In his inaugural lecture at Cambridge as Regius Professor of Modern History in 1898, Acton declared: “The narrative structure of moral judgments in history is a crucial aspect of the writing of history, namely that the deep grammar of narrative time is a device by which historians restructure real time as well as narrative time. Consider one of the several ways in which this can occur. This is through contraction or expansion of sentence duration. At the beginning of his history, Thucydides—a historian with whom most students at this university will be passing familiarly—speaks a few paragraphs on events occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century: a treaty between Crete and Athens that contradicted the time of the Trojan War to just before the outbreak of the war between Athens and Sparta, his main concern: an era that literally took place about two thousand years, all economically related in a few paragraphs. But Thucydides then devotes several hundred pages to the relationship in essence, the whole of the war he recorded. Sentence duration is an indication of the importance the historian assigns to events on the events referred to. Sentence expansion or contraction, however, may have other sustaining causes. Simply the pacing or rhythm of the historian’s prose might be one. The great French scientist and historian Bernard de Fontenelle said that if the cadences of his sentences do not correspond to the size of the event, the structure of the war is not correctly perceived. From Darwin to Hitler. The temporal grammar of narratives is encapsulated in the ideas of the individual action in a morally neutral time of narration and in the individual’s action in a morally neutral time. For example, could have allowed him to put forth peace mission just before the first engagement of the war, the prophetic regret: “This day will be the beginning of great misfortunes to Hellas.” By the horizontal order of time, the historian can describe events in ways that the actors participating in the events could not have foreseen. The historian could naturally provoke readers into making their own moral judgments about the past, without the historian coercing their opinions. This attitude of studied neutrality has become codified in the commandments handed down by the National Center for History Education. The National Center for History Education has recently proclaimed: “Teachers should not use historical events to hammer home their own favorite moral lesson.” Presumably that is what Mr. Acton meant when he delivered moral judgments on the figures of his action. Declared: “I exhort you never to debase the moral currency or to lower the standard of rectitude, but to try others by the final maxims that govern your own lives and to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undoing penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong.”

As our colleague Peter Novick has detailed in his great account of the American historical profession, by the turn of the century historians in the United States had begun their quest for scientific status, which for many young white professionals meant to put moral opinion into the objective recovery of the past—at least in an overt way. Peter Novick describes the failures of this noble project, of political historian and rampant nationalism sillied the ideal.

Let me focus, for a moment, on one feature of narrative time as a prelude to my argument of an illustration of what I mean by “the grammar of narrative.” This concerns the way time is represented in narrative histories. Time seeps into narratives in at least four different ways.

First is what might be called the time of events. Embedded in the deep structure of narrative is the time during which events occurred. Thucydides was clearly on into the future, with each unit having equal duration. Narratives project events as occurring in a Newtonian sequence. But the structuring of these events in a narrative exhibits what might be called narrative time, and this is a different sort of temporal modality. Consider, for instance, Harold Pinter’s play Betrayal. The first scene is set temporally toward the end of the Newtonian sequence dramatized, with the second image occurring in immediate succession a few days later. But the third scene falls back to two years before, and the fourth to a year before that. Events in that scene are taking us back finally to a period six years before the final days with which the play begins. The audience, however, never loses its temporal bearings or believes that time staggers along, weaving back and forth like an undergraduate leaving class. The historian might structure his or her narrative in a roughly comparable way, with events occurring in immediate succession, but then the historian returns to an earlier time to follow out another thread of the story. Or the historian might have the narrative jump into the future to highlight the significance of some antecedent event. Again, when this is done with moderate dexterity, the reader is never confused about the Newtonian flow of events.

