

The Middle Way versus Extremism

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Extremism is a perennial problem in our civilisation. It has constantly impeded our progress by leading to unnecessary wars, conflicts, enmity and hatred. Understanding the middle way between these two extremes helps us to clarify what extremism is and how it arises. Such an understanding can be made part of the education system so that children are taught from an early age to detect extremist tendencies in their own thinking and to control them for their own good and the good of society.

This paper extends the views expressed in my book, *The Promise of Dualism* (Almostic Publications) and other papers on the subject of extremism. It is focused on the following table which shows how the middle way stands between the extremes of too much power and too much belief. After the introduction, the rest of this paper explicates this table's contents in considerable detail – line by line and word by word – in explanatory notes.

Depicting the Middle Way between Two Extremes

	The Will to Power (Nietzsche) ¹	The Will to Understanding (Systematic Dualism) ²	The Will to Belief (William James) ³
Features:	Carnivorous (Wolves)	Human (at its best)	Herbivorous (Sheep)
Motivations:	Seeking immediate fame, power or notoriety ↓	Seeking long-term personal development ↓	Seeking security within 'herd/flock' ↓
Traits:			
Relational	Dominant	Independent	Dependent
Prescriptive	Commanding	Questioning	Unquestioning
Doxastic	Dogmatic	Critical of belief	Blind belief/faith
Reactive	Authoritarian	Authoritative	Credulous
Predictive	Deterministic	Latitudinarian	Fatalistic
Attitudinal	Absolute certainty	Relative certainty	Total conviction
Judgmental	Contempt	Respect	Uncritical
Behavioural	Demeaning ↓	Self-critical ↓	Subservient ↓
Effects:			
Social	Esoteric	Familial	Exclusive
Heuristic	Indoctrination	Teaching	Preaching
Emotive	Hypnotic induction	Rational passions	Mob mania
Dispositional	Them/us discrimination ↓	Tolerance of differences ↓	Indiscriminate love/hatred ↓
Goals:			
Epistemic	Messianic knowledge ↓	Hypothetical knowledge ↓	Common knowledge ↓
Personal	Adulation ↓	Truth ↓	Conformity ↓
Outcomes:	Self-deception	Insight	Delusion

¹ As in his *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and other works. For example, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 'Of Self-Overcoming' (*Von der Selbst-Überwindung*), p. 136: "That is your entire will, you wisest men, it is a will to power." (*Das ist euer ganzer Wille, ihr Weisesten, als ein Wille zur Macht.*)

² 'Systematic dualism' in dualist theory is the dualist view that looks for the middle way in an insightful and practical way. See my book, *The Promise of Dualism* pp. 44-47, and my other writings on dualist theory.

³ Cf. William James (1897), *The Will to Believe*, New York: Dover Publications, 1956, pp. 1-31.

Introducing the Middle Way

The above table shows how the middle way relates to the two extremes of too much self-assertion and too little. We can all go to these extremes in our opinions and in our behaviour. But these tendencies can be recognised and controlled. Understanding how the middle way eschews these extremes helps us to understand how we can stick to that narrow way by recognising these two extreme tendencies within ourselves. Occasionally, it may be necessary to go to extremes to find the middle way. But unless we bear the middle way constantly in mind, it is too easy to lose sight of it altogether. This is why it is important to learn thoroughly about this way and be clear about its superiority to the two other ways of thinking.

The table thus depicts three distinct outlooks or ways of thinking which characterise human nature. We have, on the one hand, the overly strong 'will to power' and, on the other hand, the overly weak 'will to believe', between which the relatively moderate 'will to understanding' hovers uneasily. The former two ways represent relatively primitive and uncivilised aspects of human nature which need to be supplemented and moderated by the middle way. The future progress of our civilisation depends on this moderation, otherwise we will lapse into our warring ways as we have done so often in the past. The primitive and uncivilised aspects of these ways emerge when they are isolated from the middle way and are taken to extremes. All forms of political, religious, and behavioural extremism result from such a loss of the middle way, as is argued below.

This extremist potential persists within us all and we need constantly to guard ourselves against its reassertion and predominance. In so far as there is progress in civilisation, it consists in the middle way being progressively introduced until it forms part of everyone's mindset and ultimately of the political and social fabric. Civilised behaviour requires the middle way to insinuate its way between these intimate extremes which feed on each other. This process has recurred several times in history when humanistic attitudes have come to the fore. Equally, the simplicity and attraction of extreme views has all too often resulted in the loss of the middle way. Until the twentieth century, the appearance of the middle way has been cyclical and impermanent. The twenty-first century ought to see its permanent institution so that it becomes an integral part of the educational system. However, there is little chance of this happening while society deteriorates to the lowest common denominator and allows extremism in all its forms to fester away in the body politic.

Both the left-wing and the right-wing in politics are susceptible to extremism of the will to power and the will to believe. Their organisations in particular are concerned about power over their participants who in their turn succumb to the will to believe in that they submit lamb-like to the dictates of their organisation. This is why both these extremes become authoritarian in their political practice. Fascists and communists were united in their lust for power and in their authoritarian imposition of their beliefs both on their followers and the public when they gained the political power to do so. When the mentality of the middle way predominates, such extreme trends are held in abeyance, and a constant vigilance is required to keep them so.

The Will to Power:

For our personal development, it is more important to gain power over ourselves than over others. Thus, the will to power is an admirable attribute in the hands of artists, writers and other creative people who wish to exploit their creative powers by willing themselves to greater things. In that respect, Nietzsche's book, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, often inspires people to make the best of their talents and abilities. This is the moderate, middle-of-the-road view of the will to power. But taken to extremes, the will to power means power over other people for one individual's ends and purposes or for an anti-social cause, and the middle way may be lost in the process. Business men, politicians, and other persons in positions of authority can misuse their power to the extent of becoming authoritarian, criminal or corrupt in their behaviour. However, in an open, self-regulating society, authority and power are usually compatible with the middle way when they are exercised moderately, rationally, socially, legally and, above all, morally.

When power goes to people's heads they are liable to use intimidation, sex, blackmail, oratory, controversy, mysticism, or other forms of emotional arousal or irrational bamboozlement to gain an advantage over those over whom they wish to wield power.

