shy of them. For the trickery too often advocated by people who foolishly strive to rid themselves of an unhappy mood, as though secretly afraid to 'pay their dues', strikes me as little more than a species of intellectual perversion. If we were really supposed to lead one-sided lives, life would have been considerably different to begin with, and it is doubtful that man would have conceived of the dual concepts of Heaven and Hell, concepts which, on a more concrete level, are clearly relative to life on this earth, and to a life, moreover, which prohibits man from ever dedicating himself to the one at the total exclusion of the other!

Therefore it can be deduced from the aforementioned contentions that man's fundamental nature is typified by its capacity for experiencing seemingly contradictory phenomena, viz. happiness and sadness, good and evil, truth and illusion, which, if he is to do justice to both himself and his kind, should be accepted and cultivated according to his individual or innate disposition.

An author, for example, who may well be 'great' by dint of the fact that he accepts himself as a whole man, should reconcile himself to the logical contradictions, cynical statements, brash generalizations, callous

accusations, superficial appreciations, cultivated vanities, dogmatic assertions, etc., which frequently appear in his writings (and constitute manifestations of his negative, or evil, side), in order to safeguard his integrity as both a man *and* a writer.

The Conflict of Opposites

My philosophy is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but a subtle combination of both optimism and pessimism. Perhaps this respect for duality, this acceptance of polarity, entitles it to be regarded as a metaphysics drawn primarily from life itself rather than imposed upon it by the whims or perversions of the human mind. Of course, its author is aware that he may think optimistically whilst experiencing a good mood and pessimistically whilst in the grip of a bad mood. But these separate inclinations are well suited to the purposes of this philosophy.

For example, if he should one moment secretly pronounce, after the fashion of Schopenhauer, that life is inherently bad because there is too much suffering and not enough pleasure in it, he will subsequently reflect, when the time and mood are propitious, that his previous oracular pronouncement was largely attributable to the persistence of a bad mood and/or uncongenial circumstances; that life was only 'bad' because he had been in a negative frame-of-mind, had set up a chain of negative reactions and accordingly dismissed optimism in the name of suffering, thereby passing judgement in a thoroughly one-sided manner.

If, however, he should sometime pronounce, after the fashion of Gide, that life is inherently good and bubbles over with joy, pleasure, intelligence, etc., he will later reflect, doubtless when the time and mood have shifted down a gear or two, that his previous oracular pronouncement was largely attributable to the prevalence of a good mood and/or congenial circumstances; that life was only 'good' because he had been in a positive frame-of-mind, had set up a chain of positive reactions and accordingly dismissed pessimism or, rather, affirmed optimism in the name of well-being, thereby passing judgement in a no-less thoroughly one-sided manner.

The claim that life is therefore both good *and* bad, according to the context of the occasion or circumstances of the individual, is doubtless a proposition that most fair-minded people would be prepared to accept. But to proclaim, like some philosophers, that life is either good or bad is surely to misrepresent or slander it in such a way as to render oneself contemptible to the more realistic spirits of this world! Let it be hoped that we dualists can see life on fairer terms than they did.

The Necessary Illusion

Just as one must know one's truths if they are to remain valid as truths, so one must remain ignorant of one's illusions if they are to remain illusions.

Whenever the spell of an illusion is broken one automatically becomes disillusioned, which is to say somewhat saddened by the realization that what one formerly took to be the truth wasn't really true at all but, rather, a misconception on one's part. Thus, by way of compensation, the shattered illusion then becomes a kind of negative truth, in that one can now see through it and thereby establish a truer opinion on the subject. So, in a sense, one's illusions are all sham truths until one becomes disillusioned.

But this realization, this process of creeping disillusionment, doesn't automatically mean that one is steadily getting closer to absolute truth, that one is 'cutting down' on one's illusions and consequently converting the knowledge of their fallacies into relative truth while simultaneously safeguarding one's inherent or acquired grasp of truth. For as everything exists in polarity, so must the newly acquired disillusionment subsequently make way for other illusions which replace those one possessed at the time of becoming disillusioned with a particular illusion, in order to maintain the balance of opposites.

A philosopher who categorically asserts his will to truth at any price, and thereupon declares himself to be the sworn enemy of illusion, is, unwittingly, the victim of an illusion which presupposes that truth can be acquired without a constant metaphysical price – namely of simultaneously maintaining and acquiescing in illusions which must, of necessity, enter

into his work from time to time, thereby preventing the ultimate realization of his notably idealistic ambitions.

The Legitimacy of Stupidity

As each person retains his capacity for truth *and* illusion throughout life, so, likewise, does each person retain his capacity for cleverness and stupidity. That this is a just condition hardly needs proving; for were he not subject to the experience of both tendencies, he would have little or no prospect of maintaining either. Hence his illusion guarantees the continual existence of his truth, his stupidity the continual existence of his cleverness.

To lament, however, over the realization that even one's favourite philosophers, novelists, and poets display periodic manifestations of illusion or stupidity is, willy-nilly, to display one's own illusion or stupidity, since these authors must also be subject to the metaphysical coercion of the human spirit and therefore be equally incapable of ultimately transcending its dualism. Were a few of them to remain wholly consistent with one's own mode of thinking, were even one of them to do so, there would surely be reasonable grounds for assuming that the impossible had come to pass, that one had come face-to-face with one's double and somehow acquired exactly the same truths and illusions as had previously been recorded by a man who hadn't so much as even suspected one's existence.

