

# The Extinction of Desire

A Tale of Enlightenment

Michael Boylan





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## **The Four Noble Truths**

Sarvam Duhkha: All is suffering

Trishna: Desire is the cause of suffering

Nirvana: The extinction of desire liberates one from suffering

Madhyamarga: The direction to follow is the Eightfold Path

# Foreword

Charles Johnson

After reading philosopher Michael Boylan's entertaining and thought-provoking philosophical narrative, *The Extinction of Desire*, I found myself thinking of the real-life morality tale of Andrew Jackson Whittaker Jr., a 57-year-old native of Charleston, West Virginia, who in 2004 won the largest undivided lottery in the history of the United States: a Powerball jackpot worth \$314 million. This good fortune, or so some claimed, was the American Dream of material prosperity come true, and Whittaker donated \$20 million of his new-found wealth to various charities. But within two years this dream of winning "the cosmic lotto" and finding "a way to beat one's karma," as Boylan so beautifully describes the addiction to betting, transformed into a terrifying modern-day Buddhist parable. In August 2003, a strip club owner and his girlfriend were charged with drugging Whittaker and stealing from his SUV a briefcase containing \$545,000 in cash and checks. In March of the next year, his SUV was broken into again, and a thief stole \$100 in a bank bag. His office was broken into – on that occasion \$2,000 was taken. Then his home was broken into on the day the dead body of an 18-year-old boy, a friend of his granddaughter Brandi Lasha Bragg, was discovered on the premises. (Some claimed she supplied the boy with drugs purchased with money Whittaker gave her.) By March of 2006, his granddaughter was missing. Two years earlier, an employee at a

race track and casino alleged that Whittaker sexually assaulted her. By December of 2004, he had been arrested twice for drunken driving and ordered to enter rehab for a 28-day period. He also faced charges for attacking a bar manager. In 2006, Whittaker's wife Jewel told the *Charleston Gazette* that, "I wish all of this had never happened. I wish I would have torn the ticket up."

Perhaps these days Jack Whittaker is pondering the question asked in the opening sentence of *The Extinction of Desire*, "What would you do if you suddenly became rich?" In the case of this novel's protagonist, Michael O'Meara, a Fairview High School teacher in Bethesda, Maryland, the sudden windfall involved – \$1 million received after a freak accident wipes out his family, leaving him the only heir – is miniscule compared to Whittaker's, but that seven-figure sum is enough to trigger a destabilizing "chain reaction" in which, he says, "I found myself confronted with myself. And I wasn't really prepared for that." In other words, he must critically examine his "worldview," a key concept in Boylan's writings as a professional philosopher. In that analytic context, he says of the Personal Worldview Imperative that, "All people must develop a single comprehensive and internally coherent worldview that is good and that we strive to act out in our daily lives." The plot and broad cast of characters in *The Extinction of Desire* pressure O'Meara to wonder, "Was it my own tattered worldview that was ready for collapse?" The answer is yes, but his achieving a new one, far from taking place in a comfortable classroom setting, can only be arrived at through an outer and inner journey into what phenomenologists have referred to as the *Lebenswelt* ("Life-world"), of unpredictably dangerous real people, real things, and real places.

For in the best philosophical fiction, ideas do not float disembodied far above human experience in a remote (or immanent) Platonic realm of forms, abstracted from what Ch'an (Zen) Buddhists would call the everydayness of life. On the contrary: engaging philosophical fiction returns intellectual questions to their place of origin, which is the muck and mud and sweaty

messiness, the ambiguity of lived experience so overrich in meaning prior to our truncating explanations and the Procrustean beds of our theories. Then the novelist dramatizes these experiences and ideas captured in their “wild being” (as philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty once put it) in a process that has epistemological importance insofar as new, hitherto unseen or concealed profiles (meanings) of the phenomenon may be revealed – a disclosure not unlike the revelation O’Meara encounters in the story about Zen Buddhist nun Chiyono when the bottom falls out of her old pail bound with bamboo. Our perception or way of seeing is forever changed. Thus, as a *dramatic* narrative, a well-crafted philosophical novel (or any novel) is never a series of dry lectures, or academic dialogues. Characters do not sit in a parlor sipping Chardonnay and dispassionately discussing ideas. They must *live* them, and for high stakes. They must dramatically face what Sartre called “the agony of choice.” Ideas must be tabernacled in the rich possibilities of character and event. And when this is masterfully accomplished, a reader is enriched by the *re*-incarnation of ideas, by imaginative storytelling giving abstractions flesh and palpability.

