Bridging Contradictions: The Power and Perils of the Task

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the scientifically conceived task and its modern analogue, management objectives, cannot be denied. Its source, however, lies not in the utilitarian premises Taylor inherited from Bentham. Rather than deriving its potency from the premise of the "natural identity of interests", the logic of the task is, under certain conditions, inherently powerful. Indeed it forms part of a dialectical process which creates a functional equivalent to identity of interests. Yet in this very effectiveness a danger resides. The task may overwhelm larger goals or even obliterate them—a process made more likely and perilous by a false perception of identity of interests. This process—its power and perils—is expressed in The Bridge Over the River Kwai.

I. Introduction:

Few, if any, contemporary social theorists would assert or assume the identity of human interests. Society is divided: racially, ethnically, economically, socially, culturally, religiously, and politically. Although many social scientists remain in denial regarding the latest scientific findings of evolutionary psychology, genetics and the other biological sciences, the weight of evidence favors the notion that human conflicts are based in human nature, most especially in the structure of our brains and that, generally speaking, about 50-75% is hereditary [Dawson, Pinker]. This mounting evidence does not, of course, imply moral approbation or disapproval of human behavior, no matter how probable. Because something is natural does not imply it is good (the Naturalistic Fallacy). Equally, because something is good does not imply that it is natural (the Moralistic Fallacy). Even if biological, psychological, genetic, neurological or evolutionary scientists claimed that their conception of human nature implied a hard determinism, and no one does, this determinism would not preclude social policies aimed at punishing or curtailing undesirable behavior. Perhaps the leading 'determinist' philosopher, Benedict Spinoza, argued precisely this point three hundred years ago [Spinoza]. Therefore, questions regarding social policies remain within the scope of rational inquiry as do their application, although some legislative/bureaucratic modesty should prevail in the light of the growing evidence that there is a human nature that is a product of both heredity and experience.

Little changes when the focus shifts to organizational theory or the theory of the firm. Executives largely exist to induce employees to use their time, talent and energy to achieve organizational goals [Barnard, Drucker]. Inducement is necessary because human interests are not identical and cannot be so considered this side of utopia. At best, cooperation is a sometime thing. Perhaps, from his well-ordered grave, the old-fashioned, Procrustean, Frederick Taylor would see this fact as a sign of human perversity [Papathanasis]. Armed with the Excalibur of the Task, he would continue to assert the near identity of human interests, at least within an organization. Perhaps this is too strong. He would assert that perceived differences are largely exaggerated and completely subject to reconsideration by the application of incentives based on scientific management. For the rest of us human strife seems inevitable and impervious to the logic of the task or any other technique which idealizes a 'mechanical' conception of human activity and its association with cost/benefit analysis. I am not claiming that human beings resist being calculating machines, although most of us do. I claim, rather, that even when we are not emotionally engaged or overwrought, we are subject to

conflicting rational interests and values and to competing methods for meeting our needs in any given existential situation. This is simply one way of saying that humans are complex animals. With 100 trillion neural connections, how could it be otherwise [Pinker, *How*]? It is hardly surprising that our lives are complicated and that we often long for simplicity. This is so, even when we restrict our concerns to our private concerns. When these are overlaid with organizational and other public or external factors, coming to proper decisions or even deciding at all, becomes problematic. Yet the fact is that these decisions are made and are sometimes made according to the Aristotelian canons of informed choice [Aristotle]. Making such choices is an extraordinarily complex task:

Ethics in the Aristotelian tradition is not a separate province in which a freely willing moral agent struggles within himself in a fretful effort to do honor to or conform to a universally binding moral law or even calculate profit and loss. It is a sober reckoning, within the communal life, of policy and the whole domain of practice: goals of life and types of character they call forth both in personal development and in institutional relations, modes of decision and guidance of conduct, problems of internal conflict and ultimate reflections on well-being [Edel].

