

JUST ...

THINK ABOUT IT!

2nd edn



PEG TITTLE

## ***Gender Fraud: a fiction***

“ ... a gripping read ... ” Katya, Goodreads

### ***Impact***

“Edgy, insightful, terrific writing, propelled by rage against rape. Tittle writes in a fast-paced, dialogue-driven style that hurtles the reader from one confrontation to the next. Chock full of painful social observations ...” Hank Pellissier, Director of Humanist Global Charity

“ ... The idea of pinning down the inflictors of this terror is quite appealing ....” Alison Lashinsky

“A deftly scripted novella by an author with a genuine flair for a riveting narrative style of storytelling that will engage the dedicated attention for women and men from first page to last ... ” Micah Andrew, *Midwest Book Review*

### ***It Wasn't Enough***

“Unlike far too many novels, this one will make you think, make you uncomfortable, and then make you reread it ....” C. Osborne, moonspeaker.ca

“... a powerful and introspective dystopia .... It is a book I truly recommend for a book club as the discussions could be endless ....” Mesca Elin, *Psychochromatic Redemption*

“Tittle’s book hits you hard ....” D. Sohi, Goodreads

### ***Exile***

“Thought-provoking stuff, as usual from Peg Tittle.” James M. Fisher, Goodreads

### ***What Happened to Tom***

“This powerful book plays with the gender gap to throw into high relief the infuriating havoc unwanted pregnancy can wreak on a woman’s life. Once you’ve read *What Happened to Tom*, you’ll never forget it.” Elizabeth Greene, *Understories* and *Moving*

“I read this in one sitting, less than two hours, couldn’t put it down. Fantastic allegorical examination of the gendered aspects of unwanted pregnancy. A must-read for everyone, IMO.” Jessica, Goodreads

“Peg Tittle’s *What Happened to Tom* takes a four-decades-old thought experiment and develops it into a philosophical novella of extraordinary depth and imagination .... Part allegory, part suspense (perhaps horror) novel, part defense of bodily autonomy rights (especially women’s), Tittle’s book will give philosophers and the philosophically minded much to discuss.” Ron Cooper, *Hume’s Fork*

### ***Sexist Shit that Pisses Me Off***

“Woh. This book is freaking awesome and I demand a sequel.” Anonymous, barnesandnoble.com

“I recommend this book to both women and men. It will open your eyes to a lot of sexist—and archaic—behaviors.” Seregon, Goodreads

“Honestly, selling this in today’s climate is a daunting challenge—older women have grown weary, younger women don’t seem to care, or at least don’t really identify as feminists, men—forget that. All in all a sad state of affairs—sorry.” rejection letter from agent

### ***Shit that Pisses Me Off***

“I find Peg Tittle to be a passionate, stylistically-engaging writer with a sharp eye for the hypocritical aspects of our society.” George, Amazon

“Peg raises provocative questions: should people need some kind of license to have children? Should the court system use professional jurors? Many of her essays address the imbalance of power between men and women; some tackle business, sports, war, and the weather. She even explains why you’re not likely to see Peg Tittle at Canada’s version of an Occupy Wall Street demonstration. It’s all thought-provoking, and whether or not you’ll end up agreeing with her conclusions, her essays make for fascinating reading.” Erin O’Riordan

“This was funny and almost painfully accurate, pointing out so many things that most of us try NOT to notice, or wish we didn’t. Well written and amusing, I enjoyed this book immensely.” Melody Hewson

“ ... a pissed off kindred spirit who writes radioactive prose with a hint of sardonic wit .... Peg sets her sights on a subject with laser sharp accuracy then hurls words like missiles in her collection of 25 cogent essays on the foibles and hypocrisies of life .... Whether you agree or disagree with Peg’s position on the issues, *Shit that Pisses Me Off* will stick to your brain long after you’ve ingested every word—no thought evacuations here. Her writing is adept and titillating ... her razor sharp words will slice and dice the cerebral jugular. If you enjoy reading smart, witty essays that challenge the intellect, download a copy ....” Laura Salkin, thinkspin.com

“Not very long, but a really good read. The author is intelligent, and points out some great inconsistencies in common thinking and action ... may have been channeling some George Carlin in a few areas.” Briana Blair, Goodreads

“ ... thought-provoking, and at times, hilarious. I particularly loved ‘Bambi’s cousin is going to tear you apart.’ Definitely worth a read!” Nichole, Goodreads

“What she said!!! Pisses me off also! Funny, enjoyable and so right on!!!! Highly recommended.” Vic, indigo.ca

## ***Critical Thinking: An Appeal to Reason***

“This book is worth its weight in gold.” Daniel Millsap

“One of the books everyone should read. A lot of practical examples, clear and detailed sections, and tons of all kinds of logical fallacies analyzed under microscope that will give you a completely different way of looking to the everyday manipulations and will help you to avoid falling into the common traps. Highly recommended!” Alexander Antukh

“One of the best CT books I’ve read.” G. Baruch, Goodreads

“This is an excellent critical thinking text written by a clever and creative critical thinker. Her anthology *What If* is excellent too: the short readings are perfect for engaging philosophical issues in and out of the classroom.” Ernst Borgnorg

“Peg Tittle’s *Critical Thinking* is a welcome addition to a crowded field. Her presentations of the material are engaging, often presented in a conversational discussion with the reader or student. The text’s coverage of the material is wide-ranging. Newspaper items, snippets from *The Far Side*, personal anecdotes, emerging social and political debates, as well as LSAT sample questions are among the many tools Tittle employs to educate students on the elemental aspects of logic and critical thinking.” Alexander E. Hooke, Professor of Philosophy, Stevenson University

### ***What If?...***

#### ***Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy***

“Of all the collections of philosophical thought experiments I’ve read, this is by far the best. It is accessible, uses text from primary sources, and is very well edited. The final entry in the book— which I won’t spoil for you—was an instant favorite of mine.” Dominick Cancilla

“This is a really neat little book. It would be great to use in discussion-based philosophy courses, since the readings would be nice and short and to the point. This would probably work much better than the standard anthology of readings that are, for most students, incomprehensible.” Nathan Nobis, Morehouse College

***Should Parents be Licensed?  
Debating the Issues***

“This book has some provocative articles and asks some very uncomfortable questions ....” Jasmine Guha, Amazon

“This book was a great collection of essays from several viewpoints on the topic and gave me a lot of profound over-the-(TV-)dinner-(tray-)table conversations with my husband.” Lauren Cocilova, Goodreads

“You need a licence to drive a car, own a gun, or fish for trout. You don’t need a licence to raise a child. But maybe you should ... [This book] contains about two dozen essays by various experts, including psychologists, lawyers and sociologists ....” Ian Gillespie, *London Free Press*

“... But the reformers are right. Completely. Ethically. I agree with Joseph Fletcher, who notes, “It is depressing ... to realize that most people are accidents,” and with George Schedler, who states, “Society has a duty to ensure that infants are born free of avoidable defects. ... Traditionalists regard pregnancy and parenting as a natural right that should never be curtailed. But what’s the result of this laissez-faire attitude? Catastrophic suffering. Millions of children born disadvantaged, crippled in childhood, destroyed in adolescence. Procreation cannot be classified as a self-indulgent privilege—it needs to be viewed as a life-and-death responsibility ....” Abhimanyu Singh Rajput, Social Tikka

## *Ethical Issues in Business: Inquiries, Cases, and Readings*

"*Ethical Issues in Business* is clear and user-friendly yet still rigorous throughout. It offers excellent coverage of basic ethical theory, critical thinking, and many contemporary issues such as whistleblowing, corporate social responsibility, and climate change. Tittle's approach is not to tell students what to think but rather to get them to think—and to give them the tools to do so. This is the text I would pick for a business ethics course." Kent Peacock, University of Lethbridge

"This text breathes fresh air into the study of business ethics; Tittle's breezy, use-friendly style puts the lie to the impression that a business ethics text has to be boring." Paul Viminitz, University of Lethbridge

"A superb introduction to ethics in business." Steve Deery, *The Philosophers' Magazine*

"Peg Tittle wants to make business students think about ethics. So she has published an extraordinarily useful book that teaches people to question and analyze key concepts .... Take profit, for example .... She also analyzes whistleblowing, advertising, product safety, employee rights, discrimination, management and union matters, business and the environment, the medical business, and ethical investing ...." Ellen Roseman, *The Toronto Star*

more at [pegtittle.com](http://pegtittle.com)

# by Peg Tittle

## **fiction**

*Fighting Words (forthcoming)*

*Gender Fraud: a fiction*

*Impact*

*It Wasn't Enough*

*Exile*

*What Happened to Tom*

## **screenplays**

*Exile*

*What Happened to Tom*

*Foreseeable*

*Aiding the Enemy*

*Bang Bang*

## **stageplays**

*Impact*

*What Happened to Tom*

*Foreseeable*

*Aiding the Enemy*

*Bang Bang*

## **audioplays**

*Impact*

## **nonfiction**

*Just Think About It*

*Sexist Shit that Pisses Me Off*

*No End to the Shit that Pisses Me Off*

*Still More Shit that Pisses Me Off*

*More Shit that Pisses Me Off*

*Shit that Pisses Me Off*

*Critical Thinking: An Appeal to Reason*

*What If? Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy*

*Should Parents be Licensed? (editor)*

*Ethical Issues in Business: Inquiries, Cases, and Readings*

*Philosophy: Questions and Theories (contributing author)*

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**PEG TITTLE**

*Magenta*

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2nd Edition  
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# Contents

Preface .....	1
Garbage.....	3
Who owns the water? .....	5
New and Improved / Needs and Wants.....	6
Canada Day — Are you sure you want to celebrate?.....	8
Life as we know it .....	10
Have you noticed the way the weather is being reported? .....	12
Business in Denial .....	14
No Advertising in Public Space .....	16
No Advertising .....	18
Supervisory Responsibility.....	20
Leadership? .....	23
Crossing the Line.....	26
Mentoring: It's Who You Know.....	28
Unprofessional.....	31
Ethics without Philosophers (the Appalling State of Affairs in Business) .....	34
Why Teaching Business Ethics can be Difficult .....	46
Business Rules the World. Do we want it to? .....	54
Change the way we do business .....	59
To Connect .....	62
The Absence of Imagination.....	65
Air Bands and Power Point .....	68
What do you want me to say?.....	71
Sexism and Teaching: The Elephant in the Room .....	74
Visionary .....	94

Useless Humanities .....	98
Dismissing Philosophy and Philosophers / Philosophy —	
Misunderstood .....	100
How Many Specialists Does It Take to	
Change a Lightbulb? .....	104
Religion: Superstition and Habit (a very brief primer) .....	107
Sex, like Religion / Religion, like Sex .....	111
I Don't Have a Conscience.....	113
Our Christian Language.....	115
Acts of God.....	118
Appropriation or Imagination? .....	119
Cultural Anarchy .....	122
Government Grants for Grad School to	
First Nations People .....	127
Taxing the Rich.....	129
Private Property and Visual Intrusion .....	131
Noise Trespass .....	134
On Power Outages.....	137
An Open Letter to Weekenders Everywhere .....	139
Making Certain Words Illegal.....	142
“I killed you. Killed you too. Got you.” In the Library. ....	149
What's wrong with selling your organs?.....	151
Assisted Suicide and Unassisted Suicide: What's the	
Difference?.....	152
Rising Above Natural Selection .....	163
The Inconsistency of Not Requiring Parents	
to be Licensed .....	164
Legislating Prenatal Care .....	173
Telling our Members of Parliament What to Wear .....	183

The Problem with Democracy .....	185
Snowmobiles Rule — Only in Canada. Pity. ....	186
Rich Rednecks .....	188
Rules of Combat .....	189
We Won! .....	190
Congratulations! .....	192
Getting Married.....	193
Reading/Watching the News: A Bad Habit .....	194
Vote? WTF?.....	197
Speaking in Code.....	199
If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.....	201
In Praise of Dead Air .....	203
YouTube: 300 hours per minute.....	205
Digital Thought.....	207
Asking the Right Questions.....	209
Good Intentions: The Road to Hell (and justifiably so).....	210
Planning is Sinister? .....	211
Every Day in Every Way .....	212
Oh the horror. ....	214
Calm down. Don't think about — Don't think.....	216
Preface to the 2nd edn .....	219
Grade Ten History .....	221
A Licence to Parent.....	223
Drugs and Sports: What's the Problem? .....	225
The Olympians.....	227
Profit and Loss — and Marbles .....	229
Being There.....	232
Wedding Leave.....	234

What's in a Flag? .....	236
Vested Interests and Cancers .....	239
On Demonstrations .....	242
Politics in Government: The Problem with Representation...	244
Food Fight Breaks Out in the House of Commons .....	247
God Promised! .....	248
In Commemoration of the Holocaust .....	250
John Smith and his Biochem Cubes .....	253
The Concept of Swearing .....	254
Land Ownership.....	257
Income Tax Deductions: Financial Reward for	
Dependence and Reproduction .....	259
A Fun Run .....	260
Quarantining People with AIDS.....	262
Poor Little Kids.....	265
Guns.....	266
To Wail like a Brat — and Advertise.....	268
Intelligent Design vs. Evolution .....	269
A New Three-Strike Law .....	270
The Illegality of Assisted Suicide.....	272
What's Wrong with Profit? .....	274
Tax Exemptions for Charitable Institutions .....	277
This Weather .....	278
Free to be — Offensive (You are <i>such</i> an idiot.).....	279
Better than Speech Codes .....	282
Seniority .....	283
People Skills.....	285
Having Kids and Having Religion .....	287
Dr. Frankenstein, meet Dr. Spock.....	288

Lionizing Shakespeare in the High School Curriculum .....	290
Death for Willy? .....	298
Fragrance-Free or Shirtless .....	300
Property Tax.....	302
Cellphone Syndrome .....	305
Opinions, Judges, and Juries .....	308
The Arithmetic of Morality.....	310
The Freedom to Fail, the Right to Succeed .....	311
Living in a Global Community: Needs and Wants .....	314
Inner Peace.....	318
Who Wants to be a Millionaire?.....	320
Ten years later, she meets Dick, and he's so — .....	322
The Freedom to Shop.....	323
Fiscal Conscription .....	325
The International Court of Justice.....	327
Generation X: Lineage.....	330
Public Universities: for members only? .....	333
Advertising Jobs.....	338
My Job, My Self.....	340
The Problem with Business Ethics Courses .....	342
The Radioactive Killing Fields .....	345
What if the right to life ... ? .....	348
Entertain me. Hurt him.....	349
Great Minds.....	350
Casual Work? .....	352
Networking and Mentoring: Legitimizing 'Connections' .....	354
Countdown to Looking Glass.....	358
Political Science: A Costly Misnomer .....	359
What's Wrong with Power.....	361

A Millennial New Year's Resolution	
(Who's Making Policy?) .....	363
Why don't we have professional jurors? .....	366
The Atheistic Samaritan .....	369
LD — just a matter of access? .....	371
English Language or Literature: Foreign Students and	
Standards.....	376
What Went Wrong with Political Correctness? .....	381
Developing Authority and Being a Parent .....	384
Paying People to Pretend to be Doctors .....	385
Dyer on Mass Media: Cause for Pessimism or Optimism? .....	386
I can do whatever I want on my own property!.....	390
Rethinking Nero and the Gas Chamber Accompanists.....	392
Assholes or Idiots (take your pick) .....	393
Is it true that some people can't think? .....	394
Why the fuck are ATVs, PWCs, and snowmobiles	
still legal?.....	395
Blind to Natural Beauty .....	397
Blood & Oil.....	398
Climate Change and Disaster Movies .....	401
A post script. Business and the Environment:	
An Introduction .....	403
Acknowledgements .....	449

# Preface

In a way, *Just ... Think about It* is part of my *Shit that Pisses Me Off* series, but it seemed to me that too many people were misled by the title and the covers of the series, dismissing the pieces as emotional rants, failing to see that in very many cases, I was actually presenting arguments worth serious consideration.

So ... new title and new cover.

When there are several pieces dealing with the same broad topic (for example, our environment, business, education, religion, legislation, etc.), I've put them together in a cluster (rather than a separate titled section, which seemed too monumental).



# Garbage

I was walking down the lane the other day and I noticed a piece of litter, looked like the melted bottom of a plastic bottle. I fumed for a bit, angry at whoever had just tossed it there, and planned to pick it up on my way back. To carry it all the way home, where I'd throw it in the garbage, and three weeks later take to the dump. And it suddenly occurred to me: why go to all that trouble just so it could be buried in some arbitrary place six miles away from here, when I could just as easily bury it here?

But it's not so arbitrary, is it. It's '*away* from here', it's not on the lane I walk on every day, it's not in my backyard. And I realized then that when city planners started including dumps in their blueprints, we took a seriously wrong turn: with such a word, such a concept, we legitimized NIMBY. So too with words like 'litter' and 'garbage'. What is that but stuff that doesn't belong here, stuff we *don't want here*, here in *our* backyard. We 'throw it away'.

And where is '*away*'? It's a piece of land bought or rented for just that purpose; a bunch of people, the city, the community, has simply pooled their money, their taxes, to hire someone to pick up and move the stuff we don't want, from 'here' to 'there'. ('There' being, often, not even in our own country.) (Explain again how the rich nations came to be so rich?)

Now that might not be so bad, but let's go back to square one: why? *Why did the people want the stuff moved in the first place?* Because it's unhealthy and/or unsightly. The stockholder model (I own, therefore I have the right to ... ) is simplistic, in denial with regard to relationships, to interdependence. The

stakeholder model (I am affected by, therefore I have the right to ... ) is more enlightened. And since the stuff we put in the dump, the 'landfill' site (ya gotta love euphemisms), can degrade the land, water, and air *beyond* its borders, no, we don't have the right, even though we have the money, to pay someone to move it from our back yard to someone else's back yard. (Actually, it can affect other people even if it *stays* in our backyard. Because it doesn't really. Stay there. So we don't even have the right to dump it, even to *produce* it — if it's going to end up dumped, in the first place.)

*Imagine a world in which there was no word for 'garbage'.* Perhaps if there was no such thing as 'the dump', if we didn't have a 'waste' basket in every room, perhaps then we wouldn't buy so many plastic bottles. There's only so many you can bury. They don't decompose. Perhaps instead, we'd buy our cola as concentrate in bottles half the size or as fizz tablets wrapped in paper. Perhaps we'd buy only reusables, only compostables. My god if we'd had to keep on our own half-acre or in our own apartment everything we've ever thrown out ...

## Who owns the water?

I am intrigued by (occasional) struggles over ownership of water — not so much the issue of whether or not Canada should sell its lakes, but whether or not they are Canada's to sell. And what intrigues me is not that we're struggling with ownership of water, but that we're *not* struggling with ownership of land. We accept that concept: someone owns the land and when you want some, you have to buy it from the owner, who bought it from the previous owner, and so on. Why isn't the same true for our water?

Is this inconsistency due to our being 'solids' as *Star Trek Voyager's* Odo might note? (Solids who, nevertheless, need liquids, as well as gases — and we haven't even *begun* to consider ownership of the air — to survive.) (And, further, who are *themselves* mostly liquid and partly gas ... ) Or is it an indication of our bias toward the visual — we can't see air nor can we draw lines in water. Whatever, it is certainly not the result of rational consideration.

## New and Improved / Needs and Wants

'New and improved' is not just a bit of harmless puffery; it's a two-party addiction. Stupid consumers must have and stupid companies must produce — new and improved stuff. And it hurts third parties. Such as the animals who are used to test a product every time it changes, every time it becomes new and improved. And, perhaps more importantly (though I'm really not sure anymore), the people who won't get their needs met because resources are being spent on stupid people's wants.

There is a difference. Between needs and wants. One you can do without; the other you can't. People like to call wants 'needs', however, because needs are more *compelling*. Such people are thus being manipulative: to say 'I need X' makes it sound like it's not an option, like X must be provided; but to say 'I want X' leaves the other free(r) not to fulfil the request. We need clean water, nutritious food, shelter/warmth, and sometimes, medical care. Everything else is a want. (So yes, Freud and Maslow and every man since who says sex is a need — you're wrong. Evidence supports the contrary claim: surprising as this may seem, people who don't have sex do not die.)

Nor do you die without the new and improved dish detergent or lip gloss. Or this year's Chrysler. Don't get me wrong: many improvements are indeed improvements; some are even valuable improvements. The new detergents *without* phosphates are much better than the ones with phosphates. And the car with the catalytic converter and higher mpg is better than its predecessor. But most changes are not improvements. (There is a difference — between change and improvement.) And most improvements are not significant

enough to warrant new and improved products at the rate they're being put on the market.

Most of the new and improved stuff is stuff we don't need. Actually, so is most of the old and unimproved stuff. There's a frighteningly high number of people in our society who exhibit arrested development, who seem stuck at the infantile phase of shouting 'More! More! I want more!' I yearn for the day when kids across our country do not start each day reciting a prayer or an anthem but the words 'We don't need.' Because, by and large, in Canada, we don't. We don't need. We already have. Enough.

