

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 4 | Issue 3

Article 7

---

7-1-1987

## Alpha and Beta Virtues and Vices

Richard L. Purtill

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Purtill, Richard L. (1987) "Alpha and Beta Virtues and Vices," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# ALPHA AND BETA VIRTUES AND VICICES

Richard L. Purtill

In this paper I argue that there are pairs of virtues relating to the same areas of human life, each with its characteristic excess and defect. The excess of one member of the pair is usually related to the defect of the other, and the defect of one to the excess of the other. One of these paired virtues is typically seen by our society as "masculine" the other as "feminine." This leads to an undervaluing of one member of each pair and an over-valuing of the other.

In this paper I want to describe and discuss two sets or systems of virtues and their accompanying vices. There are various ways to characterize these sets or systems, and we will explore some of them in due course, but initially I will simply refer to them by letters of the Greek alphabet and call them Alpha and Beta virtues and vices. (No implication is intended that the Alpha set is either more fundamental than or preferable to the Beta set.) "Virtue" is intended in both the familiar moral sense and in the wider sense of an excellence or capacity. "Vice" is used in the Aristotelian sense of an excess or defect in a quality desirable if in due proportion. However the virtues and vices we will arrive at will not always be ones noticed by Aristotle.

## I

Let us begin by looking at a common human situation; the situation where we face a danger, a challenge or solve a problem. The virtue required to face the danger, meet the challenger or the problem in an active way might be called the virtue of *boldness*. However not all dangers, challenges or problems are appropriately faced in an active, aggressive manner. Sometimes what is called for is an ability to compromise, negotiate, accept a partial solution, a virtue which I will call for lack of a better word, the virtue of *peacemaking*. Boldness and peacemaking are by no means opposed: one situation may call for one virtue one for another, and a complex situation may call for both.

To save a child from a burning building may call for boldness, a "do or die" maximum effort. But to settle an embittered strike, with some right on both sides may call not for aggressive action, but for negotiation and compromise. It is useless to try to negotiate with a fire, it is often counterproductive to act



aggressively in a strike situation. Both boldness and peacemaking call for courage in a broad sense; the ability to act as you believe is right despite pressure of one kind or another to act wrongly. But they are very different exercises of courage.

Consider now the excess and defect of boldness and of peacemaking. The excess of boldness is to act more aggressively than the situation calls for, the defect to act less aggressively. But this is not necessarily the same as Aristotle's "rashness" and "cowardice." If a child is threatened by a snarling dog, to shoot the dog may be overaggressive (not just "rash"), to do nothing but call cajolingly, "nice doggy," may be stupid as well as cowardly. An *appropriate* degree of aggressiveness is called for; less is ineffective and more is overkill. The same is true of problem solving; you do not need a mainframe computer to balance your checkbook, but you should not try to solve a complex engineering problem with a dime store pocket calculator.

The excess and defect of peacemaking are rather different: an excess of peacemaking is *over* readiness to compromise, negotiate or accept partial solutions. In a strike with some right on both sides, it is wrong for one side to cave in and make all the concessions, but it is also wrong for one side to obdurately insist on *their* right and ignore the right on the other side. (Note that just as cowardice on one side of a quarrel encourages over-aggressiveness on the other side, so overcompromise on one side of a dispute encourages obduracy on the other side.)

The excess of one virtue often has a superficial resemblance to the defect of another virtue and the defect of one virtue often has a superficial resemblance to the excess of another. Thus overwillingness to compromise may look like a defect of boldness but may in fact be due to misplaced affection or muddled thinking. Over-boldness resembles obduracy, but over-boldness is acting too boldly in a situation calling for aggressiveness, whereas obduracy is refusing to compromise when compromise is appropriate. (A given personality type may of course be prone to both rashness and obduracy, but they are still distinct.)