Terrorists use bombs and weapons to exert power over people and terrify them into sheep-like acquiescence. But they themselves are led like sheep by the persons or doctrines to which they are subject. They uncritically accept the 'truth' meted out to them as if that truth constitutes reality in an absolute and indisputable fashion. In their turn they wilfully impose their beliefs on others by extreme methods. Thus, the prosecution at the trial of the Oklahoma bomber, McVeigh, claimed that "the truck [in which he planted the explosions] was there to impose the will of Timothy McVeigh on the rest of America". Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's classic novel, *Crime and Punishment*, also saw his crime as an embodiment of his "will". However, such a misuse of the will to impose ourselves on others does not preclude the use of the will in an understanding and rational way. Terrorists typically impose their will on people by killing them indiscriminatingly. Their behaviour would be changed radically if they were to adopt the way to understanding instead of the way to power.

The Will to Understanding:

The word 'understanding' means, in this context, thinking about things instead of reacting impulsively and thoughtlessly to events. More exertion is required in understanding things than in following our emotional whims and inclinations. Therefore, the will to understanding requires more sustained and rational effort of will than either the will to power or the will to believe as these usually appeal more to our emotions than to our intellect. The will to understanding involves thinking about things as a whole and inquiring into things instead of accepting them at face value or because past authority says so. It means thinking for oneself instead of letting others do all one's thinking. Humanism throughout the ages has fostered the will to understanding as an ongoing process rather than a fixed attribute. A constant exercise of the will is required because we are not necessarily understanding and sympathetic people by nature or by upbringing. The willingness to adopt this state of mind comes through maturity and self-knowledge. It is primarily a function of our language acquisition which enables us to question others and ourselves to understand better how things are. The way of understanding thus represents the best of what it is to be human.

Because it is not a soft option, the will to understanding is under constant threat from the other two ways. It will remain so until it is a rationally acknowledged part of our culture and is sustained and renewed by unremitting reference to the middle way. Civilisation depends on our cultivating the will to understanding and on our maintaining a culture in which it is encouraged rather than suppressed. If, as a species, we stop understanding things anew for ourselves from one generation to the next, then the further development of civilisation ceases and nothing remains but the celebration of past glories. Understanding things means constantly solving puzzles and satisfying our curiosity about everything around us. We may never get to the bottom of the problems we face but we can find pleasure and interest in our grappling with them. Therefore, as well as encapsulating the humanist outlook, the middle way as depicted above also supports and justifies scientific research and philosophical inquiry.

The Will to Believe:

The will to believe was advocated by William James in his essay of that name. He rightly argued that there would be little to believe in if we always required 'sufficient evidence' before relying on our beliefs. Our ability to do anything at all is impaired since our actions depend on our believing many things implicitly and without having to investigate them ourselves. However, the will to believe is taken to harmful extremes when belief becomes an end in itself and is impervious to criticism, rethought, or revision. We are entitled to our own beliefs but we harm ourselves in holding these beliefs uncritically or with absolute confidence of their inviolability against alternative beliefs. We become slaves to the beliefs instead of using them for self-enlightenment. If we ascribe too much importance to our beliefs, we are liable to defend them to the death. Putting them at arm's length enables us to explore and revisit them to test their real usefulness to ourselves and others.

Any belief can be conceived to be untrue or limited in some way, otherwise it is not a belief but a rigid dogma. No belief can be absolutely true in all conceivable circumstances whatsoever, yet true believers behave as if that were so. Such absolutism is the source of much bigotry, extremism, especially in respect of fundamentalist religion. There is a kind of

insecurity in people that leads them to rely absolutely on such beliefs without further thought on the matter. The humanist view is that we don't deserve or need such security. As T.S. Eliot put it (in the poem, *Little Gidding*): "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." This suggests that death alone brings an end to our exploring.

The will to believe as well as the will to power applies to the extremes of the left and the right. Left-wing and right-wing extremists believe absolutely in their respective creeds. Thus, political correctness is often practiced by highly prejudiced people who apply their beliefs uncritically. Similarly, extreme-minded white supremacists see no faults in their beliefs. Both sides can only become more tolerant and open-minded in holding their beliefs, if they move towards the middle in their thinking instead of being bogged down in narrow-minded bigotry.

The Golden Mean and The Middle Way. An early precursor to the middle way was Aristotle's Golden Mean in which virtue lies between excess and deficiency, *e.g.*, courage lies between rashness and cowardice, temperance lies between licentiousness and insensibility, *etc.* (Cf. *Ethics*, Book II, vi-viii). This is inadequate because of the difficulties in defining these terms with any precision, and in relating one set of terms to another, *i.e.*, relating courage to temperance. The table above provides a more comprehensive basis for relating all the terms of the middle way to each other and for differentiating them from the ways of power and belief. This task is begun in the Explanatory Notes below. Thus, the distinctions made in that table are intended only as guidelines which highlight the importance of the humanist outlook. They are not the last word on the matter but hopefully the first. Doubtless other terms may be chosen to make similar distinctions. The reasons for making these distinctions and for choosing these particular words should be clear enough in the notes above.

Explanatory Notes

Features:

The features of carnivorous and herbivorous, as opposed to that of being human, are metaphors for our propensity to behave less than humanely towards our fellows. Neither preying on other people nor submitting abjectly to them, becomes us as human beings.

❶ **Carnivorous:** This signifies the power-mongers' preying on people who become victims subject to their power. They use their power to manipulate their victims to satisfy their own ends. Power-mongers may resort to the extremes of killing or maiming rivals and opponents, and this means that the carnivorous metaphor has a basis in reality. As they are selfish people who react instinctively to events, murder may become a way of life to them so that no one is safe in their company. Gangsters and Mafiosi are examples of carnivores who, because of their failure to value the lives of others, and to act thoughtfully and considerately towards others, forfeit the right to be called 'human'. As the power-mongers are mainly male, the masculine pronouns 'he', 'him', 'his' are appropriately used to refer to them hereafter.

❷ **Human:** We are most human when we are not only being ourselves but also being true to ourselves and our best interests as individuals. This means knowing ourselves and our place in the universe. Potentially, there is a legitimate, legal, and rational role for us all to play in society but finding it may take time and persistence. This is hard work which often brings no immediate rewards. It is easy to give up and look for more direct means of attaining our ends. No one deserves reward and acclaim when they have clearly taken shortcuts which the rest of us deliberately avoid. Dualist theory, of which this exposition of the middle way is a part, serves to help the individual in that regard.

