Preview of: **A Trinity for Living**, by Jim Michie

This is an essay on existential observations in my life that have led to the formulation of three guiding principles for interaction with other individuals and the society in which we all live, for setting the ethical framework within which we live both as social animals and alone, and for providing the direction that keeps us focused on the ultimate goal in life—fulfillment of potential.

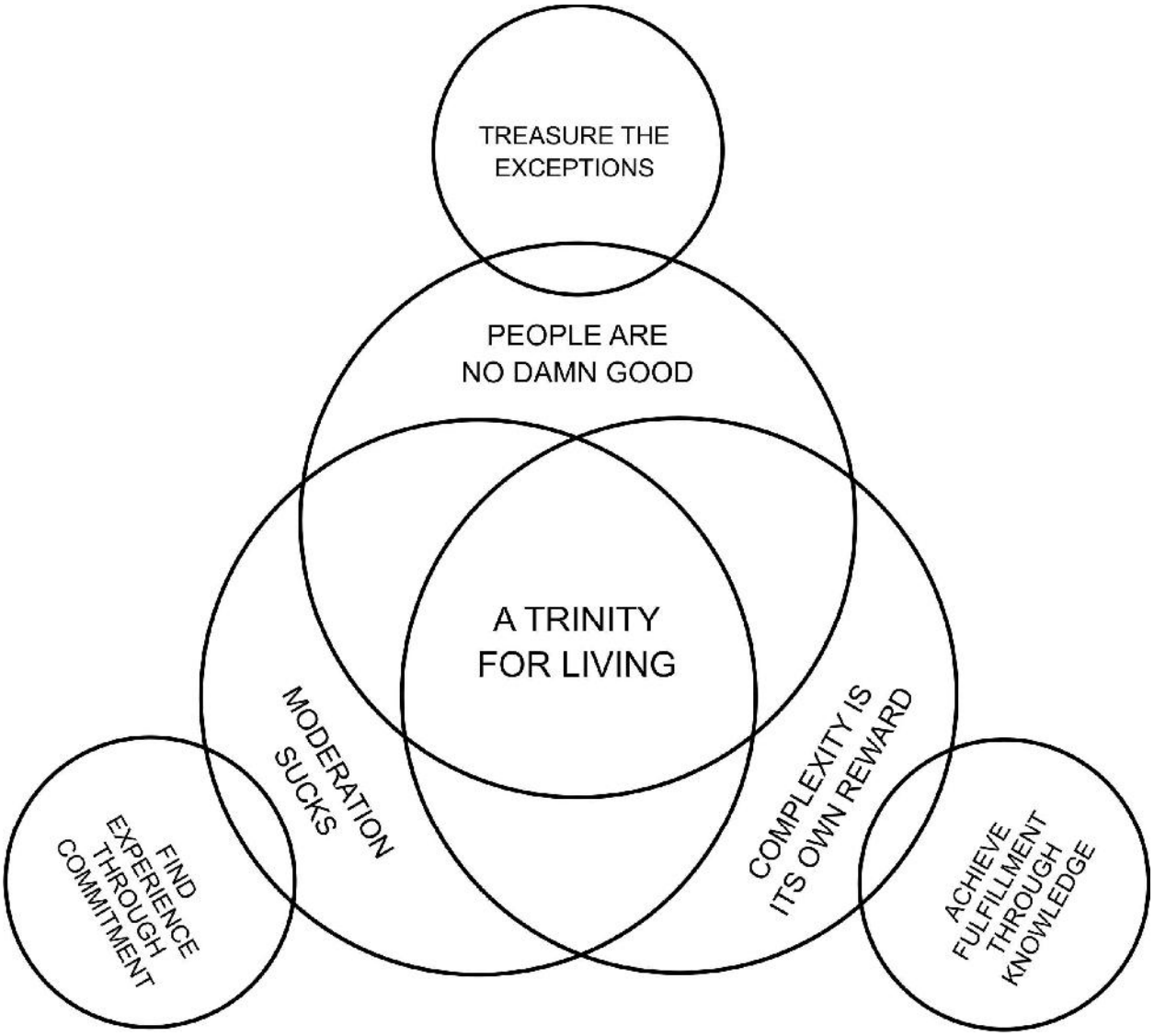
Having spent my life in constant contact with technical jargon, marketing catch-phrases, and more acronyms than any human could ever remember, I have naturally gravitated to brief and catchy phrases for the three principles. They are: people are no damn good, moderation sucks, and complexity is its own reward. The first two are moderately humorous but straightforward statements. The third statement is enigmatic rather than straightforward and totally devoid of even a humorous hint. There is absolutely no significance to the similarities and differences of these phrases other than that each of them is somewhat mnemonic in nature.