Growth is not always good. We have these positive associations with the word because we think of a child growing. But the healthy child stops growing when it reaches an optimum size. There's a name for unlimited growth: cancer.

And it's this not stopping, it's this making and taking more than we need, that has gotten us into this dead end. Our atmospheric carbon dioxide, largely the consequence of our resource consumption, is [in February 2018] at 408.5ppm (which, barring an immediate and international response, assures a global temperature increase of 2 degrees. Which triggers a bunch of feedback loops we can't stop).<sup>1</sup> Isn't it time to stop? To grow up and say 'No thank you, I'm fine, I have enough'?

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<sup>1</sup> See [scientificamerican.com/article/earth-will-cross-the-climate-danger-threshold-by-2036/](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/earth-will-cross-the-climate-danger-threshold-by-2036/) and [cbsnews.com/news/paris-un-climate-talks-why-2-degrees-are-so-important](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/paris-un-climate-talks-why-2-degrees-are-so-important).

# Canada Day — Are you sure you want to celebrate?

Before you get all patriotic and fly your little Canadian flags in celebration of Canada Day and, presumably, of being Canadian, think about it. Are you really proud to be:

- the second worst of all the industrialized countries when it comes to sulfur dioxide emissions
- the second worst when it comes to carbon monoxide emissions
- the third worst when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions (we pump out 48% more greenhouse gas emissions per capita than the OECD average, up about 13% since 1990, in violation of our international commitments)
- the fourth worst when it comes to producing ozone-depleting stuff
- the second worst with regard to per capita water consumption
- the third worst when it comes to per capita energy consumption
- the second worst when it comes to energy efficiency
- not even in the top ten with regard to garbage production per person (we're 18th out of 27) (and we're 24th out of 25 for glass recycling, 21st out of 28 for paper and cardboard recycling)

- when it comes to producing nuclear waste, we're #1!! Yay!! We produce more nuclear waste per person than any other OECD country!!

In short, we are hogs. We are stupid, don't-give-a-damn pigs. We're the ones to blame for so much of this climate change — the heat waves, the floods, the droughts, the high food prices. Our fault. Yup, fly your little flag. That's it, wave it, smile ... Ya stupid idiot.

---

*Canada vs. The OECD: An Environmental Comparison*, David R. Boyd. Eco-Research Chair of Environmental Law and Policy, University of Victoria. 2001. [bibvir2.uqac.ca/archivage/12536745.pdf](http://bibvir2.uqac.ca/archivage/12536745.pdf)

# Life as we know it

So I noticed this morning the birds are gone. They used to wake me up every morning around five o'clock and since I'd just gone to bed at two or three, I'd roll over, put in my earplugs, and go back to sleep. And I just realized that I haven't had to do this for ... must be a week now.

And it occurred to me. This is how it will happen. This is how it *is* happening. I've been hoping for, waiting for, some catastrophic event, some wake-the-fuck-up change that will make the world sit up and take notice and finally, *finally*, do something to fix, to save, the planet.

But that's not going to happen.

When's the last time you saw a frog? A bee? Fish swimming in the water?

In March [2012], it's 80 degrees in Canada and 30 degrees in Greece, food prices have increased 25% because of droughts, and *still* people drive their cars into town several times a week, *still* people go on vacation by plane, and what's on TV? Nonstop coverage of the Olympics. Of people trying to run a little bit faster than someone else or throw a ball a little bit further than someone else.

So I'm pissed off again at everyone.

And I'm pissed off at the scientists. The point of no return has been moved from 2040 to 2017.<sup>1</sup> It'll take just 2 degrees.

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<sup>1</sup> “[As] the IEA found, we’re about five years away from building enough carbon-spewing infrastructure to lock us in and make it extremely difficult — maybe impossible — to avoid 450 ppm. The point of no return comes around 2017.” [washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/post/when-do-we-hit-the-point-of-no-return-for-climate-change/2011/11/10/gIQA4rri8M\\_blog.html](http://washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/post/when-do-we-hit-the-point-of-no-return-for-climate-change/2011/11/10/gIQA4rri8M_blog.html)

We're at 1.6 degrees.<sup>2</sup> And what have they done? Quietly, politely, filed their reports. Continued to publish their papers in journals that only a dozen other people read. They should be taking political leaders hostage! They should be — I don't know, isn't there any way they can *force* someone to do something? Students organize protests against higher tuition, larger groups made the Occupy Wall Street movement happen — where are the scientists storming Ottawa and Washington saying “LOOK, YOU MOTHER FUCKERS, YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING NOW!!”?

And why isn't the rest of the world boycotting us? Telling us they won't buy any of our shit until we get our act together about the environment?

So, this is how it'll happen. First the frogs, then the bees, then the fish, then the birds ... Life as we know it will end while everyone in the States and Canada is watching TV.<sup>3</sup> Probably some new reality show.

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<sup>2</sup> “In the last century, the average global temperature has risen approximately 1.6 degrees Fahrenheit; disconcertingly, most scientists agree that the point of no return is a rise 2 degrees Fahrenheit. Beyond these levels (approximated to be 450 ppm carbon dioxide), the planet will experience unprecedented changes in the global climate and a significant increase in the severity of natural disasters (Dresner, 2008). [ ... ] [S]ome estimate that the loss of species is currently happening at 1000 times the natural rate of extinction (Esterman, 2010). Species simply do not have enough time to adapt to altered habitats or migrate to better suited ecosystems. This leaves them stranded, and many of them soon become endangered. ... [And in case you miss the relevance of that] As a population, humans depend on a great deal of species for survival. [web.mit.edu/12.000/www/m2015/2015/climatechange.html](http://web.mit.edu/12.000/www/m2015/2015/climatechange.html)

<sup>3</sup> An aside ... sort of ... I caught a glimpse, by accident, of one of those entertainment celebrity shows the other day and it hit me: we pay people who *pretend* to be doctors more than we pay people who actually *are* doctors.

## Have you noticed the way the weather is being reported?

Have you noticed the way the weather is being reported lately?

Commentators refer to “extreme storms” — making them sound all exciting and daring, like “extreme sports”.

One opens with “this week’s wildest weather” as if we’re on a fun safari.

Another asks “Will any records be broken?” suggesting that, like athletic competitions, breaking a record will be a good thing.

And on a popular weather network website, the “photo of the day” shows a huge iceberg afloat, testament to the alarming melt of the polar ice,<sup>1</sup> and the caption reads, unbelievably, “Anyone else see a face in the iceberg?”

*They’ve turned the death of our planet into entertainment.*

And then there’s all that pseudo-scientific detail! The rain is going to be caused by water droplets, that’s droplets of H<sub>2</sub>O, in the air that will succumb to gravity, under normal conditions, and eventually reach us, possibly at 6:20 or maybe 6:21.

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<sup>1</sup> “Six thousand years ago, when the world was one degree warmer than it is now, the American agricultural heartland around Nebraska was desert. ... The effect of one-degree warming, therefore, requires no great feat of imagination. ... *Whilst snow-covered ice reflects more than 80% of the sun’s heat, the darker ocean absorbs up to 95% of solar radiation. Once sea ice begins to melt, in other words, the process becomes self-reinforcing. More ocean surface is revealed, absorbing solar heat, raising temperatures and making it unlikelier that ice will re-form next winter. The disappearance of 720,000 square kilometres of supposedly permanent ice in a single year testifies to the rapidity of planetary change. ... Chance of avoiding one degree of global warming: zero.* <http://globalwarming.berrens.nl/globalwarming.htm>

Thing is, all that drama and detail distracts us from what's really going on with the weather. Notice the obsession with proximate causes? Is it because if they addressed the real causes, those remote causes like eating meat and using fossil fuels, they'd have to address blame? (Maybe that's why they're referring to "acts of weather". Not, like, acts of humanity.) (And certainly not, anymore, acts of someone's god.)

And, have you noticed the increase in climate change disaster movies? Right, yeah, let's get everyone comfortable with the idea. The idea that survival is possible. All we need is a hero.

## Business in Denial

'We're just providing what the market, what people, demand.' The CEO says. 'The customer is squarely in the driver's seat.' Yeah right. Gosh, shucks, don't-look-at-me.

One, I doubt that's true. I mean, if people really wanted your product, you wouldn't (have to) spend millions on advertising, advertising to persuade them to buy it. Supply isn't (just) following demand; demand is following supply. *Your supply. You're in the driver's seat.*

Two, even if it is true, that people do want it, I find it hard to believe that someone with enough whatever to get to an executive position, a decision-making position, would be so meekly obedient to the desires, the demands, of the common people.

Or so helpless: 'demands' is such loaded language, implying that resistance, your resistance, is futile, implying that you are without power here.

Or so spineless — as if you have no mind, no desire, no will of your own.

Please, have the guts, the maturity, to take responsibility for your actions. You produce/provide what you do because you choose to, because you want to. If you *are* acceding to market demands — and I have no doubt that you are — it's because it's profitable, it's because (you think) it's in your best interests. You 'want to make it easy for the customer to do business with [you]' because business *with* you is business *for* you. Customers are a means to your end of profit. Otherwise you'd be as interested in poverty management as you are in wealth management.

‘Our shareholders demand high returns.’ Another pass-the-buck denial of responsibility. One, again, I doubt that’s strictly true. Did you ask them all? And was their response fully informed? Were they aware that their high returns come at the expense of others? (Others’ low wages, loss of employment; other’s high prices, loss of choice through monopoly; environmental degradation; etc.)

And two, even if they do, again, do you have to obey them? Of course not. Unless — and here’s the all important hidden (by you, from you) assumption — unless you want the value of your company to be ‘high’ so people will give you money. There’s that self-interest again.

‘Return on equity is an important measure of our success.’ Not the amount of good one does, not the amount of happiness one creates, no, these things don’t matter; success isn’t even justice, isn’t getting back what one puts out, no, success is how much *more* one gets back than one puts out. Self-interest. Literally, *interest. For the self.* It’s egoism, pure and simple. And childish and dangerous. I don’t think ‘society as a whole’ is in the vocabulary. The total inability to recognize, let alone deal with, the moral dimension — i.e., the consideration of *others* — is frightening.

And the ego knows no satisfaction. ‘From start-up to growth.’ The life cycle of a business seems to stop there. At growth. And more growth. And more growth. Excuse me? What about stasis? What about decline? They are part of the entire life cycle. Only a cancer grows and grows and grows.

# No Advertising in Public Space

I once read a sci fi novel in which holographic ads suddenly appeared in front of you, 'blocking' your way, almost continuously, as you made your way down a city street. It made me imagine people paid by perfume companies wandering through the streets assailing me with sample sprays ...

I am a strong advocate of prohibiting all advertising in public spaces. There is no justification for the desires of one person, let alone the desire of one person *for money*, to be imposed on everyone. Furthermore, there are enough alternative venues for advertising (radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, websites, malls), all of which, unlike, often, public space, can be used or not (especially as long as there are advertising-free radio, TV, magazine, and website options), making the use of public space is simply unnecessary.

We should be able to go about our lives without the constant assault on the senses, on the mind, that is advertising. Of course this is an argument made by someone who *notices* ads, who *pays attention* to her environment, who *thinks about* what she sees. For most people, ads are not such an assault, because they're unconsciously perceived. But then they're even more coercive, subliminally manipulative, and even more indefensible in public space.

Advertising is not only cognitively coercive, but physically dangerous when it appears on roadsides, especially in animated form, which shamelessly tries to take drivers' attention off the road. Would we allow drivers to watch TV, similarly visual content with moving images, while they drive?

An additional argument applies to natural environment public space (forest, field, lake, ocean) which is, to my mind,

beautiful (or at least more beautiful than city). In this case, there is the added transgression of the destruction of beauty. It was a sad, sad day when advertising was allowed along the perimeter of the rink and even on the ice during figure skating performances. Years to achieve the perfect lines, sullied by persisting in-your-face BUY-MY-SHIT signs we can't help but see while we try to focus on the beauty. (And it's not like the sign enhances the beauty. It's not like the sign itself is remotely beautiful.)

Would those of us who can hear allow a deaf person to make a clamour with cymbals all day long? Then why do we allow aesthetically-challenged CEOs to do the same? Why do we allow our natural beauty to be degraded, destroyed, piece by piece, by those who are, obviously, blind to its beauty? Is it because we don't recognize the beauty or because we don't value it (or, at least, don't value it over the individual pursuit of money). (Seriously? Do we really believe that an individual's desire for money trumps so much?) (Well, no, the people with the power to make regulations believe that. And they are as aesthetically-challenged. And often CEOs.)

# No Advertising

Imagine a “No Advertising” rule. Whenever you wanted to buy something, you’d just look it up in a central directory with a really good search engine that enabled you to see all of your options (a shortlist based on your preferences) accompanied by product information. Or you could just choose from the selection offered by whatever store you went to.

Most magazines, newspapers, radio stations, and television stations would die. The ones that are just tools of the companies who use them for advertising. The other ones, the ones supported by people genuinely interested in reading, listening, and watching what they have to offer, would live on.

So that means that all those incredibly annoying DJs who sound hyper-enthusiastic about, well, everything — gone. All those TV stations full of all those inane TV shows that no one in their right mind would pay to see — gone. (And oh to watch a show without the station logo on the screen in my face the whole time. Has anyone actually proven that that increases how much I watch NBC or CBC or whoever? It’s like the company name that was etched on the glass door of my woodstove; since I like to watch a fire without someone’s name etched on my consciousness every time I do, I had the glass replaced. At an additional cost, of course.)

No more blinking billboards to distract us from driving. (Those things should be illegal in any case.)

No more flyers. All that time, labour, and material used by the company, the post office, and the recipient to deal with all that advertising — recovered, for other purposes.

No more telemarketing phone calls. (There’s a reason there are no more door-to-door salesmen. We’d’ve shot ’em all by now.)

And my god, the internet. All those pages that would load twice as quickly if they didn't have ads.

Not to mention the email spam. Gone.

In all, over \$500 billion would become available for other purposes. Instead of spending all that money to make their products *look* good, companies might use it to make products that actually *are* good. Did you know that the pharmaceutical industry spends twice as much on advertising as it does on research?

Lastly, freed from the constant onslaught of others telling us what we need and want, maybe we could recognize our genuine needs and wants.

# Supervisory Responsibility

I have come to realize that the corporate definition of ‘responsibility’ is very different than the common definition. I am thinking, in particular, of ‘supervisory responsibility’.

Consider this situation. A subordinate (say, an assistant) prepares and distributes advertisements for a position; she interviews various applicants, selects one and notifies him of his success, then trains the new person, and periodically checks his work performance. One might think the subordinate’s job description would include “recruit, hire, train, and supervise”.

One would be wrong. Subordinates can’t hire. Only superordinates (supervisors) can hire. Subordinates can’t supervise. Only superordinates can supervise. Say what? But the subordinate *did* hire and supervise, so obviously she *can* hire and supervise. Nope.

And apparently this set-up is common: the subordinate actually *does* X, but the superordinate is *responsible* for X. If there’s a problem, he’s the one who’ll be held accountable.

First, there’s a substantial incoherence here. If indeed the subordinate is *not* responsible, why is she reprimanded and sometimes even fired for making a mistake or doing a poor job? The notion of penalty implies the notion of responsibility. Why blame A for X if A isn’t responsible? Shouldn’t we blame whoever’s responsible? Shouldn’t the superordinate, then, be fired if the subordinate messes up? (Yeah right. That’ll happen. When pigs fly.)

Second, this conception of responsibility infantilizes the subordinate. A sign of maturity is that one takes responsibility for one’s actions. Only with children (and the mentally incompetent) is another held responsible. Denying the

subordinate that responsibility is, then, insisting on juvenile (or incompetent) status.

Third, it puts a great deal of strain on the superordinate. It is very stressful to be responsible for someone else's behaviour. One has the responsibility, but not the control. No wonder they develop ulcers.

And no wonder they develop into control freaks — a fourth problem. If one is responsible for something, one is surely going to try to *have* some control over that something. And so superordinates try to control their subordinates: they give orders, they criticize, they reprimand, etc. The greater the subordinate's autonomy (insistence on maturity), the more antagonistic the relationship will become.

Fifth, there's an ethical problem. It's simply not fair to hold people responsible for something over which they have no control. This moral principle is even threaded throughout our legal system.

This conception of responsibility is unfair in another way as well, and this is a sixth problem. Usually, one of the relevant aspects of a job description that determines the salary for that position is degree of responsibility. So the subordinate does X, and is awarded, say, 10 points on the salary scale. But the superordinate is *responsible for X*, and is awarded 100 points. Not fair.

This logical sleight-of-hand makes the superordinate's job look so much more demanding — after all, they're responsible for so very much: if they supervise ten people, they're responsible for ten whole jobs! No wonder they get paid ten times as much! But, of course, there's something wrong here — the meaning of the term 'responsible' gets changed half way through: in the first case, 'responsible for it' means 'doing it', but in the second case, 'responsible for it' means 'seeing that it gets done'.

Let me suggest that supervisory responsibility was instituted as a checks-and-balance sort of thing, as a quality

control mechanism. And this is a good thing. But having someone be responsible for making sure another person does his/her job is quite different than having that someone be responsible for the other person's job.

And the first kind of responsibility need not have a great deal more status and salary attached to it. In fact, it need not have *any* more status and salary attached to it. A doing X, B doing Y, C doing Z, and D double-checking A, B, and C doing X, Y, and Z — why shouldn't all four people be considered equal in terms of status and salary? In fact, one could argue that A, B, and C should have more status and salary than D. It usually takes more skill and effort to *do* X, Y, and Z, to a standard than to see whether they got done to that standard. And if B messes up, why can't B be held responsible for not doing Y, and D held responsible for not checking B's work (which is different from D being held responsible for not doing Y)? And why can't B have control over how to do Y, and D have control over how to check B doing Y (which is different from D having control over B)? There would be a need for B's work to be accessible to D, but accessible is not the same as controllable. This way, both responsibility and control are kept in their proper spheres. And both B and D are treated like adults. And neither is put on a fast track to an ulcer. (Of course, another arrangement is to have A doing X, B doing Y, C doing Z, and A double-checking B, B double-checking C, and C double-checking A; no need for D at all.)

So why does the corporate world maintain the problematic view of responsibility? Well, it sure keeps the hierarchy cemented in place. The very terms 'subordinate' and 'superordinate' mean 'inferior' and 'superior' (in fact, one often hears references to 'one's superiors' rather than, as is more accurate, 'one's *organizational* superiors'). So my guess is that the desire to control is not necessarily linked to responsibility; more often, it's linked to ego.

# Leadership?

Some time ago, I attended a “Women in Leadership” conference put on by one of Ontario’s larger unions. What I learned there disillusioned two parts of me: the labour part and the feminist part.

In the seminar on Collective Bargaining, I was told that “Every negotiation is an exercise in perceived power: if you have power and act as if you don’t, then you don’t; if you don’t have power and act as if you do, then you do.” If you don’t have power, then don’t act as if you do! Don’t act like every obnoxious male I know, strutting about with an inflated sense of importance, acting like The Authority on Everything. Yes, of course, many buy the act (including, eventually, the actor): many are suckered in by the suit and tie, the bass voice speaking with weighty pauses, the overly serious demeanour. But to pretend is to deceive. And to pretend in order to gain power, in order to control — that’s manipulation.

Furthermore, I’m disturbed by the view that perception is more important than reality. Although perception may well guide human action more often than reality, I think that that state of affairs is unfortunate. Whatever happened to ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’? To perpetuate, indeed to encourage, pretence over substance, form over content, is very dangerous. Especially at the bargaining table. It occurred to me that the union probably hires image consultants — does it pay them more than it does its policy consultants?

I was also told that “*I need* is better than *I want*.” Wait a minute, there is a difference between needs and wants, and to call a want a need is misleading, and, again, manipulative. So is inflating needs and wants, the next piece of advice.

I was reminded of the scene in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* in which a worker describes why the fictional socialist-run Twentieth Century Motor Company failed miserably: at first 'from everyone according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' worked fine, but then people didn't just need supper for their kids and a wheelchair for their grandmother, they needed cream for their coffee, they needed the living room replastered, and they needed a new car. Well of course it was the squeaky wheels (the "rotten, whiny, snivelling beggars") that got the grease — as well as the yacht they 'needed'.

It's hard enough to reach an agreement when two parties have different objectives; to lie about those objectives makes it harder, not easier. We should say what we mean and mean what we say. So if you want X, say you want X, not X times two. It's the morally correct thing to do, but even from a pragmatic point of view, it makes sense: people stop believing people who exaggerate, people who lie.

"Negotiations is a game." One seminar leader said it, and another illustrated it. The 'ice breaker' in her seminar was a game called "Diverse Points". Basically the game went like this: the Leisure Area was for single players to form pairs in preparation for negotiation; the Negotiations Area was for negotiation — people met in pairs and tried to reach agreement on how to divide 100 points between them in any of four proportions, 90/10, 80/20, 70/30, 60/40 (a division of 50/50 was not permitted); the object of the game was to accumulate as many points as possible and the player with the highest total score was the winner.