❸ **Herbivorous:** The herbivorous metaphor applies to the contrast between the preying and exploiting nature of carnivorous humans and the herd/flock-like nature of their victims. The herbivores are less than human because they behave so submissively and humbly that they invite the contempt and disdain of strong and powerful people. They become the victims of those who exploit their weaknesses. In failing to stand up for themselves they lessen themselves and lose a portion of their humanity in the process. They lack the self-respect and inner strength which are essential to our humanness. However, they can be helped through education, therapy and sympathetic understanding to bolster their egos and find their own place as the human beings they undoubtedly are.

Motivations:

By monitoring our motivations, we can keep track of our adherence or deviation from the middle way. It is an important part of our self-knowledge that we are not only aware of our motivations but also honest about them and critical of them. The motivations of particular importance in the context of the middle way are fame etc., personal development and security.

❶ **Fame, power and notoriety:** It is one thing to seek fame and fortune, and another thing to take shortcuts in achieving these. A rational and sociable quest for fame and fortune can benefit humanity and is not to be discouraged. However, the extreme and indiscriminate quest for these is often unreasonable and harmful to society. It invariably means using power over others to get achieve one's ends regardless of the cost to others or of the long-term consequences of one's actions. Extremists and fanatics often seek notoriety more than fame and fortune by their dastardly acts. They should meet with silence and oblivion rather than the cacophony of media attention. As befits a meritocracy, fame and fortune should be merited by worthy acts. In a tyrannous, autocratic, plutocratic, or an authoritarian regime generally, the wolves within us are unleashed and the nasty side of human nature is revealed. This is why as much reason and justice as possible is required to ensure that the irrational, impulsive, and bestial aspect of human nature is given no succour or encouragement.

❷ **Long-term personal development:** The middle way promotes self-improvement in being self-critical and open-minded. This can be an end in itself which gives us satisfaction whether it leads to fame and fortune or not. Thus, the secondary motivation for our activities may still be that of achieving fame and fortune but we are realistically settling for becoming better human beings with more self-knowledge and understanding of what we are as individuals.

❸ **Security within the herd:** Within groups and organisations, we can cloak ourselves with a herd-like security which we lack when we stand alone. Such security is precarious and unpredictable as our fates are then bound up with the fate of the said group or organisation. Sacrificing some control over our own lives may reap rewards that make it worthwhile but we can lessen ourselves in the process. But the point is to avoid being so cowed into submissiveness that we put up with anything for the sake of a quiet, secure life.

Relational Characteristics:

Adopting these three ways of thinking and living involves the characteristics of dominant, independent and dependent behaviour by which people relate to others in applying their respective belief systems.

❶ **Dominant:** An extreme use of the will to power means achieving dominance over others. This is dominance for its own sake and not necessarily because of the benefits accruing from it. Exacting circumstances such as war, disaster, pandemic, or a chaotic situation, may require one person to exert dominance over others. But this is for the purposes of the situation and not for the specific ends of the dominant individual. We can rationally submit such dominance in these circumstances. But if we have no way of choosing for ourselves and of changing our minds, then we should begin to worry.

❷ **Independent:** The will to understanding in contrast fosters an independent spirit which is relatively detached in its relationships with others. Much of our scientific and cultural progress results from fostering our freedom of self-expression. However, independence can be taken too far when it cuts us off from other people altogether.

❸ **Dependent:** We are all dependent on each other in our various family, friendly, business or other relationships. But we depart from the middle way in being so dependent on other people that we lose our self-identity altogether. In becoming totally dependent on others to do our thinking for us, we are unlikely to make full use of our creative talents, or to be as enterprising and full of initiative as we might be. Our inner potential determines the extent to which dependent and restrictive relationships are or are not necessary to enable us achieve that potential and make the best possible use of our talents.

Prescriptive Characteristics:

Prescriptive behaviour refers to our influence on each other's behaviour in achieving our goals. In behaving in a commanding, questioning, or unquestioning manner we are usually attempting to change other people's minds in some way.

❶ **Commanding:** Such behaviour is all very well as long as it permits questioning. But taken to extremes, it involves intolerance of questioning, opposition, contradiction, disagreement, and so on. It is 'do as I say' rather than 'do as I do', or dictation instead of example. Commanding behaviour therefore inhibits free communication and, in its extreme form, it is only justified in times of war or other exigent and pressing circumstances which demand urgent decision-making and equally urgent obedience.

❷ **Questioning:** This behaviour involves asking questions which may discomfit the person being questioned. The middle way welcomes questioning since that is the best way to get to the bottom of things. Posing questions is one of humanity's earliest and most successful innovations in their use of language. Questions enable us to satiate our curiosity and express our puzzlement. Unfortunately, the exercise of power often inhibits people from posing questions for fear of giving offence, being punished or whatever. Questioning others keeps us all human while ceasing to question them leaves us open to inhuman and irrational treatment.

❸ **Unquestioning:** An unquestioning attitude leads to a tacit tolerance of intolerable behaviour and of harmful ways of thinking. If people are prevented or discouraged from asking questions then they lapse into dismissive silence and fail to oppose that which requires to be questioned. To be completely unquestioning is to be thoughtless, mindless, and ultimately lacking in humanity.

Doxastic Characteristics:

'Doxastic' refers to the beliefs that we adopt for ourselves. Doxastic characteristics concern the way that our beliefs are handled in everyday life. They are listed as dogmatism, suspension of belief, and blind belief/faith.

❶ **Dogmatism:** This is a stubborn adherence to belief regardless of the evidence against it or the shakiness of the foundations on which it is based. A dogmatic stance is therefore one of certainty and self-assurance which favours instant decisions and forthright activity. This is done at the cost of blocking out uncertainties and imponderables. While we all need to be dogmatic to some extent to get things done, it is objectionable to close one's mind entirely to objections and criticisms, and to take no account of them in one's actions.