In my scheme boldness is an "Alpha" virtue, peacemaking a "Beta" virtue. What are some other Alpha and Beta virtues? Consider another basic human situation: love and sexual relationships. The "aggressive" virtue here might be called *ardency* (or ardor), the readiness to arouse and pursue love or sexual feeling. The complementary virtue is *faithfulness*, the ability to sustain and nourish a relationship. The excess of ardency can be simple lust in the case of sexual relationships or an exaggerated ardor in more complex love relationships. The defect of ardency may be simple disinterest or active repugnance to sexual or love relationships. The defect of faithfulness is obviously fickleness; an unwillingness to sustain or nourish a relationship. The excess of faithfulness however is the tendency to attempt to continue or enhance a relationship when it is no longer appropriate; when for example the loved one is completely unwilling or

completely unavailable (e.g., obsession with a deceased lover or a historical or imaginary personage).

An excess of ardor may or may not manifest itself as fickleness: it can sometimes result in obsessive overfaithfulness. Similarly a defect of ardor may lead to easily relinquishing relationships, which looks like fickleness, but it may also lead to “locking in” on one relationship because of convenience or familiarity. Similarly fickleness may simulate over-ardor, because of the fascination of the unfamiliar or look like lack of ardor because the object of desire is easily relinquished.

Before saying in more detail why I want to call ardency as well as boldness an Alpha virtue and faithfulness as well as peacemaking a Beta virtue, let us consider one more pair of virtues. This time let us look to intellectual rather than moral virtues. What might be called the virtue of *rationality* is what we call “listening to reason”: following and accepting good arguments for or against a belief or course of action. A person with this virtue need not be (though they often are) an originator of arguments; the virtue consists in a *respect* for reason; shaping one’s belief and action in accordance with logic and reasoning. By “reasoning” here I mean deductive argument and checkable, veritable, inductive argumentation. Good mathematicians or good scientists will have this virtue in their professional lives: it may or may not carry over into their personal lives.

On the other hand there is a virtue which might be called *wisdom* (or less grandly common sense) which is characteristic of the good judge, the good statesman, the good administrator. This is the ability to make a wise or sensible decisions in conditions where deductive reasoning or the more straightforward kinds of inductive reasoning do not apply.

It is important to realize that wisdom is not a substitute for rationality nor rationality a substitute for wisdom: they operate in different spheres. Rationality deals with what might be called “linear” thinking, wisdom with what might be called “global” thinking (or “holistic” thinking). Some problems—especially mathematical and scientific ones are amenable to linear thinking; other problems, especially social and ethical problems require global thinking. Global thinking is typically multifaceted: it consists of weighing in due proportion a number of interacting factors. Its decisions are rarely categorical or immediately verifiable, but they are not expressible as numerical probabilities either.

The defect of rationality is irrationality: not paying due heed to linear thinking where linear thinking is applicable. The excess of rationality is an abstract overrationality which loses touch with reality. G.K. Chesterton pointed out that overrationality of this kind is often characteristic of the insane, and Bertrand Russell spoke of a sense of reality which protects us from the excesses of logic.

The defect of wisdom or common sense is a failure to weigh all relevant factors in due proportion. One way, but not the only way, to be unwise or foolish in this way consists of being overrational: the excess of rationality may lead to

the defect of wisdom. However, there is an excess with regard to the virtue of wisdom or common sense, which consists of a refusal to simplify for fear of oversimplifying. In trying to consider every relevant factor we “can’t see the wood for the trees” and this often leads to a paralysis of decision. (One kind of scepticism arises from this excess). Thus the vice which is the excess of the virtue of wisdom may lead to the vice which is the defect of the virtue of rationality. As can be seen the relation between excess and defect of complementary virtues can be quite complex.

## II

Let us now consider alpha and beta virtues and vices in general. The first thing to note is that in our society alpha virtues such as boldness, ardency and rationality are generally seen as “masculine”; characteristic of men rather than women, while beta virtues such as peacemaking, faithfulness and wisdom are seen as “feminine”; characteristic of women rather than men.

The second thing to note is that our society by and large overvalues the alpha virtues and undervalues the beta virtues. Boldness, ardency and rationality are rewarded and praised by our society and peacemaking, faithfulness and wisdom are not rewarded and praised and are sometimes even discouraged and dispraised, especially in men.

The third point of interest is that historically Christianity has been more encouraging of and has put more emphasis on the beta virtues rather than the alpha virtues. There are exceptions to this, for example the medieval ideal of chivalry which praised boldness and ardency, and medieval scholasticism which praised rationality. By and large, however, it is the beta virtues which have been preached and praised by Christianity.