The time of narration is a less familiar device by which historians restructure real time as well as narrative time. Consider one of the several ways in which this can occur. This is through contraction or expansion of sentence duration. At the beginning of his history, Thucydides—a historian with whom most students at this university will be passing familiarly—spends a few paragraphs on events occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century: a treaty between Crete and Athens that contradicted the time of the Trojan War to just before the outbreak of the war between Athens and Sparta, his main concern: an era that literally took place about two thousand years, all economically related in a few paragraphs. But Thucydides then devotes several hundred pages to the relationship in essence, the whole of the war he recorded. Sentence duration is an indication of the importance the historian assigns to events on the events referred to. Sentence expansion or contraction, however, may have other sustaining causes. Simply the pacing or rhythm of the historian’s prose might be one. The great French scientist and historian Bernard de Fontenelle said that if the cadences of his sentences do not correspond to the size of the event, the structure of the war is not correctly perceived. From Darwin to Hitler.
The Moral Structure of Narrative Grammar

I am now going to turn specifically to the moral structure of narrative grammar, and then illustrate some of the ways that structure characterizes Ernst Haeckel’s story. If now you attribute the structure I am attributing to them, then it would be well for historians to be reflectively conscious of this and to formulate their historical reconstructions in light of a set of principles that I believe should be operative. And in a moment I will suggest what those principles ought to be by which we morally judge the behavior of individuals who lived in the past and by which we assess their culpability for the future actions of others. But let me first pose these questions: Do historians make normative judgments in their histories and should they? I will argue that not only should they, they must by reason of narrative grammar. At one level, it is obvious that historians, of necessity, do make normative judgments. Historical narratives are constructed on the basis of evidence: written documents, such as letters, diaries, and published works; artifacts, such as archeological findings; high-tech instrumen- tations, such as DNA analysis; and sometimes oral interviews. And historians attribute modes of behavior to actors on the basis of inferences from evidence and in recognition of certain standards. Even when doing something apparently as innocuous as selecting a verb to characterize a proposi- tion, historians assign a norm to an actor, the historian must employ a norm or standard. For example, Thucydides could have had Melesippus think that disaster was in the offering, be convinced that disaster was in the offering, suspect that disaster was in the offering, assume that disaster was in the offering, prophe- dy that disaster was in the offering. Whatever verb the historian selects, he or she will do so because the actor’s behavior, as suggested by the evidence, has reached a certain standard for such and such a moral description—say, being in a state of firm conviction as opposed to vague supposi- tion. All descriptions require measurement against standards or norms—which is not to say that in a given instance, the standard and consequent description would be the most appropriate. The better the historian, the more appropriate the norms employed in rendering descriptions. Virtually all the historian’s choices of descriptive terms must be normative in this sense. But must some of these norms also be moral norms? I believe they must. The argument is fairly straightforward—at least as straightforward as arguments of this sort ever get. Human history is about actions, things done by human beings, human actions. Actions are not mere behaviors, but behaviors that are intended and motivated. Inevitably these actions impinge on others, immediate or remote. But intentional behavior impinging on others is precisely the moral context. The historian, there- fore, must be in order to assign motives and inten- tions to individuals whose behavior affects others and to describe those moti- ves and intentions adequate, must employ some norm, which is the moral context, that is, behavior in the moral context. Certainly the assessment of motives and intentions may yield only morally neutral descriptions. But even deciding that an intended behavior is morally neutral is, implicitly at least, also to judge and to judge it against standards of positive or negative moral valence, and to decide that it conforms to neither. Even a morally neutral assessment is a moral assessment. There is no claim here, of course, that such evaluations are generally self-consciously performed by his- torians. Most of these evaluations occur quite reflexively, instead of reflexively. And they usually exist, not explicitly on the surface of the narrative, but in the inter- stices. Let me offer a more concrete example of what I am arguing, from a historian whom no one would accuse of cheap moralizing—his moralizing is anything but cheap. His descriptions reveal a rainbow of shaded moral evaluations, which range subtly be- tween the polar categories of shining virtue and darkling vice. Byron called him the Lord of Irony, and it is often through that trope that he makes his moral assessments. I am speaking, of course, of Edward Gibbon. Let me read just a short passage from The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, where Gibbon is describ- ing what might have been the motives of Julian as his soldiers were clamoring for his elevation to emperor, while Constantinus was still on the throne. Julian protested that he could not take the dia- monds, even as he reluctantly and sadly ac- cepted it. Gibbon writes:

The grief of Julian could proceed only from his innocence, but his innocence must appear extremely doubtful in the eyes of those who have learned to suspect the motives and the professions of princes. His lively and active mind was suscep- tible of the various impressions of hope and fear, of gratitude and re- venge, of duty and of ambition, of the love of fame and of the fear of reproach. But it is impossible for us to ascertain the principles of action by which might escape the observa- tion, while they guided, or rather impelled, the steps of Julian himself. . . . He solemnly declares, in the presence of Jupiter, of the Sun, of Mars, of Minerva, and of all the other deities, that till the close of the evening which preceded his eleva- tion he was utterly ignorant of the designs of the soldiers; and it may seem ungenerous to distrust the honour of a hero, and the truth of a philosopher. Yet the superstitious confidence that Constantius was the enemy, and that he himself was the favourite, of the gods, might prompt him to desire, to solicit, and even to use other individuals as agents of the imperial reign, which was presidened to re- store the ancient religion of man- kind.

In the cascade of rhetorical devices at play—a euphony, anathema, irony—Gibbon explicit- ly refuses to attribute morally demeaning motives to Julian, and, of course, at the same time implicitly does precisely that. Another element of judgment that Gibbon evinces here is also an important feature of the moral grammar of historical narrative. Narratives explain action by allowing us to understand character, in this case Julian’s character. Gibbon, however, has led us to comprehend Julian’s action, not only by cognitively suggesting what the motives of a prince might be, but also by shaping our emotional response to Julian’s character and thus producing in us a feeling about Julian’s actions. We morally evalua- te individuals, partly at least, through feelings about them. The historian can or- chestrate outrage—as some dealing with Haeckel have—by cutting quotations from an actor into certain vicious shapes. Or, like Gibbon, the historian can evoke feel- ings of moral disdain with little more than the magical mist of antithetic possibilities. As a result, readers will have, as it were, a sensible, even an olfactory understanding: the invisible air of the narrative will carry the sweet smell of virtue, the acrid stench of turpitude, or simply the bitter-sweet of irony. These feelings will become part of the deli- cate moral assessment rendered by the art- istry of the historian.

This is just one small example of the way moral judgment exists in the intersub- spaces of a narrative, instead of lying right on the surface. But sometimes such judg- ments do lie closer to the skin of the narra- tive. Let me now focus precisely on a case of this and consider the principles that I be- lieve, should be operative in making moral judgments of historical figures. This is in the instance of Ernst Haeckel.

Ernst Haeckel, Darwin’s Champion in Germany

Haeckel was Darwin’s great champion of evolutionary theory in Germany; he was a principal in the theory’s introduction there, and a forceful defender of it from the mid-1860s until 1919, when he died. Haeckel’s work on evolution reached far beyond the borders of the German lands. His popular accounts of evolutionary theory were trans- lated into all the known and some of the unknown languages—at least unknown to the West—including Armenian, Chinese, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Esperanto. More people learned of evolutionary theory through Haeckel’s voluminous writings during this period than from any other source, including Darwin’s own work. Haeckel achieved many popular suc- cesses and, as well, produced more than twenty large, technical monographs on vari- ous aspects of systematic biology and evo- lutionary theory. (See figure 1.) In these works he described many hitherto unknown species, established the science of ecology, gave currency to the idea of the missing link (which one of his protégés actually found), and promulgated the biogeographic law that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Most of the promising young biologists of the next generation came to study with him at Jena. His artistic ability was considerable: at the
beginning of the twentieth century he influenced the movement in art called Jugendstil by his book Kunstformen der Natur (Art Forms of Nature). He became a greatly celebrated intellectual figure, often mentioned for a Nobel Prize.

A measure of his celebrity might be taken from this photo that the scandalously famous dancer Isadora Duncan sent Haeckel, of her admiring his photograph while at her writing table. (See figure 2.) Haeckel was also the scourge of religiousists, smiting the preachers at every turn with the jawbone of evolutionary doctrine. He advocated what he called a "monistic religion" as a substitute for the traditional orthodoxies, a religion based on science.