❷ **Suspension of belief:** This contrasts with dogmatism because it means holding a belief at arm's length rather than adhering to it, come what may. It implies open-mindedness because suspending one's belief means disowning the belief rather than following it when good sense or reason cast doubt on it. Suspension of belief does not necessarily imply scepticism or an inability to believe in anything at all. It involves believing with an open mind together with an ability to change one's mind when circumstances show a belief to be erroneous or untrue.

❸ **Blind belief/faith:** Those who adopt and practise their beliefs uncritically and unthinkingly are subject to them, and they are not really following them freely. They are blind to the flaws and limitations of their respective belief or faith. However, the Christian, Jewish or Moslem humanist believes and maintains his faith while being fully aware of the limitations to his faith. He is confident enough in his own faith not to want to impose it on others by authoritarian means.

Reactive Characteristics:

One can react to events in an authoritarian, authoritative, or credulous manner depending on one's state of mind. But moderation in any of these depends on their being underpinned by rational and thoughtful considerations. There is an important distinction to be made between authoritative power and authoritarian power. The former is rational and social whereas the latter tends to be irrational and anti-social. The power that we exert in family life, at work, in schools and universities, is overwhelmingly rational power when we respect the right of others to reason and even disagree with us.

❶ **Authoritarian:** The authoritarian characteristic involves using power to subordinate others to our will by such means as fear, coercion, emotional appeals, sexual favours, blackmail, and the like. This is not rational or social except in extreme circumstances that demand immediate action or reaction such as war, disaster, pandemics, criminal scenes, and so on.

❷ **Authoritative:** The authoritative characteristic means using expert knowledge, advice, and experience to help other people in their lawful and socially beneficial actions. We are laying

out the factual possibilities without necessarily telling people what to do with their lives. An authoritative person wishes people to choose for themselves on the merits of the facts and arguments presented to them rather than just because that person says so.

⑤ **Credulous:** The credulous characteristic comes into play when people are willing to believe something in spite of all reason, evidence, or good sense to the contrary. Perhaps we are all necessarily credulous to some extent to get things done, but thoughtless people are liable to be gullible and suggestible to a fault. They are over-impressed by the power of a person's presentation and insufficiently critical of the beliefs being foisted on them. They are particularly vulnerable to the oratory of demagogues and rebel-rousers.

Predictive Characteristics:

Predictive characteristics concern the kind of predictions made concerning the future in adopting these three ways of thinking. They tend to be deterministic, latitudinous, and fatalistic respectively.

① **Deterministic:** In making predictions, the power-monger is deterministic because of overconfidence in his own reasoning powers. In his mind, whatever he thinks is the truth, and that is undoubtedly so because of the apodeictic rigour of his thinking processes. Anyone who disputes his reasoning is too stupid to see the truth as he sees it. He relies excessively on making absolute connections between the different parts of his reasoning processes. And he expects everyone else to accord absolutely with his thinking. He therefore relies totally on the logic of his arguments at the expense of any evidence that casts them in doubt.

② **Latitudinous:** The middle way is latitudinous in taking a broader view of what is or is not possible in the future. It is open to the possibility of things turning out differently from what is expected. Being latitudinous in one's thought processes therefore means anticipating unexpected and unforeseen events, and being ready to take account of them. Being latitudinous does not mean being uncertain or indecisive; it means taking the widest possible view consistent with certain and decisive action, and it means being flexible in response to complex situations. It means facing realities fearlessly and self-confidently.

③ **Fatalistic:** People who have given up thinking for themselves are invariably fatalistic about the future. They no longer see that the future could well be different from what they think must be the case. They consider themselves to be at the mercy of events which they are powerless to change or react to in any constructive manner. But this is only because they are in a fatalistic state of mind and not because the future really is as predetermined as they assume it to be. The middle way can help them think for themselves and have the confidence to change things for the better.

Attitudinal Characteristics:

The attitudinal characteristics of absolute certainty, relative certainty, and total conviction refer to the attitudes we adopt in respect of our belief systems. This is regardless of the content of these belief systems, let alone their truth or otherwise.

① **Absolute certainty:** We are all looking for certainty to a greater or lesser extent in our daily decision-making but we can only do so reasonably within certain parameters. Absolute certainty is what dogmatists and bigots look for but it is illusory as far as many practical, moral and political matters are concerned. The absoluteness is assumed to make things easier and to avoid further thought on the matter. But life is not meant to be that simple for us. The uncertainties of life are a constant and necessary challenge to us. It is good to be fired and inspired by ideas but they are to be applied critically and not with absolute certainty to be useful in practice.

② **Relative certainty:** Humanists settle for relative certainty in the hope of reaching the truth eventually. They seek sufficient certainty to make effective action possible, but always with the proviso that the certainty is relative to the factors known when making the decisions. Thus, relative certainty does not entail scepticism or moral relativism but only a realisation of the uncertainties of life and the universe.

③ **Total conviction:** The illusion or assumption of certainty is sufficient for true believers to hold total conviction in the certainties being presented to them. Such conviction gives them the security and peace of mind for which they crave. But that is only because they lack the inner confidence to depend on their own resources. An inferiority complex plainly prevents

them from questioning their convictions because such questioning threatens their underdeveloped egos.

Judgmental Characteristics:

Judgmental characteristics concern how we judge others in relation to ourselves. They consist in having either contempt or respect for people or being uncritical of them.

❶ **Contempt:** The power-monger typically feels contempt for those subservient to his will and he certainly cares nothing for them as individuals. He may expect others to have respect for him but, in showing that respect, they only reinforce his contempt for them. He only has respect for their conformity to his wishes and not towards them as individuals.

❷ **Respect:** Having respect for others is an acquired characteristic which doesn't always come naturally to us. We learn to appreciate the value of other people and what is worth respecting about them. We can then take pleasure in their differences, quirks and idiosyncrasies instead of treating them as threatening or as evidence of their inferior to us. To respect someone is to be interested in them as unique individuals who have a right to have an opinion of their own.

❸ **Uncritical:** People under the power of others is usually uncritical of them because they have lost the will to use their own judgment concerning those wielding power over them. In learning to submit to the power of dominant persons, they are conditioned to accept the decisions and orders of these persons and no longer have faith in their own judgments.

Behavioural Characteristics:

We are all capable of being self-serving, self-critical, or of displaying subservient behaviour towards others. And we can all go to extremes in respect of all of these. The middle way aims for balanced behaviour by encouraging rational behaviour as opposed to intuitive and impulsive responses.