Well. First of all, trying to get as many points as possible is not negotiating, it's competing.

Second, why isn't a split of 50/50 permitted? In the absence of significance (the points had no meaning) and, therefore, rationale, a split of 50/50 is, to my mind, most fair. Why structure a game that excludes fairness as a possibility? Could it be that achieving fair agreement is not the point?

Third — the Leisure Area! I suppose it was intended to simulate the golf course, the tennis court, the cocktail lounge — you butter up your associate, pretending to be friends, doing the leisure thing together, and then you saunter over to the Negotiations Area. ‘How To Use Your Friends’ couldn’t be written more clearly over the entrance. Instead, why not just show up at the Negotiations Area when you want to negotiate?

I played the game, with great reluctance and after considerable thought, trying to average 50 points per negotiation. As I mentioned earlier, it was the best I could do in terms of fairness (I believe a split of 90/10 could also be fair — it depends on context, which was absent). To my pleasant surprise, many of the women I interacted with were quite happy with this approach, and we easily and pleasantly decided who would get 40 and who would get 60, based on each of our totals so far; sometimes we agreed on 70/30, or even 80/20, if one of us was quite a bit over an average of 50 and the other quite a bit under. However, at least one woman lied to me about her point average. This was not surprising, given the preceding instruction. She may have been the winner, I’m not sure; to be honest, I didn’t care much who won.

The conference proceeded and the more I learned about succeeding in my role as a union officer, as a woman on the labour front, the more I wished I hadn’t been elected by my branch. The last thing I remember was this statement: “Collective bargaining has nothing to do with logic or reason.” Apparently it has nothing to do with ethics either.

## Crossing the Line

I crossed a picket line once. The Ontario Federation of Secondary School Teachers (OSSTF) in the Toronto area was on strike in 1983, and one of their demands was that union members be hired to fill night school and summer school teaching positions. They were concerned about quality of education: they didn't want these courses to become second-class courses as a result of being taught by second-class teachers who were unqualified and inexperienced.

Well, I was qualified. More qualified than many of the older OSSTF members who got their teaching jobs when you didn't even need a B.A., let alone a B.Ed. And I was experienced. In addition to about ten years of private music and dance teaching experience, I'd had a half-time regular day school position for one year and had taught a few night school courses the following year.

But more than that, I was enraged: what right does a person who already has a full-time teaching job and income (a wage that even at the lowest point is enough to support *two* people) have to an extra, a second, teaching job and income when there are so many without even a first?

Insofar as unions fight against abuses by management, I support them. It's the have-nots pulling together against the haves. But more and more today, union members themselves are the haves — they have jobs. And when they take action to protect (only) their own members, as is their mandate, well, it's the same old us/them thing, isn't it? And it perpetuates, it doesn't eradicate, class inequality.

If unions really want to honour their socialist history, they'd not be selfishly protecting their own but sharing. At the

time, in Canada, about one in ten was unemployed. If those nine employed people had given up just four hours of their forty-hour work week, that tenth could've been employed — and all ten would have a very adequate thirty-six hours a week income.

There's something morally indecent about expecting the have-nots to support the haves, asking them to forego the little bit of income they could get as replacement workers (I prefer the term 'bandages' to 'scabs') in support of fringe benefits and pension plans for the regular workers. Pretty soon, unions will be asking the people in Thailand and wherever not to accept the jobs at Mattel and GM. And *that's* crossing the line.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, one has to consider population control as well: if you're reproducing yourself for no good reason and I'm not, why should part of my job go to your offspring? That is, why should your choices reduce my quality of life?

# Mentoring: It's Who You Know

Studies show that people who have had mentors, who have had someone to provide “sponsorship, exposure, visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments — activities which directly relate to the protégé’s career” do indeed experience more career advancement than people who have not had mentors.<sup>1</sup> In a study of 1241 American executives, 67% of all respondents said they had a mentor.<sup>2</sup> Which just goes to show — it’s who you know. That’s how, why, they *are* executives.

Given that it’s a 1979 statistic, presumably the respondents are referring to an informal mentorship, which arises spontaneously, as opposed to a formal mentorship, which is arranged by the organization as part of a mentoring program. The problem in both cases, however, is that most people who are in a position to mentor, a position of power and prestige, a well-connected position, are men. Still. So sexism keeps women from becoming protégés — because even if the guy’s wife is fine with it, everyone will wonder whether she’s sleeping her way to the top and that’ll handicap her, essentially cancelling any advantage of the mentorship. Furthermore, women who could be mentors avoid mentoring other women because they fear being labelled feminist troublemakers. Why don’t men avoid mentoring other men for fear they’ll be labelled — what, part of the old boys’ network?

All that aside, it seems to me that mentoring is unfair: it

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<sup>1</sup> “Formal and Informal Mentorships: A Comparison on Mentoring Functions and Contrast with Non-mentored Counterparts,” Georgia T. Chao and Pat M. Walz *Personnel Psychology* 45.3 (1992)

<sup>2</sup> “Much Ado about Mentors,” B. Roche. *Harvard Business Review* 5.7 (1979)

makes 'it's who you know not what you know' true. Merit becomes *not* the sole criterion for advancement.

Though perhaps mentoring counters chance. Chance is unfair too. With mentoring, those who do get doors opened for them are those who deserve it. But to say 'All A are B' doesn't mean 'All B are A': to say 'All those who are mentored have merit' doesn't mean 'All those with merit become mentored'. I'm not sure mentors choose their protégés according to merit (or develop merit in their protégés). (In which case, mentoring simply legitimizes favouritism.<sup>3</sup>)

So why *do* mentors choose who they choose? Why do mentors mentor at all? I wonder if it isn't just some primitive lineage impulse in action. You know ... men need a son, someone to carry on the family name. And since it's more and more unlikely that men have *actual* sons in a position to be their protégés ... Do mentors tend to choose sons of friends when available? Do they tend to choose people who are twenty to thirty years younger, in the 'son' age bracket? What about women who mentor? More likely, *their* motive is social justice,<sup>4</sup> not personal legacy.

I'm not saying people shouldn't seek, or give, advice and guidance. But a mentor doesn't just act as a source of information about the policies and procedures of the organization, help you with specific skills, give you feedback, etc. A mentor often does *more* than that: a mentor introduces you to influential people in

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<sup>3</sup> Or its opposite: let's not forget that mentors can close doors too — what do you do when your mentor starts 'forgetting' to 'mention' you?

<sup>4</sup> For example, several mentoring programs are designed for women and minorities *because* they are unconnected, because they are "not as well integrated into departmental or institutional networks" (Linda K. Johnsrud, "Enabling the Success of Junior Faculty Women through Mentoring" in *Mentoring Revisited: Making an Impact on Individuals and Institutions*, p.53). But this just compensates for an unfair system; it doesn't make it less unfair.

the organization, facilitates your entry to meetings and activities usually attended by high-level people, publicly praises your accomplishments and abilities, recommends you for promotion, and so on. But see here's the thing. Introductions should be unnecessary. Meetings attended by high level personnel shouldn't be open to others. *Everyone's* accomplishments and abilities should be praised publicly. Only your immediate supervisor or some named designate should be able to recommend you for a promotion. And so on.

So the need for mentors means the organization isn't structured to advance based on merit. So shouldn't mentors' efforts instead be directed to making sure that it is? To making sure that mentors aren't needed? You shouldn't need a mentor to open doors because the doors shouldn't be locked. You shouldn't need a mentor to give you inside information because there shouldn't be any inside information: an organization's policies and procedures should be written out for all to read, perhaps even presented at a new employee training session (and there should be no unwritten policies, no under-the-table procedures); any preferences for application materials, be it for a job, a promotion, or a grant, should be stated on the application form itself, or perhaps explained in a separate "Tips for Applicants" sheet; and knowledge of any available job, promotion, or grant should be freely accessible to all. Influential people should use their influence only in formal channels; their authority should only be that vested in them by the terms of their job description.

Men are so proud of not mixing pleasure and business, of separating the personal from the public. Bullshit. Aren't a lot of critical connections, let alone decisions, made on the golf course? At the bar? Between conference sessions? It seems that by 'personal' and 'pleasure' they just mean women — wives, daughters, sexual liaisons. They leave the women in their lives out of consideration. But their relationships with their buddies and their sons — these are very much brought into the workplace.

# Unprofessional

As in 'unprofessional behaviour' or 'unprofessional attire'. As in 'not good'. As in 'cause for dismissal'. Given that extreme consequence, we'd better define 'unprofessional'. Easier said than done.

The word 'professional' means, simply, 'pertaining to the profession'. Not helpful. Let's assume that the profession's *standards* are being referred to, standards which, presumably, identify a certain minimum regarding *quality of performance*. For example, good counselling depends on trust; specifically, for example, the counsellee trusts the counsellor not to tell others what has been discussed during the session. Therefore, a counsellor who fails to maintain confidentiality is being unprofessional. As another example, it is incontestable that certain professions are best carried out when their practitioners do not accept bribes. So if a police officer or a lawyer does accept a bribe, s/he would be guilty of unprofessional behaviour. So far, so good.

What about the professor who has a relationship with a student? *Is* it incontestable that university education is best achieved *without* personal attachment between professor and student and/or when the professor is impartial? Is impartiality possible, let alone probable, even *without* professor-student relationships? (I'm thinking of racial, religious, and gender prejudices, and even simple personality conflicts.) And do personal attachments necessarily mean *lack of impartiality*?

Consider the profession of broadcast journalism. One could argue that based on the evidence of public opinion polls, a newscast is taken more seriously (i.e., is more successful) when delivered in a bass voice. So it would be unprofessional to hire tenors, let alone altos and sopranos.

Things become even murkier when we leave unprofessional behaviour and venture into unprofessional attire. In which professions is the success of the job dependent on specific attire? Incontestably, scuba diving and fire fighting. What about nursing? Why do they have to wear those uniforms? They aren't intrinsically sterile. Ease of identification in emergencies? Okay, I'll accept that. What about the staff at fast food outlets? I should think correct identification is pretty much guaranteed by their being behind the counter (not that getting fries with that is a matter of any urgency). From here, we can readily get into the ridiculous: how does wearing lipstick and mascara relate to success on the job for an airline worker or a bank teller? (One of the former was fired for not wearing any make-up, one of the latter for wearing too much.) How does wearing cotton pants and a sweatshirt relate to success on the job for an elementary school teacher? (Suspended without pay for the entire school year.)

That much of professionalism is concerned with appearance is unsettling for several reasons:

- (1) There is often no correspondence between the appearance of competence and competence itself; whether that teacher wears polyester or denim, for example, does not, cannot, indicate the quality of her teaching. (Especially in education, this view is abhorrent because it contradicts one of the fundamentals of scientific inquiry: we try to teach our students to understand what it is, not what it looks like.)
- (2) It violates one of our moral fundamentals — 'Don't judge a book by its cover' and 'It's what's on the inside that counts' — and makes us hypocrites.
- (3) Accordingly, it doesn't matter then whether or not we actually do X; it matters only whether or not it looks like we've done X. Hello?

Truth is, much of professionalism comes down to custom. The airline attendant was not conforming to custom. Nor was the bank teller. Nor the teacher. Each was doing something a little aberrant, a little individual. But how can we justify equating 'professionalism' with 'conformity'? (Well, we seem to equate 'morality' with 'conformity' fairly easily ... ) A researcher was once reprimanded for using 'unprofessional salutations' in letters requesting information: rather than 'Dear Sir/Madam', a simple 'Hi' began the letter. Unprofessional or just unconventional? Would recipients of such letters really refuse to send the information just because 'Dear Sir/Madam' wasn't used? (What do we take each other for?)

Now, from 'doing what's expected' (custom), we easily get to 'doing what you're told' (obedience) as a definition of professionalism. Consider this, from a biography by Vicki Goldberg: "... she did not seek out politically charged stories to make her political point, nor refuse an assignment for political reasons (or for any other). *Margaret was a professional*" (my emphasis). In fact, it may not be unusual for charges of 'unprofessionalism' and 'insubordination' to occur together (insubordination referring, of course, to not deferring to your supervisor, perhaps especially with respect to orders given).

In fact, it's beginning to look like being professional is incompatible with being an individual, an individual with ideas, values, thoughts, feelings, integrity. To be professional, you wear a uniform (you look like everyone else, you become *impersonal*) and you do what you're told (you listen to another person, rather than to your own person). Is it not 'unprofessional' for a doctor to refuse to help an injured person who has just killed and is certain to kill again? No doubt, it would be 'unprofessional' for an engineer to refuse a project with military applications. Impartiality and emotional distance, no personal opinions or judgements — I'd say professionalism is downright dangerous.

# Ethics without Philosophers (the Appalling State of Affairs in Business)

Could someone without a business degree become a marketing consultant? Then how is it that people without philosophy degrees are becoming ethics consultants?<sup>1</sup> Is it that people don't know that Ethics is a branch of Philosophy just as Marketing is a branch of Business? Doubtful. Is it just the typical male overstatement of one's expertise?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps. Is it that people think they already know right from wrong, they learned it as children, there's really no need for any formal training in ethics? Possible. I have certainly met that attitude in business ethics classes and ethics committees.<sup>3</sup> Or is it that ethics consultants (advisors, officers, practitioners, and so on) don't really act as consultants about ethics? They act as consultants about managing ethical behaviour. Actually, they don't even do that. Ethical consultants, practitioners, officers, focus on how to

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<sup>1</sup> I have only anecdotal information here. I did send a three-item questionnaire to survey the Ethics Officer Association (U.S.), the Ethics Practitioners Association of Canada, and the Canadian Center for Ethics and Corporate Policy. In the first case, I was informed they have no way to track the education status of their members as that was not one of the questions asked on their membership application, and apparently they were not interested in sending my three questions to their members; in the second case, again, I don't think my questions got passed on; in the third case, my questions did get passed onto the Board of Directors, but no further, and I received three replies — one person had a B.A. in Science and an M.B.A., another indicated that he was a Chartered Accountant, and the third had a B.A. and an LL.B. with no particular training in ethics.

<sup>2</sup> My personal experience strongly indicates that most ethics consultants are men.

<sup>3</sup> Though, of course, childhood ethics doesn't tell you who gets the kidney and at what price.

increase the likelihood that employees will follow some specific professional code of ethics or, more likely, the ethical rules the company's elite want them to follow. They don't, as they proclaim, 'develop methodologies for ethical decision-making.'<sup>4,5</sup>

As far as I can see, business ethics courses taught by business faculty and ethics programs run by managers are superficial at best.<sup>6</sup> First, following a code is just an appeal to custom, an appeal to tradition, which philosophers consider a weak basis, if not an actual error in reasoning: just because it's common to do it that way doesn't mean it's right; just because you've always done it that way doesn't mean it's right.

Second, legal moralism is prevalent: if it's legal, it's right, and if it's not illegal, it's not wrong. Few philosophers (and I daresay few intelligent people) accept this equivalence of moral rightness and legality. After all, slavery was once legal, and even at that time many considered it wrong and had excellent arguments to support their position (which is, to some extent, why the law changed — ethics should determine law, not the other way around).

Third, the so-called 'media test' and 'gut test' are essentially

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<sup>4</sup> I say that developing methodologies for ethical decision-making surely refers to decision-making that accords with the company code because methodologies for ethical decision-making already exist, (Are ethics practitioners intending to reinvent or surpass Aristotle, Kant, Mill, McIntyre, and the many, many others who have developed ways to determine what is right? Doubtful.)

<sup>5</sup> And yet even at this rudimentary level, they fail. Perhaps the biggest obstacles to ethical behaviour are bonuses for behaviour that increase profit. Dangling such a carrot in front of someone for doing the profitable thing makes it harder, not easier, to do the right thing. High salaries, which will be lost if one loses one's job, which will happen if one doesn't increase profit, is another way exactly *not* to 'encourage compliance'. So of course if a company were really serious about their ethics, they'd give bonuses for doing the right thing, whether or not profit is increased or decreased.

<sup>6</sup> Of all the conferences I've attended, only for the ethics practitioners conference was I told what to wear. Philosophers don't care; they understand it's not important.

nothing but appeals to intuition, which is nothing more than childhood conditioning that makes us say X ‘feels’ wrong. I think it far better to approach ethical issues with thought, to consider the many rational approaches to making decisions about right and wrong, such as an appraisal of values, principles, consequences, and so on.

A second weakness of ethics as done by non-philosophers is that what takes place is usually preaching not teaching. That is, course material consists of ‘This is the right thing’ and ‘Do this in this situation’ — professors simply convey the current conventions and standard practices and legal obligations. The underlying principles and values are unexamined, and likely to be inadequate or contradictory in any case.

The human resources director or management executive is simply not equipped to examine the principles and values enshrined in the code she or he advocates,<sup>7</sup> nor to approach an ethical issue with any rigor (for example, to figure out whether affirmative action

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<sup>7</sup> Consequently, ethical codes remained unexamined and, therefore, more often than not, useless. Partly, this is because there is no definition: what exactly is professionalism, for instance? Excellence? Integrity? The last-mentioned, so often listed as a value in codes of ethics, is nothing more than non-hypocrisy: having integrity means that if you think X is right, you should *do* X. It doesn’t indicate *what* is right in the same way that, for example, honesty or beneficence does. Examination reveals that transparency and accountability are similar to integrity. I’ve even seen ‘objective’ [sic] [not ‘objectivity’] listed in a code of ethics — again, qualified attention to definition would reveal that objectivity isn’t a moral value.

And partly ethical codes are useless because of internal conflict and lack of prioritization. For example, one code I looked at says employees “shall act in a manner that is in the best interests of their clients and employer consistent with the public interest.” That one item alone is fraught with internal conflicts. It doesn’t take a genius to imagine an instance in which the best interests of the client *collide with* the best interests of the employer, let alone the public interest. When they collide, when, for example, honesty conflicts with loyalty, or providing the highest quality of service conflicts with providing the highest return to shareholders, which one is to take precedence? The code doesn’t say. I’ve seen *no* code of ethics provide a means of ranking values, a means of resolving such conflicts.

programs are really fair, to determine if a proposed advertising campaign is really coercive, or to decide if anticipated environmental destruction is ethically justifiable), let alone teach various ways of making decisions about right and wrong.

Philosophers are. Not only are they equipped to approach ethical issues with rigor, they look at the principles and values involved in such approaches; they would consider whether one should conform to the codes that are so taken for granted by those in business, whether those codes are at all adequate. A philosopher's focus is thus more fundamental. And therefore prerequisite. That's why the business ethics done by non-philosophers is so alarming: it's building a house without a foundation — or, rather, convincing people to live in the house, without examining the foundation.

A very rudimentary version of a philosopher's methodology for ethical decision-making would be something like this:

1. Identify the ethical issue, the question to be answered.
2. Identify the relevant facts, consulting all involved.
3. (a) Identify the relevant moral principles and values.  
(b) Rank them.
4. (a) List all the decision options.  
(b) Identify the consequences for each option.
5. Align the options with the values and principles — which are upheld, which are violated?
6. Decide what is the 'rightest' thing to do.
7. Repeat the process for deciding about the 'rightest' way of doing it.

I present below notes that I made (while I served on the ethics committee of a local hospital) for analysis of ethical problems to show what a philosophically trained person can do:

**I. A Nephrology Questionnaire was presented to the committee by Dr. X for approval.**

The basic question underlying the questionnaire is this: *Who gets dialysis?* This question can be framed as

- (1) a futile treatment question
- (2) an allocation of resources question

The first has already been discussed, the main issues being the definition of 'futile' and whether we have a moral obligation to provide futile treatment.

With regard to the second, decisions can be made according to the following three criteria:

- (i) *medical value* in prolonging life, alleviating pain, and/or enhancing life — key questions are 'How much value?' and 'How likely is the value to be achieved?' and the central conflict would be between the 'best outcome' approach (an end point approach) and the 'most in need' approach (a beginning point approach)
- (ii) *self worth* — the key question here is 'Does the person have a high or low quality of life?' (and is a subjective standard or an objective standard used to determine this?)
- (iii) *social worth* — the key question here is 'Does the person contribute to or cost society?' (this would

include consideration of emotional and/or economic dependents)

These three criteria can be used

- *simultaneously* (consider all three at the same time)
- *serially* (if, and only if, the first criterion is met — that is, the dialysis does have medical value — is the next criterion considered)

These three criteria can be given *equal* or *different* weight. One can judge

- according to *consequences* (in which case the ‘best outcome’ might weigh heavily, but one would have to ask outcome for who — the patient only, or for the family, or for society as a whole)
- according to *rights* (do all have equal rights to the treatment, in which case we toss a coin or consider ‘first come, first served’)
- according to *justice* (are some more deserving than others?)