Consequently, it will be no great surprise or hardship to an enlightened reader when he eventually comes to realize that his attitude towards each of his 'favourite' writers is bound to be ambivalent, to entail both agreement and disagreement, approval and disapproval, faith and scepticism. For as there has never been two people exactly alike in the world, so it is inevitable that one man's meat will continue to be another man's poison.

Even the greatest writers must, of necessity, be subject to the continuous prevalence of antithetical values, if they are to live as men and not degenerate into lopsided monsters! The pernicious idea of someone's being 'all too human' simply because he makes mistakes, acts stupidly, suffers from ignorance, fosters certain misleading arguments, etc., is clearly founded upon a superficial grasp of human reality (as though the person

accusing another of being 'all too human' on account of such failings wasn't, in reality, 'all too human' himself for failing to detect their ultimate legitimacy!). But being 'all too human' is really an indication of human perfection rather than of imperfection. For a man who never made mistakes, never committed an illusion or absurdity to paper, would be highly imperfect – a sort of computerized robot, and therefore no man at all!

More Positivity than Negativity

If illusions are only illusions insofar as man is basically unaware of their illusory nature, can it not be deduced from this that his real evil, stupidity, illogicality, injustice, etc., only come to the fore when he is basically unaware of the fact, not when he wills it? In other words, because the life-force is essentially positive, because everything arises in nature to fulfil itself, is not man's deepest inclination likewise to seek the positive rather than the negative, to aspire towards his individual truth, goodness, cleverness, profundity, logic, justice, etc. as an *inherent* inclination rather than towards their opposites which, being negative, are things that he is fundamentally unconscious of, i.e. in the sense that one is unconscious of an illusion until one becomes disillusioned with it?

Men aspire towards truth while still besotted with illusions, towards goodness while still fostered on evil, towards social order while still subject to the chaos of their individual lives. They often think they are doing the right thing when it subsequently transpires to being wrong; they often consider themselves to be acting justly when, to those upon whom they have acted, the consequences are manifestly unjust; they often imagine themselves to be doing good when, to those who are the recipients of their goodness, the main consequences are evil. It is only out of ignorance that they act wrongly at all, but it is a necessary ignorance which ultimately transpires to being justified, a fact which may well explain why the dying Christ gave utterance to the words: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do', and why Nietzsche asserted: 'Man always acts rightly'.

Thus man is largely ignorant of his real evil, stupid, illogical, and superficial tendencies because his innate positivity generally leads him to

treat every action as a good, no matter what its nature. He doesn't attack others, whether verbally or physically, simply for the pleasure of doing so but primarily because he feels *justified* in doing so, because, by a quirk of fate, context, experience, or life-history, he feels that to be the right thing to do under the prevailing circumstances.

From the viewpoint of the people he has attacked, however, his actions are almost certain to be condemned as evil. And for the very sound reason that whenever someone acts cruelly to us it offends our prevailing sense of goodness, causes us to feel outraged, engenders negative feelings, and is automatically translated into an evil act. Because it offends us we recognize it as an evil action, instinctively regard its perpetrator in a negative light, and straightaway succumb to a misconception, viz. that the aggressor is inevitably in the wrong. But even if it may appear so from our point of view, this is insufficient to make it so from his and, consequently, each side acting according to their lights, the antagonism continues.

If, therefore, man aspires towards goodness without ever becoming wholly good, whatever he does from ignorance or spite, wounded vanity or a sense of outraged innocence, the warrior impulse or self-defence, which can be interpreted as evil, can never make him wholly bad. And the same may be held true of all the other polar attributes as well. He will aspire to acquiring nothing but the truth without ever freeing himself from illusions. He will endeavour to boast of his cleverness without ever managing to completely rid himself of stupidity. But let us not add to that stupidity by bewailing the existence of these indispensable antitheses!

Both Positive and Negative

In speaking of antitheses we almost invariably put the positive attribute first and the negative one second, as the following short list should serve to confirm: good and bad, truth and illusion, pleasure and pain, happiness and sadness, life and death, light and dark, love and hate, day and night, heaven and hell, man and woman, boy and girl, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, high and low, yes and no, etc. To say that man's nature is good would hardly constitute the truth; for in order to have any goodness at all he must have sufficient evil from which to create it, he must have one tendency

balanced by another.

Granted that man is neither good nor evil but both good *and* evil (which should not be confounded with a combination of each), one can nevertheless assert that the positivity of goodness generally leads him to aspire towards the Good rather than towards its opposite which, being negative, can only take second place, as it were, to the 'leading string'.

Thus, as an inherently positive phenomenon, life is geared towards goodness, but to a goodness which can only be maintained with the aid of evil.

Yes, Gide was right to contend that man was born for happiness, in that man's strongest predilection is to aspire towards the positivity of happiness rather than towards the negativity of sadness. Admittedly, this happiness ultimately depends upon the intermittent prevalence of sadness. But sadness can never become the 'leading string', or man's principal objective.

For the essential positivity of our being does not induce us to pine for sadness when we are happy but, on the contrary, to immerse ourselves in happiness as if it were a natural condition, as if we had found our spiritual home. And this same positivity eventually goads us out of our sadness by causing us to pine for happiness.

Now according to Schopenhauer – who is virtually antithetical to Gide – happiness is merely the absence of pain and thus a negative thing, whereas pain itself he saw as very positive, a thing upon which life mostly depends.

To follow Schopenhauer's reasoning here isn't particularly easy, but it should be fairly apparent to most people that he was somewhat mistaken.

For as the accepted antithesis to pleasure, not happiness, pain is really anything but a positive thing, since we aren't driven by our essential being to pain but to pleasure, so pleasure must be the ...