❶ **Self-serving:** Such behaviour characterises particularly the power-monger because he regards his own ends as being more important than any other ends. In being self-serving, he consults his own wishes and neglects other's interests which might otherwise curb and discipline him. Domineering personalities are self-serving because they have a low opinion of those under their power which they use to make others subservient to them. -

❷ **Self-critical:** Being self-critical is the best way to retain an open mind and a flexible response to events. Self-criticism means also criticising ourselves for being too self-critical. It feeds on itself to ensure that extreme behaviour is not entertained. A self-reflective interaction occurs between our thoughts and deeds and their consequences. Thus, a feedback process keeps us on the straight and narrow. This contrasts with self-serving and subservient behaviour which can spiral all too easily into extremism. -

❸ **Subservient:** Those who are required to fulfil the wishes of dominant personalities will become subservient to them. They may subordinate themselves to the will of others because of their lack of self-esteem, inferiority complex, or whatever. They may even take masochistic pleasure from their submission to others. Clearly, taking a subservient position is not conducive to the development of a healthy and well-balanced personality.

Heuristic Effects:

The heuristic effects of applying these three ways of thinking concern their educational implications. They are imparted to others in radically different ways which affect how information is used and processed. These effects are preaching, teaching, and discipleship respectively.

❶ **Preaching:** Educationally, the power-monger prefers to preach than to teach. He tells people what to think instead of stimulating them to think for themselves. He seeks disciples who will adopt and propagate his doctrines. Preaching is easier than teaching because it means impregnating others with one's own thought patterns rather than giving people useful skills or information which they can use for their own purposes.

❷ **Teaching:** At its best, teaching involves not cramming facts and figures into people's minds but helping them to think through things for themselves and to acquire skills and abilities which will help them to be useful citizens and live good and worthwhile lives. Teaching does not mean inducing conformity but enhancing a person's capacity for thought,

argument and questioning. Teachers teach students whereas preachers create disciples who follow and apply their preachings to the letter.

③ **Discipleship:** The preacher all too easily finds disciples who submit themselves to his dispensations. Discipleship means submitting oneself abjectly to doctrines rather than acquiring facts, theories, skills and abilities to make oneself a useful in society as a whole. The Taliban in Afghanistan thought of themselves as 'students' of the faith, but they were clearly disciples of extreme doctrines which reacted irrationally against all the values and advances achieved by modern civilisation.

Emotive Effects:

The emotive effects concern how our emotions are involved in these three ways of thinking. In these three cases, people's emotions are being manipulated respectively, either by means of hypnotic induction, the rational passions, or mob mania.

① **Hypnotic induction:** This is used by one or more people to manipulate the emotions of other people. It may be used for innocent or even therapeutic purposes but it is also used by power-mongers to gain a mesmeric control over one or more individuals for personal or anti-social purposes. The obvious example is the malevolent orator who mesmerises masses of people with spellbinding oratory. The implications of that oratory are put into practice by the mob without question or proper criticism.

② **Rational passions:** These are used by one individual to enhance his own powers and abilities as individual. They include those of love of truth, contempt for dishonesty, repugnance of error in logic or fact, disgust at evasion, and admiration of theoretical achievement. They counter the view that being rational means being dispassionate, cold and objective. For we can be passionate about being truthful, logical, honest, theoretical and so on, because our own emotions are involved. What is important is that each individual should learn to cope with and direct their own passions in rational directions. In that way, they are manipulating their emotions for their own explicit purposes and not because of external pressures or influences.

③ **Mob mania:** In contrast, the mindless following of dictatorial leaders leads often to mob mania and collective delusion. In submerging his identity in the group, crowd or the masses in general, the individual's emotions are indistinguishable from those of the latter. Their identity is submerged into the will of the many. Mob mania often results from the mesmeric powers of the orator or demagogue, and sometimes the mass media. It occurs particularly in orchestrated riots, political protests, the adulation of popular idols, the mass effusive of grief at the unexpected death of a famous person, and so on. Such events bring out the herd-like behaviour of people *en masse*. The mob doesn't think for itself but allows rabble-rousers to take over and run things according to their whims and impulses. Clearly, a mob can be formed whenever the constraints of the middle way are cast aside because people can lose not only their individuality in mobs but also their sweet reason and humanity.

Dispositional Effects:

The dispositional effects concern how people in these three frames of mind are disposed to behave towards others, particularly those who are markedly similar or different from them in behaviour and outlook. Their dispositional responses are often those of them/us discrimination, tolerance of differences, and indiscriminate love/hatred respectively.

① **Them/us discrimination:** This kind of discrimination creates absolute divisions between people so that 'them' becomes a clearly identifiable enemy that must be combated and surpassed. The effect is to unify the group or organisation and make the members more susceptible to will and aims of their leader. It becomes important to the leader whether a newcomer is 'one of us' (as Margaret Thatcher used to put it) and this enhances the exclusivity of the group or organisation. It unites them against the 'others' and sows the seeds of hatred and conflict.

② **Tolerance of differences:** This is an enlightened view, the importance of which was only clearly recognised during the twentieth century. Tolerating differences does not necessarily imply moral relativism. For example, a person may disapprove of homosexual behaviour on moral grounds while understanding that some people are compelled to behave in that way, though still believing that it is not necessarily a good thing.

③ **Indiscriminate love/hatred:** Sheer emotionalism leads people to display indiscriminate love or hatred of people or things which power-mongers desire them to have an exaggerated regard for or against. The crowd or mob indiscriminately loves or hates according to their emotions and regardless of rhyme or reason. They oscillate from one to another according to mood, whim, or rumour. The object of their love/hatred may not change in any way, only their perception of that object.

Social Effects:

The social effects concern how these ways of thinking function in society as a whole. The esoteric, familial, and tribal effects respectively are far from being the only ones but they are perhaps the most important in helping us to clarify the middle way.

