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TRUTH, DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE

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One cannot be both a liar and a skeptic (and, of course, it is preferable to be neither). The liar understands what truth is and even believes that some statements are true and some are false. The first element in lying consists in saying in words the opposite of what you think or believe is true. The second element in lying consists in intending to deceive and willingness to injure by that deception. (The white lie has a contrary intention so far as injury is concerned). A third aspect of lying is whether one has an obligation to tell the truth to everyone—or only to some.

The extreme skeptic cannot be a liar unless he is a liar when he declares himself to be an extreme skeptic for whom there is no truth; nothing is either true or false. If that is what the extreme skeptic really thinks, then he is at least telling us the truth when he tells us that that is what he thinks. But he cannot tell us a lie about anything other than his own state of mind or feeling.

What the extreme skeptic denies is not the possibility of truth or falsity in speech, but only the possibility of truth or falsity in thought.

The definition of truth and falsity in thought is as follows. It is the agreement or correspondence between what one thinks is the case and what is the case in reality.

Truth and falsity in thought parallels truth and falsity in speech. Truth in speech may accompany falsity in thought, and falsity in speech may accompany truth in thought. For this to be possible, it must also be possible for us to be mistaken or in error in our judgment about what is true or false. (I will return to this very important point later.)

This theory of truth and falsity rests on the following presuppositions: first, the existence of an independent reality

which is what it is whether or not we know it and regardless of what we happen to be thinking about it; and second, the determinateness of that independent reality. This is made clear by the principle of contradiction as an ontological principle. Nothing can both be and not be at one and the same time. Nothing can both have a certain attribute or characteristic and not have it at one and the same time. This principle is self-evidently true; you cannot think the opposite.

The logical counterpart of the principle of contradiction tells us that to think truly, we must avoid contradicting ourselves. We cannot both affirm and deny one and the same proposition at one and the same time. It cannot be thought by us to be both true and false. We cannot answer the same question by saying both Yes and No at one and the same time.

Now let us consider the position of the extreme skeptic, To say that there is nothing either true or false, or to say there cannot be a true or false statement is tantamount to denying the presupposition of truth—denying the ontological principle of an independent and determinate reality, and flouting the logical principle of contradiction,

Here is the refutation of the extreme skeptic. Consider the statement: NO statement is either true or false.” If that is true (which the skeptic asserts), then he has contradicted himself, because at least one statement is true. If that is false, then there may be one or more statements that are true as well as this one statement's being false, And if that statement is itself neither true nor false, why should we pay any attention to it?

There is no point in arguing with the extreme skeptic since he is willing to contradict himself at every step of the way. No one who lives in the common sense world of practical affairs can operate on the basis of extreme skepticism.

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Two moderate forms of skepticism involve mistaken interpretations of the matter.

Consider the statement: “That's true for me, even if it isn't true for you.” If the statement merely intends to call attention to the fact that individuals can differ or disagree in their judgments about what is in fact the truth of the matter, it raises no special difficulty,

To acknowledge the possibility of differences of opinion or disagreements concerning what is true or false is not to be skeptical. In fact, not to do so is to go to the opposite extreme of extreme dogmatism: only what I declare is true is true; if you disagree with me, you are wrong.

Unfortunately, people who say “That's true for me” make the mistake of adding “And that's all there is to it.” When they do this, their moderate skepticism turns into an extreme subjectivism. There is no objective aspect of truth: there is only what is true for me (only the subjective aspect).

Such extreme subjectivism is just as self-refuting as extreme skepticism. What can one mean when one says “true for me” if one does not also claim that the statement I judge to be true is objectively true? “True for me” can mean no more than “I like it,” - “I want to think it,” “I prefer it to the opposite.” And if that is all there is to it, then extreme subjectivism becomes extreme skepticism.

The other mistaken form of moderate skepticism is exemplified in the statement: “That was once true relative to the circumstances that then existed, but it is no longer true.”

If the statement merely intends to call attention to the fact that what we once thought to be true (at an earlier time or place and under different circumstances), we no longer think is true, it raises no special difficulty. To acknowledge the possibility of change or alteration in our judgments about what is true or false is not to be skeptical. In fact, not to do so, to insist that our judgments about what is true are infallible, incorrigible, or unalterable is to go to the opposite extreme of dogmatism.