All three points are connected. Our society is a sexist one: women are in a disadvantaged position relative to men. Thus virtues which are classified as “feminine” virtues are practically bound to be undervalued. Conversely if the beta virtues are undervalued and women are seen as displaying these virtues then women will be undervalued. There is a vicious circle of underevaluation involved.

Arguably, Christianity has emphasized the beta virtues *because* society undervalues them: the church has tried to correct society’s imbalance by a counteremphasis. However, this has sometimes led to religion being regarded as “feminine,” “only for women,” “not for real men”; the underevaluation of women and of the beta virtues has spilled over to the church as advocate of those virtues.

It is plausible, but by no means certain that women in general find it easier to practice beta virtues and harder to practice alpha virtues while men in general find it easier to practice alpha virtues and harder to practice beta virtues. There is some evidence that biological differences are involved. Aggression and sexual

aggressiveness seem to be related to the presence of male sex hormones, while global thinking seems to be easier for women because of a more efficient connection of the right brain and left brain in women. However, even if these tendencies in men and women are entirely the result of social conditioning, they are thoroughly ingrained in a great many men and women.

One traditionalist reaction to this situation is to see it as a reason for a “division of labor” in the virtues. Let men be bold and women make peace. Let men be ardent and women faithful. Let men be rational and women, wise. For this kind of traditionalist the ideal man is one with alpha virtues and the ideal woman one with beta virtues. The masculine ideal is an alpha ideal, the feminine ideal a beta ideal.

The problem with this traditionalist view is that both men and women face situations where both kinds of virtues are needed. Men need to negotiate and compromise to achieve some of their ends whereas women need to show boldness and initiative to achieve some of their ends. If men do not have the beta virtue of faithfulness, long term relationships will not be possible. Women may need to exhibit ardor to encourage shy or reluctant men. Men need to be wise as well as rational, women to be rational as well as wise.

In practice, a “division of labor” now encourages the *excess* of the virtues praised and valued. Our society is heavily biased in the direction of overaggressiveness, over ardency and overrationality. Women have been encouraged to be overconciliatory, overly faithful (“stand by your man” even if he abuses you) and overly pragmatic and particularist in their thinking. The practical upshot of this is our present sexist society; for those who have the excess of alpha virtues have a considerable advantage over those who have the excess of the beta virtues in any struggle for power.

There have also been bad effects in the Christian churches from their emphasis on the beta virtues. Overconciliatoriness in the face of aggression has often led Christianity to compromise itself by giving in to powerful secular forces such as Nazism. Overemphasis on faithfulness at the expense of ardency has sometimes led to an anti-sex, anti-love bias in Christianity, or at best a “necessary evil” view of sex and love. Overemphasis on “the reasons of the heart” which are often global and non-rationalistic has often led Christianity into an anti-rational, anti-intellectual attitude. Christian preaching has often not made Christians aware of the dangers of the excesses of beta virtues or the defects of alpha virtues.

### III

Now that we have the general idea of alpha and beta virtues clearer, we can look for other virtues which fit into the same general scheme and meet the same pragmatic criteria. It seems to me, however, that the virtues and vices I will

now discuss are less central than those discussed earlier.

A common human situation is that human beings have emotions. Two virtues are relevant to this situation. We often need to control emotion to enable us to take appropriate action; this is the virtue which I will call *self control*. On the other hand we often need to express emotion appropriately, this is the virtue I will call *expressiveness* or emotional expressiveness. (As is often the case, our language seems to lack precise, generally understood terms for the beta virtue.)

Consider the situation where a spouse dies and the needs of the children of the family need to be considered by the surviving spouse. He or she will certainly need self control; if the surviving spouse is overcome by grief the children's needs will not be met. But a complete suppression of grief will be bad for both the surviving spouse and for the children: grief must be appropriately expressed. Traditional societies often have recognized symbolic means of doing this: our society largely lacks such means. Also it is no news that our society sees emotional control as a male virtue ("big boys don't cry") but allows emotional expression as appropriate for women. As usual the alpha virtue is recognized as a virtue. The beta virtue if recognized as a virtue at all is undervalued and seen as "feminine."