① **Esoteric:** The social effects of the extreme use of the will to power are esoteric, exclusive, and centred on the power-monger and the group, organisation or disciples on whom he exercises his power. As everything is centred on himself, his group and disciples become an extension of himself and his needs. Thus, all his social actions are an esoteric reflection of his egoism. He is so inward-looking that he is incapable of stepping outside the context of his own ego to see himself as others see him. An extreme example of this effect is the millionaire movie mogul, Howard Hughes. Having exhausted all other outlets in his lust for power, he was ultimately left only with exercising total power over himself and his body, to which everything else had to be related.

② **Familial:** This effect refers to the importance of the family as preserver and propagator of the middle way. The family as a group can be taken to authoritarian extremes as easily as any other group of human beings but, at its most normal and balanced, it symbolises what is most human about us. The family can harbour extreme and unacceptable behaviour, as in the case of Mafia families, but it can also lay a foundation for rational and sociable behaviour. It is essential to our upbringing because of the unique contributions of husband and wife in raising children. While males are generally more inclined to deviate from the middle way than females, the latter adhere to it more readily to the point of mediocrity and crassness. Thus, a unique partnership can ensue whose interactions can askew the extremes of the middle way and of the will to power and belief. Children brought up in that kind of stable interactive environment are doubtless better equipped than otherwise to become balanced adults who can stick with the middle way.

③ **Tribal:** The effects of absolute belief are positively tribal because everyone is expected to think and behave in the same way. For the tribe is symbolic of the imposition of conformity and the deprecation of individuality. It is also an exclusive and self-contained unit which typically differentiates itself from the rest of humanity, often to the point of setting itself against humanity. Nationalism, sectarianism, racialism, and other divisive groupings, are mere developments of tribalism at its most extreme.

Epistemic Goals:

Epistemic goals refer to the kinds of knowledge on which these three outlooks ground their beliefs. In this context, messianic knowledge, hypothetical knowledge, and common knowledge are used to demonstrate the epistemic differences between them.

① **Messianic knowledge:** This usually has a divine, sacred, supernatural, superhuman, or alien source. The holders of such knowledge may also claim a scientific or evidential basis for believing in such knowledge. The fact that no one else has access to their sources of knowledge, casts immediate doubt on their claims. To an open-minded person, the true source of such knowledge will lie in the selfish, power-mongering aims of the perpetrators.

② **Hypothetical knowledge:** This human form of knowledge often aspires to be scientific in being a prelude to establishing reliable scientific theories and explanations. It is open to revision and improvement in the light of further experience or evidence. It depends for its acceptance not only on the thoughts and words of individuals but also on the approval of a community of experts using publicly accepted standards of truth, evidence and consistency.

③ **Common knowledge:** While we all welcome common knowledge with which we can all agree, the naive believer settles for knowledge because it is generally accepted by his group and not because it is the truth of the matter. As a conformer, he is satisfied with common knowledge which reinforces his security and his need to conform to whatever is the dominant

view within his group or organisation. He is not interested in seeing this body of knowledge from any other point of view than that of the group and therefore will not step outside this point of view to criticise for what it really is.

Personal Goals:

The personal goals of adulation, truth, and conformity characterise the teleological differences between these three attitudes.

❶ **Adulation:** The power-monger seeks adulation and total submission from his admirers and adherents. The achievement of such power over others is an end in itself as far as he is concerned. He may claim to be seeking the truth but it is not an end in itself since he clearly uses his self-proclaimed truth to promote himself and his own interests. It is a tool used to hammer others into submission and he is not interested in the ongoing process of truth seeking since he has already arrived at all the truth which is sufficient for his purposes.

❷ **Truth:** The humanist is more interested in seeking truth for its own sake while being well aware of its elusiveness. The notion of truth is difficult enough to define; let alone the difficulty of knowing whether or not truth has been established. Even if he reaches what seems to be the truth of the matter, he is cautious as to whether he has really arrived at the truth *per se* and is not just fooling himself. He enjoys the process of truth seeking in itself and does not expect to reach ultimate solutions.

❸ **Conformity:** The naive believer seeks only to conform to the norms and beliefs of the group or organisation to which he belongs. He willingly accepts the truths as laid down by the group because they are held by the group as a whole and not because he has personally criticised, analysed and assessed the value of these truths or the evidence for holding them. This suits his personal purposes because he wants no more than to belong, have security, and be an accepted and respected member of the group.

Outcomes:

The outcomes of these three ways of thinking are respectively self-deception, insight, and delusion. These outcomes are over and above our implicit or explicit aims in using these ways of thinking. Not achieving these aims cannot change the outcomes because the latter follow necessarily from putting these ways of thinking into practice.

❶ **Self-deception:** The power-monger deceives himself into believing that his way is the only conceivable one. His overconfidence of his own mental capacities leads him to believe so. Anyone who disagrees with him is either a fool or a contemptible opponent. Any other views than his own are considered equally contemptible and beneath him. Thus, the true merits of other people and their views will escape him because he wilfully deceives himself regarding them.

❷ **Insight:** If the way of understanding doesn't lead the individual to truth, it will at least provide insight into the extent of our own ignorance. As our abilities to reach ultimate truths are strictly limited, perhaps the best we can hope for is to add to our insights and thus increase our understanding of things. Gaining greater insight can give us pleasure enough since it changes and enlarges our minds. We feel more at one with ourselves and the world as a result.

❸ **Delusion:** This is usually the outcome of absolute belief because the believer participates in the delusions of the group and is unable or unwilling to free himself from group influences or to view these beliefs for what they really are. The naive believer cherishes his delusions because he is absolved from the need to see things from any other point of view than that dictated by the group. The need to believe is more important to him than truth because he is freed from the peril of facing realities alone and unsupported.

Conspectus

The middle way, as portrayed here, is an intellectual and educational tool to be used by us for our personal insight and self-improvement. It is something to be used rather than believed in. It is intended to be a contribution to knowledge and not to be imposed on people willy-nilly. Clarifying the importance of the middle way, compared with its extremist alternatives, will hopefully make people more conscious of the need to avoid such extremes. It will hopefully heighten people's sensitivity to their own susceptibilities in that regard. This development

may not be enough in itself to achieve that goal but it can contribute to the process. Moreover, there is much more to the middle way than is dealt with in this outline. It is one tool among many which are required to strengthen the humanist view. Understanding the middle way in greater depth can form a whole science of our being to which this analysis may hopefully contribute.