Unfortunately, people who say “That was true some time ago, but it is no longer true” make the mistake of adding “And that's all there is to it.” When they do this, their moderate skepticism turns into an extreme relativism. They deny the immutability of objective truth when what they should be denying is the immutability of our subjective judgments about what is true or false,

The mutability of our judgments had no bearing on the immutability of truth in its objective aspect. If any statement is ever true, it is always true, and unchangeably so, regardless of how we change our minds about it. This holds even for changing aspects of reality itself: the addition of a precise time specification in the statement makes it possible for the statement to be immutably true.

By correcting these mistakes we reach the defensible and sound skepticism that wisdom recommends we adopt.

Most of the judgments we make about what is true or false are fallible and corrigible. They are mutable, not final. They have a future, in which they may be corrected or amended in some way, or replaced by other judgments that are truer.

The realm of judgments that have a future comprises those judgments with regard to which all relevant evidence may not yet be at hand, and the thinking we have done may not be as good as

possible. Hence, when new evidence is found or when better thinking is done (or when we discover and correct errors or inadequacies in prior thinking), we change our minds and alter our judgments concerning the true and false.

The most impressive example of this is in jury trials of questions of fact. They imply two standards of proof: (1) by a preponderance of the evidence (more likely than not to be true); (2) beyond a reasonable doubt (but still not beyond all doubt, not beyond the shadow of a doubt).

The judicial reason for re-opening a case or having a second trial may be either to allow for the introduction of new evidence, or to correct a procedural error that may have affected the deliberations of the jury. Reversal is possible even if the original verdict was beyond a reasonable doubt.

What I have just said about jury trials applies to all fields of research—historical and scientific, to everything that is in what I am going to call “the realm of doubt” which is the realm of judgments that have a future—judgments that are subject to change, that are not final, infallible, and incorrigible.

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Do all of our judgments fall in the realm of doubt? Are there none that belong to the realm of certitude?

The realm of certitude is the realm of judgments that are subjectively as immutable as objective truth is. These are judgments for which we dare to claim finality, infallibility, and incorrigibility—*without being dogmatic*. They are, therefore, judgments that have no future.

What judgments have this status? All self-evident truths: judgments the opposite of which it is impossible for us to think, such as the principle of contradiction; the statement about wholes and parts involving indefinables; the statement that no triangle has any diagonals involving definitions.

All empirically falsified generalizations have this status also. No empirical generalization is beyond the shadow of a doubt. One negative instance falsifies such generalizations. Once falsified, it is always false—immutably.

Finally, this status belongs to evident truths, such as my own existence or the existence of physical objects perceptually present to me, Beyond all doubt? Beyond the shadow of a doubt? No, not quite, because of the possibility of hallucination. When I am perceiving, not hallucinating, what I am perceiving really exists independently of my perceiving it. The only question here is whether I am in fact perceiving. That is the shadow of a doubt which I cannot remove. Nevertheless, for all practical purposes, such evident truths are certain rather than probable: what we call

practical or moral certainty, which falls just a little short of epistemological certitude.

Except for the two or three types of judgments just indicated (self-evident truths, empirically falsified generalizations, and evident truths), all other judgments fall in the sphere of doubt: all our common sense generalizations, most of which are immoderate because they go beyond the evidence, and are subject to falsification; all of the generalizations made in the empirical sciences; almost all scientific theories or hypotheses—which are subject to correction, amendment, or rejection in the light of new evidence or better thinking; a great deal of what we call “historical knowledge” including here both what we regard as historical facts and also the interpretation of these facts.

An apparent paradox results. As we normally use the word “knowledge,” we speak of our common-sense knowledge of the world in which we live, of our scientific knowledge of it, of our historical knowledge of its past, and so on.

We distinguish between the realm of knowledge and the realm of opinion, as follows: knowledge consists in the possession of the truth. The phrase “false knowledge” is self-contradictory. The phrase “true knowledge” is redundant. Only opinion, not knowledge, can be either true or false.

That being our customary usage or acceptance, how can we place common sense knowledge, scientific knowledge, and historical knowledge in the realm of doubt—the realm of judgments which, though now regarded by us as true, may turn out to be false when new evidence is forthcoming or better thinking is done?