For along with the profound individuality of our human endowments, we are also able, for equally sound biological reasons, to make cooperative decisions [Pinker]. It must be emphasized that cooperation can be rational; it can be as rigorously based on cost/benefits as any 'selfish' decision [Pinker]. As Aristotle pointed out 2500 years ago, no human being is self-sufficient [Aristotle]. We need each other and we need a relatively complex social/political organization to realize our humanity. Only beasts and gods can live alone. The difficulty, then as now, is how to get profoundly individualistic and therefore conflictual individuals to realize their common interests and to effectuate their plans for accomplishing their common goals. One answer has been to remove the possibility for conflict even at the price of stifling individuality: the totalitarian answer. The 'liberal' approach tries to accommodate human freedom, variously defined, with the need to accomplish complex goals requires sustained and coordinated cooperation. Of course the liberal approach assumes that task accomplishment cannot always be done 'mechanically,' that is, according to Taylor's scientific management.

This essay is concerned with those tasks that require the complex and sustained cooperation of human beings who operate as if they are free to make their own decisions and their own accommodation to their own definitions of necessity [Barnard]. In other words, this essay assumes that the proper locus of human decisions is the individual and that effective organizations will accommodate this assumption. Free individuals will only support liberal organizations. But first a sketch of Taylor's work is necessary.

II.   The utilitarian basis of Taylor's thought:

Believing in the assumption of the identity of interests forms part of the dialectic which creates it, giving it pragmatic, if not logical, force, because it is a powerful source of cooperation. The other part of the dialectic is the scientifically conceived task. Together they can move willingness to cooperate off the "zero point" and thus provide organizations with the sine qua non of their effectiveness [Barnard, p.84; Vasillopulos]. In other words, one need not premise effectiveness of the task or, any other ordered human activity, on identity of interests. A perception of mutual interest, or at least its pragmatic equivalent, can be created by the prospect of effectiveness, a promise lent credibility by well-conceived tasks. Thus, in an unexpected and odd way, Taylor was correct, at least under certain circumstances. For this reason his ideas have found contemporary expression even by those who do not consider themselves scientific managers. It found expression almost one hundred years before Taylor in utilitarianism.

Utilitarian thought developed under the spell of Isaac Newton. In an atmosphere of political crisis he

founded of a science of nature in accordance with one principle: the law of attraction. This was more than a scientific accomplishment of the first magnitude. By extension, it promised resolution of all moral and political conflicts. Properly understood human behavior did not differ significantly from Newtonian mechanics. "It is possible to conduct one's study of man as an individual and as a social being in the same way that the physicist studies other matters, and here again to apply the Newtonian method with a view to determining the smallest possible number of general simple laws which, once discovered, will enable all the detail of phenomena to be explained by a synthetic and deductive method" [Halevy, p.6].

Contrary to this understanding of Aristotle, positivists, or in the terminology of this section, 'Newtonians' in their quest for explanation look for law-like behavior. Using a Newtonian conception of physics, they examine, measure and verify the behavior of humans as though they were billiard balls. Though Weber, as befits a founder of modern social science, yearned for social scientific laws, he was not so naive as to believe finding them would herald a brave new world, based on reason, justice and wisdom:

Even with the widest imaginable knowledge of 'laws,' we are helpless in the face of the question: how is the causal explanation of an individual fact possible —since a description of even the smallest slice of reality can never be exhaustive.... Order is brought to chaos only on the condition that in every case a part of the concrete reality is interesting and significant to us, because only it is related to the cultural values with which we approach reality [Weber, p.384].

From this perspective billiard balls could never serve as human analogues, because what should interest us was precisely what the Newtonian chose to ignore: the less than mathematical behavior of the balls. Few social scientists are satisfied with mathematical accounts of 'human' behavior in would-be vacuums. Behavior demands to be understood in its own terms, which means in its environment—physical, cultural, economic, political, psychological or aesthetic. Even billiard balls, when considered in their environment, not as mathematical relationships, become inordinately complex. They are round only in degree and roll on tables only problematically flat. If I may translate, *albeit* roughly, the 'environment of the billiard balls' into the terms 'quality of an event' we can perhaps better understand why Weber thought we needed to get beyond (not do without) positivism. For Weber: The quality of an event as a 'social economic' event is not something which it possesses 'objectively' it is rather conditioned by our orientation of our cognitive interest as it arises away from the specific cultural significance that we attribute to an event in a given case [Weber, p.370]. The implication of his thesis is that 'to the extent that our (read Weber's) science imputes particular causes...it seeks historical knowledge [Weber, p.372]. Thus the quality of the social event was what called for the application of technique, save for those who were interested in verification for its own sake. Was this scientific? It was neither generalizable, nor replicable. It was historical. From this perspective the positivist or Newtonian effort to remove mathematical impurities from the billiard balls was largely wasted. Insofar as it succeeded and considered its success equivalent to explanation, it removed significance from the inquiry. Methodological sophistication could not cross the logical chasm between inquiry and application.