But as a young student, trying to find a subject for his habilitation, Haeckel roamed along the coasts of Italy and Sicily in some despair. He thought of giving up biology for the life of a bohemian, spending his time in painting and poetizing with other German expatriates on the island of Ischia. But he felt that he had to accomplish something in biology so that he could become a professor and marry the woman he had fallen deeply in love with—his love letters sent back to his fiancée in Berlin are something delicious to read. He finally hit upon a topic: a systematic description of a little-known creature that populated the seas, the one-celled protist called a radiolarian.

(See figure 3.) It was while writing his habilitation on these creatures in 1861 that he happened to read Darwin's Origin of Species and became a convert. Haeckel produced a magnificent two-volume tome on the radiolaria, which he himself illustrated with extraordinary artistic and scientific acumen. Later in the century, his illustrations of radiolaria would influence such artistic designs as René Binet's gateway to the Paris World's Fair of 1900. (See figure 4.) But the radiolarian monograph's most immediate and significant effect was to secure Haeckel a professorship at Jena, thus allowing him to marry his beloved cousin, Anna Sethe.

On his thirtieth birthday, in 1863, Haeckel learned he had won a prestigious prize for his radiolarian work. And on that same day, a day that should have been one of great celebration, his wife of eighteen months tragically died. Haeckel was crushed. His family feared he might commit suicide. As he related to his parents, this heart-searing blow led him to reject all religion and replace it with something more substantial, something that promised a kind of progressive transcendence, namely Darwinian theory.

In the years following this upheaval, Haeckel became a zealous missionary for his new faith, and his own volatile and combative personality made him a crusader whose demeanor was in striking contrast to that of the modest and retiring English master whom he would serve. This outsized personality has continued to irritate historians of smaller imagination.

The Moral Indictment of Haeckel
In 1868, Haeckel produced a popular work on the new theory of evolution, entitled Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte (Natural History of Creation). It would go through twelve editions up the time of his death in 1919, and prove to be the most successful work of popular science in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are two features of that work that incited some of the fiercest intellectual battles of the last part of the nineteenth century and have led some historians and others to comparably fierce judgments of Haeckel's moral probity.

The first has to do with what became the cardinal principle of his evolutionary demonstrations, namely the biogenetic law that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. This principle holds that the embryo of a developing organism goes through the same morphological stages that the phylum went through in its evolutionary history: so, for example, the human embryo begins as a one-celled creature, just as we presume life began on this earth in a one-celled form; it then goes through a stage of gastrulation, and Haeckel believed that in the far distant past, our primitive ancestors piled the seas in that cup-like form; then the embryo takes on the morphology of an archaic fish, with gill-arches; then of a primate, then a specific human being.

The corollary to the law is that closely related creatures—vertebrates, for example—will go through early embryological stages that are quite similar to one another. (See figure 5.) Some of Haeckel's enemies charged that he had exaggerated the tail of the human embryo to make it more animal-like—a controversy that became known as Die Schwanzfrage. But the real deeper, more damaging, fight came with Haeckel's illustration of embryos at the very earliest stages of development. (See figure 6.) In the accompanying text, Haeckel remarks: "If you compare the young embryos of the dog, chicken, and turtle, . . . you won't be in a position to perceive a difference." One of the very first reviewers of Haeckel's book, an embryologist who became a sworn enemy, pointed out that one certainly wouldn't be able to distinguish these embryos, since Haeckel had used the same woodcut three times. He had, in the words of Ludwig Rütimeyer, the reviewer, committed a grave sin against science and the public's trust in science.

In the second edition of his book,
Haeckel retained only one illustration of an embryo at the sandal stage and remarked in the text: “It might as well be the embryo of a dog, since, without looking at you, you can’t tell the difference.” The damage, however, had been inflicted, and the indictment of fraud haunted Haeckel throughout his life. The charge has been used by creationists in our own day as part of a brief, not only against Haeckel, but against evolutionary theory generally. Yet not only creationists but also several historians have employed it in their own moral evaluation of Haeckel and his science.