The excess of the alpha virtue of self control is of course the overcontrol or complete suppression of felt emotion. It can resemble the defect of the beta virtue which is the inability to express emotion appropriately. The difference is that in the alpha vice one is restraining a tendency to give way to emotion, in the beta vice one is encouraging a tendency to suppress emotion.

Similarly the defect of the alpha virtue, lack of emotional control may resemble the excess of the beta virtue, excessive or inappropriate display of emotion. But in the one case we are failing to suppress a natural tendency, in the other case we are overstimulating a natural tendency. Metaphorically speaking one is like not keeping the lid on a boiling pot, the other is like adding excessive fuel to a fire which was large enough. Outward behavior may be similar, but it is usually clear to us internally whether we are failing to suppress a strong emotion or are instead whipping up that emotion.

Our society's "genderization" of virtues results, as I have said before in an exaggeration of behavior: men are encouraged to be over controlled and under expressive while women are encouraged to be under controlled and over expressive. The remedy as usual is to encourage the beta virtue of expression in men and the alpha virtue of control in women. Stereotypes such as the superstoic male hero must be discouraged and counter-images emphasized. Christian teachers, for example, might point out that although Christ exhibited emotional control during his suffering and death he also expressed emotion freely (weeping for Jerusalem, showing anger during the cleansing of the temple.)

Let us now turn to another pair of virtues and their accompanying vices. The

human situation which is involved is the use of property and possessions. Since behavior with regard to property is less "genderized" than some other behavior the alpha/beta distinction is less clear here, but to some extent *generosity* in giving or loaning property is an alpha virtue, while *conservation*, or thrift—respect for and proper use of property—is a beta virtue. The excess of generosity is *extravagance*, an overly generous use of resources, while the defect of conservation is *wastefulness*, a lack of respect for property. Leaving an excessively large tip is extravagance, letting tools rust or break for lack of proper maintenance is wasteful. The defect of generosity is *meanness*, refusing to share resources and the excess of conservation is *avarice* or greed, excessive desire to gain property. The same person may be both extravagant and wasteful and the same person may be both miserly and avaricious but the vices do not necessarily go together. A gambler may be both avaricious and extravagant, and a person who is mean in sharing his or her resources with others may also be wasteful.

Our society admires generosity in men and somewhat grudgingly admires conservation in women (the generous host, the thrifty wife). As usual the consequence of our over valuation of alpha virtues is that we are unaware of the danger of the excess of the alpha virtues and the defect of beta virtues; our society is both extravagant and wasteful. We are somewhat more alive to the defect of the alpha virtue and the excess of the beta virtue; neither meanness nor avarice are admired. However, it is easy enough to encourage extravagance in men by using a fear of seeming to be mean ("I didn't want to look cheap") and to encourage wastefulness in women by disguising it as thrift ("I know I didn't need it, but it was such a bargain").

Within Christianity there has traditionally been some emphasis on the virtues of conservation and the dangers of extravagance and wastefulness, but such emphasis is often seen now as "puritan" or "old fashioned." Generosity to the poor (and the church) has been emphasized but less often Christ's injunction to "give to these who ask and from those who would borrow turn not away." As Father Ronald Knox pointed out in a sermon, Christ exhibited thrift in commanding that the leftovers be collected after the feeding of the five thousand as well as generosity in the feeding itself.

Where the commercial realm has largely been taken over by men, our images of avarice and meanness will probably be male images (e.g., Scrooge), but we have some stereotypes of female avarice and meanness, for example the "gold digger" type of woman who marries for money or the wealthy wife who is mean in sharing her wealth with her spouse. Both types sometimes use male extravagance as an excuse (if I let him keep/have it he'll only throw it away).

Let us now turn to virtues having to do with the human need to be respected and accepted by those around us; to have a place in society. We may claim a place in society on the ground of achievement or relationships. The desire to do



well in terms of achievement is the alpha virtue of *ambition*, the beta virtue of desire to do well in terms of relationships has as usual no precise name; we will call it *community* (or “belonging”). Overambition leads to *envy*, the vice which makes us desire the downfall of our rivals, even if this does not benefit us, while lack of belonging leads to *jealousy*, an exaggerated insecurity about relationships. Envy and jealousy are distinct vices but often occur in the same personality type. Lack of proper ambition is the defect of aimlessness, excess of belonging leads to the vice of taking relationships for granted. Our society assigns ambition as masculine, belonging as feminine and, as might be expected, overvalues ambition and finds it hard to see envy and jealousy as vices (males are *expected* to be envious of achievement rivals, females are *expected* to be jealous of relationship rivals, (e.g. mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law).