In lieu of the law of attraction, utilitarians postulated the principle of "fusion of interests," which held that the sympathetic operation of each individual conscience produced "identity of the personal and the general interest" [Halevy, p.13]. There were two variants: the first held that egoism automatically produced the general good; the second that a legislator was required to perceive and enforce the already existent overlap of interests [Halevy, pp.13-17]. The most important utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham, believed in an extreme version of the automatic production of the general good: he "argued from the persistence of the human species that egoistic motives must predominate: could humanity survive for a single moment if each individual were engaged in

promoting the interest of his neighbor at the expense of his own?" [Halevy].

Paradox seems unavoidable. If an identity of interests exists, wherein lies the expense? The only way to deny one's own interest would be to deny one's neighbor's. This curious and self-defeating inversion of the Golden Rule formed, nevertheless, the basis of Bentham's belief in a "natural identity of interests" [Halevy]. The paradox can perhaps be cured by postulating that an effort to see with another's eyes would cloud not only one's own perspective but distort the other's interest. A kind of futile folly of well-intentioned imputation would result, leaving everyone hopelessly confused. This interpretation finds support in Bentham's antipathy to the subjective and delight in the measurable. He even defined the study of morality as the understanding of measurable utility. Otherwise, it cannot be a social science [Halevy, p.28]!

Much of this has a contemporary ring, one which is not limited to libertarian or Friedmanist circles. Yet, the premise of utilitarian thought—the identity of interests—jars modern assumptions. Conservatives acknowledge divergent interests, and sometimes even inequities, but believe little can be done which would not result in more harm than good. Punish the miscreants. Reward the virtuous. How else can society operate productively, that is, efficiently? While the more tender-minded prefer treating the miscreants or removing the social "causes" of their misbehavior, they also favor virtue, although they would not restrict the label to the productive. Even unreconstructed liberals and socialists believe in the necessity of a healthy economy, if only to finance social reform.

I cite these ideological positions to indicate how far one can diverge from Bentham's major premise and still remain faithful to many of his subordinate arguments and policy implications. It is a measure of Bentham's continuing influence on modern life or rather that he understood the rationality of human nature hat nearly everyone is a utilitarian of one sort or another. Who does not count the cost or assess the benefit? As in all things, however, Taylor was more rigorous. With Bentham he believed in an identity of interests, at least regarding the firm. More than historically interesting, Taylor's utilitarianism retains, through its many practitioners, pragmatic significance.

There is irony in this dialectical relationship of task and interest. Few thinkers are more linear than either Taylor or Bentham. Yet, instead of the logic of the task gaining deductive cogency from the premise of an identity of interests, the task creates dialectically a functional identity of interests. This irony is compounded for Bentham, who was suspicious of "corporate" action seeing in groups what the Federalists saw in factions, a pernicious tendency to deny both the interests of the larger society and the individual [Halevy, p.117]. (One is tempted to say therefore the individual or vice versa.)   Irony aside, the logic of the task was for Taylor the solvent of human conflict. The task did not create an identity of human interests so much as indicate how human perversity, which denied it, could be defeated. Perversity, considered as indolence or unexamined habit or, more generally, the unwillingness to analyze human activity systematically, was the root of conflict. Conflict—unnatural and unnecessary—frustrated the natural plan or at least the human portion of it. Conflict indicated deviance from a scientifically ordered norm predicated on a natural identity of human interests. To withhold cooperation or even dissent from a properly conceived and administered task was irrational [Papathanasis].

