

**The Trap of Either/Or**  
by  
**Daniel E. White June 19, 2023**

“The impotence of man to govern or restrain the emotions, I call bondage, for a man who is under their control is not his own master but is mastered by fortune.” Spinoza, “Of Human Bondage,” in *Ethics*.

One of my favorite authors is Somerset Maugham. He was a skilled storyteller and social critic who was seldom nasty but always pointed when he aimed at pretense or arrogance or unwarranted privilege. My favorite Maugham novel is *The Razor's Edge*, a story about searching.

The literary world considers *Of Human Bondage* his masterpiece. At 684 pages of small print in a paperback, it certainly was his longest novel. It has been over fifty years since I first read it, and I remembered little except the name of the hero, Philip Carey, and the fact that Carey ultimately became a doctor.

I re-read it this spring. My first discovery was in plain sight all along: the origin of his title. It is printed on the back cover. The book is about Philip's journey from impotence to understanding.

At page 490, I found the key, at least for me, to the novel. Philip had endured much in his life. After becoming an orphan at 8, he was raised by an uncle, a distant man who merely tolerated children and his more sympathetic wife. He attended a good school, but he had been born with a club foot, a disfigurement that led the boys to make fun of him in school and Philip to feel inferior to others.

Following school, he had tried several possible endeavors and not succeeded at any, largely because he was indifferent to them all. One of the versions of Philip was as an artist in Paris where he proved to be average in technique and lacking creativity in finished products. Paris, though, was where Philip developed a desire to think deeply about life and share his thoughts with a group of similarly untalented artists who reveled in nightly debates about the meaning of life over wine.

By page 490, he had left Paris. Further indignities in life had occurred. But then came the “aha” moment. Maugham wrote: “Philip had cultivated a certain disdain for idealism. He had always had a passion for life, and the idealism he had come across seemed to him for the most part a cowardly shrinking from it. The idealist withdrew himself because he could not suffer the jostling of the human crowd; he had not the strength to fight and so called the battle vulgar...”

In reaction, “Philip clamored for life as it stood; sordidness, vice, deformity did not offend him...and he rubbed his hands when an instance came before him of meanness, cruelty, selfishness, or lust: that was the real thing.”

Then the “aha.” “He felt vaguely that there was something better than the realism which he had adored; but certainly, it was not the bloodless idealism which stepped aside from life in weakness...” His new view “accepted life in all its vivacity, ugliness and beauty, squalor and heroism; it was realism still; but it was realism carried to some higher pitch, in which facts were

transformed by the more vivid light in which they were seen...It was like a message which it was very important for him to receive, but it was given to him in an unknown tongue, and he could not understand.”

People of a Certain Age, are you like me, some days the idealist who believes that we can create the Age of Aquarius, where “peace will guide the planets, and love will steer the stars.” And then on other days, the realist who sees how successful humans have been in creating ways to destroy each other, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and our planet?

I am, of course, both and more. So, most likely, are you.

In infrequent moments of introspection, I have concluded that I do not like, in most situations, either/or. There are, of course, circumstances where either/or choices are appropriate but not all the time, every time.

I also understand that not every situation can be a both/and, often offered as an alternative to either/or. But why the tendency to create any false dichotomies, when it would seem there are so often more choices?

Philip Carey believed that “there was neither ugliness nor beauty, but only truth; the search after beauty was sentimental.” He moved on to understand that “what looked like truth” was often visible only as one might see a mountain range on a dark and stormy night briefly illuminated by lightning.

That image is appealing. Maugham, through Carey, does not dispute that there exists truth. He does, however, suggest that any one person’s vision of truth might be determined by where one is standing when the lightning of illumination strikes.

Reasons for realism strike our lives in every newspaper or TV news show. So do hopeful signs of people in communities solving problems together collaborating without regard to artificial divisions like race, religious, politics, etc. We can color each day by what we choose to pay attention to.

Philip Carey believes in a “realism carried to some higher pitch.” I like the idea of “dreaming with my feet on the ground.” Neither constitutes an “either/or.”

Spinoza advised us to “govern” our emotions to escape “human bondage.” Discerning when a dichotomy of any sort is real is a start to that governance.

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