

Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

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A motivational speaker holds up a water glass and asks, "Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?" The intent of the speaker is to emphasize that any situation may be viewed either pessimistically or optimistically. However, in this usage the question is a *non sequitur*, in that it does not logically follow from the situation presented.

Consider the following mental experiment. I stand behind a table that sits in front of you. On the table are two identical glasses, one filled with water and the other empty. I take the empty glass in my left hand and the filled glass in my right hand. Then, I pour half of the water from the filled glass into the empty glass. It follows that I now have a half-full glass in my left hand and a half-empty glass in my right hand.

Next, I place both glasses on the table and, with sleight of hand, move the glasses about so that you cannot follow the relative positions of the glasses. Can you tell me which glass is half-empty and which is half-full?

Which glass is half-empty or half-full is not a characteristic of just the end result of the experiment. In order to identify which each one is half-empty or half-full, prior history must be known and attachable to each glass.

The motivational intent of the water glass question is to illustrate that one can choose to respond to life situations pessimistically or optimistically. The inherent presumption is that an optimistic view is more desirable than a pessimistic one. This presumption is also a *non sequitur*.

A man takes a bucket to the bottom of a hill and fills it with water so that he can give drink and cleansing to his sick family. On his way back, he finds that water is leaking from a hole in the bucket. If optimistic, he could say to himself, "If I hurry, I may be able to get some water to my family." Or, if pessimistic, he could say, "All of the water will leak from the bucket before I get home." The optimist struggles mightily and reaches his home with a few pints of water in the bucket. The pessimist finds a small dead twig and plugs the hole in the bucket and delivers gallons of water to his family.

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