The second feature of Haeckel’s work I would like to focus on really did not create a stir in his own time, but has become a central moral issue in ours. This has to do with the assumption of progress in evolution, an assumption which Haeckel certainly made. That assumption is forcefully displayed in the frontispiece of the first edition of his Natürliches Schöpfungsgeschichte. It is a depiction that did not survive past the second edition of the book. That is, only the best blood flowed. The Catarrhine or narrow-nosed apes (including the orangutan, chimpanzee, and gorilla) have risen the Papuan, the African, and the Australian, finally reaching the pinnacle of evolutionary development, the Indo-German group, represented by a figure modeled on the bust of a Greek.

More graphically, the species of human-kind can be displayed in a tree diagram, with height on the vertical axis meant to represent more advanced types. (See figure 7.) Here the Caucasian group leads the pack (seen in the upper-right branch of the tree), arching above the descending orders of the “lower species”—all rooted in the Urmensch or Affenmensch, the ape-man. You will note that among the varieties of the Caucasian species, the Bersbers and Jews were thought by Haeckel to be as advanced as the Germans and Southern Europeans. This classification should have had bearing on Haeckel’s assignment by some historians to the ranks of the proto-Nazis. This classification should have had bearing on Haeckel’s assignment by some historians to the ranks of the proto-Nazis. This classification should have had bearing on Haeckel’s assignment by some historians to the ranks of the proto-Nazis.

Nazi Race-Hygienists and Their Use of Haeckelian Ideas

That several Nazi race-hygienists appealed to Haeckel to justify their views is clear. One pertinent example is Heinz Brücher’s Ernst Haeckel’s Bluts- und Geistes-Erbe (Ernst Haeckel’s Racial and Spiritual Legacy), published in 1936. Not only did the author look to Haeckel’s views of racial hierarchy as support for policies of National Socialism, he first gave full account of Haeckel’s own impeccable pedigree. Included with the book was a five-foot chart laying out Haeckel’s family tree. The aim of Brücher’s racial-hygienic analysis was both to demonstrate a new method of showing the worth of an intellectual position and to use that method to justify Haeckel’s own doctrine. That is, the best blood flowed through Haeckel’s veins; and, therefore, we may trust his ideas.

To make the favorable connection between Haeckel and Hitler, Brücher quoted on a passage from Haeckel’s Natural History of Creation that reads: “The difference in nationalities between an Englishman, a German, a Laplander, a Lamarrin, a Darwin and that of the lower natural men—a Veda, a Kaffer, an Australian and a Papuan is much greater than the evolutionary theory generally. Yet not only creationists but also several historians have employed it in their own moral evaluation of Haeckel and his science.

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...to be distinguished, of course, from mere accidental behavior?

Third, the motive for acting, the ground for that intention, is not in certain fashion. The motive will determine moral valence.

Finally, in assessing moral behavior, we must examine the beliefs of the individual actor and try to determine whether they were reasonable beliefs—and this is the special province of the historian. Let me give an example.

During the great Athenian plague, which Thucydides so dramatically describes, the Hippocratic physicians purged and bled the afflicted. This treatment actually hastened the deaths of their patients. But we certainly don’t think the physicians maligned or malfessed, since they had a reasonable belief in the curative power of their practice. Their intention was to apply the best curative techniques. And their motive, we may presume, was altruistic, since they risked their own lives in caring for the sick.

One should judge them, I believe, moral heroes, even though the consequence of their behavior was the injury and even the death of their patients.

The case of Ernst Haeckel is decidedly more problematic. In assessing the moral probity of his replication of woodcuts, the historian would have to examine his intentions and motivations. Did he claim his woodcuts were evidence of his biogenetic law? If so he must have been motivated to deceive, and we may be thus entitled to suspect his character. Or did he merely intend to provide an illustration of the law for a general audience, recognizing that indeed at an early stage the embryo cannot be distinguished? And thus at best, through a false economy, he committed a very minor infraction—one that doesn’t rise to the level of fraud and moral condemnation.