One can also, of course, combine these approaches: for example, a person might by lifestyle forfeit their rights and so another might be more deserving.

By way of contrast, non-philosophically trained people (the others on the ethics committee) would’ve responded with something like ‘I think the questionnaire’s okay’ or ‘I think it’s too long.’ See the difference?

Here’s another example:

**II. Dr. Y was faced with a request by a mother to employ aggressive management for her newborn son whose longevity was limited (following a premature birth and surgery for a severe fetal anomaly).**

I identified six ethical issues involved the decision faced by Dr. Y:

(1) the conflict between physician and patient/proxy issue:

- the physician can override patient/proxy requests in some circumstances, one of which is a request for futile treatment, another of which is a request for harmful treatment unbalanced by benefit; this may be especially defensible if the proxy has already made an ethically questionable decision (in this case, the decision to carry to term with full knowledge of the defect)

*objection:* patient/proxy requests must always be fulfilled

*response:* this position simply seems indefensible

(2) the futile treatment issue:

- (i) the aggressive management requested falls into the category of futile treatment (the procedures won't cure the condition)
- (ii) the aggressive management won't prolong life - and if it does, such life is of insufficient quality (must define 'insufficient', perhaps by reference to mental abilities, physical abilities, and presence of pain) and/or the prolonging is too short-term to be worthwhile (must define 'worthwhile', perhaps as above)

(iii) the aggressive management won't alleviate pain

**objection:** the procedures would alleviate the parents' pain

**response:** this would be using the baby as a means to others' end; such alleviation doesn't override lack of benefit to the baby; such alleviation doesn't override harm to the baby

**objection:** life should be maintained at all costs in all cases

**response:** this position is indefensible

(3) the harmful treatment issue:

- the aggressive management falls into the category of harmful treatment unbalanced by benefit because there is physical trauma involved and/or because there is no resulting recovery, minimal prolonging (quality and quantity), and/or minimal alleviation of pain

(4) the DNR issue:

- the physician should (a) make a DNR order (b) against the proxy's wishes
- re (a), arguments re futile treatment apply
- re (b), arguments re conflict apply
- also, proxies don't have medical expertise
- also, proxies are biased by love/emotion

**objection:** the parents bear the consequences the most

(5) the euthanasia issue:

- the physician should (a) provide euthanasia (b) against the proxy's wishes
- re (a) and (b), if the patient is in pain, especially/but only (?) serious pain, which is resistant to alleviation and/or there is no hope of recovering to a certain quality of life (must define 'certain' perhaps as above with 'insufficient')
- re (b), if the proxy's wishes are clearly not in the patient's best interests (in this case, we can't use the 'patient's previously expressed wishes' standard, nor the 'patient's would've expressed wishes' standard)

**objection:** life should be maintained at all costs in all cases

**response:** this position seems indefensible

**objection:** passive, but not active, euthanasia is acceptable

**response:** there is no difference if the motive, intention, and consequence are the same

**objection:** euthanasia is illegal in Canada

**response:** ethics overrides legalities

(6) the allocation of resources issue:

- probably doesn't apply in this case, but if it does, it seems merely to strengthen most of the preceding arguments (rather than add any)

*Recommended reading:*

“Defective Newborns” Michael D. Bayles

“Selective Nontreatment of Handicapped Newborns” Robert F. Weir

By way of contrast, non-philosophically trained people would've responded with something like 'I think you should do what the mother has asked you to do, after all, she's the mother' or 'I think you should do whatever is in the baby's best interest.' Again, see the difference? These responses are no different than, no better than, what the physicians would've gotten in the lunch room. (Which is why they brought the matters to the ethics committee!)

To see similar differences in business, one need only compare business ethics articles with papers written by philosophers. The philosophers will deal, in depth, with any one of a number of difficult issues; for example, if the issue is advertising, she or he might investigate the various kinds and degrees of influence and deception; the rights of persons to be free from intrusions in their physical, sonic, and visual space; the difference between private and public space; the special rights of children given their undeveloped cognition; the relevance of what's advertised and how it's advertised; and so on. The managers will present a checklist for making sure their marketing campaigns don't break any laws. The former will contain arguments, the latter mere assertions.

How has this terrible misunderstanding, this doing ethics without philosophers, come about? Perhaps the problem lies with the term 'applied ethics'. Business people take it to mean applying ethical codes, setting up policies and procedures that conform to — well, there's the problem: that conform to *which* ethics? (And perhaps only a philosopher would ask this question.)

Or perhaps the problem is that philosophers have understood ‘applied ethics’ to mean applying ethical analyses — identifying and examining the ethical issues in business. Because ‘ethics’ doesn’t mean ‘moral rules’; ‘ethics’ means ‘*the study of moral rules*’. This is a common misunderstanding. A term with a very specific meaning among specialists has been adopted and used erroneously in the general population.<sup>8</sup>

But I can’t help wondering if it hasn’t just been a case of blatant appropriation. Business has hijacked ethics as a marketing tool, just as it did with environmentalism, and turned it into something superficial and useless. Managers aren’t really not interested in the substantial, fundamental matters. They just want a new way to attract customers and clients and so increase profits. Indeed the blurb for an ethics seminar titled “Integrity Wins”, offered by and for ethics practitioners, not philosophers, described its purpose as “explor[ing] how ethical issues ... can affect the legal status, revenue generation, and perceived trustworthiness of your organization.” A subscription form for *The Corporate Ethics Monitor* says this:

“Successful executives, investor relations professionals, and independent corporate directors understand that business ethics is not a fad. They know why companies are beefing up their ethical management, training and compliance programs. They understand that high-profile misconduct can cause serious repercussions for a company — including alienation of customers, suppliers, employees, investors and business partners. Therefore, quite apart from a desire to avoid fines and other financial penalties

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘philosophy’ is itself is another example: to philosophers, it means something like the critical examination of fundamental concepts, but to the general population it means simply a certain view of or attitude toward life.

resulting from ethical problems, an effort to identify potential points of ethical weakness can pay off in higher morale and productivity, an enhanced reputation, and a healthier bottom line.”

Nothing is said about doing the right thing *because* it’s the right thing!

However, I don’t want to put the blame solely on business. If philosophy faculty didn’t have such disdain for business, and if they took a little responsibility for their discipline, there would be more preparation for philosophy majors to *be* ethics practitioners. Philosophy departments should advise their students of careers as ethics officers and consultants; they should encourage their students to, therefore, take courses in business (if they want to become a business ethics officer) or science (if they want to become ethics consultants in bioethics or environmental ethics), because without a background in business or science, philosophers won’t know which questions to ask, what difficulties to anticipate (for example, ethical belief in intercultural business is a real thorny issue — philosophy students will have to grapple with moral relativism in a big way ... ). Philosophy departments could even arrange to have their applied ethics courses team-taught; this would require business, similarly, to dampen their disdain for philosophy.

# Why Teaching Business Ethics can be Difficult

Teaching a business ethics course can be more difficult than one anticipates. This is so for a number of reasons, which are briefly outlined below. The list is not necessarily unique to business ethics — some of these problems apply to other courses as well, particularly other applied ethics courses. And, very importantly, some of these problems also apply to the teaching one does as an ethics consultant or an ethics officer serving on an ethics committee or in an ethics program.

1. *You're a philosophy professor.* Know that both inside and outside academia, philosophy doesn't have a very good reputation.<sup>1</sup> (Indeed, 'academic' doesn't have a good reputation. The word is often used in the business world to dismiss something as irrelevant — 'Yes, well, the question's academic, isn't it.') Philosophy is typically considered useless or easy. Or both. Since it's useless, you'll never have your students or committee members/employees' attention. Since it's easy, you'll never have their full effort. And when your students receive a grade they were not expecting (usually that'd be anything less than an 'A'), they'll be outraged. And likely very vocal about it.

A solution to this problem might be to team teach the course with a business professor.

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<sup>1</sup> To be fair, humanities students don't think much of business either. The disdain is reciprocal. And yet I have a feeling that a course called "Marketing your Poetry Book" or "Running your Theatre" taught to humanities students by a marketing or management professor would be more attended to than the business ethics course taught to business students by a philosophy professor.

2. *You're teaching to non-philosophy majors.* Philosophy majors tend to understand, or learn pretty quickly, that philosophy is more, not less, difficult than other disciplines (top scorers on the GRE tend to be philosophy majors or physics majors — they are the ones most adept at critical, abstract reasoning), so they pay close attention and work hard. Non-philosophy majors tend to think (as mentioned above) that philosophy is a 'bird' course.<sup>2</sup> So (as mentioned above) they won't work very hard and yet will be outraged to receive a poor grade.

It might help to present the GRE stats. But don't just tell them. They won't believe you, you're just a philosophy prof. Give them your source: [umflint.edu/philosophy/phil-gre.htm](http://umflint.edu/philosophy/phil-gre.htm) [phil.stmarytx.edu/faculty/philhp/articles/gre.html](http://phil.stmarytx.edu/faculty/philhp/articles/gre.html)

3. *You're teaching philosophy* — which typically involves the higher cognitive skills. To explain in terms of Bloom's taxonomy, while most business courses deal with knowledge and comprehension, and application, philosophy deals very much with the higher three levels — analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. If it's true that business students are typically the 'B' and 'C' students in high school (the 'A' and 'B' students go into science and humanities), then many of your students will simply not be up to it.

There are two important implications. First, abstraction is involved. Although the task is to *apply* the abstractions, the abstractions must nevertheless be dealt with. Principles and values must be understood and juggled (compared, evaluated, weighted). Business students (indeed, most people) are not comfortable with abstraction.

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<sup>2</sup> It takes a lot of work to critically evaluate a philosophy paper and maybe that's why so much bullshit gets an 'A' (supporting the students' opinion about philosophy courses) — professors simply become too tired to do a good job.

Second, evaluation is involved. You're requiring your students/participants to be critical. Most students, most people, have no training in critical thinking. And no, it doesn't come naturally.

Furthermore, your students/participants will misunderstand 'critical' — when you model the thinking you want them to develop, they will think you're being either needlessly negative or needlessly adversarial. They will not understand that being critical means simply evaluating the strength and weakness of an argument. They'll understand your critical approach as antagonistic, a personal attack. They'll call you rude. They'll be offended. They'll accuse you of not respecting their beliefs. (And indeed you're not. Not without some support, some defence.) They'll complain to the Dean.

And the reason they will not understand that is because they will persist in thinking that everyone is entitled to their own opinion. They will not understand that some opinions are better than others. Because they will not understand the criteria for evaluation — they will not understand that there are rules of reasoning about which there is no 'matter of opinion'. For example, to conclude that because all A are B, all B are A is simply wrong — as wrong as concluding that  $2 + 3 = 5$ . And it will come as a rude awakening to be told that they are simply wrong.<sup>3</sup>

What exacerbates all of this is that many assumptions have been presented as fact in the business program. For example, your students think the goal of business is to

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<sup>3</sup> Formal logic and even informal logic courses attend to correct and incorrect reasoning.

maximize profit.<sup>4</sup> Philosophers demand evidence for facts; they examine assumptions. And most of them can argue that ethics trumps profit. But say that in a room full of business students and most will tune you out and, so, fail the course. The others will become hostile:<sup>5</sup> they'll challenge you and spend a lot of time trying to win (most of your students will be male); they'll call you names and complain to the Dean that you don't respect their opinions. (And also fail the course).

It would help, of course, if Critical Thinking 101 were a prerequisite. If it's not, explain that *some opinions are better than others*: suggest that your students can express their opinion that Santa Claus exists until they're blue in the face, but until they present some reasons for their opinion, the rest of the class is justified in ignoring them (politely, of course); and until they present *good* reasons, the rest of the class is justified in not changing its mind (assuming they disagreed).

4. *You're teaching ethics.* There are several implications of this.

First, people tend to think they already know right from wrong. After all, it's something we're taught as

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<sup>4</sup> So whether something is morally acceptable or not is simply irrelevant to them. It might come into play when two options yield the same profit, but how often does that happen? And even so, other concerns are likely to be tie-breakers.

<sup>5</sup> Students become especially hostile when a lot of work is required for what is, after all, a 'bird' course. If they're used to knowledge and comprehension courses, then ethics, requiring arguments to support opinions, is doubly difficult. (And business students have led me to believe that the kind of critical and abstract thinking required in these ethics courses is significantly different from anything they've had to do before — which worries me insofar as this kind of thinking, at a much more advanced level, is required for the Reading Comprehension and Logical Reasoning sections of the GMAT.)

children. So, since you're not teaching them anything new, you won't get their attention or effort.

Further, since it *is* something we're taught as children, most people feel infantilized to be taught it as adults — and will resent it.

It might help to explain that ethically speaking, most of us are quite unsophisticated; we haven't updated our childhood. Most of our moral training stopped when we were somewhere around thirteen or fourteen years of age, but as adults, we have to deal with a lot of ethical issues that our childhood morality simply can't handle very well. It doesn't have much in the way of conceptual complexity and subtlety; it doesn't make the fine distinctions that are necessary; it's not as precise as it needs to be. For example, 'Do what your parents tell you' is fine until you realize that parents make mistakes too. 'Don't steal' is adequate as long as you're not starving and someone else has food that *they* have stolen. Even 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' must bite the dust: *you* may say 'tell me the truth' but some people really may prefer not to know — do you respect their wishes?

Just as someone who is educated about forestry can tell the difference between a five-year-old sick white pine and a ten-year-old healthy red pine (to me, they're all trees), and someone educated about colour can distinguish between magenta, scarlet, and burgundy (to you, they might all be red), someone *educated* about ethics will be able to distinguish between justified discrimination and unjustified discrimination or between morally acceptable profit and morally unacceptable profit. Those distinctions can then be used to make decisions.

Second, ethics is for girls. (Apparently.) And business is dominated by boys. It's Mom who teaches us right from wrong; she's the moral compass. And anything Mom does is

to be held in contempt as soon as a boy hits puberty. In order to become a man, it's necessary. To hold in contempt all things female. Ethics presumes caring, and real men don't care. (Qualification: they don't care about others. They care about profit, their own place in the scheme of things, and because their sons are extensions of themselves, they care about them, *their* place in the scheme of things, but caring about strangers? Strangers are other; the other is the competition.) Ethics is something for priests to worry about and we all know priests aren't real men. They're celibate for gawdsake. So, men avoid ethics — it's effeminate to be concerned about right and wrong.

Third, despite the critical thinking element, in which there is a great deal of black and white, ethics is very 'grey'. Unlike many disciplines, there is typically no correct answer. In ethics, and ethics assignments, it's how you get the answer that is typically evaluated, not the answer itself. (See point 9, below.) Business students (and again, most people) are uneasy, uncomfortable, with grey. They want black and white, a bottom line. (Which is why perhaps they cling to the bottom line of profit. It's easily quantifiable.)<sup>6</sup>

It might help to articulate and emphasize to your students before they become overwhelmed and give up that their goal is to become able to make *better* ethical decisions, more *carefully considered* decisions; they don't have to figure out with absolute certainty what's *right*, but just what's *better*.

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<sup>6</sup> This might be true especially of men. They gravitate toward the quantitative, the ill-(but sexually aptly-)named 'hard sciences' of engineering and chemistry, rather than the 'soft sciences' of psychology and sociology. They say such fields are not as legitimate, but really they're just harder to navigate because the reasoning and the evidence are 'stronger' and 'weaker' rather than 'right' and 'wrong'. (Which is why, when men *do* get involved with ethics, they prefer moral legalism, the approach that equates right and wrong with legal and illegal, which is black and white.)

Fourth, the subject matter is very sensitive. People will get upset; they will become disturbed. You are teaching what is perhaps the most sensitive course in the curriculum. No matter how carefully you lay the groundwork and say things like ‘We’re discussing positions/opinions, when someone criticizes a position, they’re criticizing the position, not the person who holds that position, in fact we don’t even need to know what positions you personally hold, that’s your own business’, there will be many students who don’t have the maturity to handle a course that implicitly and explicitly questions the beliefs and values they hold dear. Their response is (further) resistance, anger, and hostility.

Fifth, morality is very personal. So people may respond with ‘It’s none of your business’ when you try to elicit discussion. This is intensified in the workplace because there is this unfortunate assumption, belief, that one must leave one’s personal life at the door.

5. *Writing skills become very important in business ethics courses* because students are typically required and write extended analyses of and arguments for various ethical positions. This kind of writing is very unlike the point form norm of business presentations (consider the standard of Power Point) and the expository short answer and multiple-choice questions of business tests and exams. And most students aren’t very good at it. (This is related to point 3, above.)

It would help if Business Communication 101 incorporated such writing.

6. *High level reading skills are required* since the student must be able to follow the extended reasoning typical of the text material; quite simply, the essays written by philosophers

that rightly appear in many business ethics texts are *way* beyond business students.

7. *If the course (or participation in the program) is mandatory, students (participants) will resent such coercion. This resentment will spill over.*
8. *If the course (or participation in the program) is an elective, students (participants) will assume that it's not, therefore, very important — certainly not integral to their business education, their job performance. Add this to the first point, that you're a philosophy professor, and you're truly fringe, so very *unimportant*. Being offered as an elective *every second year* sends a message of such unimportance, you may simply not be able to compensate. Give up.*
9. *If you're a sessional instructor, know that business students are very aware of rank. Hierarchy rules their world. So if you're 'just' a sessional, again, the course can't be very important or very difficult.*
10. *If you teach the course in the evening, see point 9.*
11. *If you teach the course in a portable, see point 9.*

# Business Rules the World. Do we want it to?

One of the most common — and most serious — weaknesses of codes of ethics, and indeed, most ethical theories, is that they don't prioritize values. They're fine for many of the simpler ethical questions, but when goods and interests conflict, when virtues and rights collide, they don't provide a way to determine which interest, which right, is stronger. For example, it's all very nice to say that both customers and shareholders are valued, but which is valued *more*? Do you opt for lower prices or greater profits? And it's all very good to say that loyalty and honesty are among the company's virtues. But what does an employee do when honesty seems to be a breach of loyalty? Does the employee blow the whistle or not? The code I begin to develop here is an attempt to solve that problem, an attempt to prioritize values.

First, I propose that life be set in the position of highest priority: nothing is more valuable than life itself. This is so if only for logical reasons — without life, nothing else is possible, nothing else matters. A point of clarification: violations of this value, that is, the causing of death, need not be sudden or immediate: a slow poisoning is a poisoning nevertheless.

Included at this point, though perhaps better listed as a separate item so as not to be forgotten, would be the resources necessary to sustain life: food, water, and oxygen.

Having put life at the top, however, I hasten to explain that life for life's sake is not my aim. Rather, I see the value of life to be in its quality; life itself is a means to an end, the end being a certain quality of life. And I suggest, therefore, that freedom from pain and injury be also included.

Obviously, even to this point, there are questions I need to address. Just exactly which life forms am I including? I am a little uncomfortable specifying only *human* life, even though many other life forms are required *for* human life. But I am more uncomfortable including *all* life: the simplest construction project surely kills a few worms, and prohibiting such construction for that reason seems unwise. Where I draw the line is not clear to me at the moment. However, with respect to freedom from pain and injury, I include all sentient life: the presence of pain is worse than the absence of life for many creatures, especially those with fully developed pain receptors but little sense of time continuity and attendant life plans.

A further problem is that we often don't know for sure that someone is going to get killed. So probability must play a role. But, and here's the big question, how probable is probable enough? If there's a fifty-fifty chance that someone will get killed if X is done, is that a sufficient reason for choosing not to do X?

With respect to resources necessary to sustain life, one might well ask 'How much life?' Is it fair to say that the conduct of business must not diminish resources below the level required to sustain life while at the same time allowing life unlimited increase? I think not. Surely we can calculate the ideal quality of life we desire, and from that, calculate the ideal population level, given the nature (limits and renewability) of our resources. (I suspect these calculations have already been done, but since limiting population means limiting markets ... ) Business must then not diminish the resources below the level needed to sustain that population.

Further, while in theory, the quantities of food, water, and oxygen necessary to sustain life are known amounts, ensuring these amounts is a difficult matter in practice. Since people are, at this moment, dying for lack of food and water, one might assume that we've already gone beyond the point of equilibrium.

However, surplus food and water elsewhere on the planet suggests that the problem is one of distribution, not quantity.

With respect to freedom from pain and injury, one must ask 'How much pain and injury?' Specifying 'serious' solves little — 'How serious is serious?'

Further, given that all sentient life forms are included, one must ask whether they are also to be given equal consideration. That is, is a rat's pain of the same value as a human's pain?

And yet, even to this point, even with the most conservative answers to these questions, this code of ethics, if implemented, would radically change the face of business as we know it. Let me repeat that. *Even with the most conservative answers to these questions, this code of ethics, if implemented, would radically change the face of business as we know it.*

Before describing some of these changes, I'd like to append to my code two possibilities for veto. The first veto is that of voluntary and informed consent: if the person who is (probably) going to die or be injured is identifiable and s/he agrees to (the risk of) that death or injury, one is justified in carrying on with one's business. Proxy consent of non-human sentient life is not allowed, however.