It has, of course, proved relatively easy for researchers to undercut much of Taylorism. His rationalistic assumptions seem flawed, all the more as frightening caricatures which too often underpin authoritarian regimes. Lenin, for example, believed in Scientific Management. Few social theorists, commentators, or politicians in Western Democracies deny there is more than one dimension to human rationality. Alongside the logic of the task there exists the logic of the human group and even the logic of individual rebellion, to say nothing of political action. It has become a parlor game to ridicule the assumptions of goal-directed,

self-consistent and well-adjusted mankind. Not only are humans contradictory, not only do they resist their organizations, their societies and themselves, they do so in ways which they know will be injurious. Taylor has had rough treatment not only from modern research but from history. The events of the last half-century make it difficult to think of Taylor as anything but an Edwardian relic without the capacity for fin de siècle enjoyment. It cannot be doubted, however, that many of his techniques and still more of his ideas flow through managerial brains, but seldom without realizing that these concepts and skills are employed to overcome the consequences of divergent interests, not to serve their identity. No matter how much sense the logic of the task makes, it cannot override other expressions of human rationality or the occasional irrational assertion of human freedom. It cannot deny their existence perhaps, but may deny their effects. The logic of the task can override human action—rational and irrational—and do so even when the situation is fraught with undeniable conflict: war. The logic of the task can overwhelm the reality of the job, even when it lends aid and comfort to the enemy.

III.   The Conquest of War: The Bridge on the River Kwai:

I make no apology for the use of fiction in this analysis. A word, however, might comfort the skeptical. The realism of fiction, particularly the war novel, is normally of a very high order, as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the *Naked and the Dead*, among others, demonstrate. To be effective their characters and plots must be credible. They must reflect basic human needs and problems many of which prevail in corporate life. If one stresses its leading character and ignores much of its plot to avoid distorting the "data" with dramatic action, the truth of the novel is undeniable. Anyone who reads the book or views the film with a manager's eye cannot avoid focusing on the exceptionally able Colonel Nicholson. The novel's first sentence establishes the premise of war and pushes it to the "inseparable gap between East and West" [Boulle, p. 9]. Almost immediately it subverts the distinction by calling it an "illusion" and finally suggests an identity of Colonel Saito, the Japanese commandant, and Colonel Nicholson. The twain has met. It will in time be rudely broken, but only by intrusion of a force alien to both men, commandos who treat the bridge as a military target, not a great achievement.

It is important to realize that the colonels despised each other—reflecting the prejudices of their cultures reinforced by the antagonism of brutal jungle warfare. Only when the task of the bridge-building became paramount did the traditional military struggle for authority and control between the commanders abate and finally disappear. Although Colonel Saito gave something of a "pep talk" regarding the "specific task", there was little doubt he would treat any resistance with cruel measures [Boulle, p.29]. Colonel Nicholson objected on traditional caste grounds buttressed by the Geneva Convention to Saito's orders that British officer perform manual labor. Though severely beaten he continued to defy Saito. Stalemate resulted. Under a deadline to complete the bridge, Colonel Saito relented. British officers would be expected only to supervise their men for "maximum efficiency" [ibid, p.51]. Colonel Nicholson and his staff then set to work as if the task were their own. Building the bridge was not simply a civil engineering problem. On the basis of time studies, Nicholson's staff determined that the work quotas set by the Japanese were too low and should be raised at once [Boulle, p.84]. Saito, somewhat confused but grateful, relinquished effective control of the project. The British or, more accurately, the task took over.

It should be emphasized that the logic of the task, not a group of enthusiastic soldiers, was the dominant element in the process. The Japanese could have gotten a bridge built with the coerced assistance of the POWs. But the bridge over the River Kwai could only be built by Colonel Nicholson and his men or men very much like them. Over and over the Western mode of thinking is contrasted to the Eastern and nowhere is this more evident than in the managerial language of the British officers. Colonel Nicholson, Major Hughes and Captain

Reeves speak continually in terms of managerial functions: "Sometimes I feel like screaming at the sight of such inefficiency" [Boulle, p.56]. "These Orientals have to be shown how incompetent they are, when it comes to the man management" [Boulle, p.57]. "They don't realize they'd save time by planning in advance" [Boulle, p.56]. (This book was written when it was inconceivable that the West would admire Japanese management.)

The author summed up this manager's view of the world: "Western mechanical procedure entails a lot of grueling preliminaries, which swell and multiply the number of operations.... They entail, for instance, a detailed plan; and for this plan to be made it is essential to determine in advance...a mass of details [which] entail further calculations.... Mechanics, in fact, entail a complete a priori knowledge; and this mental creation ...is not the least important of the many achievements of Western genius" [Boulle, p.89]. When coupled with executive ability this genius achieves enormous power. Colonel Nicholson "had the practical sense of a born leader, who never loses sight of his objective or the means at his disposal and who keeps subordinates perfectly balanced between idealism and reality" [Boulle, p.93].