It would appear that what we call knowledge is no better than opinion, if it can turn out to be false. Must we restrict our use of the word “knowledge” to judgments that clearly belong in the realm of certitude and refrain from using the word “knowledge” for any judgments that belong in the realm of doubt?

The resolution of this apparent paradox is as follows. It consists in noting a strong and weak use of the word “knowledge” and a strong and weak use of the word “opinion.”

In its strong use, the word “knowledge” refers to judgments that belong in the realm of certitude. Here it would be wrong to say “I believe” or “I opine” or even “I think.” Here we must say “I know.” In its weak use, the word “knowledge” and in its strong use, the word “opinion” refer to a middle ground.

Here it is appropriate to say “I believe on reasonable grounds” or “I have reasonable grounds for believing, opinion, or thinking,” and, as of this moment, that is equivalent to saying “I know,” *but only as of this moment*. Here we have, not final or incorrigible truth of the kind we have in the realm of certitude

(knowledge in the strong sense), but only that which is *truer* than anything else at the moment.

That which is truer than alternatives may become truer still with additional evidence or better thinking (may have even more reasonable grounds). Or it may be replaced by an alternative that is truer in the light of more evidence or better thinking. Nevertheless, our claim of truth here is not an unsupported claim. On the contrary, it is the truth we *must* affirm in the light of the best evidence we now have and the best thinking we can now do.

At the opposite extreme is mere opinion—totally unsupported opinion, not knowledge in even the weaker sense of that term. When we express, espouse, or insist upon such opinions, we do so only as a matter of personal prejudice. It is an act of will on our part, not an act of thought. Here, if we use the word “truth” at all, we do so in the purely subjective sense: “true for me, and that’s all there is to it.” It may still remain the case that such opinions are either objectively true or false, since whatever is asserted about the way things are may either agree or not agree with the way that in fact things really are. But, since we can offer no reasonable grounds to support such opinions (since we have no evidence in favor of them or thinking to base them on), our assertion of them reduces to “I like to think that...”

Herein lies the radical diremption between the sphere of truth and the sphere of taste—the sphere of supported judgments and the sphere of unsupported prejudices. The sphere of taste consists of all opinions that, being unsupported, are unarguable. It may also include opinions that are not only unsupported but are intrinsically unsupportable. Hence the fundamental maxim: *de gustibus non disputandum est*. This applies to all opinions that are nothing but expressions of our likes and dislikes and cannot be anything else (the intrinsically unsupportable); and also to those opinions that are unsupported at a given time, but which may nevertheless not be intrinsically unsupportable.

In sharp contrast, the sphere of truth consists of those opinions (in the strong sense, which is identical with knowledge in the weak sense) that are intrinsically supportable and that are also based on reasonable grounds —supported by what evidence is available and what thinking has been done. Here the judgment we make is necessitated by evidence or reasons: it is not voluntary or an entirely free choice on our part. Here the fundamental maxim is the very opposite: *-de veritate disputandum est*.

Skepticism with regard to truth reared its head in antiquity. Confronted with it, the ancients came up with its refutation. Not so with regard to goodness.

Skepticism about value judgments—about the validity of our attribution of goodness to objects and about the truth of any statement that contains the words “ought” or “ought not”—begins in the modern world. Without having been confronted with that brand of skepticism, the ancients nevertheless provided us with clues enabling us to separate that aspect of the good that has the objectivity of truth from that aspect that is entirely subjective and relative to the individual.

At the dawn of modern thought, Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza advanced the view that “good” was merely the name we gave to those things that in fact we happened to desire or like. Goodness is not a discoverable property of the things themselves. We simply call them good because we desire them. If we had an aversion to them instead, we would call them bad. Since desires and aversions are matters of individual temperament, nurture, and predilection, there is nothing that all human beings agree upon as deserving to be called good or bad. Just as the skeptic concerning truth says that what is true for me may not be true for you, so here the skeptic says that what is good for you may not be good for me.

A century or more later, David Hume added another arrow to the quiver of skepticism about values. He pointed out that from our knowledge of the facts about nature or reality (as complete as one might wish it to be), we cannot validate a single value judgment that ascribes to the object a goodness that makes it true to say that all men ought to desire it.