The second veto involves the purpose of the business: if one is in the life-saving business, then perhaps some degree of life-taking is justified. Ditto for the business of life-sustaining resource production or the business of serious pain and injury alleviation — some 'taking in kind' may be allowed. The notion of sacrifice is difficult and beyond my objective at the moment, but I want to leave this door open: perhaps we can justify causing some pain, or even death, to some life forms, even of our own species, if we can thereby prevent a great deal of pain or save a great deal of lives.

Now, the application of my code so far is simple: barring the previous vetoes, no business decision that entails death, the destruction of life-sustaining resources, or serious injury is

ethically justified. (See what I mean by radically changing the face of business ... .)

The implications of this code, however, are extensive: if the conduct of one's business entails someone's death, one should not conduct said business. No business is worth dying for. Even CEOs would (hopefully) agree. I expect the entire industrial revolution would have been considerably slower had this code been in use. Even today, some of the higher risk operations such as mining might be far less developed (and perhaps alternate energy sources would have been far more developed).

Further, if business-as-usual involves causing serious pain, one should not engage in such business-as-usual. No company's existence, let alone its profit margin, is worth another's pain, be it human or rodent. That is to say, almost any business involving animal experimentation would have to close. A fourth brand of dish detergent or eye mascara is simply not worth causing severe pain to even one rabbit. It is also to say that the military business would have to shut down. No more manufacture of 'anti-personnel missiles'.

And if the consequence is bankruptcy, so be it. Better that a company go bankrupt than that someone dies or gets seriously injured. (Note that *the company* does not have a right to life or to freedom from pain and injury.)

Further, assuming that we are already over the point of equilibrium with regard to life and resources, any business that is not environmentally-sustaining is ethically unjustified. That alone would have huge consequence.

Now at this point, I'd like to anticipate and respond to one objection. Closing down my business, one might argue, will involve a lot of negative consequences: thousands will be put out of a job, there will be no food on their tables, etc. To respond, I don't believe that a business closure has ever resulted in employee death or even serious pain and injury. When a company employs the whole town and it goes out of business,

the town becomes a ghost town, yes, but because its people have moved on, not because they've died. Perhaps they are poorer, but better that some are poor than that some are dead. So, by my code, since life and freedom from pain and injury are ranked above having a job, the closure must be chosen if otherwise someone will die or get hurt.

The greatest result of implementing a code such as the one I propose might be, simply, the reduction of business. So many businesses provide services or products we simply don't need, or at least not in the quantity they're being produced, and as long as their production, in the process, violates this code (and I've just identified the first *three* values — I expect values four through whatever would include various freedoms and virtues that would further enhance quality of life), their very existence is unjustifiable.

With the reduction in business per se will come, hopefully, a marked decrease in its all-pervasive role in our lives. Nations are already just corporations; presidents and those who fill political offices are, more often than not, businesspeople — not philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, scientists ... Business rules the world. *Do we want it to? Do we really want someone's pursuit of profit to determine our lives?*

## Change the way we do business

Looking back at the last fifty years, we see protests against deception and injustice: the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, feminism, the gay rights movement, environmentalism, the animal rights movement, the Occupy movement. What's left? What should be the current generation's crusade? Big Business. Big Oil, Big Ag, Big Pharma, Big Media.

"In 2011, a think tank in London called the Carbon Tracker Initiative conducted a breakthrough study that added together the reserves claimed by all the fossil fuel companies, private and state-owned. It found that the oil, gas, and coal to which these players had already laid claim — deposits they have on their books and which were already making money for shareholders — represented 2,795 gigatons of carbon. ... [W]e know roughly how much carbon can be burned between now and 2050 and still leave us a solid chance (roughly 80%) of keeping warming below 2 degrees Celsius ... 565 gigatons. ... [A]s Bill McKibben [author of *Oil and Honey*] points out, 'The thing to notice is, 2,795 is five times 565. It's not even close. ... What those numbers mean is quite simple. This industry has announced, in filings to the SEC and in promises to shareholders, that they're determined to burn five times more fossil fuel than the planet's atmosphere can begin to absorb.' ... In other words, the fossil fuel companies have every intention of pushing the planet beyond the boiling point" (Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* 148, 353-4).

And Big Ag? "Billions of people on the planet are supported by farmers who save seeds from the crops and replant these seeds the following year. Seeds are planted. The crop is harvested. And the seeds from the harvest are replanted the

following year. Most farmers cannot afford to buy new seeds every year, so collecting and replanting seeds is a crucial part of the agricultural cycle. This is the way food has been grown successfully for thousands of years. With Monsanto's terminator technology, they will sell seeds to farmers to plant crops. But these seeds have been genetically-engineered so that when the crops are harvested, all new seeds from these crops are sterile (e.g., dead, unusable). This forces farmers to pay Monsanto every year for new seeds if they want to grow their crops." (Ethical Investing: Monsanto Terminator Technology [ethicalinvesting.com/monsanto/terminator.shtml](http://ethicalinvesting.com/monsanto/terminator.shtml))

Big Pharma? The average price of the fifty drugs most used by senior citizens was nearly \$1,500 for a year's supply. In 2002. And now they're creating the disease so they can sell the cure. Halitosis was just the beginning. Now we've got erectile dysfunction, female sexual dysfunction, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), restless legs syndrome, osteoporosis, social shyness (also called social anxiety disorder and social phobia), irritable bowel syndrome, and balding. We're all sick. We all need drugs. (Larry Dossey, "Creating Disease" *The Huffington Post* Jun18/10 [huffingtonpost.com/dr-larry-dossey/big-pharma-health-care-cr\\_b\\_613311.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/dr-larry-dossey/big-pharma-health-care-cr_b_613311.html))

But this kind of information isn't screamed in the news because — Big Media. A mere six corporations own 90% of the median in the States.

So this is my call to this generation: protest against the veneer of respectability that has enabled "business" to proceed 'as usual' — unchallenged. Question progress. Question profit. Question the right of way that's been given to business merely because it wears a suit and tie and provides jobs. 'I've got a business to run' is used as an all-purpose legitimizing excuse. As if merely by employing several people, business becomes some sort of social service. *It's not.*

You've got fifty years to learn from. The greater one's youthful idealism, the greater one's middle-aged bitterness. So, yes, many of us over forty are worse than useless: we are infectious with cynicism. But we were once young. Study what we did and what we didn't do. Figure out what worked and what didn't work — then. Figure out what'll work and what won't work — now. Take a good look at Kent State, Birmingham, Greenham Common, Tiananmen Square, Seattle ... It's not as easy anymore (if it ever was) as offering a flower or sitting in the way. They will shoot you. They will run over you. And you can't depend on media coverage — your local station is owned by some fat cat in LA or NY who doesn't want the world to know. DIY. Use the internet. Figure it out.

As is the case with movements, little bits here and there gradually add up to something that makes the structure collapse and the veil of naïveté dissipate. Utopia doesn't rise from the rubble, but we never see things in quite the same way again.

*A special note to those in business: with great power comes great responsibility. You're in the driver's seat. Get us out of here. Use your intelligence, use your imagination. Find a way. Change the way we do business. And save your world.*

## To Connect

Back when I was a teacher, I noticed a lot of incomplete sentences in my students' conversation and in their writing. But I thought hey, it's a fragmented world: videos with their bits and pieces of images, radio and TV with their sound bites, even entire degree programs present their courses as if they're unrelated.

But then I wondered, is it because they don't have complete thoughts or is it because they're used to being interrupted? If the latter, is that the cause or the effect? That is, were they interrupted so often they seldom got the chance to finish a sentence? So leaving sentences incomplete became a habit; worse, due to lack of practice, they never developed the ability to actually finish their sentences, to express complete thoughts. Or were they interrupting each other because they didn't expect an end, a complete sentence? In this case, they haven't really interrupted; I noted that they didn't even seem to consider it rude; it was just us older ones, those of us who *do* intend to finish our sentences, who felt interrupted.

Or, third possible explanation, was the incompleteness just the extreme of brevity? Apparently many students get through high school without having to write more than one paragraph on any give item. 'Extended thought? What do you mean?' Of course, in art, fragmented images are often effective. But unless the audience can make the implied connections, such art will also be unsuccessful. One study revealed that listeners didn't agree about whether a particular rap song condemned or condoned violence, suggesting that this is often the case.

Then I noticed that even when the sentences *were* complete, there were no connections *between* the sentences; there were no

connections between paragraphs; there were entire essays without a thesis, without a point.

The problem isn't just the lack of continuity; it's the lack of *connection*. Connecting the dots makes something linear. Connecting them in a particular way gives the line a particular shape.

Call me masculist, call me eurocentric, but linear thought *is* important. The ability to connect enables us to survive. We need to see similarities and differences ("Categories", clap, clap, "Names of", clap, clap, "Colours" ... ); we need to see cause and effect ("Look both ways before crossing ...").

But my students' sentences lay like so many dots on a page. They expected *me* to make the connections, to give their work shape, to give it coherence. The most important words are not nouns or verbs: they're prepositions, conjunctions, and all the other transitional words — in, through, before, after, and, neither, therefore, because, although, despite. I actually had to spend time in a second year Philosophy class explaining that not only was 'A *because* B' not the same as 'A *therefore* B', but that they were exactly opposite.

It's not chance that left their writing without colons or semicolons. The former introduces an explanation or an example of a thought; the latter joins related thoughts of equal importance. If students don't see these connections between the dots, their sentences, they can't see, they have no use for, such advanced punctuation.

Further, when marking their papers, I often found myself writing 'wrong word' in the margin. This referred not to something like using 'quick' where one should use 'quickly' but to something like using 'with' where one should've used 'through'. Such an error indicates a fundamental lack of understanding of the connection, the relation, involved: 'A *with* B' describes merely a correlative relationship; 'A *through* B' can describe a causal relationship.

And ‘irrelevant’ and ‘off-topic’ — these are not just harmless ‘messy bedroom’ problems. Rather, something has been connected, albeit implicitly, without justification. This indicates that the person doesn’t truly understand the nature of the subject and so can’t tell if something is relevant or not.

My students seldom prepared an outline for their papers. (‘What do you mean, an outline?’) It wasn’t a matter of laziness. And it wasn’t a matter of just not bothering to write it out. Most often, the student didn’t *know* what his/her main subjects were, and then what the subordinate subjects were for each of the main ones, etc. Preparing an outline is a rigorous task involving relation: chronological relation, causal relation, categorical relation, etc. Making an outline is making connections — *conceptual* connections. (I fear the best answer many would’ve given to ‘Which doesn’t belong — shoe, jacket, or saw?’ is ‘Jacket — because it doesn’t begin with an S.’)

But perhaps the scariest symptom, the most dangerous manifestation, of this inability to connect is the view that ‘Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion,’ with its correlative, stated or implied, ‘You can’t criticize my opinion; my opinion is just as good as yours.’ True enough if you didn’t have to worry yourself with connections to fact (truth), or connections to other opinions (consistency), or connections to consequences (pragmatics). To understand that some opinions are better than others, some more certain, some more valuable, is one of the most important skills we can develop; but it is dependent on perceiving relations, on being able to connect.

# The Absence of Imagination

We notice it when we say ‘Kids don’t know how to play anymore.’ Gone are the games of dress-up and make-believe. The more specific and recognizable the toy, the more popular; least favourite are the ambiguous toys, the ones with so many possibilities.

Later, we observe and lament the fact that the students don’t know how to amuse themselves. They can’t sit quietly. Discipline problems abound. They are bored, school is boring, everything is boring. Their style becomes, necessarily, one of passivity. Or perhaps reactivity. But not proactivity — it takes imagination to initiate.

Why is this so? Why is there this absence of imagination? Perhaps because human beings are like most objects: we choose the path of least resistance. It takes less energy to watch TV than to read a book. It’s easier to put on a prepared costume, use prepared props, and follow a prepared storyline than it is to make your own costume, props, and storyline. Sure, the latter is probably more satisfying. But how is the kid to know that if s/he hasn’t experienced it? (And precisely because she hasn’t experienced it, hasn’t experienced the imagining, she can’t imagine it.)

What to do? Anyone will tell you that forcing someone to do something is the quickest way to make them hate it. But given the contemporary context, it’s unlikely the kid will voluntarily choose the seemingly less attractive and certainly less popular option.

And yet we’d better find a solution soon. As Céline says in *Journey to the End of the Night*, “Everything’s allowed inside oneself.” (He obviously wasn’t a Roman Catholic, with its sick

doctrine of sinful thoughts.) Using one's imagination is the perfect escape: anything goes and no one gets hurt.<sup>1</sup> People denied that escape route may be pushed to find another, less perfect one.

But not only might the unimaginative become the dangerous, the unimaginative becomes the deadweight: the unimaginative preschooler who becomes the bored (and boring) teenager becomes the useless adult. To improve, to change, requires that one imagine an alternative; in a thousand and one ways, our world is desperate for improvement, for change. But if we can't even imagine it, we sure as hell won't be able to make it happen.

My response to the ozone depletion, as one who read the biochemical facts and then gave up aerosols back in the 70s, was 'You can't say we didn't see it coming.' But I'm realizing, with more horror than accompanied my first conclusion (that 'we' were selfish, irresponsible, and just didn't give a damn), that 'we' didn't see it coming. We couldn't. People couldn't extrapolate from A to B: to anticipate the effect of a cause, the consequence of an action, requires imagination.

In the same way, I'm appalled to hear teenagers say what a good program it is that gives them a tour of jail or takes them into the operating room to see a gunshot wound. They 'didn't know', they say. What? What did you think happened when a bullet enters someone's body? Well, they didn't. They didn't think. They're not used to doing that. It requires a sort of 'let's pretend' mental activity that's simply not within their repertoire.

Ditto for the 'carrying the egg (or bag of flour) around for a week' exercise. I certainly didn't need to do that in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Ignoring for the moment that some research suggests that the more we imagine doing something violent, for example, the more we desensitize ourselves to it and more likely we become to actually do it.

understand what's involved in being a parent. And I'm the youngest child, so it's not like I saw it. I imagined it. I thought about what my life would be like if I had a child — and on that basis decided not to have one. Simple.

Apparently not. Imagination is necessary for the consideration of options, of alternatives; it's the prerequisite for choice, for exerting one's will, for having control over one's life. Without it, we are doomed, as individuals and as a species. It's what separates us (well, some of us) from lower life forms: if a horse could imagine life as a deer, my guess is it would jump the fence in a second. And while I'd like to say 'See ya', we're all in this together.

## Air Bands and Power Point

I still remember the feeling I had when I saw my first air band performance. It was a sick kind of feeling.

I hadn't known what an air band was. The announcement came over the P. A. at my school-for-the-day, and I dutifully shepherded the class to the gym. Then I watched, incredulous, as group after group of high school students came on stage and pretended to play their favourite songs. I mumbled a query to the teacher standing next to me. Apparently this air band stuff was quite big. Students spent weeks practising. They really wanted to get it right. 'It' being the appearance, the pretence.

In my day, the guys [sic] (sigh) actually *did* play, guitars and drums mostly. Each school had a couple bands. From time to time they even played at our dances.

But I tried not to go there. That was then, this was now. There is some skill required for this, I thought. It does take practice to get it right. But still. It bothered me. As everyone applauded — faking it.

I was reminded of that sick kind of feeling a few years later when I heard a new technopop piece on the radio; it was based on a sample from a Gene Krupa drum solo. That's how technopop is 'composed': someone uses bits and pieces ('samples') of other people's music and puts them together — often at random, mostly in repetition. That is to say, there's no coherent development, no substance.

It's sad to see that the ability to play, let alone compose for, a musical instrument is on the wane. But it's frightening to think about the why and the therefore.

I read somewhere that playing a musical instrument is the most mentally challenging task humans perform. Certainly the

daily practice requires a level of both concentration and discipline that I just don't see anymore. Is it that our kids don't have the mental stamina needed to learn how to play a musical instrument? Or is it that because they don't learn how to play a musical instrument, they don't develop such mental stamina? Either way, it's cause for concern. And my guess is it's both.

That is to say, attention to pretence/form instead of to substance/content is both the cause and the effect of a paucity of higher cognitive skills. True, content without form can be incomprehensible. But form without content isn't anything at all. One must attend to content *before* one attends to form. At best, content *determines* form. Further, inattention to content entails inattention to *quality* of content. And that makes things so much worse.

Consider the addiction many people developed to the internet (even *before* social media sites). Surfing the net is like watching the news (and browsing the encyclopedia). It's kibbles and bits of information. That's all. It's pure content. Sure, it's knowledge. But is it *valuable* knowledge? Is it *relevant*, is it *sufficient*? Is it *usable*? One has to have some of those higher level cognitive skills to go beyond acquisition and comprehension into analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application.

And, well, I've read about the increase in kids' television viewing time. I've heard about their inability to play games at recess: they just stand around, or maybe they play with a ready-made single-purpose toy for a bit and then they're bored. I'm told that kids, young people, don't go to the library anymore; they don't go to the used bookstores either, to trade in one handful of paperbacks for another. I know about the increase in learning disabilities. And I found out about grades inflation: Cs are now Bs, Bs are now As — 'So what do I give to students who really do get an A?' 'Trust me — you won't have that problem.' An exaggeration?

When I later taught courses at a university, basically applied philosophy — Informal Logic, Contemporary Moral

Issues, Business Ethics — I discovered right away that essays on controversial issues were way over most of the students' heads. I soon started giving an open book reading comprehension quiz for each essay I assigned; it doubled as a guide to the main points of the essay. I couldn't teach them to assess what they didn't even understand.

And in three out of three courses, students told me that the kind of thinking I was demanding, essentially critical thinking, was a new way of thinking: they hadn't had to do it before. Arts majors, Science majors, and Business majors, even third and fourth year students — they all said the same thing.

And then — I happened to be in an Accounting class, watching students present case studies. The second group was very impressive. They sure had their act together. Respectfully in their suits and ties, standing at business attention, their voices projecting confidence, they introduced themselves as Wannick, Smith, and Pratsk: 'We thank you for choosing us as your Accounting consultants, and we are happy to present to you today our analysis ...' They had rehearsed, that much was clear. And the power point presentation sure was slick: titles variously fonted with fade-ins and fade-outs, points neatly aligned and bulleted, graphics full of colour and icons — it looked just like the real thing. The class applauded.

I mumbled a query to the prof sitting next to me. 'Suitcoats and power point aside, which group had the better analysis?' 'The first group — these guys missed some important discrepancies in the accounts.' Hm. And if they didn't get an A, there was hope, I thought.

Then again, no there wasn't. The week after, the Student Union held an air band competition.

## What do you want me to say?

Who among us has not heard the student in distress, claiming not to know ‘what the professor wants’? As if getting good grades is dependent on finding out each professor’s hidden idiosyncrasies — on figuring out how to please. This attitude has become very prevalent, and I’ve seen students paralysed by it. A professor will assign an essay, and students who are uncertain about how to proceed believe it’s because they don’t know what the professor wants; they truly believe they’re missing some crucial bit of information. Of course, the real reason for their uncertainty is usually their poor academic skills — they don’t know enough about the topic to generate some ideas or opinions with which they can then play around and organize into a paper. But instead of heading to the library or the Internet, they wander the halls and poll other students, trying to discover ‘what the professor wants’.

My answer to this question — ‘I want you to demonstrate your competence with the course content’ — has been met with blank stares. If I’m lucky. Otherwise, it’s been met with anger, as if I’m being maliciously evasive and unclear, as if I’m holding something back, as if I’m being unfair! I’ll persist then: ‘I want you to do exactly what I said — write a critical analysis of X’ or ‘Answer the four questions I pose’ or whatever. ‘Yeah, but, like, what do you mean? You aren’t actually saying what you want us to do.’ Students who are really keen to ‘succeed’ might come right out with it: ‘But what do you want me to say? Tell me what to say and I’ll say it!’ I imagine the rest of the conversation. ‘Well if I did that, I’d be writing your essay for you.’ Responded to with ‘Oh could you do that? That would be really helpful. And could I borrow your notes for your lecture?’

Oh and I missed the reading guide you handed out for the chapters we were to have read. And when will you be giving us the exam questions? And the answers? So we know what you want?’

(Thinking the problem might be lack of imagination as well as lack of knowledge, I’ve started giving students specific examples of what I want: for one course, I prepared four versions of a specific assignment, an A, a B, a C, and a D; when I work with students to help them improve their writing skills so they can pass our Writing Competency Test, I give them lots of examples of essays that would pass. But it takes an accomplished pianist to hear the difference between a Rubenstein performance and a Kiwanis Festival performance. It sounds the same to the person-next-door. I’ve learned that often the students who ‘need’ examples of good papers are exactly the students who can’t see the difference anyway.)

It used to be that one was careful about image, careful to make it represent reality. You didn’t want to give ‘the wrong impression’ — ‘wrong’ meaning one that was inaccurate, one that really wasn’t you. Now people are careful to present the image of what they *want* to be. Or worse, if they are aiming to please, the image of what they think *the other wants* them to be.