Expounding the Middle Way. The above three outlooks or ways of thinking characterise human nature. We have, on the one hand, the overly strong 'will to power' and, on the other hand, the overly weak 'will to believe', between which the relatively moderate 'will to understanding' hovers uneasily. The former two ways represent relatively primitive and uncivilised aspects of human nature which need to be moderated by the middle way. Their primitive and uncivilised aspects emerge when they are isolated from the middle way and are taken to extremes. All forms of political, religious, and behavioural extremism result from such a loss of the middle way,. This extremist potential persists within us all and we need constantly to guard ourselves against its reassertion and predominance. In so far as there is progress in civilisation, it consists in the middle way being progressively introduced until it forms part of everyone's mindset and ultimately of the political and social fabric. Civilised behaviour requires the middle way to insinuate its way between these intimate extremes which feed on each other. This process has recurred several times in history when humanistic attitudes have come to the fore. Equally, the simplicity and attraction of extreme views has all too often resulted in the loss of the middle way. Until the twentieth century, the appearance of the middle way has been cyclical and impermanent. Hopefully, the twenty-first century will see its permanent institution when it becomes an integral part of the educational system.

Our Capacity for Extremism. Perhaps our most admirable and our most dangerous trait is our capacity for excess. The seemingly limitless extremes to which we can push ourselves bring out the best and worst in us. Our obsessions lead us, for example, to climb the highest mountains, write huge novels, and gain immense advances in scientific knowledge, while crippling ourselves with addictions, killing each other in the millions, and destroying the planet in our pursuit of the 'good life'. From a moral standpoint, it is obvious which of these are beneficial and which are harmful. But it depends on our states of mind whether we adopt the first and avoid the second. In so far as we have personal insight and self-discipline we can avoid harmful states of mind when we recognise them as such. We can choose not to do harm or to have negative thoughts in so far as we have control over our emotions. For example, we can stop being angry with someone when we realise that our anger is unfounded or unreasonable. People about to commit murder or suicide can be persuaded by others to desist. Potentially we can all change our minds if we choose to do so. Therefore, we have enough freewill to consciously avoid going to these extremes if we really want to. A clear method is needed to deal with these extremes, and the distinctions in the above table hopefully help us to recognise extreme and harmful states of mind both within ourselves and in others, so that we can avoid them.

The Middle Way Favours Science and Democracy. The humanist view, in emphasising the value and importance of the individual, has helped us to unleash human potential in both the past and present. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, for instance, the contributions of individuals were encouraged and promoted, and these periods saw great cultural advances. The middle way represents the state of mind wherein we make our best contributions to culture and civilisation. It favours science, democracy, the open society, freedom of the individual, consumer rights, and above all, human rights. It is also the way of common sense to which we mostly adhere in ordinary life. It is arguable that saving the world from our own depredations on it, depends on our pursuing the middle way and on our coming together as a species to fulfil our collective duty as caretakers of this planet.

Without the Middle Way We Lose our Humanity. In the absence of any middle way, power-mongering and intimidation prevails, and the human race is composed of nothing but knaves and fools, or exploiters and victims. Knaves think too much of themselves and fools too little of themselves. The knaves quarrel among themselves and use fools to fight each

other. The divisions between people are irreconcilable and they erode trust, perpetuate enmity, make co-operation impossible, and prevent us from fulfilling our potential as human beings. Killing each other becomes a routine matter when we have no respect for others as human beings and regard them as disposable vermin. It is Hobbes's 'state of nature' in which there is 'war of every man against every man'.⁴ The highest human aspirations are thrown away in favour of the lowest and meanest ones, dictated by narrow, personal, group, sectarian, nationalist or religious matters. Such are the conditions which prevailed under authoritarian regimes such as Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Pol Pot's Cambodia.

The Middle Way Itself can be Taken to Extremes. Moreover, the middle way is itself not immune from extremism. Taken to extremes it leads to mediocrity and sterility. But unlike the other ways, it is largely self-regulatory. In being self-critical, we can detect when we are getting into ruts, failing to do justice to ourselves, harming ourselves by going too far in one direction or another, and so on. If we constantly have in mind the middle way perspective, we can stop ourselves from pursuing it to excess. Therefore, on the whole, the middle way is less susceptible to extremism but never entirely resistant to it. While we must forever work hard to keep ourselves on the straight-and-narrow, we must also be flexible and openminded in seeing the value of change, innovation, and creative solutions to problems generally.

The Consequences of Repudiating the Middle Way. It is arguable that excess is tolerable while it is related to the middle way wherein we remain human rather than inhuman. We can be a little wicked as long as we repent of that wickedness and resolve to do better. For we need to bear in mind the harm which excessive behaviour does to ourselves and others. We need the restraints of the middle way to function as sociable and rational beings. Repudiating the middle way entirely means losing one's moral sense or social conscience. Psychopaths and sociopaths feel no shame or remorse because they have lost all restraints over their behaviour and have nothing within them to draw them back from doing their worst. In the same bracket, we may include terrorists, extremists, fanatics, zealots, criminals, rapists, gangsters, gurus, charlatans, and sectarian bigots of all kinds, who commonly scorn the middle way between the will to power and the will to believe. They seek the nearest way to satisfy their ambitions, desires, compulsions and obsessions. In preying on the populace like wolves on sheep, they dehumanise themselves and demean their victims. They dominate people to achieve their self-serving ends. They are so sure of themselves that they become dogmatic and authoritarian in their behaviour towards others. In the case of religious and political bigots, they exert power over others by means of messianic knowledge which is usually a belief system specific to themselves or the organisation within which they operate. The belief system is often so esoteric and divorced from common life that they adopt a them/us discrimination policy. You are either in or out, for or against and there is no middle way.