Our society makes it very difficult to have both achievement success and relationship success; it is taken for granted that one must be sacrificed to the other. A generation or so ago men were expected to sacrifice relationship for achievement and women to sacrifice achievement for relationship, now women (and to a lesser extent men) are told that they must choose which to sacrifice (“You can’t expect to have both career and family”).

A less superficial analysis of human needs shows that all human beings, male and female, need both a sense of achievement and some security in relationships. Christianity has been effective in promoting the value of community, good relationships with others, less effective in promoting a proper, nonenvious ambition to do “good work” as well as “good works.”

Closely related to the area of our status in society is our self-image or estimation of self. The alpha virtue in this area is *self-respect*. The beta virtue is *humility*. Self-respect is often confused with its excess; which is *pride* and humility is often confused with its excess, which is *self-denigration*. The defect of self-respect is *self-hatred* and the defect of humility is *vanity*.

Humility is basically a state of self-forgetfulness, of not putting a higher value on your own talents or achievements than you would on the same talents or achievements in another person. Vanity is the exaggeration of one’s own good points, while self-denigration is an exaggeratedly negative view of one’s own good points. Humility is basically realism about oneself; vanity and self-denigration are unrealistic in opposite directions.

Self-respect is basically a state of realistic self-approval; having the same goodwill to ourselves that we try to have towards our neighbor (if we try to love our neighbor as ourselves we must logically love ourselves as we love our neighbor). Pride is an exaggerated self-approval, loving ourselves much more than we love anyone else simply because we are ourselves. The vain person is vain about his or her achievements or talents, the proud person is proud of *himself* or *herself*. The self-hating person has the opposite defect, an exaggeratedly low love of self

or actual detestation of self. It is easy to let rhetorical exaggeration carry us from condemning vanity to praising self-denigration or from condemning pride to praising self-hatred. But the person with genuine self-respect has *due* self-approval, the humble person has *due* self-estimation.

Of course, as we well know, many of us have a strong tendency toward both pride and vanity and a realistic self-love and self-estimation may be very much below the self-love and self-estimation one finds natural. Christianity reminds us that our very existence as well as all of our gifts and talents come from God and there is no reason for us to be puffed up about it.

There are many virtues and vices which I have not considered. For example both gluttony and self-starvation are vices and moderation in eating and drinking is a virtue. But I do not see in these virtues and vices the alpha/beta contrast I discern in the virtues and vices I have already considered. Aside from gluttony however the traditional "seven deadly sins" all make an appearance in our discussions; pride, avarice and envy explicitly under those names; lust as excessive ardour and anger as excessive boldness or aggressiveness. Sloth does not appear in the sense of mere laziness, but in the more fundamental sense of *accidie*, an attitude of not caring about anything, it is probably related to emotional overcontrol or underexpression.

I agree that the theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity, are indeed virtues and may to some extent have an excess/defect structure. The traditional excess and defect of Faith are credulity and over scepticism and of Hope presumption and despair. However Charity may not have an excess; as one saint said "The measure of loving God is to love God without measure." And again I find no alpha/beta structure in these virtues.

The fourteen virtues which I have considered in this paper are alike in having what I call the alpha/beta structure; in each of seven areas we found a *pair* of *complementary* virtues each with its own excess and defect. Our society and many others have "genderized" these pairs, assigning one as masculine, the other as feminine. Our contemporary society has largely over-rewarded and over-estimated the alpha virtue in each set, underestimating the dangers of the excess of the alpha virtues and the defect of the beta virtues.

It seems to me that pointing out this double structure in virtues having to do with many basic areas of human life is valuable both theoretically and practically: it helps to clear up confusions in ethical discussion and helps us to guide our own choices with regard to the areas of human action we have discussed.