Why is this attention to image so dangerous? There are two reasons. One, we are losing the ability to see through it. Quite simply, the ability to think is becoming obsolete. My students provide me with the evidence. When I first taught critical thinking, I took for granted that they would *understand* the material — the letters to the editor, the informal essays. My objective was to teach them to *critically assess* the material. Surprise! Indeed I was surprised — and appalled and enraged — to discover that they *couldn’t* understand the material. And so teaching them to critically think about what they couldn’t even understand was — well — difficult. (And these are university students, the cream of the crop, academically

speaking.) Now if we can't understand the substance, let alone evaluate it, of course we'll be at the mercy of the pretence.

And this leads me to the second danger. A vicious circle will surely develop: if people can't respond to the substance anyway, why spend time on it, why *not* just focus on the pretence? But if we spend all our time cultivating the pretence, there will eventually be no substance. So it won't be 'image above all': it'll become 'image *is* all'! First you separate image from reality, then you focus exclusively on image, then you've got no reality, nothing's real anymore. Read William Gibson's *Idoru*.

So no wonder the students fret, 'Okay I get it, I have to have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. But what do I put — I mean, what do you want me to put — in the paragraphs in the middle?' Hm. *Does it matter?*

# Sexism and Teaching: The Elephant in the Room

Back in 1996, I was fortunate enough to get a job teaching a few courses at a university: several sections of a non-credit remedial English language course, a section of critical thinking, and various applied ethics courses. At the end of the second year, I was notified by the Dean that my student evaluations for the critical thinking course were too low, and I was asked to submit a self-assessment, along with an outline of proposed changes, were I allowed to teach the course the following year.

I submitted the following (slightly edited). (*Skip ahead at any time to the elephant in the room.*)

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First, let me say that I was a bit surprised to receive [your] letter. One, I don't think scores of 3.3 and 3.25 on a scale of 5 are unacceptable; they're not what I would like, but they translate to a 'satisfactory' (to use the grading scheme we use for our students) 65%. Two, given the 'uprising' early in the year, to have brought the course and myself to the favourable side of neutral is, I think, admirable. ...

Regardless, you continue to have concerns about my teaching ability, so I will continue to try to alleviate those concerns. I'll start by describing changes made [following the uprising]:

- 1) I agreed, after an hour of consensus-reaching discussion with the class, to weight the 'crapbook' assignment (the first assignment which, I believe, started it all, for which

students were to simply find examples of logically fallacious reasoning in the media and explain the fallacy) as low as 5% instead of 15%. The remaining 10% could be made up however each student wanted, in 5% chunks, choosing from the crapbook (so for those who did well, it could count the 15% it was originally supposed to count), an in-class test on the fallacies, a homework assignment schematizing the argument of one of the weekly assigned essays, and/or a participation mark.

- 2) I agreed to consider quantity alone for the participation mark (i.e., it didn't matter what the student said, as long as s/he opened her/his mouth ...).
- 3) I reduced the length of the final exam (which was originally planned to be exactly like the mid-term, which, you may recall, was thought to be too long) by half for Parts A and B. (Part C, which required the student to argue a position on a given issue, was left as is.)
- 4) I re-calculated the mark for the mid-term as if Parts A and B had been half as long, with no maximum (i.e., if a student originally scored 23 out of 40, re-calculation gave the student 23 out of 20).
- 5) I used the mastery approach for the final essay assignment: that is, students could rewrite their essay an unlimited number of times, each time having it marked — thoroughly annotated by me and a number value assigned. Additionally, I scheduled individual student conferences to discuss my feedback, spending up to two hours per student (on top of my usual office hours). (I heard another faculty member say he simply didn't have the time to do that. I made the time. Pretty good, don't you think, for a sessional instructor who

gets paid half as much per course as a Lecturer gets paid, never mind what a Professor gets paid ... )

- 6) I also added an extra class each week, attendance optional, an hour in length, during which 'practice Parts A and B' were worked through. (Way beyond the call of duty here ... )
- 7) I made a public apology in class to anyone I may have offended or ridiculed. (I wish you could have seen the expressions of many as I did so — it was clear they thought the accusations were a 'crock of shit'.) (Also, I would still like to know, by the way, exactly what the basis was for the accusations of rudeness and disrespect — it's been really difficult to stop doing whatever it is that's perceived as rude and disrespectful when I don't know what it is.) (One student said I didn't ridicule, I 'teased' — I do think this is much more accurate; one teases good-naturedly, not maliciously.)

With all of these changes, the average of the class was, as you requested, not below 69. It was, in fact, 69.5 (excluding, of course, three students who didn't write the exam and/or the major essay).

Now, as for your requested "self-assessment and an outline of what [I] might propose to change next year" — it was decided, was it not, half way through the first term, that I would not be allowed to teach [the critical thinking course] next year? Nevertheless, I have carefully considered each criterion, and my score (in parentheses, below), and submit the following responses.

## Course Presentation

1. Required texts were useful (3.50) — I examined 14 texts before choosing the two I used. I chose a logical reasoning text that was fairly easy (I anticipated *not* having a class full of Philosophy majors) and rather entertaining (there were cartoons throughout). I also chose an argument reader — an anthology of essays on topics as diverse as capital punishment, abortion, smoking, war, mowing one's lawn, sexism, civil rights, aboriginal rights, and the value of a university education; the essays were varied in length (about 3 to 15 pages) and difficulty (newspaper article to academic essay). *Without further feedback, I'm not sure what change to make here ...*
2. Other instructional material (3.82) — I'm not sure whether quality or quantity was evaluated: in addition to the texts, I used a few handouts as supplements; I also prepared a quiz on overheads to summarize, review, and measure learning outcome achievement at the end of each chapter. Should I have used more materials? Perhaps the overheads were not easily seen by those in the back? *Again, I'm not sure what change is in order here.*
3. Assignments/Papers useful (2.94) — First of all, because I extended the deadline for the major essay four times (if I hadn't, there would have been a lot more than three students who received a zero), these evaluations were done *before* the major essay was done. This is important: I believe that many students experienced *significant* benefits from the mastery approach and the intensive one-on-one appointments with me. Half of the students eventually wrote an A essay; the average was 78%; they did learn; it was useful.

This score was based, then, on two assignments: the crapbook and the argument schema assignment (which was optional). I can't believe the crapbook assignment wasn't useful: as mentioned above, students were to find examples of logically fallacious reasoning on television, in the newspaper, on the radio, in videos, in political party material, etc. And as for the argument schema, being able to read an essay and extract the argument (the author's point and his/her reasons for claiming that point) should be considered useful to anyone who considers the course useful. (Perhaps that's the problem. See item 8.) So, *again, I'm not sure what change is in order here.*

*However, knowing now how valuable the mastery approach to the major essay was, I'd use the approach on a smaller essay (a mini version of what the major essay would be) during the first term — and then perhaps not use it with the major essay.*

4. Tests (3.39) — I'm not sure what the question was (unfortunately I have only my score sheet, not the questionnaire originals), but I don't see any problem at all with the one test: students had to identify and explain the fallacy present in three of five given items, and they had the entire class (80 minutes) in which to do this. Perhaps students wanted more tests? They could have said so when we discussed the grading scheme at the beginning of the course. Perhaps they didn't think the test was fair? Only 12 of them opted to write it (recall, it was optional) and the average was 73%. *Again, what to change?*
5. Labs/Seminars — N/A
6. Appropriate difficulty (3.00) — While a few students clearly said that the course was a much needed refreshing

challenge, 12 of 18 students noted that the course was too difficult. I disagree. And in a way, that's all there is to it. I think I'm in a better position to know what a second year Philosophy/Critical Thinking course should be like than my students (at least, I'd better be!).

I'd like to point out that 'appropriate difficulty' is a problem for most professors here at [name removed] University (it received the second lowest score) — I am assuming the problem is that the courses are perceived to be 'too difficult', not 'not difficult enough'.

The texts I chose were specifically written for this kind of course, at this level, and so they should not have been too difficult. In fact, the logical reasoning text I chose was easier than the one [the department chair] had been using.

I think a large part of the problem was students' reading skills. The argument reader was, quite simply, way over their heads. Many of them even had difficulty with the newspaper articles (which are typically written at a grade eight reading level) — difficulty even with *comprehension*: they couldn't tell me what the point was, let alone what the reasons for that point were. And this ability is prerequisite to the course, which focused on *evaluation*: whether or not the reasons were *good* reasons. That Part B on both the midterm and final exam ("Read the passage below, then explain and evaluate the argument.") was the most poorly done supports my analysis. [A colleague's] passing comment about the Nelson-Denny results at [name removed] University (there was an alarming number of students who tested at a grade four reading level) also supports my analysis. The course I'm currently teaching also supports my analysis: at the beginning of the class, I give an open book quiz on the assigned reading, and questions like "Does Berns support capital punishment" are not always correctly

answered; that is to say, it's not unusual for students to have read a whole essay on capital punishment and not know whether the author was supporting it or attacking it.

One could say 'teach to the lowest common denominator' — but if we're always teaching to the sparrows, when do the bluebirds get their education? Surely, university is *for* the bluebirds. Or one could say 'start at where the students are' — but this is not high school; students are not required by law to be in my classroom; if the course is too difficult, then they shouldn't take it (or, at least, not expect an A grade).

And yet, and yet ... Perhaps next time, I'll spend the first month on reading comprehension: I'll start by having the students read just a one-paragraph piece and tell me what the issue is; once they can do that, I'll see if they can tell me what the point is; after a week or so, we'd graduate to a letter to the editor; then a short article; then I'll have them tell me the point as well as the reasons; and maybe by second term, we'll get to academic essays. But that would be a Remedial Reading course, not a Critical Thinking course.

Another large part of the problem is student effort. Attendance was low, or at least lower than I expected (I know, you'll say this is my fault), and many students seldom put in the three hours it took to be prepared (most had just read the essay — they were also supposed to have figured out the point and the reasons for that point, and thought about relevance, adequacy, and truth, the criteria for a good argument). Had they done this every week, had they put in this practice, I maintain the exams wouldn't have seemed so difficult. More than one student supported the idea of graded quizzes based on the readings; they were too busy doing the homework for other courses, they said, which was marked. In the same vein, another suggested

giving marks for attendance. Frankly, I find this really pathetic: if students need to be rewarded by marks to do the homework, and even to attend the class, then they aren't really interested; and if that's the case, again, why are they taking the course? I don't want to encourage such 'marks dependency' nor do I think I should have to entice, coax, cajole, or bribe students — at the university level. However, if most of the other professors here at [name removed] University *do* give marks for attendance and homework completion, then I can understand why the students were less motivated in my class. *And so, much against my better judgement, I am giving quizzes on the readings in my current course; I've made them 'open book' quizzes and have designed them to act as 'advance organizers' for our discussion and review notes for examination preparation, so perhaps it's not turning out too badly; I would consider continuing with this practice.*

And part of the problem was writing skills. Some (many?) students resented the fact that I 'marked for grammar and stuff' ... ; one specifically said on the comment sheet of her evaluation that it was unfair of me to have marked the writing. Am I not to consider the quality of writing when I grade essays?

*What other changes would I make? To be honest, I'd do a little of the Remedial Reading suggested above. But you have often told us not to lower our standards. You've also said make sure they get Bs. You can't have it both ways. (Unless incoming students are better prepared or become better prepared very quickly.)*

7. Course Content Valuable (3.12) — Well, this is a sad comment on our society, isn't it. The ability to think clearly and critically is not valuable. Or perhaps the students think they already know how to think clearly and

critically. I think that's more likely. Trying to get through the 'It's my opinion and everyone's entitled to their opinion' attitude was like trying to walk underwater. *Perhaps next time I'll open with a video of "The Jerry Springer Show" and then follow it with a video of "Studio 2" — to try to get them to see that they do have something to learn ... Though if I start the course by telling them what they can't do, I'll be perceived even more as insulting them.*

*(Reminder that you can jump ahead to the elephant in the room if you've had enough.)*

### **Instructor**

8. Course Objectives were Clear (3.56) — I articulated them orally and wrote them on the board at least four times throughout the year: "To succeed in this course, whether you're reading, writing, listening, or speaking, you have to know (i) what the point is, (ii) what the reasons are for that point, and (iii) whether or not the reasons are good ones — considering relevance, adequacy, and truth." And every Thursday, when we considered that week's essay, these questions were asked, repeatedly. In fact, even the first class icebreaker introduced them to the fundamental concept of the course: they were to introduce themselves to someone by saying 'Hi, my name is X and I believe A because B'. *How many times am I expected to convey course objectives? How could I have been more clear?*
  
9. Grading, Evaluation Criteria (3.22) — Assuming this addressed whether or not the criteria were clear, I confess bafflement. I must have said their writing had to be "clear and correct" a hundred times. I put students' crapbook items (voluntarily submitted items that received diverse marks) on

the opaque projector so students could see what a 5/5 was like and compare it to a 1/5, and I walked them through: 'See, here the student has stated clearly what fallacy is present, that's one mark; then the student has defined the fallacy, there's the second mark, etc.' When I handed back the mid-term exam, I included perfect answers to every one of the fallacy items, and I had written out an 'A' answer to Part B and included that as well. *What more to do?*

10. Consistent, Fair Grading (2.56) — Almost my lowest score. Amazing, given that I marked blind (that is, students identified their work by student number only) in order to eliminate bias; I also, of course, marked all Part As, then went back and marked all Part Bs, and so on, to further ensure consistency; and, also of course, I marked recursively — that is, part way through, I looked again at the first few answers to be sure I hadn't drifted, and I looked again at the middle few when I was at the end; lastly, neither [the department chair nor the only other Philosophy professor] thought my marking was inconsistent when I offered a sample for their examination. *Suggestions for change?*
11. Helpful Comments and Feedback (3.00) — Again, I remind you that this was *before* the major essay assignment. Nevertheless, this is again a puzzle. Perhaps the students couldn't recognize the help; perhaps they thought that my Socratic questions leading them to the light were just bludgeoning them into the dirt. Or perhaps they just *wouldn't* recognize my help. More on this later.
12. Meaningful examples (3.56) — What do you want me to say about this one? I do try and *will continue to try* to provide meaningful examples.

13. Organized, well-planned (3.33) — Again, a mystery. I am *compulsively* organized. I recall twice forgetting to assign homework questions, and once I put the wrong overhead on the screen. Is that really, seriously, a problem? *There is, simply, no need for change here.*
14. Opportunity for Questions (3.72) — I consistently solicit questions in class; I am in my office during office hours. *No room for improvement here.*
15. Clear, Effective Answers (3.11) — This was the first time I taught this course and so I was fielding questions in this area for the first time. Yes, there were times I was not as incisive as I might have been. *I'll do better next time.*
16. Encouraged independent thinking (3.44) — [see below]
17. Challenged, provoked thought (3.50) — [see below]

On both criteria, more mystery. Rather, misunderstanding. I would've thought both of these items would have scored over 4.0. It makes me think that these students have never been exposed to the Socratic pedagogical style before. And actually, I do think this is part of the problem. If most professors lecture, then indeed I am unusual, indeed students don't know how to take my constant questions, my constant challenges — perhaps they take them as insults. Perhaps when I present an opposing view, they think I'm genuinely disagreeing with them and they are offended. Perhaps when I insist on reasons, they think I'm insisting that they're wrong (and that I'm right — and hence I'm not encouraging independent thinking but, instead, I'm encouraging them to agree with me ... ).

Also, we're back to 'It's my opinion and I'm entitled to it' and a built-in difficulty with this kind of course: not only do I push (and I do — I push, I prod, I prick), I do so close to their hearts — the content (abortion, capital punishment, the pursuit of profit ... ) is more personal than, say, physics.

*Next time, I'd do a lot of advance explanation of my pedagogical style. The Rasool text has an excellent 'Note to the Student' explaining that when professors ask for reasons, they are not insulting you ... apparently I'm not the first Critical Thinking professor to have been so misunderstood ... I really didn't think I had to explain all of this ...*

18. Made the course interesting (2.78) — Wow. If issues such as those in the argument reader (see above) and assignments like the crapbook (see above) aren't interesting, I don't know what is. (Actually, if they aren't, then the student should've dropped the course.) One of our classes was a United Nations simulation in which students were Iraq and Israel, Somalia and Bosnia, and Ireland, and the rest of us were whatever country we wanted to be. In another class, we played a game I made up called 'Argument Chess.'

I speak with an animated and enthusiastic voice (which also happens to be genuine). While I can't move around the room, I do move back and forth at the front rather than planting myself in one spot for the whole class. I vary the mode of presentation (Tuesdays was mostly text and oral with overheads; Thursdays was mostly text and visual and then discussion — in twos, small groups, and large groups, sometimes assigned groupings, sometimes student-selected).

*I think I made the course as interesting as I need to; I am not wholly responsible for whether or not the students are interested.*

Honestly, I think there was something else going on here ... *The elephant in the room.*

19. Clear effective voice (4.06) — Can I assume this score is acceptable?
20. Responsive out-of-class (3.82) — How would they know? 90% of my office hours were not used. (And again, this was before the intensive appointments about their essays.) *No improvement needed here.*
21. Up-to-date knowledge (3.50) — I confess, I do not have up-to-date knowledge on all the issues we discussed. But I don't think I am expected to: when we evaluate argument, we say 'If the premises are true, this would be a valid/sound argument' — we leave the determination of truth to those qualified.
22. Learning Environment (2.44) — Surely who's in the class affects the learning environment as much as, if not more than, the professor. I must confess I think the critical thinking course was a case of 'a few bad apples' — I agree with the student who said, on the comment sheet, "There were a lot of immature students in this class who didn't respect [the prof] and gave her a hard time no matter what she did."

You may ask then, why was this so? Why did they give me such a hard time? Good question. One student suggested that it was because I didn't have a Ph.D. Though a few others complained that I constantly flaunted my degrees! (Like I'd flaunt an M.A.)

Another suggested that things would've been different had I been teaching in the auditorium rather than in a portable. Apparently being in the portables is a low-status indicator.

Another suggested that students were so free to express their opinion in my class, they kind of got carried away.

A few said that I shouldn't have let them get away with so much, I should have asserted my authority more; and others complained that the class was run like a dictatorship.

One complained that I was always right and the student was always wrong and I made that perfectly clear. (If I say the answer's 5.4 and my student says it's 3.2, I'd better be the one who's right, and I'd better make it clear to the student!)

What do I think? How do I explain the hostility?

- 1) I think a lot had to do with the marks — as I pointed out earlier, the uprising occurred only after the first assignment was marked. Perhaps some of the hostility toward me was displaced anger and frustration with their grade. *Next time then, the first assignment will be earlier, and while it will be marked, it won't count. Also, I'd like to say that next time, the exam will be worth 30% and everything else will be weighted according to each student's preference, decisions to be made at the end of the course. Perhaps also next time I should find out before the course begins what the average grade is supposed to be.*
- 2) Also, my style is somewhat personal. I would often share bits of what I was doing or had done, as conscious role modelling; I'd say things like "That's exactly an issue I'm struggling with right now in a paper I'm working on" or I'd refer to my own article on euthanasia when we read the anthology selection on euthanasia. Unfortunately student comments indicate that this was perceived as bragging — *so I guess I won't do this next time.*
- 3) My guess is that some students simply didn't take the course seriously right from the beginning because (a) they

thought that Philosophy was an easy, rather than a rigorous, discipline; (b) they thought that any course without a prerequisite would be a breeze; (c) they were convinced they already knew how to think; (d) they assumed that since the course was very much about opinions, it would be easy because, after all, 'everyone's entitled to their own opinion' so all that's necessary is to *have* an opinion ... .

- 4) Unlike other courses, there is very little content in a critical thinking course to 'save' them; there is no research to be done, there is no knowledge per se to acquire — this is pure critical thinking (the stuff that brings their other marks down) (here it is the *only* stuff). I find it interesting that with blind marking, the top student was a Math student; there is a close relation between Math and Philosophy in their disciplined clarity of thought; Math is right up there with Physics and Philosophy regarding GRE scores.) One of my [former] professors recently said to me that she first thought this course would be easy to teach because there's no content; then she realized it was the hardest to teach — because there's no content. And since it's purely a skill course, practice is essential — and I don't think most students did the practice I assigned. Perhaps like Statistics, this is a course that students need to take twice to pass.

\* \* \*

Of course, even while I was preparing the above response, it occurred to me that all of it could be irrelevant, an exhaustive and exhausting bucket of red herrings. Why did the students complain? Why were they so resistant to my questions, my comments, my instruction? *Because I'm female. That's the*

*elephant in the room.* There's no way men (and many of my students were male) are going to take instruction from a woman. There's no way men are going to concede to a woman, grant that she's right and they're wrong. There's no way men are going to consider women competent. [I found out later, regarding another course I was teaching, that a male student actually organized a meeting to prepare a list of complaints about me, one of which was "She puts comments on our essays." Seriously.]