Those who, before or after Hume, identify the good with pleasure or the pleasing, do not avoid the thrust of his skeptical challenge. Rather, they reinforce it, for what pleases one individual may not please another; and, in any case, the goodness that is identified with pleasure does not reside in the object but in the emotional experience of the individual.

Hume's challenge is further reinforced in our own century by a group of thinkers whose names are associated with a doctrine that has come to be called “noncognitive ethics.” They use the word “ethics” to refer to the whole sphere of moral judgments about good and bad, or right and wrong, especially in the form of prescriptions about what ought and ought not to be sought or what ought and ought not to be done. Their dismissal of ethics as “noncognitive” is their way of saying that statements that assert an ought or an ought-not cannot be either true or false.

Not capable of being either true or false, such assertions are noncognitive. They do not belong to the sphere of knowledge, even

in the weaker sense of that term, which connotes verifiable or supportable opinion. Thrown out of the sphere of truth, they are relegated to the sphere of taste. They are at best expressions of personal predilection or prejudice, entirely relative to the feelings, impulses, whims, or wishes of the individual.

If we ask why judgments about what ought to be desired or done are totally incapable of being either true or false, the answer appeals to an understanding first formulated in antiquity and one that these twentieth-century exponents of a non-cognitive ethics adopt.

Once we conceive the truth of a statement as residing in its correspondence with the facts of the matter under consideration, with the way things really are, we are led to the conclusion that only statements that assert that something is or is not the case can be either true or false—true if they assert that which is in fact the way things are, false if they assert the opposite.

All such statements can be characterized as descriptions of reality. Statements that contain the words “ought” or “ought not” are prescriptions or injunctions, not descriptions of anything. If our understanding of truth and falsity conceives them as properties that can be found only in descriptions, then we cannot avoid the skeptical conclusion that prescriptive statements cannot be either true or false.

A moment's reflection will lead us to see that the only way that this skeptical conclusion can be avoided is by expanding our understanding of truth. Can we find another mode of truth, one that is appropriate to prescriptions or injunctions, just as the more familiar mode of truth is appropriate to descriptions or statements of fact? How can oughts and ought-nots be true?

For the answer to this question, we must go back to antiquity—to the thought of Aristotle. Recognizing that the descriptive mode of truth did not apply to prescriptive statements or injunctions (which he called “practical” because they are regulative of human action), Aristotle proposed another mode of truth appropriate to practical judgments.

That mode of truth, he said, consists in the conformity of such judgments with right desire, as the other mode of truth consists in the correspondence of our descriptions of reality with the reality that they claim to describe. Unfortunately, Aristotle did not explain what he meant by right desire. We are, therefore, on our own in pushing the inquiry farther.

What is right desire? It would appear that the answer must be that right desire consists in desiring what we ought to desire, as wrong desire consists in desiring what we ought not to desire.

What ought one to desire? The answer cannot be —simply and without qualification —that we ought to desire what is good.

The good is always and only the desirable and the desirable is always and only the good. As Plato's Socrates repeatedly pointed out, we never desire anything that we do not, at the moment of desiring it, deem to be good. Hence, we must somehow find a way of distinguishing between the goods that we rightly desire and the goods that we wrongly desire.

We are helped to do this by the distinction that Socrates makes between the real and the apparent good. He repeatedly reminds us that our regarding something as good because we in fact desire it does not make it really good in fact. It may, and often does, turn out to be the very opposite. What appears to be good at the time we desire it may prove to be bad for us at some later time or in the long run. The fact that we happen to desire something may make it appear good to us at the time, but it does not make it really good for us.

If the good were always and only that which appears good to us because we consciously desire it, it would be impossible to distinguish between right and wrong desire. Aristotle's conception of practical or prescriptive truth would then become null and void. It can be given content only if we can distinguish between the apparent good (that which we call good simply because we consciously desire it at a given moment) and the real good (that which we ought to desire whether we do in fact desire it or not).

Up to this point we seem to be running around in circles. We have identified the real good with that which we ought to desire. We have interpreted right desire as consisting in desiring what one ought to desire, which amounts to saying that it consists in desiring what is really good. To say that the truth of the prescriptive or practical judgment, which tells us what we ought to desire, consists in conformity with right desire amounts to saying that a prescription is true if it tells us that we ought to desire what we ought to desire. And that is saying nothing at all.