Colonel Nicholson and his staff are more than adherents to the logic of the task as a way of getting things done. They have an artistic, almost religious, appreciation of their systematic way of thinking which is the only alternative to "chaos" [Boulle, p.69]. They considered their effectiveness a passport to immortality [Boulle, p.94]: "Six hundred years!" exclaimed the Colonel. There was a glint in his eye as he involuntarily turned toward the river. "Six hundred years, Reeves—that would be a pretty good show!" Thus intoxicated, there could be and was no consideration of the military purpose of the bridge or the mission of the British Army. Immersed in the glories of achievement, discussion was limited to technical considerations and to having the Japanese appreciate their efforts to please them: "You must use fresh timber. We can't achieve the impossible. If they blame us for any fault in construction, at least we'll be able to tell them that it couldn't be avoided" [Boulle]. The logic of the task overwhelms not only chaos but the antagonism of war.

This startling turn of events was foreshadowed by Colonel Nicholson's hatred of guerilla conflict. He stifled his men's passive resistance to their Japanese conquerors even before the bridge became a task [Boulle, p.13]. After work commenced Nicholson considered guerilla tactics against the Japanese as insubordinate acts to him. Coupled with the need for achievement, the satisfaction of cooperation and the security of authority, the task transformed enemies into partners. When properly conceived and competently administered the task can create, at least pragmatically, an identity of human interests and do so in defiance of many other values.

In the case of Colonel Nicholson it did so (in my view) wrongly. The job of a prisoner of war is not suspended. The task of building a bridge for a military purpose violates that job. (In a class of mine held on an army post, Nicholson was "court-martialed and convicted" by Vietnam veterans for his actions.) Any ancillary purposes served by building the bridge might mitigate but not cure the offense and therefore are not controlling. If, for example, the morale and health of the men were improved by their efforts to build the bridge, this could only be justified in the warrior's code if the morale was to support resistance to the enemy. On the River Kwai there was no pretence of military resistance to the Japanese.

IV.	The Dilemma of Effectiveness:

The power of the task moved Nicholson from a conviction that gentlemen follow orders—even the orders of their captors—to an obsession to enlist all the resources at his disposal to help the enemy do what he cannot do for himself. The instincts of his men served better the mission of British arms than the training of their commander. The nonrational or even irrational hatred of the enemy served better the purposes of Britain than the rational or super-rational techniques of modern society which so easily obliterated more traditional values. Here is a true dilemma: In this glorious respect for civility, the gentleman engineer qua commander finds an answer to all who deny limits to warfare; but can he ask the larger uncomfortable questions or even

perceive their existence? To what end civility? To what purpose rules? Why are we alive? Why are we fighting? And so on.... Even if these questions be considered too philosophical to be fit subjects for soldiers or gentlemen, what of the question of mission? What of the duty to impede the enemy? On what grounds can officers challenge the instincts of their men to resist the enemy? Or to collaborate? None of these questions can be properly avoided by a conscientious commander?

There is little need to spell out the equivalent responsibilities of an executive in the peaceful competition for the control of economic resources. Nor is there need to elaborate the idea that the pitfalls are similar if not identical. The power of the task is undeniable. Although contemporary theorists and managers may not accept the principle of the identity of interests, the logic of the task remains central to their thought and action. There is more to this than the rudimentary and common sense expression of managing by objectives.

Like Colonel Nicholson and his staff, executives admire the power of their techniques to shape recalcitrant material into lasting achievements. It is useless, futile and perhaps foolish to deny their satisfaction, to keep their attitudes as objective and sober as the logic of the task. Human resource management efforts more often move in the opposite direction. The latest label for these unceasing efforts is corporate culture. The common sense of objectives needs to be supplemented with enthusiasm if they are to be fulfilled. More soberly, loyalty and other non-utilitarian, non-objective, unmeasurables may be essential to the securing of the cooperation necessary to a vital organization [Barnard, p.84].