But I came of age in the 70s, obtained my teaching degree and my first teaching position in the early 80s, when we were developing non-sexist language and revamping the dead-white-male canon, and taught joyously and enthusiastically through the 80s; I then moved to a backwoods sort of place that I thought was just behind the times a bit — through the 90s, I assumed the rest of the world was progressing in the direction set in the 70s and 80s.

So one, I thought that my sex couldn't be the explanation for my experience at the university, or at least not the whole explanation, because we were so past sexism. And two, I thought that that explanation was so obvious as to not merit mention; I assumed everyone my age or younger was as up-to-speed as I was about sexism in the classroom.

I didn't know about the backlash. I didn't realize that all the ground we had gained, and then some, had been lost. So I was wrong. So very wrong. On both points.

Some time after I'd prepared my detailed, anguished response to the Dean's letter, I happened to stand outside a male colleague's class for a few minutes (I'd been invited to do a special talk on ethics and economics), and I was amazed at the quiet: no one was interrupting him; no one was challenging his every word; no one was competing with him. That is to say, they were not trying to undermine his authority; they had accepted it. *Because he was male.*

Just in case you haven't had enough, before I was completely 'fired' (a.k.a. not asked to teach any other courses), yet another (male) student went to the Dean to complain. I may be wrong, but I suspect that he never would have done so if a *male* professor had refused, given the circumstances indicated in my response below, to increase his grade. The following is the response I prepared to *that* complaint.

\* \* \*

Please consider this as comment/rebuttal to Cody's allegation of unfair treatment in [Ethics for Social Science]:

1. I don't fully understand Cody's first point: "with a considerable amount of commentary and another re-write, [his first paper] was worth at least a pass." Students were not allowed to submit re-writes of the first paper (not one, and certainly not "another"), and any "commentary" he wanted to include in his paper would have been, should have been, included in the version he submitted.

Also, I'd like to point out that I met with every student, Cody included, on a one-to-one basis, to discuss in detail their first paper — partly because it was indeed their first, partly because the final exam would be similar, and partly because such feedback is simply excellent pedagogy and my classes are usually small enough that I can do this.

2. I did not grant an extension to any student for the second paper (as Cody claims) — certainly not to a student who "simply forgot about the due date." I did allow a student to hand in the *third* assignment a week after it was due: I had changed the due date, moving it earlier by a week, and she apparently was not present when I announced the change

(she was working to the original due date as per the course outline). Also, I did allow two students to resubmit their second paper, but this was clearly not permission to rewrite: while both students had identified the secondary source they used, they did not include quotation marks wherever they quoted — I merely refused to mark their papers until they inserted the quotation marks (so I could clearly see what was their work and what was not). Believing that Cody, and perhaps others, misunderstood that as permission to rewrite (and therefore evidence in unfairness), I explained at some length to the class as a whole exactly what I was permitting those two students to do; unfortunately, that was a day Cody arrived late, and I had to therefore repeat the explanation — it's possible my repeat explanation was abbreviated, leaving Cody without full understanding the distinction between 'rewrite' and 'resubmit'.

Further, I'd like to point out that with regard to the second paper, students were required to submit an extensive outline four weeks before it was due. I provided extensive feedback two weeks hence (again, meeting with students individually), leaving them two weeks to rework (if necessary) and write up the paper — I, thus, 'built in' the re-write option. Cody, however, did not take advantage of this: he did not submit an outline, but, instead, simply submitted a completed paper on the final due date. (Such preliminary feedback was also allowed for the third assignment; again, Cody did not take advantage of that.)

Further still, with regard to the second paper, I did allow a few students to re-write their paper correcting their grammar and punctuation (but not changing the content at all); they could then resubmit it for a slight increase in the grade (for example, a C+ would turn into a B-). Cody was one of these few students, but he did not bother to correct and resubmit his paper.

3. With regard to Cody's class participation mark, those marks were based not only on quantity, but also on quality of contribution. As for quantity, attendance was also taken into account: Cody missed at least two full classes, which I consider substantial in a course totalling a mere twelve classes. As for quality, Cody's contributions were very poor. For example, in a discussion about whether one is morally 'allowed' (the weak version) or morally 'obligated' (the strong version) to tell someone that someone else is HIV positive, Cody's contribution was something like 'And what about at places like Casino Rama where they have a separate trash can for needles in the washrooms?' Given that that discussion occurred during the *last* class, such a comment is indicative of Cody's persisting inability to understand and follow the arguments that comprise the course content; that, not my unfairness, explains his failing grade.

It is certainly quite possible that I use different assessment standards than Cody is used to: ethics is quite a different course than, say, marketing or accounting. However, I believe I use standards appropriate for the course, and they are, thus, not unfair. And I have used the same standards for Cody as I have used for the other students in that course — which is to say, again, that I have not been unfair. (Of course, much depends on one's definition of 'fair' — as this was a topic we explored at some length in the course, it's disappointing, but not surprising, to see Cody using the term with such imprecision.)

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As I say, if I were a male professor, I doubt Cody would have gone to the Dean.

Perhaps more importantly, *if I were a male professor*, I probably would have responded to the Dean's request for a response to the evaluations with just a short paragraph full of generalities about possible changes.

*And that would have been the end of it.*

# Visionary

When I read about Nipissing University's Students in Free Enterprise (NUSIFE), which is a group of students who undertake projects "intended to increase the public's awareness of entrepreneurship and business-related subjects," it occurred to me to wonder why such an endeavour is undertaken only by business students.

Consider the projects listed below — then imagine ...

- "Global Crusaders" educated high school students about minimum wages and exchange rates in five different countries — why not educate them about gender issues in five different countries ...
- "Team Builders" led team-building exercises during a weekend program at the YMCA — my guess is that sociology students' take on team-building would be quite different than that of business students ...
- "Junior Tycoons" were high school students who presented a basic business plan — why not have "Junior Diplomats" present a recess plan based on insights from political science, history, and psychology ...
- "Budgeting for Mental Health Patients" — how about "Philosophy for Mental Health Patients" ...
- "My First Bank Account" — whatever happened to "My First Library Card" ...

- “Nipissing East Community Opportunities” received a marketing plan — they could have used an environmental assessment plan ...
- “Show Me the Money” was about financial planning guidelines on the web — how about “Show Me the Stars”, about astronomy on the web ...
- “A Feasibility Study” was presented to graphic arts students — how about presenting them with an ethics study ...

Such projects, both by training students to apply their knowledge outside academia and by increasing the visibility of business in the outside world, probably contribute to the strangle-hold business — business activities and business interests — has on the world; therefore, suggesting that similar endeavours be undertaken by humanities and science students as well is more than an exercise in imagination — it’s an identification of responsibility.

This particular infiltration of business is so developed that there are actually *competitions* among universities for their SIFE teams. Yes, there are poetry and drama competitions too, but poems and plays don’t reach out and engage the community in the same way; they just present to, perform for, the community (except for those cool workplace theatre guerrilla groups). Perhaps science does a little better; there are, of course, the annual science fairs, but from time to time I also see students out in the field with their lab kits.

This lack of engagement is rampant throughout the humanities curriculum. We teach our English students how to appreciate and write poetry, but not how to find a literary agent; how to appreciate and write drama, but not how to

produce a play. Philosophy students are great at clarifying concepts and values, identifying hidden assumptions, testing for consistency and coherence; psychology students know all about how our minds and emotions work; sociology students know about people in groups, small and large, in cultures and subcultures and countercultures; history students know what hasn't worked. Along with our students of gender studies and native studies and our other social science students, humanities students (the humanities focus on humanity — and who, what, are we talking about when all is said and done?), and of course our science students (what is humanity but one bunch of carbon-based organisms among many), would be great consultants — if they had any consulting skills. But we don't teach them how to write a proposal, how to contract for business, or how to manage a project.

Until we do these things, our humanities and science students will be dependent on business students as go-betweens and as enablers. And since business students, by definition apparently, have profit as their motivator, their purpose, and their goal, there is bound to be a certain amount of unfulfilled potential. Business students are not likely to set up Sociologists, Inc. or History Is Us. Nor are they even likely to engage the services of non-business students as consultants.

OPAS (the Office for Partnerships for Advanced Skills) is another example of the deficiency I'm trying to expose. It's a partnership between Ontario universities and Canadian companies with a mandate to "foster more effective relations between universities and companies who hire and maintain a highly skilled workforce" and "respond to requests and develop initiatives that promote increased use of university-based resources including advanced skills development." One might be forgiven, therefore, for thinking it was pretty inclusive. This seems indicated even by the Special Events & Programs (which include a Visionary Seminar Series, Industry Sector Symposia,

Internship & Reciprocal Exchange Programs and the development of a National Network) and by the Skills Development statement (which says “In knowledge industries, skills requirements advance and change, creating new needs [and] OPAS responds to these changing skills needs with solutions designed and delivered by leading university programs across Ontario”).

However, a close look reveals that there isn’t a whole lot of room for humanities and social science; there’s something for science and engineering (an auto parts symposium is listed, as well as a biotech sector symposium), but it seems that the university programs they’re talking about partnering with are pretty much the B.B.A. and M.B.A. Their website welcome page confirms this: “In today’s knowledge-based economy, business organizations are faced with the need to address constant changes in operating practices, human capital requirements, and technology.” That page is pure business buzz (“human *capital*”?!). (And there you do see the specification — “*business organizations ...*.”)

Indeed, had I visited the OPAS website first, I wouldn’t have been so surprised to discover that the keynote speaker (the only speaker) at the “Visionary 2000” seminar was the CEO of the Royal Bank (how much more focussed on business, profit, money, can you get?). And the very fact that his talk, nothing more than a Royal Bank promo, was billed as *visionary* indicates just how much we need to correct this deficiency.

## Useless Humanities

That a humanities degree is useless for the workforce says more about our workforce than the degree. It says that we value, that we'll pay for, someone to provide cars, electric toothbrushes, and running shoes. But not beauty and insight.

It doesn't have to be that way. Imagine a world in which companies had, along with finance departments to look after their money and maintenance departments to keep things clean, art departments to make the place beautiful. Municipalities could have art departments too, right alongside their legal departments and transit departments, to keep the city beautiful. Or entertaining. Or edifying. Depending on your view of the role of art.

Provinces could have, in addition to the Ministries of Environment, Energy, and Revenue, a Ministry of Music. Yes, of course, there is a Ministry of Culture and Recreation, and that's close. And there are provincial arts councils. Close again. But they're just administrative bodies: there are no practicing artists on staff whose job it is to *do* their art. (The Ministry of Environment, on the other hand, has, for example, biologists on staff whose job it is to do biology.)

We'd have municipal and provincial concert halls and theatres and galleries with full complements of staff — that is, full-time paid musicians, playwrights, actors, painters, providing a year-round schedule of daily events. Attendance would be covered by our taxes, just as is our use of the roads.

Imagine a world in which video stores had as many videos of dance performances as of war movies. A world in which poets and short story writers and novelists read in movie theatres. And people paid to get in. As many people. Hell, our lit grads might make a living!

Imagine a world in which we valued knowledge about ourselves as much as knowledge about our money. And we paid philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists as much as we pay financial advisors.

Imagine a PR department hiring a historian to manage the information, to develop true, coherent archives. With intelligent analysis.

We have concert halls, libraries, and museums. We have jobs for musicians, poets, and historians. But we have so many more banks and stores and restaurants. We thus have so many more jobs for business majors (the managers and the accountants) and non-majors (the clerks and waiters), for people whose *raison d'être* is to make or serve profit — not beauty, joy, insight, or understanding.

Is it truly supply and demand? Do we really have the world we want to have? Yes and no. If we asked the philosophers and psychologists and sociologists, we'd know that we want what we're used to, so supply creates demand as much as, if not more than, demand creates supply. And we'd know that pressure can modify our wants: customs and marketing strategies can compromise our autonomy if we don't pay attention. To our real desires, our real goals. To our joys, to our hopes. (Every now and then, I think things may be different in Europe. But how would I know — it's not the sort of thing that the U.S. or even Canada puts on the news. Around and around ... )

And anyway, so what? So what if a humanities degree is useless in the workforce. Not all value need be tangled up with the economy, with business, with the workplace. (Have you mistaken your job for your life?) Not everything has to have a price. Not everything need be, or *can* be, sold. Or bought. Some things just are. (The recognition and appreciation of beauty and joy. The cultivation of curiosity and interest. The achievement of exhilaration and understanding ... .)

# Dismissing Philosophy and Philosophers / Philosophy — Misunderstood

“Yes, well, that’s a philosophical question, isn’t it.” So, what, the question’s unimportant? Because it can’t be answered with quantitative certainty? But philosophical questions *can* be answered with more or less strength, more or less adequacy. Read on.

Also, since there’s no absolutely right or wrong answer to most philosophical questions, the consensus seems to be that anyone can ‘do’ philosophy. In one sense, that’s true. Anyone can do philosophy. Anyone can do physics too. It’s just that incompetence, inadequacy, will be more apparent in the latter case. Because there are right and wrong answers. Most of the time. At least at the lower levels.

But one can make mistakes in when engaging in philosophical reasoning too. It’s just that we haven’t trained people to see mistakes in reasoning as much as we’ve trained them to see mistakes in arithmetic. (Which is, partly, why people mistakenly think all opinions are equally valid.)

Not only are philosophical questions dismissed, philosophers too are dismissed. After all, they’re no better than the rest of us. Their opinions are no more valid. I’m starting to see the dismissal of scientists in the same way: it occurs when the person doesn’t understand science — after all, if you don’t understand the scientific process of hypothesis formulation and testing, if you don’t understand how scientists arrive at their opinions, you won’t consider scientific opinions any more valid. Similarly with philosophers: if you don’t understand the relationship of premise and conclusion, the necessity of relevance ...

That it took so long for philosophy to become a high school course suggests that most people misunderstand philosophy (and philosophers). Even within academia, however, there seems to be confusion. Two PhDs expressed surprise at the title of my masters' thesis in Philosophy ("The Issue of Consent in Sex and Sexual Assault"); both seemed to think that philosophy was stuff like 'If a tree falls and no one's there, does it make a sound?' or 'Does the table really exist?' Philosophy *is* that. But not, at all, only that.

Metaphysics (Is the table real?) and epistemology (What's the difference between believing something and knowing something?) are both areas of philosophy. So are ethics (How could/should we determine right and wrong?) and aesthetics (What do we mean when we say 'X is beautiful?').

But so are social philosophy (Why is there war? Are affirmative action programs fair?), political philosophy (Which is better — liberalism or socialism? What is the nature of the just society?), and philosophical psychology or philosophy of mind (What is the relation between the mind and the brain?). And some areas have fields pretty large in themselves: environmental ethics (Should we use animals for experimentation? Do trees have rights?); business ethics (Is profit an acceptable motive? How do we define, exactly, a conflict of interest?); biomedical ethics (Is it right to pay someone for their organ donation? Is euthanasia immoral?).

Truth is philosophy is not so much a subject as a skill: philosophy is disciplined reflection. So there is, there can be, a 'philosophy of anything or an 'anything philosophy': philosophy of science, philosophy of language, philosophy of education, philosophy of love, feminist philosophy, legal philosophy, etc. *Whenever you're examining the conceptual foundations, especially for clarity or consistency, you're doing philosophy.* Far from being the least relevant endeavour, philosophy is the most relevant: other disciplines deal with who, what, when, where, and how;

philosophy deals mostly with why (after dealing with ‘What exactly do you mean?’).

One of the most misunderstood courses in university is a second year philosophy course called, variously, Critical Thinking, Clear Thinking, or Informal Logic. The template in such courses is ‘I think X because Y’. The purpose of the course is to teach people to have reasons for their opinions — to have *good* reasons. Most of us know that something can’t be *A* and *not-A* at the same time. But there are other rules of reason, rules we constantly break — and this constantly gets us into trouble. (Is your argument sound? Are your premises true? Are they valid — relevant and adequate?) What the course does is teach these rules of reason, the skills of thinking: it develops the capacity to analyze an issue, to break it down into its parts; to draw distinctions, identify assumptions, clarify concepts, understand connections; it trains one to check for coherence, consistency, and completeness. A philosophical analysis is a very careful examination and assessment.

A supervisor once said of me, after I had provided feedback on a sexual harassment brochure, ‘I wish I had a mind like that’. It’s a mind developed by the rigours of philosophy. It’s a mind developed to be clear, to be precise, to be thorough. It’s a disciplined mind. I may not tell you the answers. But by the time a philosopher’s through, you’ll know what all the important questions are (as well as how they’re connected). You’ll also have a pretty good idea of the *possible* answers, each with their implications.

Whether or not to quit your job, whether or not to have an abortion, whether or not to kill yourself — these are all philosophical questions. Even trying to determine why you feel depressed involves philosophical skills — to uncover and clarify perceptions, assumptions, expectations. In fact, while here in Canada and the U.S. when we advise someone to get counselling or therapy, we mean *psychological* counselling, there is also such a

thing as *philosophical* counselling. It's a well developed field in Europe: it has its own journals, its different schools of thought; one can become a certified philosophical counsellor and hang out a shingle for business, much like the familiar psychological counsellor here. As a parallel to psychoanalysis, it makes perfect sense. After all, philosophy *is* analysis.

# How Many Specialists Does It Take to Change a Lightbulb?

Every now and then, there is a swing in academia toward the holistic approach, toward systems theory, if you will. In this anti-atomistic, anti-reductionist view, the essence is the process, not the structure; what's important is not so much the thing, but the relationship between the thing and other things. I think of Fritjof Capra's work of fifteen years ago, *The Turning Point*, and I wonder if perhaps quantum physics will provide the necessary weight once and for all for critical mass so the pendulum will stop, making the atomistic view a thing of the past, permanently.

Given this, this need for seeing the relationships, not just the things, it's too bad people think 'jack of all, master of none'; it's too bad generalist degrees (the Bachelor of Liberal Arts, the Bachelor of Liberal Sciences) are considered almost worthless, while the only ones that seem to 'count' are the specialist degrees (a B.A. or a B.Sc. with a concentration in Some One Thing) — and the more specialist, the better (a Ph.D. in Some One Thing). On the contrary, the value should be on *generalist* degrees, more specifically, on *interdisciplinary* degrees, for only interdisciplinary studies focus on the relationships between, the interdependence of, things.

One reason, perhaps, for reluctance to make this paradigm shift is that 'dependence', as in 'the *interdependence* of things', has a bad name — it's thought to be weak. Especially by men. Who rule the world. I think that's why communitarianism, with its emphasis on connectedness, isn't exactly usurping Rawls and company (including grandfather Kant). The concept of gestalt provides one way around this: the sum can be greater

than its parts. Linguistics provides another: let's call it 'interactive' rather than 'interdependent'.

Of course part of the reason for the evolution of specialization is the quantity of information: one simply *can't* stay at the cutting edge in more than one area. This is true, but if everyone's at their own section of the edge, who's supervising the cutting? Are we going to allow our pattern to be one of chance? We need multi/interdisciplinary people, meta-people, to help put the pieces together. Philosophers, trained to examine conceptual foundations, are especially suited for this task; the plethora of 'philosophy of X' courses supports this. A philosophy of science course, for example, deals with the basis (not the basics) of science.

And I wonder if the drive to specialization hasn't become self-defeating. Knowledge is not power; it's knowing what to do with knowledge that's important; and it's knowing what knowledge you want or need that's important. I am repeatedly surprised to discover just how much of how many university courses never get past the knowledge/comprehension level, to use Bloom's taxonomy. They can't — because there's so much knowledge (if one is to specialize) to cover. True, many (mostly the Sciences) also get into application; and some (usually the Humanities) venture into interpretation and evaluation; but very few (almost Philosophy alone) has as its *focus* analysis and synthesis.

The value of a generalist approach, specifically of an interdisciplinary approach, is not just that it's appropriate to the nature of *things* — it's appropriate to the nature of the things' *problems*. Problems don't respect disciplinary boundaries; rather they go outside the lines, they leak from one field (supposing they even start in one field) into another and often still another, making the colours run together and leaving a trail of grey areas.

*Solutions* seem to depend then on an interdisciplinary approach. Economic solutions often fail because they haven't

accounted for the psychology of the involved people; environmental solutions fail when they don't recognize and incorporate the politics involved; social solutions can fail simply because the architecture, the design of the society's city, wasn't taken into account. The list goes on.

So who are you going to call? Specialist-busters: interdisciplinary generalists.

(Either that or an interdisciplinary committee of specialists, with no egos and excellent communication skills — one that *can change* the damn light bulb.)

# Religion: Superstition and Habit (a very brief primer)

I find it amazing that so many people still believe in God. I can only conclude that, in most cases, they just haven't thought about it. Because thinking about religion is the surest way to atheism. (Which is probably why so many religions discourage thought: come to God as a child<sup>1</sup> — whose intellectual faculties are quite insufficient for the task; trust in me, listen to me, I speak for God — you don't need to worry your little head about it.)