The only way to get out of this circle is to find some way of identifying what is really good for us that does not equate it merely with what we ought to desire. How can that be done? Aristotle provides us with the answer by calling our attention to a fundamental distinction in the realm of desire.

On the one hand, there are the desires with which we are innately endowed. Because they are inherent in human nature, as all truly specific properties are, they are present in all human beings, just as human facial characteristics, human skeletal structure, or human blood types are. Not only are they present in all human beings, as inherent properties of human nature, but they are always operative tendentially or appetitively (that is, they always tend toward or seek fulfillment), whether or not at a given moment we are conscious of such tendencies or drives.

On the other hand, there are the desires that each individual acquires in the course of his or her life, each as the result of his or her own individual temperament and by the circumstances of his or her individual life. Consequently, unlike natural desires, which are the same in all human beings, acquired desires differ from individual to individual, as individuals differ in their temperaments, experiences, and the circumstances of their lives. Also, unlike our natural desires, of which we may not be conscious at a given moment, we are always conscious of our acquired desires at the time they are motivating us in one direction or another.

The quickest and easiest way to become aware of the validity of this distinction between natural and acquired desires is to employ two words that are in everyone's vocabulary and are in daily use. Let us use the word "needs" for our natural desires, and the word "wants" for the desires we acquire. Translated into these familiar terms, what we have said so far boils down to this: that all human beings have the same specifically human needs, whereas individuals differ from one another with regard to the things they want.

The use of the words "need" and "want" enables us to go further. Our common understanding of needs provides us at once with the insight that there are no wrong or misguided needs. That is just another way of saying that we never need anything that is really bad for us—something we ought to avoid. We recognize that we can have wrong or misguided wants. That which we want may appear to be good to us at the time, but it may not be really good for us. Our needs are never excessive, as our wants often are. We can want too much of a good thing, but we can never need too much of whatever it is we need. We can certainly want more than we need.

One thing more, and most important of all: we cannot ever say that we ought or ought not to need something. The words "ought" and "ought not" apply only to wants, never to needs. This means that the natural desires that are our inborn needs enter into the sphere of our voluntary conduct only through the operation of our acquired desires or wants.

In other words, we may or may not in fact want what we need. Almost all of us want things that we do not need and fail to want things that we do need. In the statement just made lies the crux of the matter. We ought to want the things we need. We ought not to want the things we do not need if wanting them interferes with our wanting—and acquiring—the things we do need.

The distinction between needs and wants enables us to draw the line between real goods and apparent goods. Those things that satisfy or fulfill our needs or natural desires are things that are

really good for us. Those that satisfy our wants or acquired desires are things that appear good to us when we consciously desire them. If we need them as well as want them, they are also really good for us. However, if we only want them and do not need them, they will nevertheless appear good to us because we want them. Beyond that, they may either turn out to be harmless or innocuous (in that they do not impede or prevent our acquiring the real goods we need) or they may turn out to be the very opposite (quite harmful or really bad for us because they somehow deprive us of one another of the real goods we need).

We cannot ever be mistaken about our wants. No one can be incorrect in saying that he wants something. But it is quite possible for individuals to be mistaken about their needs. Children are frequently given to thinking or saying that they need something when they should have said that they want it. Adults are prone to making the same mistake. If we can be mistaken about our needs, does not that weaken the underpinning of our argument so far? To avoid this, we must be able to determine with substantial accuracy the needs inherent in human nature.

Since their gratification often requires the presence of certain favourable environmental circumstances, we must also be able to determine the indispensable external conditions that function instrumentally in the satisfaction of needs (e.g., a healthy environment is instrumentally needed to safeguard the health of its members). Success in these efforts depends on the adequacy of our knowledge and understanding of human nature in itself and in its relation to the environment.

It is by reference to our common human needs that we claim to know what is really good for all human beings. Knowing this, we are also justified in claiming that we can determine the truth or falsity of prescriptions or injunctions. As Aristotle said, prescriptions are true if they conform to right desire. All our needs are right desires because those things that satisfy our natural desires are things that are really good for us. When we want what we need, our wants are also right desires.