Preserving the Middle Way may Require Extreme Measures. When the other two ways of thinking predominate to extremes, the tolerance of differences is overlooked. People are divided into factions and are forced to take sides against each other. The human race is then divided against itself and neglects its true ends in favour of war, enmity, hatred, and sectarianism. War typically breeds inhumanity, and any savagery is justifiable if it leads to victory. Thus, it took the ultimate savagery of the atomic bomb to prevent the even more savage prolongation of the Second World War. Presumably much of Japan's remaining population was preserved, to say nothing of countless allied lives, by this justifiable savage act of using atomic weapons. Extreme measures may be morally justifiable on rare occasions to respond to extreme activities. We cannot tolerate the intolerable if we are to preserve the continuity of our civilisation. The continued existence of the middle way itself may depend on extreme measures being taken to preserve it. This clarification of the middle way disciplines us to go so far in preserving it without losing touch with it altogether. Otherwise we are prone to the Dr. Strangelove solution in which the extremes take over, and people *qua* people are conveniently forgotten. The end only justifies the means when the end is the welfare of individuals and not just humanity as a whole.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, Part I, Ch. 13, (1631 – London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 186.

Insight and developed intuition are important goals. The will to understanding is a drive towards greater insight into ourselves and the human condition in general. It does not come naturally to us and we must make the effort to do it. Adopting the dualist view gives our thinking the extra dynamism and open-minded needed to develop it further and to help us become yet more insightful. It is a dynamic and ongoing philosophy that brings intuition into play. To achieve insight we need to have a developed intuition. In dualist theory, this is systematic dualism as contrasted with naïve dualism in which intuition is underdeveloped and therefore not dependable because it is random and impulsive. This dualist view is discussed at length in my book *The Promise of Dualism* (Almostic Publications, 2014).

Humanism as the Middle Way. The humanist view is the middle way between these two extremes of behaviour to which we are all prone, *e.g.*, caring too much or too little; being too overbearing or too submissive; and so on. Humanism emphasises the importance of the individual and his freedom as against social and other restrictions on that freedom. But it has always fallen between stools because the middle way has previously been undeveloped fudge and woolliness, appealing to everyone but pleasing no one. It has hitherto been too weak to survive for long against the strength and allure of extremist views. Hopefully, the above table is a step towards remedying this defect and towards reinforcing the importance of the humanist view and making it a permanent feature of our civilisation.

We can all be Humanists now. In distinguishing the will to understanding from the will to power and the will to believe, we can identify what is good and worthwhile about the humanist, pluralist, democratic, open-minded outlook which, by-and-large, characterises Western society. This distinction shows the importance of moderate ways of thinking as against those of fundamentalist and political extremism. Thus, the moderate Christian, Moslem, capitalist, liberal, conservative or whatever, can confirm his moderation by reference to the middle way as outlined above. Then we can all be humanists by the mere fact of being human beings. Contemplating the middle way helps us to rise above our petty concerns and hobby horses and see what is really important about us as a species. It alone enables us to exploit our common humanity, our sympathy, and our understanding of each other. Just as there is no potential limits to what a unified human race can achieve in bettering itself, so there are no potential limits to the destruction and devastation which a disunited and unfocused humanity can wreak upon itself and its environment. In so far as there is hope for our future it lies in the unifying effects of the middle way to which all our disparate activities may be related and rationalised.

The Strength and Weakness of Humanism. Humanism's great strength in emphasising the middle way has also been its greatest weakness. It appeals to sweet reason and our common humanity in eschewing such extremes. However, its weakness lies in the fact that it is unreasonable for us to be forever reasonable and moderate in our behaviour. It is decidedly boring and uninspiring to be wholly sensible and predictable in one's behaviour. Going to extremes is more natural than not doing so, especially when we are young and carefree. Indeed, we often clarify the limits of our behaviour in going to extremes. It is not in our nature to cling rigidly to the middle way between two extremes. We often wobble and veer towards one extreme or the other. The main lesson of above table is not to lose sight of the middle way in all our worldly peregrinations. The value of the middle way is most apparent to us all when we function as mature and responsible citizens in a diverse, pluralistic society.

How Humanism Relates to Extremism. The above table is therefore intended to show the relationship between humanism and extremism. It reinforces the middle way which otherwise is vulnerable to, and on a knife-edge between, these more accessible ways of thinking. These are often seen as more attractive and alluring alternatives to the apparent mediocrity of the middle way. On the one hand, we crave change and excitement, and on the other hand, we seek security, predictability and a quiet life. These incompatible desires, to which we are all subject at one time or another during our lives, make it difficult for us to

take the middle way between (1) imposing ourselves wilfully and aggressively on the world or (2) submitting to a dominant person, creed, or way of life to absolve us of the need to think or act for ourselves.

No Excuses for Repudiating the Middle Way. Clarifying the middle way helps us to put strident extremists in their place and treat them with the contempt and disapproval they deserve. Neither their genetic inheritance nor their social backgrounds are sufficient to excuse their opprobrious ways of thinking over which they potentially have as much control as the rest of us. Their freely adopted attitudes and frames of mind are primarily to blame for their deplorable behaviour. We need not respect or tolerate behaviour and attitudes which cannot be justified by reason or reference to the middle way.

No Such Things as Absolute Good and Evil. The middle way gives the lie to the Manichean myth concerning the existence of good and evil as opposing forces in the universe. Absolute good and evil exist only as symbols of our own tendencies towards to the extremes. We become absolutely good or absolutely evil only by going to one extreme or the other. There is nothing outside our own minds that will partake of one way or the other. That is to say, there is no substance of good or evil waiting out there to take possession of us. If there were, then it would be impossible for us to moderate our behaviour and to prevent ourselves from going to extremes. The mere existence of the middle way shows that we can indeed control ourselves from extremism by encouraging us to think securely along the lines of the middle way.

Masculinity/Femininity and the Middle Way. The power/belief extremes are rooted ultimately in the masculine/feminine dichotomy. Wholly masculine behaviour is typically power-driven just as wholly feminine behaviour is typically subservient. But most of us most of the time are neither entirely masculine nor entirely feminine, whatever our genetically determined gender. Thus, the middle way reflects this ambiguity and makes sense of it. For it is arguable that men are more effective as men, and women more effective as women in relation to the middle way, since it brings the sexes together in pursuit of the common purposes of humanity, *e.g.*, marriage and family life. Outwith the middle way, the sexes are in isolation from each other, and masculine and feminine attributes are mixed up in a confusing way. People don't know whether they are the one or other, instead of just accepting their given gender and getting on with life. Such perversions are particularly apparent in extreme cultures such as in Ancient Sparta, prison populations, monastic communities, and celibate priesthoods. The fact that these are now reappearing in western culture suggests that the middle way is yet again being endangered by extreme reactions against it.