Once these guidelines were postulated and their brief catch phrases devised, I began to formalize some of the corollaries inherent in the principles. Actually it was more that they sprang forth on their own like weed seeds in the fallow field of philosophy.

This field has, for some four thousand years, resembled an enormous cow pasture filled with a few philosopher bulls strutting through and servicing an ever-changing group of societal cows. An immediate conclusion one might draw is that this field would be lush and verdant with the wisdom dropped frequently and randomly by such bold and imposing bulls, but alas, the field has only the occasional daffodil. For me, the sage droppings of philosophy have proven to be little more than bullshit.

A lifetime of producing charts and graphs in an effort to distort esoteric study conclusions has led me to reduce the basic three principles to a Venn diagram. It is simple in concept, as you would expect, showing little more than a roughly equal relationship between the principles. I then complicated the basic diagram by adding the immediate corollaries and overlap relationships of the principles.

Having set the goals of this essay, I will proceed to further confuse you with the details. Unlike Mr. Thoreau, who thought our life was "frittered away by detail," I feel that detail is where it's at. Or perhaps, the Devil is in the details.



1st Principle - People Are No Damn Good

What are your expectations of the people with which you have casual day-to-day interactions, not people you know, but people like store clerks, delivery persons, wrong numbers, others in the movie ticket line, and the people at the next table in the restaurant? Do you expect them to treat you with courtesy, the forgotten concept of current society? Do you expect them to interact with you the way they would want you to interact with them? Well . . . you might, if your basic personality includes eternal optimism or you are firmly wedded to Socratic ideals.

However, the existentialist knows that the important question is, "what has been your experience with these people?" Be honest with yourself here, and think about the bulk of your experiences. Some of these people, mostly those who must interact with others as part of their livelihood, have been taught or have learned on their own to show careful neutrality in their

dealings with others. This usually carries over to deportment in public and is a reasonable, if not ideal, approach to dealing with living in a less-than-perfect society. Eugene O'Neil would have you see these people as wearing their "social interaction" masks whenever they are in contact with the generally unknown public, which is a perfectly sane approach for social animals.

Man seems to have distinguished himself from the lower social animals by being the first to have a society where characteristics other than the physical ones might be dominant in interactions with others. It's not a characteristic that is completely integrated into the psyche of all mankind yet, as history is replete with examples of backsliding from Helen of Troy to Mike Tyson. And we have learned how to extend and shade this "might makes right" axiom of the animal world to the societal structure we now call politics, but that's another essay.

Suffice it to say that if you have answered the question at hand with any sort of honesty (your real experiences with people, in case you forgot the question), you must agree that most of the time the people at the next table could care less that you are having dinner with your mother and grandmother when they make choices about their use of loud and boisterous language. The parents at another table, after having to deal with angry demands and persistent crying, are only too glad to have their three children racing through the tables in an effort to relieve their boredom at having to wait eternally for their food—after all, the kids are not bothering them anymore. And bring to mind all those shopping carts blocking the close parking places because the shoppers didn't give a thought to how they were inconveniencing others.

These are just casual or incidental interactions. What about the people you have to work with? Are they any better? What about the assistant who has plenty of time to tell you about his or her past and currently unfolding life but not enough time to accomplish the assigned work? How about the boss who has trouble pouring piss out of a boot but belongs to the right country club and plays a mean round of golf—usually twice a week during working hours for everyone else? What about the four workers just below you on the ladder who will stab you in the back for your job the minute your guard is down?

The business world is full of these people, and if you have any supervisory role where you work, you really see the bad side of everyone. Everybody knows the rules were written for the other employees, or if they are smarter than average, they know that the rules were written for "normal" situations and don't apply to their case—for which they can give you endless illogical argument. And of course, they would like to take off early today, which they are clearly entitled to do because of that day three weeks ago when they stayed late to finish the report that they could have easily finished during the day if they hadn't been screwing-off most of the morning.

Finally, we have the people with whom we interact socially. One would assume that these are carefully chosen people who come closer to your own ideas of intellectual interest, ethics, and social responsibility. Right? Wrong.

Life for most people really allows little opportunity to exercise much selectivity over this group either. If you enjoy the symphony, it is impossible to attend with only those you know and like. If you go to that good restaurant you like for dinner, you have no control over whose sitting at the other tables. Do you give up these social activities you enjoy just because you are not in total control of the people you might have contact with? No, you don't. You have elected, either consciously or unconsciously, to live in and enjoy the advantages of this society, and you must pay the price.