Before concluding this paper let me consider some possible objections to my thesis. First, it might be argued that the alpha and beta virtues in each area are the same virtue considered in different ways. This could just be a terminological quibble, if it is granted that each of seven virtues has two distinct aspects. But if the two distinct aspects are denied then it seems to me that such a "unified

virtue” theory would fail to do justice to important distinctions. For instance ardor is not the same as faithfulness or ambition the same as community and we must take both into account.

Another way of questioning the alpha/beta structure would be to challenge the assertion that either alpha or beta virtues *are* virtues. For example one sort of religious ethicist might find it shocking to find boldness, ardor, ambition, etc. described as *virtues*, while one sort of humanistic ethicist might reject the idea that humility and faithfulness are virtues. But I think the motivation for such objections would generally be a confusion of a virtue with its excess or defect, e.g. humility with self-denigration or ambition with overambition. Surely it is unreasonable to deny that an honest self appraisal or a desire to accomplish some aims are virtues.

The final objection might be that the theory is *empty* because it continually has to make use of such ideas as a proper amount of ambition, self-love, etc. It might be claimed that unless we are given a rule to determine how much is a *proper* amount the theory is vacuous (a similar criticism is often made of Aristotle’s theory of the golden mean).

However I would reply that this confuses the kind of reasoning appropriate to ethics with the kind of reasoning appropriate to mathematics. In the nature of the case there can be no algorithms in ethics which can be applied to a concrete situation and yield mechanically the correct answer. Ethical judgments involve weighing a number of factors and coming up with a reasonable answer, which can be further tested by discussion and criticism. In other words the type of thinking appropriate to ethics is “global” or “holistic” thinking and the criticism assumes incorrectly that the standards of abstract rational thinking can be applied to ethics. In fact, as Aristotle pointed out, in order to do ethics we need a certain amount of experience in dealing with ethical situations and ideally the ethical philosopher should possess and practice the virtue he or she discusses. Moralists need not be saints, but unless they have practiced the virtues they discuss they are like someone who tries to discuss romantic poetry without ever having been in love.

A final word about method: I have not tried to *argue* that alpha and beta virtues exist and are virtues; I have simply described these virtues and assumed that the reader would recognize them as virtues (Aristotle uses very much the same procedure in the *Ethics*). This kind of “moral phenomenology” or “descriptive ethics” is, I would argue, a legitimate part of ethics, and one which has been sadly neglected in recent ethics. Since I am to some extent reopening this area of ethical discussion I have no doubt made, like most pioneers, many blunders. But that the topic is both important and interesting I have no doubt whatever.

If the framework I have sketched in this paper is correct, then the general

outline of a solution to these problems is clear. Each of us individually must cultivate *both* alpha and beta virtues and end *both* alpha and beta vices. This may mean that most men must work a great deal harder on acquiring the virtues of peacemaking, faithfulness, wisdom, and so on, while most women must work a great deal harder at acquiring the virtues of ardency, boldness, rationality, and so on.

Society must be reformed so that both sets of virtues are praised and rewarded. The teaching and preaching of Christianity must return to a more balanced emphasis on the value of alpha as well as beta virtues and the danger of beta as well as alpha vices. Without both alpha and beta virtues we are incomplete human beings. Without both beta and alpha virtues society is dangerously imbalanced: it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that our society is actually insane in this area. Christian churches have been pushed into a dangerously reactive position in this area and have, to some extent, failed both their full tradition and their responsibilities to their people.

What we can do about this situation depends a great deal on our position in life. Parents can certainly do a good deal to inculcate beta as well as alpha virtues in their sons and alpha as well as beta virtues in their daughters. Those with power and influence in society should praise and reward beta as well as alpha virtues and discourage alpha as well as beta vices. Those in the media of news and entertainment can do a good deal to make both kinds of virtue attractive and both kinds of vice unattractive. Preachers and teachers can do a great deal to explore and recommend both sets of virtues.

This paper is a small and fragmentary first step toward such explanation and recommendation. It is no doubt inadequate and incomplete in many respects. But if it leads to further discussion and development of the idea of what I have called alpha and beta virtues it will have begun a process which can be of great benefit to us individually and to our social and religious institutions.