Concerning Haeckel’s conception of a racial hierarchy, the historian has the task of exploring two questions in particular: What did he intend to accomplish by his theory? And how reasonable were the beliefs he harbored about races?

To take the first question: Could Haeckel be construed as intending to set in motion something like the crimes of the Nazis? Or, minimally, did he exhibit a careless disregard for the truth of his views about races, so that some malefic act could, at least, have been vaguely anticipated. It is in answering this question that the grammar of narrative must be carefully observed. The historian may lay down the scenes of his or her history so as to lead causally to a terminal event, such as Hitler’s racial beliefs and their results in the Holocaust; but the historian needs to keep the actors in the dark, if possible, since their urgency, to admire their originality, to feel again the pulse of their vitality, to sense their urgency, to admire their originality, and thus to empathize with their authors. And yet one has to do all of this while remaining reflexively aware of the moral structure in which actors conceived those ideas and perceived their import.

Figure 7: Descent tree of human species, 1868

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Notes
10. Ernst Haeckel, Natürliche Schöpfungs geschichte (Berlin: Reimer, 1868).
11. Ibid., p. 249.
13. Ibid., p. 249.

Robert J. Richards is the Morris Fishbein Professor in the History of Science and Medicine, Departments of History, Philosophy, and Psychology; Committee on Conceptual & Historical Studies of Science, and the College.

About the Lecturer
Robert J. Richards is the Morris Fishbein Professor in the History of Science and Medicine, Departments of History, Philosophy, and Psychology; Committee on Conceptual & Historical Studies of Science, and the College.

Richards came to the University of Chi-
cago as a graduate student in 1974, and he joined the faculty after receiving a Ph.D. in the History of Science from Chicago in 1978. Richards’s research concentrates on the history and philosophy of biology. The author of numerous books, he is using a 2004 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship to complete “The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernest Haeckel and the Battle over Evolution in Germany.” He has also received a grant from the National Science Foundation.

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The Nora and Edward Ryerson Lectures

The Nora and Edward Ryerson Lectures were established by the Trustees of the University in December 1972. They are intended to give a member of the faculty the opportunity each year to lecture to an audience from the entire University on a significant aspect of his or her research or study. The President of the University appoints the lecturer on the recommendation of a faculty committee, which solicits individual nominations from each member of the faculty during the Winter Quarter preceding the academic year for which the appointment is made.

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Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar
“Shakespeare, Newton, and Beethoven: Patterns of Creativity”
1975–76
Philip B. Kurland
“The Private I: Some Reflections on Privacy and the Constitution”
1976–77
Robert E. Streeter
“WASPs and Other Endangered Species”
1977–78
Albert Dorfman, M.D.
“Answers without Questions and Questions without Answers”
1978–79
Stephen Touilmin
“The Inwardness of Mental Life”
1979–80
Erica Reiner
“Thirty Pieces of Silver”
1980–81
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Saunders Mac Lane
“Proof, Truth, and Confusion”
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George J. Stigler
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“What Does a High-Energy Physicist Really Do?”
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Philip Gossett
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“Constitutional Myth-Making: Lessons from the Dred Scott Case”
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Eugene N. Parker
“Probing Space through Measurements and Meditations on Your Porch”
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Bernard Roizman
“Herpes Simplex Viruses: Our Lifetime Unwanted Guests and a String of Pearls”
1998–99
David Bevington
“Shakespeare Faces Retirement”
1999–2000
Lee P. Kadanoff
“Making a Splash, Breaking a Neck: The Development of Complexity in Physical Systems”
2000–01
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
“Scents and Sensibility: Pheromones, Social Dynamics, and the Control of Fertility and Disease”
2001–02
Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd J. Rudolph
“Engaging Subjective Knowledge: Narratives of and by the Self in the Amar Singh Diary”
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Stephen M. Stigler
“Casanova’s Lottery”
2003–04
Robert B. Pippin
“Bourgeois Philosophy? On the Problem of Leading a Free Life”