But social contact is not governed just by chance encounter at social events. It is more likely to be governed by someone else within your social circle. It could be your wife's or husband's friends, your parent's friends, your children's friends, your sister's friends, or even your friend's friends. If

you're lucky, some of these people won't be too bad. In fact, if you chose your own friends cautiously, there is a good chance that some of their friends will be unexpected jewels.

Looking at the whole body of people that your life as a social animal brings you into contact with on a continuous basis, you're lucky if you find a couple of jewels in the gravel truck of human interaction. And even though they might have a lively, bright color with a few sparkles on a side or two, they will probably just be rough-cuts.

Now if this sounds unbearably cynical, it's because it is. In fact, it is my opinion (redundant but stated to emphasize that all this essay is my opinion) that Antisthenes, as founder of the cynic school, was the first existential philosopher. Apparently the people who Antisthenes came into contact with in his contemporary Greek society weren't all that different from those we suffer today.

Life has to be lived as it is experienced, not as one would like it to be. Fooling yourself about the great masses of the unenlightened is a waste of time and energy. Actively trying to work within the reality that these people are inescapable demands your dedicated attention if you hope to produce a reasonable return on your effort. To do this, it is first necessary to understand how our society has devolved to the production of so many people who are no damn good, that is, if you think mankind ever had periods of greater enlightenment. I personally think we did, but that greater enlightenment was socially stratified and thereby had its own set of problems.

Well, we didn't get to our latest schuss from grace by chance, and we didn't get there without help. Those indigenous to Western culture have gone through the last forty years having modern philosophers tell us that we have been too focused on other people and need to focus on ourselves. The "Me First" philosophy has been eating away at civility and courteousness like acid rain on marble. Books on the subject are surefire best sellers, television incorporates the theme in most of its pap, and pop music glorifies the me-me-me concept. As a result, whole generations have succumbed to the immediate reward syndrome.

Why have people succumbed to this bullshit approach to life and why do they grasp blindly for immediate reward? There are three probable answers. First, our society hasn't provided them with the cognitive skills to reason that the sum of "me second" is greater in the social setting than the sum of pouncing on all the "me first" opportunities life will present them. Second, they might be smart enough to realize the first point but have allowed the jaws of aggressive behavior to eat away at the fabric of self-restraint carefully built up in human society for the last four or five thousand years—that is, they have been taught that placing themselves second to another person or society is a sign of weakness. Third, they truly believe they are better than anyone else and deserve to be numero uno in every situation—a state they would undoubtedly enjoy all the time if the world wasn't against them.

Are these people salvageable? Sure. Is it likely you can do the salvage work? No. Should you make every effort to do so? Of course. Why bother? Because we are responsible members of a society (I know you are, because if you weren't, you wouldn't have gotten this far into the essay). How do we do it? Education.

Wait a minute. How about stirring up a little redistribution of wealth, or ensuring real equal opportunity, or following the wishes of God through theocratic reform? The answer is again one built on the existential approach. When you look at man's roughly five thousand years of recorded history, you realize that our society has tried all these things more than once, and only one of them has worked with any sustained measure of success—education of the individual.

After making such a positive statement, I feel that it must be qualified to ensure that it not be misinterpreted. Other things have worked for the social body, but only education has worked for

the individual. Early in the development of social interaction, mankind was in great need of rules for governing such interaction. It also happened that we needed answers to natural phenomena that would allay our fears of these things and events. Thus came primitive religions, inextricably bound to social behavior. When these became more codified into real rules, we experienced morals.

These socio-religious morals appear to have been the bedrock of human society until Hammurabi (in the Western world) made the effort to go beyond morals to societal law. In Mesopotamia, with the concept of a societal law in place and the rudiments of mathematics and science taking hold, a few genuine thinkers started creating man's next step up the social interaction ladder—ethics—that is, a rationally deduced set of societal rules rather than the early-man mixture of the religious, the superstitious, and the practical. The Egyptians didn't manage to contribute anything useful to this new concept of ethics, since they were the first big culture to figure out that rule by terror worked quite well, but the Greeks jumped on ethics like a pack of dogs on a cow femur.

By the time Greek culture was flourishing, ethics had been transformed into a stand-alone method for understanding, generating, and modifying the rules of social interaction. Myth, religion, pseudo-science, or even real science were no longer needed by society to ensure that all the various levels of society, together with their interdependencies, functioned smoothly. It was the synchromesh gear design required to harness the latent power of urbanization, a transmission that could step-down the new energy of the social engine through multi-level cultural, ethnic, and economic strata to the lowest common denominator—the citizen. The rubber had finally found the road. How did the Greeks do this? Education. Was their society perfect? Not by a long shot.

