

## "...IS ITS OWN REWARD...":

### THE POWER & DANGER OF SELF-VALIDATING VALUES

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The flag will be in the tube's eye, and thus in the people's eyes, our eyes, as the first President Debate of '88 comes off this coming Sunday. How do I know? Because both candidates have been more-patriotic-than-thou wrapping themselves in the visual symbol of our civil religion....This Thinksheet is about the power and danger of self-validating values, values that need no arguments from consequences: they just are, they are there, they are here "in place," and they are (as we Christians say God is in Jesus) "for us." Yes, there are absolute values, and one transcendent "pearl-of-great-price" value: but which values have that status, and which of those is supreme, the summum bonum? The more pluralistic a society, the harder both questions are to answer, and the harder it is to candidate for the Presidency....Let's see....

1. **"Money is its own reward."** For the 100% capitalist, the spending power of money is of only secondary interest: it's what it can do for you peace-of-mind-wise and status-wise that really counts. Compared with the religion of grace, the religion of money is like eternal security and being a child of God....The reason this self-validating value is here in quotes is that the sentence is one of many MINIMS (as opposed to maxims--title of Tom Weller's new book [Houghton Mifflin] of statements "expressed in proverbial or sentential [sic: "sententious"] form but having no general application or practical use whatever"--an assertion I'd challenge in the case of this minim)...."The business of America is business."....Henry Adams, whose business was letters & who was scion to a great American family whose business was politics, worked away on two critical convictions: that the alliance of money & power, ie, capitalistic government, is inevitably corrupting; and that overbelief in science correlates with underbelief in God, leaving religion weakened to resist the seductions of mammon. His novel DEMOCRACY was popular the year he died & I was born, 1918....Lewis H. Lapham's recent MONEY AND CLASS IN AMERICA: NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS ON OUR CIVIL RELIGION wittily spikes our country's love-affair with money as "synonymous with religious devotion." Money mania, for many, is above social conscience, personal morality, and national purpose; and disaster is approaching as the have / have-not gap widens.

2. **Pleasure is its own reward.** If it walks like a duck & quacks like a duck, you're still free to call it whatever you want to. I call it narcissistic hedonism. As surely as God has designed physical pain as a signal of something physically wrong, God has built boredom into every excess of pleasure in order to signal something spiritually wrong. As long as their money holds out, hedonists can, by jumping from one pleasure to another and then another, avoid fully facing the spiritual pain of boredom....Irony: Money, possessions, dispossess the soul, as pleasure eventually dispossesses the body. Money & pleasure become their own punishment.

3. **Patriotism is its own reward.** Any value overvalued & thus become an idol parades itself as ultimate, as not to be judged by consequences, as its own reward. If the authentic or phoney patriot is elected to office, there are rewards additional to patriotism, to the love of and dedication (not, please, devotion!) to one's country. ...Patriotism is a blessing, superpatriotism (chauvinism) is a curse--as in the "bear any burden" inaugural speech Theo. Sorensen wrote for JFK, who soon thereafter sent our troops to Vietnam. Dirty rhetorician Roger Ailes has Bush keeping Dukakis defending his patriotism as well as resisting being plastered with the "Liberal!" label. The response to the Pledge flap: the House of Representatives now begins every session with it. May the better-seeming patriot win? Both men are avoiding the explosive issues while their trainers-keepers electronically manipulate sight-and-sound bites. Henry Adams worried that religion might not endure science: can democracy now endure communications-technology?

4. **Love is its own reward.** Full love is both affective (feelingful) and active (faithful in companionship and support). Since it's closer to being self-validating than is any other value, why is it, with so many, so fragile? Because it is, of all values, the most costly; and when the boredom gets thick and the going gets rough, many conclude that the cost is too great even though the potential rewards are the greatest....Only love for God is its own reward, so "Seek first...." (Mt.6.33: wanting God's will for yourself and the world relativizes "all these other things," which God provides as we need them in pursuit of this goal).