

Half Empty or Half Full?
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Is the glass half full or half empty? I'm sure you have heard this one before. What do you see when you look at the glass? Supposedly, if you are a positive, happy, upbeat, optimistic person, you will see a half full glass. If you are a negative, unhappy, downbeat, pessimistic person, you will see a half empty glass. Pretty revealing, huh?

Well, perhaps and perhaps not. Maybe there is more here than first meets the eye. There may be other ways to look at this old question. Indeed, how we look at it may be the key.

For example, a realist looking at the glass might point out that it is in fact neither half full or half empty. One half of the glass contains liquid, one half gas (air, in this case.) The glass in, in fact, full.

Another perspective is that the glass itself is only a vessel that provides space which the liquid occupies, and it is the space that is filled or not.

Someone else might ask, was the glass ever fuller? Or is it fuller now than it ever has been? Is it being filled or drained?

Do we look at the liquid level, at the process of filling or emptying the glass? Do we only consider the liquid and not the air? It is perhaps not so simple a question after all.

Life can be rather like that. All of the important factors may not be readily obvious, may, in fact, be dismissed. We don't think about the air when asking if a glass is full or not. We take the presence of air so much for granted that we forget about it. Yet, if the air were not there, there could be no glass. How many factors do we miss when facing life's questions?

Returning to the glass, the fundamental question is seen as one of optimism versus pessimism. Of course pessimism is the bad option. We are expected to be or at least to want to be half-fullers. They emphasize the positive. They see what is still there. They are the sunshine of life. Do you get the idea I am about to say, "Not!"?

You see, I feel pessimism often gets a bad press. Or, of not pessimism, at least the ability to see the negative.

Ben Franklin was once asked whether he was an optimist or a pessimist. He replied, "I'm a pessimist. The optimist is too often disappointed. A pessimist is at least occasionally pleasantly surprised." That may be the saving grace for pessimists to hang on to the ability to be pleasantly surprised. Hope need not be the negative side of things. So, another old adage goes, "Hope for the best but prepare for the worst." That way one is ready for whatever happens.

The half-fullers, to me, run a danger of being Pollyannas and Pollyannas drive me right up the wall. Pollyannas see how great the world is all the time. And sadly, the world is not always great. Sometimes it stinks and it is important to see that.

A half-fuller is happy to have half a glass, celebrates the half glass. A half-emptier may get up, go get a pitcher and fill the glass up to the top. If one does not see the negative, one is never going to improve things. Negative can be energizing.

Now, I am not saying that being positive is bad,--far from it. And we will get back to that. I'm just trying to put in a good word for us grumblers at this point. The grumbler serves a very important function. We point out what is wrong.

Throughout history, those who saw the glass was half empty have been the ones who prompt or take action. Jesus looked at the glass of spiritual well-being of many of his contemporaries and saw that it was half empty. So did Buddha and Mohammed. Martin Luther King, Mohatmas Ghandi, Archbishop Tutu all looked at their people's glass of liberty and saw it was not at least half empty. Mother Theresa say many, many half empty glasses. Father Damien looked at the glass of comfort for his flock and found it half empty. Jenner and Salk looking at the glass of health saw emptiness.

Galileo, Newton, Curie, Pasteur, Copernicus, Mendel filled their own glasses of knowledge and those of all of us because they realized that there was empty space. It was a dissatisfaction with things as they were that motivated every human advance.

Half-fullers are more likely to be satisfied and not see a need to make changes. Half emptiers, however, may well also fail to make changes. Some half emptiers will see that the glass is half empty and then dissipate all their energy bemoaning the fact. We all know someone like that. Let's face it, at some point we have all been someone like that. Such half emptiers are no help at all. They can be just as annoying as the Pollyannas. It is the half emptier who knows deep down that the glass can be filled who moves us along.

Of course, that can be a problem, too. It matters what glass we want to fill. To go to the other extreme of the half empty spectrum, Hitler saw his glass as at least half empty and set about filling it with a vengeance. So, too, did Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Stalin. They too were energized by what they found missing. So, half emptiers do not always do good. They do realize that the world they find is lacking something. Thus can make them saviors or destroyers. Vishnu or Shiva. Those half emptiers who do move us forward can not be regarded as true pessimists, or, at least, not dyed in the wool pessimists. They have hope that the world can be a better place and the best of them work to make it better.

Now the half fullers serve a purpose, too. Half emptiers can fill the world with despair, can put so much energy into pointing out what is missing that we lose sight of what's here. Half fullers remind us that there is much to enjoy in life, that even with all that could be here and is not, there is still a great deal here. Too often half emptiers leave the impression that things can only get emptier. Half fullers remind us that need not be so.

The person who focuses on the fact that the glass is half full is not likely to be a Napoleon or Alexander, not likely to try to take from others to fill his or her own glass. The half fuller reminds us not to be greedy. That perhaps we want more than we need.

Preservationists and conservationists are half fullers. Rather than simply bemoan what has been lost, they concentrate on appreciating and preserving what remains. Half fullers generate energy because of their appreciation for and dedication to what we do have. They know how to value what is here.

Of course, appreciating and holding onto what is here can also have problems. It can blind one to what could be. It can lead to placing so much value on what is here that one cannot see that some of what is, should not be. Half fullers run the danger not only of being Pollyanas—seeing everything that is as good but also of putting their energy into uncritical maintenance of that which is.

Clearly, both points of view can be helpful. Clearly, both can generate good and bad energies. Clearly, both are needed for a clear picture. The glass is both half empty and half full.

Despite appearances, the question half empty or half full is not a simple one, nor does it have a simple answer. It is a question about perception and perception is a complex issue. We are constantly learning how perception affects reality. Indeed, there are many scientists who maintain that perception actually helps to create reality. That the very act of observing an event alters that event. Doctors tell us how a patient's perception of his or her chances can have a profound impact on those chances. Teachers constantly urge students to believe in themselves. They know that students' perceptions of their abilities will play a vital role in accomplishments.

How we perceive our world has a lot to do with how we live our lives. And no one perception will suffice, will it? There are times when we see the world through rose-colored glasses and life is wonderful for us. There are other times when we are all gloom and doom, because that's how life is going for us.

There are times of joy that make us appreciate what we are and have and times of, let us say, serious reflection rather than despair, that force us to face up to what needs to be done. There are times when our perception is filtered through specific concerns—we evaluate everything as to how it furthers or retards particular goals—our health, our children's well-being, what have you. Other times we can step back and take a more detached view.

Any and all of our perceptions can be valid and helpful. Indeed, being human must involve perceiving the universe around us and processing those perceptions. To be human is to perceive. All of the ways we talked about seeing our glass—half full, half empty, full of both liquid and air, neither full nor empty. Potentially full or potentially empty, a vessel holding some amount of liquid, and so on, are all valid perceptions.

Which one works at any given time is the one we will see. However, whole new worlds can open up when someone points out a different perception.

It is when we bring our perceptions together with our best hope that we can move the world along. When we marry perceived reality to worthy goals, we are doing the work of religion.

It is a good thing that we have half fullers and half emptiers. The more ways of seeing, the more opportunities open up. The world is not a simple place and none of us can have a complete and true picture of it. It is by combining our perceptions that we gain some clarity. Your view and mine may differ and both may be partly correct. Half fullers and half emptiers need each other. The glass can be seen in many different ways, but the real question is, what do we want to do with the glass and its contents? And that depends on a lot of things, including how we see it at any given moment.