The experiential topography of Michael O’Meara’s Life-world is presented early in the story by a nameless, gum-chewing girl at Fairview High eager to marry a rich Georgetown law student. But, she says, “I won’t stay married to him. Oh no. I’m too smart for that. I’ll divorce him and take half his money . . . To have *me* it’s going to *cost* him.” Although probably a poor student academically, this young gold-digger understands the “ethos centered around the acquisition of *things*,” which is universally grounded in the basic goods required for human action – food, clothing, shelter, and protection from bodily harm. Most likely, she is not a “bad” person, but the urge to not only survive but also prosper – as a tactic for dealing with everyone’s dread of poverty and death – leads to a Hobbesian state that exacerbates ruthless competition and inequality: a social realm we know all too well today because many residents of non-Western nations live on a dollar

a day (or less), and here in America, which consumes the lion's share of the world's resources, citizens are bombarded with 3,000 product messages a day (according to Brad Adgate, senior vice-president of the New York branding firm Horizon Media) that enflame and condition (if not actually create) an endless amount of thirst for (*trishna* in Sanskrit) and attachment to *things*. That ethos has also been internalized by O'Meara's ex-wife Sara. A woman who reduces herself and others to a state of thinghood, and yearns to "be with the 'important' people and collect desirable acquaintances so they might be displayed for all to see," she demands more alimony and child support (for children from her earlier marriage) after learning of Michael's inheritance. Like the tiger raised as a grass-eating goat in the novel's prologue, almost everyone in O'Meara's world – from his swindling college friend Bernie to the "honest crook" Mookie – discovers their "true nature" is, if not predatory, then certainly dominated by the acquisitive profit-motive, by "overreaching for what you don't have." That, for Hobbes, is the primary sin, as the protagonist learns late in the story. And this sin appears in Boylan's philosophy as the violation of two requirements for any civilized society: namely, "the assurance that those you interact with are not lying to promote their own interests," and "the assurance that those you interact with will recognize your human dignity and not exploit you as a means only."

Yet O'Meara, the poor scholar, is still something of a grass-grazing goat when the novel begins, and therefore he is at a disadvantage in this loveless realm of greed, conspicuous consumption, and selfishness. He is still grieving for his dead father, and longing for his "quasi fiancée" Aisling, his Beatrice, who has left her teaching post at Fairview High to complete her doctorate at the University of London. All in all, O'Meara is charmingly quirky in his morality, believing that, "You can't be perfect. You shouldn't even try to be perfect . . . The Turkish rug makers used to have a tradition of putting a flaw in each of their rugs . . . To show to God that they did not aspire to perfection."

The very thought would have been an instance of pride.” In a social world of movers and shakers, O’Meara – so lacking in vanity, so flawed – is usually the “shaken,” a man lacking “inner fire. . . . Reactive and not proactive” was his style. However, once wealth comes, he dabbles in a received, unearned worldview, which produces moral dilemmas that only deepen his state of disequilibrium.

Those scenes in *The Extinction of Desire* when O’Meara tries his best to be a winner and stop being “screwed, blued, and tattooed” by others, are deliciously ironic moments of comedy. Aware that Bernie has invested his windfall in a shady operation called Capital Ventures in “a Ponzi fraud with new monies used to cover old debts,” O’Meara’s only recourse is to correct a deceit with a deceit of his own by taking out a loan from a subsidiary of Capital Ventures and *not* repaying it. He toys with purchasing luxury items such as an imitation Patek Philippe watch, feeling, “I would not be honest if I didn’t . . . find *something* attractive about these baubles. But what was it? How strong was its force? Would it win me over, too?” For a time, he acquires a BMW and a three-leveled “behemoth” of a house, but eventually this flirtation with the hedonistic fantasy of a “pampered life” abruptly ends when O’Meara finds himself thrown into a German jail.

There, he encounters cellmates who represent three of the classic “Four Signs” of impermanence and change – old age, sickness, and death – that all life will inevitably experience. That transitoriness includes thoughts as well as things, and is summarized in the terse Pali formulation *anicca dukkha anatta* (“All things are transitory; there is suffering; and there is no enduring self”). According to legend, these signs of the brevity (*anicca*) and ontological emptiness (*shunyata*) of all things led Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama to abandon the pleasure palace of his father to pursue spiritual awakening. No matter how wealthy or famous people may become, O’Meara sees, these three signs will spoil their ephemeral pleasures (*dukkha*) and heaped-up possessions (or, as a friend of mine puts it, “You’ve never seen a hearse car-

rying luggage, have you?”), and they will, if they are observant, appreciate how in a world where all things are mutually dependent and interconnected (*pratitya samutpada*), the idea of an independent, separate, enduring self or individuality is simply an illusion (*anatta*).

In that jail cell, O’Meara does not see the fourth sign, a wise and holy man whose tranquility suggested to young Siddhartha that perhaps there might be a path one could pursue to achieve release from the suffering caused by the first three conditions. (For one of his epigraphs, Boylan recites that canonical Buddhist blueprint or path for enlightenment and liberation called the “Four Noble Truths,” the last of these truths being that liberation is realized by following “The Eight-Fold Path,” or *Arya Ash-tanga Marga*.) The reason for that omission is because during O’Meara’s journey he has already come to know two important avatars ready to assist his developing a new worldview. The first is his priest, Father Mac, a man who appreciates the life of the senses without becoming lost in it. “Quality things in life that give us pleasure should not be rejected out of hand,” he says. “The Lord gave us whiskey and fine watches and other trinkets to satisfy our longing for perfection which is only understood in the abstract through God . . . it’s not the trinkets themselves that are troublesome, but our attitudes about them.” In other words, desire and attachment to them make us their slaves.