Greek society was highly stratified, with only a few percent of the top strata being educated enough to engage in ethical thought. But it was a start, with the only impediment to a society where the citizens were capable of understanding their needs and formulating or changing its social rules to meet those needs being a lack of universal education. As far as I can tell, the Greeks never recognized how close they were to fashioning a perfect society, being caught up in the class blinders that allowed only a privileged few to have an education.

Of course the Greeks blew it. They let themselves be swayed by the likes of Socrates and his gang, rather than listening to the sensible approach of Antisthenes. The Socratic gang took the gung-ho approach that they could somehow divine the ideal set of both personal and social goals without recourse to what was really happening in the world around them. This ultimately made them prey to the much more practical Romans, and so ended our first real chance at the use of personal and social ethics to guide our social interactions rather than the strictures and dogma of the ruling class, which always have multiple axes to grind.

All of this history is interesting (of course the events I chose to emphasize represent my own bias—it's my essay), but why is the situation so much worse now than at other times in recent history? Here in the United States, which is most pertinent to my expected readers, we have so screwed around with the educational system that we have a great percentage of the population who went to school for the government prescribed amount of time and think they got an education—but they didn't. They got some training in skills that used to be in demand by the business world, some ruling class determined social conditioning for a society that doesn't now exist, and an imprinting introduction to the existing social stratification (replete with racial, ethnic, and religious subdivisions) that would govern the rest of their lives. What they didn't get was knowledge. What they didn't learn was how to think.

Without its individuals having the ability to think, our society has been overcome by Future

Shock (thank you, Mr. Toffler, for getting the concept to the public but not for making a ten-page treatise into a book). Technology is forcing change on our society much faster than institutionalized social rules can be changed to accommodate such societal changes. Consequently, most individuals in the current population are educated just enough to know that most of the societal rules they were taught are no longer valid, and they have no ability to define their own guidelines—they have no personal ethics and no ability to acquire them.

How could a person spend all those years in school and not learn how to think? Easy. We succumbed to the political, business, and religious demands that our schools focus on the "basics" these influential groups thought were required to stoke the economic growth furnace. But as you would imagine, these groups knew absolutely nothing about education, only self-interest. Consequently, starting in the late fifties or early sixties, the public school educators in our country were given marching orders to stop wasting time with such subjects as art, music, and literature. More insidiously, they were told to restrict subjects like government, social studies, history, and even science to indoctrination; and not to confuse their rote teachings with seditious concepts like cause and effect. Of course, on a practical level, this approach allows our educational system to be purged of topics distasteful to racial, ethnic, and religious interest groups with a reasonable level of political power.

To most educators who have dedicated their lives to teaching others (they certainly don't do it for the money), this has been a time of overwhelming oppression. Many who would have been teachers were discouraged from pursuing their goals, and as a consequence, too many of the teachers now in the system are themselves ill equipped to teach children how to think—even though it's a lot easier than getting them to absorb rote indoctrination. Children are actually eager to learn if intellectually challenged, but intellectual challenge is a by-product of thinking.

All this soapbox stuff notwithstanding, can individuals really decide what is socially and personally right by their own cognitive efforts? Wouldn't they be constantly conflicted by "social right" and "personal right?" We existential humanists don't believe so for a second. Having accepted the postulate that it is to our benefit to belong to a social group (we haven't chosen to live in isolation, which is still possible in this country), and if we can suppress the seemingly overwhelming lure of instant gratification, simple logic dictates a minimal conflict between group and individual ethics.

So if I claim to be a humanist, why don't I believe that people are inherently good? Because I'm an existential humanist. And while I do not agree that people are inherently good, I don't believe they are inherently bad either. As a humanist I believe that individuals have the potential to be either good or bad (as I will explain later, I would never take the middle of the road on this [or any other] issue.) As an existentialist, reality is inescapable, and my experience has been that most people are no damn good.

Do I like this fact of my life? No! Can I change this fact by the application of some form of idealistic double-think (thank you, Mr. Orwell)? No! Is it possible for us to recover from this socially induced stupor? Being an optimist in regards to the human condition (oh! you couldn't tell?), I would say yes, but probably not in my lifetime.

Consequently, I will continue to engage in social intercourse on the basis that the people I meet will be disappointing, but I will be courteous (at least if unprovoked) and wear my social interaction mask, always on the alert for that rare exception that makes my choice to live in our society worthwhile.