The injunction to want knowledge, for example, is a true prescription--the true statement of an ought—because human beings all need knowledge. As Aristotle pointed out, man by nature desires to know. Since the acquired desire for knowledge is a right desire, because it consists in wanting what everyone needs, the prescription “You ought to want and seek knowledge” is universally and objectively true—true for all human beings—because it conforms to a right desire that is rooted in a natural need.

No one, I think, would question man's need for knowledge or the truth of the prescription that everyone ought to want and

seek knowledge. That truth comes to us as the conclusion of reasoning that rests on two premises.

The first is a categorical prescription or injunction: We ought to desire (seek and acquire) that which is really good for us. The second is a statement of fact about human nature: Man has a potentiality or capacity for knowing that tends toward or seeks fulfillment through the acquirement of knowledge. In other words, the facts about human nature are such that, if we are correct in our grasp of them, we can say that man needs knowledge and that knowledge is really good for man.

Now, if the foregoing categorical prescription or injunction is true and if, in addition, the foregoing statement of fact about human nature's involving a need for knowledge is true, then the prescriptive conclusion, that everyone ought to want and seek knowledge, not only follows from the premises, but is also true—true by conforming to right desire as set forth in the categorical prescription that we ought to want and seek that which is really good for us (i.e., that which by nature we need).

The truth of the categorical prescription that underlies every piece of reasoning that leads to a true prescriptive conclusion is a self-evident truth. Anyone can test this for himself by trying to think the opposite and finding it impossible. We simply cannot think that we ought to desire that which is really bad for us or that we ought not to desire that which is really good for us.

Without knowing in advance which things are in fact really good or bad for us, we do know at once that “ought to desire” is inseparable in its meaning from the meaning of “really good,” just as we know at once that the parts of a physical whole are always less than the whole. It is impossible to think the opposite just as it is impossible to think that we ought to desire that which is really bad for us. We acknowledge a truth as self-evident as soon as we acknowledge the impossibility of thinking the opposite.

What about the truth of the other premise in the reasoning? That is a factual premise. It asserts a fact about human nature. As I pointed out a little earlier, Aristotle's observation that man by nature desires to know seems unquestionable. Man's natural desire or need for knowledge being acknowledged, the factual premise can be asserted as true—if not with certitude, then with a very high degree of assurance. It is beyond a reasonable doubt, if not beyond the shadow of a doubt. That suffices for present purposes.

What about other natural desires or needs, about which we must make accurate statements of fact if we are to proceed with reasoning that will yield us other true prescriptive conclusions? I have already admitted that, while we can never make a misstatement about our wants, we may be mistaken about our needs, declaring that we need something that we should have said

we wanted, or failing to recognize that we need something that we do not want. Such mistakes would result in false rather than true factual assertions about human nature and the desires that are inherent in it.

The consequence of this is obvious. The prescriptive conclusions to which our practical reasoning would lead us would then be false rather than true, practically or prescriptively false because the errors we have made about matters of fact prevent the conclusions from conforming to right desire. Therefore, what remains for further inquiry is whether our knowledge of human nature enables us to identify—with sufficient assurance, not with certitude—the real goods that fulfill man's natural desires or needs.

I conceded earlier that David Hume was correct in pointing out that, from our knowledge of matters of fact about reality or real existence, *and from that alone*, we cannot validly reason to a true prescriptive conclusion—a judgment about what one ought or ought not to desire to do. In the foregoing statement, I have italicized the “and from that alone.” Upon that qualification, the correctness of Hume's point rests. It follows therefore, that practical or prescriptive reasoning can be validly carried on if it does not rely upon factual knowledge alone. The reasoning to be found earlier in this lecture relies on factual knowledge but not on that alone. Factual knowledge is represented solely in the second or minor premise—the one that asserts a certain fact about human nature, for example, that man by nature desires to know.

The prescriptive conclusion, that everyone ought to want and seek knowledge, does not rest on that premise alone. It rests on that premise combined with the first and major premise—a categorical prescription that is self-evidently true, the injunction that we ought to want and seek whatever is really good for us. Upon this one categorical prescription rest all the prescriptive truths we can validate concerning the real goods that we ought to seek, limited only by the extent to which we can discover, with reasonable assurance, the facts about human nature and its inherent desires or needs.

THE END



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