His second guru is Aisling, a woman of such idealism and integrity that O’Meara remembers her risking her job when their department chair at Fairview High tried to pressure her into passing a failing student because he had a rich, influential father. “I don’t care if his father is president of the world,” she says. “It has nothing to do with my judging his son’s work . . . I stand by my decision.” It is, therefore, logical that *The Extinction of Desire*, in addition to being a spirited philosophical odyssey, is also the love story of O’Meara and Aisling. She never tried to “remake me,” he says, and her balance and clarity “brought out the best in me.” One of the notable accomplishments of Boylan’s novel

lies in its dramatizing the timeless truth that after awakening (or *nirvana*, which literally means “to blow out” the illusory sense of self or ego) all that remains is a life – and social relations – based on joy, thanksgiving, and love. In the Buddhist tradition this is known as the attitude of *metta* (loving-kindness) toward all sentient beings. Such wisdom is obviously not exclusive to any one culture, Eastern or Western, but rather is – to paraphrase William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech – the treasure that awaits all of us when the human heart is no longer in conflict with itself, when the secular and sacred are experienced as one, and when objects and others again radiate a sense of the holy. That, I believe, is a conclusion with which the best novelists and philosophers can agree.

(Charles Johnson, the S. Wilson and Grace M. Pollock Professor for Excellence in English at the University of Washington in Seattle, is the author of *Middle Passage*, winner of the 1990 National Book Award.)



## Prologue: An Ancient Fable

His mother died soon after he was born. Somehow he survived. The tiger cub was found by a herd of mountain goats. They took him in and raised him as a goat.

At first it was very hard for him. He had to learn to eat grass with his sharp teeth. His teeth tore at the blades of grass and were not efficient. Soon, however, he ate grass just like the goats. He became quiet and peaceful in his soul as he discovered his bodhi nature.

Then one day he encountered a group of tigers roaming the mountains. They took one look at him and laughed. "What is a tiger doing eating nothing but grass! This is not what tigers are meant to do! Come with us and we will reveal to you your true nature." And so he went.

After a short while the group of tigers came upon a cow wandering at the foot of a mountain. The tigers killed the cow and brought some meat over to the tiger cub. "Here, this is what tigers eat!"

So he ate. The blood and warm flesh made his head spin. Deep inside him something stirred. From some unknown place within came strength. He roared.

The other tigers smiled in delight. "You see. What you were *before* was not your true self. You were duped. Now you have discovered your true nature."

The young tiger became aggressive and thirsty for more fresh meat. He pawed the ground, looked to the west, and eagerly awaited the next kill.



# Part One



# Chapter One

What would you do if you suddenly became rich?

I'll tell you what I did. It may interest you. You see, I was a high school teacher (or *am* a high school teacher – I'm not sure it ever leaves your blood). I was teaching history at the time, a nebulous discipline that gets civics, geography, psychology, and whatever else dumped into it. I suppose this means history either is the all-encompassing discipline or is nothing whatsoever and so demands continual supplement. But I'm getting away from "the event."

The facts are these. My uncle Will's wife's parents were celebrating their golden wedding anniversary near West Palm Beach, Florida, when a plane crashed into their festivities and killed the lot of them. I wasn't there. I had to work, although no one would have expected me to be at the party. Even my dad had considered skipping it (since going to one's brother's wife's family's get-together is, by any estimation, a bit outlandish). But you see the Tristys were short on family members of their own and so had to import some. My dad humored his baby brother, and Uncle Dick, the eldest, tagged along too.

So there it was: eight people wiped out in a flaming instant, including my father and his two brothers. No heirs except me. It happened on April 1, 1989. No joke. Almost a year and a half later, what with estates, life insurance, and triple indemnity, I was

confronted with an item that would change my life: a check for one million dollars.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "A million dollars isn't what it used to be." It is true that in 1960 there were only a few thousand millionaires in the whole country, and now they seem to be as common as cute expressions on T-shirts. But a million dollars is still a lot of money. Or so my friends keep telling me.

"Naturally, you'll let me manage it for you," said Bernie.

"Naturally," I echoed without thinking. Bernie had volunteered to handle my finances. We'd both gone to Pembroke College in Minnesota and now found ourselves living in the Washington, DC, area (albeit he was in a big house near Chevy Chase Circle, and I was in a one-bedroom apartment a few blocks from school).

Bernie was a "take charge" guy. "There's not a moment to lose," he said. "I'll draw up some papers. Now, let's see when I can get them to you. We have a big hearing at the Labor Department tomorrow, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait until Wednesday – unless that's too late. We could meet after work around seven-thirty."

"Wednesday is fine. Thursday is fine. Really, Bernie, there's no rush."

"That's where you're wrong, old salt."

When he wasn't calling me "old salt," Bernie called me "Mike" even though I had told him I preferred "Michael." All my friends call me Michael. Nobody calls me Mike – except if you count Sara. But I'd rather not count her.

"There are taxes and the investment objectives to discuss. You can't accept such a large sum of money responsibly without a plan."

"Right, Bernie."

Bernie was bursting from his vest. His large body reminded me of Father McGinnis, how his belly stuck out like a balloon from the lower abdomen. The difference was that Bernie culti-