Executives and other leaders can, however, remain alert to the perils of effectiveness arising from technical virtuosity. The danger seems especially acute when managerial expertise recognizes no inherent limits. Taylor was interested only in production. He did not care what workers thought. Modern inculcators of corporate culture see the power which inheres in a properly "acculturated" worker. It is equally important to see the perils which inhere in effective corporate cultures. An identity of interests falsely created may be more dangerous--for the society, the firm and the individual--than an identity of interests mistakenly premised in a theory. The separation of technical achievement from purpose jeopardizes the survival of the organization [Vasillopulos, 'Surprise']. Turning a large percentage of its most capable people into technocrats jeopardizes the larger society. Encouraging individuals so to transform themselves subverts their humanity by subordinating it to a single value.

Taken together these processes may destroy the very civilization Colonel Nicholson so proudly represented. "No, it was not funny; it was rather pathetic; he was so representative of all the past victims of the great Joke. But it is by folly alone that the world moves, and so it is a respectable thing upon the whole. And, besides, he was what one would call a good man" [Boulle, epigraph, quoting Joseph Conrad]. Herein lies the danger. The virtues of a good man are disarming. He can lead others without coercion and therefore without resistance. Good men can thus accomplish more than evil men, for their authority is not so ephemeral. This is particularly true when their virtues can be institutionalized; or, even more powerfully, when their virtues become a way of thinking and conceiving the world. Colonel Nicholson did not build a good bridge because he was a good man. He built a good bridge because he could not do otherwise, even when a defective one would have served his nation by fulfilling his mission. He could not do otherwise because he could not defy the logic of the task. For unlike the cruel beatings which rained on him from without, the logic of the task controlled him from within. It would be a major misconception to see in Colonel Nicholson's actions a mistake or an error in judgment. His fault was more grievous. He used his position of authority and his great abilities to undercut his organization's military mission. As an inadvertent fifth columnist he succeeded beyond all expectation. Consider his accomplishment: He overcame his men's hatred for the Japanese—racial and national—into a cheerful rivalry to determine which "soldiers" were more productive. However intrinsically laudable this

process for world peace or even for peaceful competition among departments in the same firm, in Colonel Nicholson's situation, the result was disastrous.

An organization exists to achieve what cannot be otherwise accomplished, not to make friends of enemies or any other extra-organizational goal. Leaders or executives exist not to accomplish any worthwhile task but to achieve the organization's mission by the fulfilling of objectives subordinate to that mission within the constraints of the larger society [Barnard]. These comments would be too banal to recite were it not for the power of the task to defeat this message. Armed with proven techniques employed with religious zeal, competent leaders and their followers—both in service to needs to achieve, to be secure, to be respected—constitute an almost irresistible force, one which our civilization depends on to provide effective organizations. But, to employ Newtonian language, this force can be employed with equal and opposite effect, negating the purpose of the organization and perhaps, in the final analysis, civilized life itself.

The danger seems more virulent when the utilitarian premise of natural identity of interests is operationalized. Management by objectives and other contemporary approaches need no such premise. But this difference—Important as it is—is not necessarily sufficient to keep the logic of the task from overwhelming larger organizational goals. For technical achievement can create the functional equivalent of identity of interests. Indeed this alchemy is often one of the major objectives of human resource management, which of course complicates the problem of keeping tasks subordinate to mission. Furthermore, like any other executive, Colonel Nicholson's job would have been made much more complex—perhaps intolerably so—had he perceived it properly. Like most executives he had a preference for simplicity. This, too, is part of the problem, for a great deal of management is entailed in the process of making the complex simple or at least simpler. Most of the time, this process is unobjectionable. But occasionally it creates impediments to the accomplishment of the mission in direct proportion as it fulfills the logic of the task. It is an executive function to know when and to know how to keep the logic of the task in organizational perspective.

I'm not sure these executive functions can be structured. I'm more certain they resist the utilitarian ideal of objective measurement. Yet it is not too much to ask of modern executives and commanders to keep the potential contradictions of their organizations in mind. Indeed in them may lie the means of preventing the inappropriate resolution of conflicting values and perspectives. Nor is it too much to expect them to resist the intoxicating effects of technical achievements, however they are defined. Not too much to ask perhaps, but not so simple as is generally understood. For what is required is a capacity to countervail the effects of the virtues which in large measure conditioned their selection for ever greater responsibilities. This kind of self-restraint seems less likely to be the product of utilitarian calculus than of the traditional processes of character formation, vague and ill-defined as ever.

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