There are several classic arguments for the existence of God. But as Bertrand Russell (*Why I am not a Christian*), B.C.Johnson (*The Atheist Debater's Handbook*), George H. Smith (*Atheism: The Case Against God*), and so many others have pointed out, their flaws have been, over the course of the last few centuries, revealed.

Consider the first cause argument: everything must be caused by something (nothing can come from nothing), therefore, God exists — God is the something that created everything, or at least that created everything that caused everything else. But who created God? No one: God is self-caused. Then why couldn't everything else, or even some of everything else, also be self-caused? You can't have your cake and eat it too: you can't say everything needs a cause in order to get to God and then suddenly change your mind (when you get to God) and say no, not everything needs a cause.

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<sup>1</sup> "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein" (Luke 18: 16-17) (Matthew says almost the exact same thing) (copycat).

Consider the argument from design: when we observe the world, we see how everything fits together so nicely, it's obvious it was created, by design, by God. Well, one, you must be looking at different stuff: I observe that I don't have earlids. And two, even if I grant that everything does fit together very nicely, it's not obvious that it does so from design: it could be from adaptation (and what *didn't* fit together with everything else simply died).

There are many more, and equally poor, arguments for a God, but anyone who *really* wants to examine his/her belief can look them up. In short, there's no reason, no basis, for such belief.

But even if you *do* accept one of the arguments supporting belief in God, you still have to find a reason for believing in *your* god. Christians (the dominant group in Canada and the States) still have to find a reason for believing in the *Christian* God; Muslims still have to find a reason for believing in the Muslim God; etc.

The most common reason for believing in Jesus Christ *et al* is that 'It says so in *The Bible* and *The Bible* is the word of God.' This is circular; it's like saying you know that Santa Claus exists because he said he did in a letter he wrote to you — you believe he exists (you believe the letter was written by him) in order to prove that he exists.

Quite apart from the invalidity, let's consider consistency: it says a lot of other stuff in *The Bible* too. For example, if you do something wrong with your hand, you should cut it off (Matt 5:29-30); you shouldn't plan for the future (Matt 6:34); you shouldn't work to obtain food (John 6:27) — but my guess is you don't believe any of *that*. So if you're just going to pick and choose and believe only what you want to believe, why involve *The Bible* at all — why not just start from scratch?

Then there are those who believe in God because they had a vision, because God appeared to them. I can't deny personal

experience. I can, however, point out that such a person's *interpretation* of their personal experience is unlikely and/or is inconsistent with a lot of other stuff (not the least of which is *other* people's personal experiences). And I can direct such people to a study of psychology and physiology, which would provide alternative explanations worth considering. (Ever wonder why such visions and conversions usually occur to people who already believe in God? And/or who are in a state of extreme stress or weakness?)

Let's face it: Christianity is a superstitious cult just like any other we so quickly condemn and then rush to save our children from. Unfortunately, because it's a cult that has brainwashed entire societies, from birth, it's safe from such criticism (and therefore more dangerous). Haven't you ever thought how coincidental it is that most people believe in the religion they were raised in? Doesn't that spell 'brainwash' to you? If people freely chose Christianity from among half a dozen others, at the age of maturity, with none having had a headstart, well, that would be different. And in that case, I doubt there would be so many Christians around.

And actually, I doubt that there are. So many Christians around. Except for fundamentalists, fanatics, and a few others who *do* choose in adulthood, who are 'born again', religion is less a belief than a habit. And habits are hard to break. Especially life-long habits that have become security blankets (if only because familiarity is comforting). Saying 'I believe in God' is such a life-long habit.

It's especially hard to break a habit if you think you need it. And most people mistakenly think religious belief is a prerequisite for morality. I think this explains the outrage at atheists: to say 'I don't believe in God' is thought to mean 'I'm immoral' or at least 'I'm amoral.' But let's be clear here. One, to be Christian entails a lot more than being good; and if Christians had the honesty to recognize that, frankly, they'd be

acting differently — they would be cutting off their hands, or they'd be doing anything they want because all is forgiven, or they'd be in a deep depression because they did everything they wanted and are now damned to hell (did I mention that Christianity is full of contradictions?).

Two, being good does not require that you be Christian; it just requires that you have an ethical system. And there are several, in addition to Christian ethics, to choose from: values-based ethics, rights-based ethics, consequence-based ethics, etc. (And the key word there is *choose*.)

Next time you cross yourself or chant a prayer, consider the nature of superstition and habit.

## Sex, like Religion / Religion, like Sex

What do Madonna, Prince, and Leonard Cohen<sup>1</sup> have in common — with evangelists, ministers, and priests? They all feed on the proximity of religion and sex.

But, but, you stutter, don't religions mostly prohibit sex, considering pretty much anything to do with the body to be distasteful or unclean or just plain immoral? Well, yes. Could be hypocrisy. Could be denial.

So what can religion and sex possibly have in common? Well, they both promise transcendence, ecstasy. (They both fail to deliver, but that's another point.)

What else? Religion is like infatuation (which is fuelled by sexual desire): both involve adoration, worship, of the object of one's desire. Add a little confusion and pretty soon one deifies the object of one's desire or desires the object of one's deification.

And both religion and sex involve salvation: one looks to God like one does to a lover, for salvation in the other's arms. (They both fail to — never mind.)

Furthermore, sex involves a release, a purging if you like — rather like fasting, or confessing and then doing penance. Again, one gets confused with the other, and pretty soon sex is thought to purify. I'm sure that's what all those priests thought when they had sex with those boys. Consider the sadomasochism and bondage and discipline. More than one saint has submitted to flagellation, by self or by others. Isn't

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<sup>1</sup> And no doubt so many other, more current, ones ...

every monk given a hairshirt and every nun her own little whip?

And on that note — it's no coincidence that 'rape' and 'rapture' come from the same root.

# I Don't Have a Conscience

While I was very pleased, way back in 1997, to see the introduction of Bill C-272 regarding the use of taxes for military purposes, I was not at all pleased with its title: The Conscientious Objection Act. I object to paying for a lot of weaponry, but I don't have a conscience.

Phrases such as "Follow your conscience" and "Do what your conscience tells you" suggest that one's conscience is a fixed sort of thing, an unchanging absolute. Indeed, it often sounds like one's conscience is innate, something we're born with. And something quite separate from us, a sort of homunculus, or at least an 'inner voice' (the voice of God?). Chomsky may have proven that there are innate structures of language in the human brain, but to date, to my knowledge, no one has proven there are, in the human brain, innate moral principles. Nor, despite a dictionary definition of conscience as "the moral *sense* of right and wrong", has such a sixth (?) sense been established.

On the contrary, our 'conscience' is acquired: it is the collection of moral principles, or more accurately, since the acquisition occurs before we have the cognitive competence to handle *principles*, it is the collection of moral *habits*, that have been inculcated during childhood. So our conscience is dependent on our parents' moral principles, or, more likely, habits, and to some extent on the principles manifested by our community, our society. Our conscience amounts to nothing more than a moral reflex. We say "Examine your conscience", but we do not intend a critical examination; rather, we mean a simple examination of discovery. We never say "*Develop* your conscience" or, God forbid, "*Reconsider* your conscience".

And yet surely that's what our attitude toward moral principles should be: moral principles should not be inherited by indoctrination, but developed and maintained by careful, rational thought. I propose therefore that we replace the word 'conscience' with 'ethics'. 'Ethics' refers not to one's *sense* but to one's *system* (hopefully it's a system, a coherent collection) of moral principles. Bill C-272 should be called "The Ethical Objection Act" — for all of us who object, on *ethical* grounds, to the use of taxes for the military.

Now many people may be reluctant to replace 'conscience' with 'ethics' because, well, whose ethics? But that's exactly the question that must be asked. And it should be asked of conscience as well. I suspect there's a rather naive presumption of homogeneity with respect to conscience: when someone advises you to follow your conscience, my guess is that the person assumes you will choose to do the right thing, which is the same right thing he or she would do. But what if my conscience tells me to torture? What is the response to that — 'Your conscience must be wrong'? Until we ask *whose ethics*, we're avoiding the issue, skating on the thin ice of individual relativism, the very weakest of ethical systems: X is right because I think it's right (I followed my conscience). It's circular and most unhelpful: Why do you think it's right? How do you come to that thought? That is, *what makes you think it's right?* (Where did you get your conscience from?)

The fear, of course, is that the question has no answer, that we will set ourselves adrift on a sea of cultural relativism. Not true: we're capable of making anchors. We must confront the fact that we decide what's right and wrong, and surely deciding consciously is better than deciding unconsciously. Surely it is better to identify and compare, to critique, to evaluate, to choose our moral principles. And then to act, and lobby, according to those principles, instead of merely according to our 'conscience'.

## Our Christian Language

I hadn't really thought about it until I saw 'his word' corrected to 'His Word' on a Writing Competency Test at a publicly-funded university.

I can accept a capital on 'God' because the word is being used as a name, and names are generally capitalized. (Though I do find it rather presumptuous to so appropriate a common noun. It's also a bit coercive: to use a common noun without an article is to imply there's only one — the claim 'Cat is happy' demands the question 'Which cat?' unless you think there's only one; so when the rest of us want to refer to the Christian god, since we must say 'God' instead of using a real name like 'Zeus' or 'Hela', we are unwillingly implying the same belief.)

And I can accept capitals on '*The Bible*', as well as italics, because the words refer to the title of a book, and such words are generally capitalized, as well as italicized.

But what's the rationale for capitalizing 'His Word'? It was suggested to me, when I questioned the marking committee, that 'his word' was being used to refer to *The Bible* and so, as a title, should be capitalized. Well, one, then it should also be italicized, and, oddly, this wasn't mentioned. Two, we generally don't accept substitute titles for other books; for example, we would not accept *The Dictionary* for *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* — not at the university level.

I suspect the student meant 'his word' not as an equivalent to *The Bible*, but as an equivalent to 'his teaching'. So again, what's the rationale for capitals? With two exceptions, no other pronoun is ever capitalized.

The first exception is that pronouns are capitalized when they refer to royalty — 'His Majesty'. I suspect it's meant to

show respect. Well I, for one, don't respect someone who's in a position of power and wealth merely by accident of birth. And for our language rules to impose such a display of respect is completely unjustified.

The second exception is 'I'. This one's unjustified on the grounds of inconsistency alone: no other subject pronoun is capitalized in the normal course of things. To make 'I' an exception is to be egocentric as well as inconsistent.

Since both exceptions are then, to my mind, unjustified, neither, to my mind, supports capitalizing in the instance under consideration. So much for 'his' in 'his word'.

As for 'word' (or 'teaching' or 'messages' or whatever), it doesn't belong to *any* class of nouns usually capitalized (names of people, countries, cities, months, etc.). Case closed.

So capitalizing 'His Word' seems to be an *exception* to the rules. And on what basis is this exception made? Well, it seems to me that capitalizing 'His Word' is meant to designate some special status, some special respect. And, as I suggested when I considered 'His Majesty', language has no business legislating opinions of value.

More specifically, religious values have no place in our grammatical rules. It especially has no place in the grammatical rules taught in public schools. Jewish schools can teach their kids to write 'G-d' and Christian schools can teach their kids to write 'His Word' — but neither should be stipulated as a common rule of grammar, and students in public schools should not be 'corrected' if they don't express these religious opinions through their spelling.

Nor should such rules be in any grammar book not identified as a Christian grammar book. Lamentably, five out of five grammar texts that I checked listed as a rule that names of deities and other religious names and terms be capitalized. However, in three at least, capitalizing the pronoun was presented as optional.

It's one thing to impose religious belief in public education,<sup>1</sup> which is not only contrary to the view that a just society is one which separates Church and State, but also contrary to the view that public education is committed to the pursuit of knowledge, not superstition.

It's another, and far more insidious, thing to entrench religious belief in our common language. We've exposed the sexism rooted in our language, and we have managed to begin to make changes. It's past time to do the same for the religionism rooted in our language. Just as B.C. (Before Christ) has given way to B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), let's make 'His Word' and the like equally anachronistic.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, through insisting that all students in public schools stand and recite the Lord's Prayer [sic] every morning.

## Acts of God

Calling tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and so forth ‘acts of God’ exempts insurance companies, and sometimes individuals, from responsibility.

Fair enough. Then let’s sue the responsible party. Let’s sue God.

If he doesn’t show up, maybe people will start thinking he doesn’t exist. Maybe they’ll stop believing that he does.

And if he does show up, well, what’s he going to say? That he didn’t know about the tornado? There goes omniscience.

That he did know, but couldn’t do anything about it? There goes omnipotence.

That he did know, and he could’ve done something, but — chose not to. There goes benevolence.

No doubt some believer in the courtroom will protest, ‘God works in mysterious ways.’ Try us.

Maybe God himself will protest, ‘Who are you to presume to question me?’ Um, we’re your children. (No doubt someone will figure out that that makes him the son of god.)

It can’t end well. God will be on the hook for compensation. It’ll set a precedent. It might even require back-compensation. (What’s the statute of limitations for acts of God?) Everyone who’s ever suffered personal injury or property damage from a storm or lightning-triggered forest fire ... my God! He’d have to restore their belongings, their houses, their — lives.

Then *I’d* believe.

## Appropriation or Imagination?

Two poems of mine have been published in a journal dedicated to “the Black experience”. An audio piece of mine has been aired on First Nations radio programs. I am neither Black nor a member of any First Nation. Had this been known, I suspect some might have accused me of cultural appropriation.

It’s an interesting idea, but as a reincarnation of the autobiographical school of writing — according to which one must have actually experienced what one is writing about — it is also a poor idea.

Taken to its logical extreme, any poem about a child must have been written by a child. Well no, one could say, you were *at one time* a child, so that’s okay. Hm. So memory is okay but imagination is not? I suggest that often the one is as accurate as the other.

But perhaps accuracy is not the point. Perhaps it’s a matter of “I can speak for myself, thank you” — a reaction against previous patronizing attitudes to the contrary. And if that’s the case, if you *can* speak for yourself, then by all means do so. But that shouldn’t stop me from *also* doing so if I want to. And if the editor or publisher selects only and always *my* speaking, then take that up with the editor or publisher, not the writer. Let’s be inclusive rather than reactionarily exclusive.

Further, there is a difference between speaking *for* and speaking *about*. Speaking *for* does entail the suggestion of advocacy — patronizing if unrequested, and possibly unnecessary. Speaking *about* entails no such suggestion. And actually, there’s a third option, the one that I thought I was doing — speaking *with*.

Think, for a moment, of all the literature that would not exist if writers had to limit themselves to what they have

personally experienced. Entire genres would disappear: science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, probably most adventure and mystery too. Oh, and romance.

Also, to be consistent, this perspective should extend to non-fiction writing as well. So there goes most of the news — most stories are not first-hand accounts. But at least, you'll say, the third person accounts remain third person — there is no saying 'I' when you really mean 'he/she'. True. And this is one important difference between fiction and non-fiction — the leap of the imagination, the projection of oneself into the other.

But let's not pretend for even one second that news reports are bereft of this very same imagination. If they were, they'd have to be written in a purely phenomenological fashion, bereft of *all* ascriptions of emotion, for starters. To say 'the demonstrators were angry' instead of 'the demonstrators were shouting' is as much a leap of imagination — unless the reporter spoke to the demonstrators (all of them) and they said they were angry. (Even then, strict accuracy requires you to report 'they said they were angry' rather than 'they were angry'.) To merely assume anger on the basis of their behaviour is to project, to imagine, to fictionalize. Chances are, you're quite correct, they *were* angry. If you know about human behaviour and if you know about the context, you can probably come up with a very accurate story without actually experiencing it yourself. *The same goes for the fiction writer.* (But then again, I suspect accuracy is not the issue.)

Furthermore, the 'no appropriation' perspective doesn't seem to recognize that there are people whose awareness doesn't go very deep. They live in and for the moment, they are not reflective, they are not analytic. Or they may be all that but just not very articulate. And there are others whose research is thorough, whose imagination is rich, and who are articulate to boot. Which is why Brian Moore can write a better novel about a woman with PMS than a woman who has it but doesn't even

know it. And which is why I can write a better poem about being Black or a First Nations person than some Blacks or First Nations people can. In short, one's imagination can exceed another's awareness.

But it's not really 'just' imagination, it's *informed* imagination — it's *empathy*. So not only does the 'no appropriation' perspective discourage imagination, it discourages empathy. But surely to limit ourselves to ourselves is sad. And dangerous.

# Cultural Anarchy

Why is it that so many people claim, usually with considerable passion, “I’m an American!” or “I’m Canadian” or what have you?

To identify yourself by country is to accept the territorial divisions made by people with economic power eager to retain that power. So why the passion? Furthermore, why grant such importance to an accident of birth? You had nothing to do with where you were born.

To identify yourself by the country in which you happened to be born is bad enough, but to identify yourself by the country in which your parents or grandparents or great-grandparents were born, as many do (“I’m African-American” and “I’m Japanese-American”), according to the birthplace of people you may not even have known, people who are long dead, is worse. Why is where your grandparents were born so much more important than what you think, what you value, and what you do? Why wouldn’t you identify yourself *that way*? “I’m an atheist” or “I’m an environmentalist” or “I’m a painter.” Identification by country of ancestral origin smacks of tribalism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I can see that identity claims according to ancestral lineage (“I’m First Nations because my great-grandfather was First Nations”) are important in many territorial conflicts, but they’re typically based on arguments of primacy — which are flawed on at least three counts. One, what does it matter who was here first? Does mere presence entitle one to ownership? Doesn’t the quality of one’s presence matter at all?

Two, what time shall we establish as the starting point, and on what basis shall we establish it as the starting point? For example, certainly the various indigenous tribes were here before the Europeans (and so “I have a right to X, a greater right to X than you, that is, because my ancestors were here before your ancestors”), but the various indigenous tribes also came from somewhere else 10-50,000 years ago — so they’re not really indigenous. They’re not *native*, they’re just *prior*. To be fair, we’d have to determine the time and location of each evolution into homo sapiens

For some people, such identity claims are a matter of culture, not country. But what *is* culture? What exactly is cultural identity? Race, religion, and nation are often used almost interchangeably to define culture: consider ‘I’m Black’, ‘I’m Christian’, and ‘I’m Chinese-Canadian’; consider ‘I’m Jewish’ which is, apparently, a bit of all three.

First, insofar as cultural identity is *racial* identity, it must, again, depend on an accident of birth, on chance, on something you did not consent to: we do not choose our race — we do not choose the colour of our skin, the shape of our eyes, the bridge of our nose, the fullness of our lips, etc.

Second, insofar as cultural identity is *religious* identity, and insofar as religion is a system of beliefs, it is, at least, *not* an accident of birth: one cannot be *born* a Catholic, for example, because one cannot be born believing anything, one simply doesn’t have the cognitive capacity at birth to form beliefs. But that kind of cultural identity is, then, something you can have only as an adult, when you have developed the intellectual faculty capable of understanding, assessing, and choosing beliefs.

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(should this be a measurable moment) and then establish complete lineages, in order to determine whose ancestors were where first. (Unless, of course, we just accept the Judeo-Christian view — in which case everyone not currently living in whatever country the Garden of Eden was in is an immigrant, not indigenous, a non-native.)

Three, even if we accept a right of primacy, on what grounds do we include that right in one’s genetic heritage? What my greatgrandfather did or didn’t do has nothing to do with me — I should not pay for his errors, nor should I have the right to go back to his childhood home (should I be able to determine where it is) and demand to be paid for what was stolen from him. It was stolen from *him*, not from *me*. What is his is his, not mine. Unless, I suppose, he left a will stating that whatever it was that was stolen was to have been given to me. But even then, one could reasonably argue that what is merely *potentially* yours isn’t yours enough to warrant a charge of theft should such theft cause that potential not to be actualized. And he could have as easily willed that it be given to the greatgrandson of a friend. (Perhaps likely, given the sexism of many inheritance traditions.) Why are genetics so very important? What if, after all, I’m adopted? (And therefore don’t even have the same skin colour as my greatgrandfather?)

Third, insofar as cultural identity is *national* identity, we are, barring emigration, back to an accident of birth and an endorsement of political 'agreements'.

Perhaps, rather than defining culture as a matter of race, religion, or nationality, it is better defined as a collection of costumes and customs, mere habits, practices, a way of living. But it seems strange to elevate your habits to the status of an identity, and then, perhaps, to demand certain rights on the basis of those habits.

What about defining culture as a set of values? This would certainly make race and nation irrelevant: values are seldom clearly correlated with racial or national boundaries — to say 'I'm Black' or 'I'm Serbian' doesn't necessarily say anything about your values, let alone anything exclusive or exhaustive. While your religious identity more probably does say something about your values, it would also be irrelevant because, again, it says nothing exclusive or exhaustive — a Muslim and a non-Muslim may both value X, and a Muslim may have values additional to those of the Islamic religion. And in any case, I question the individual who accepts so totally the set of values held by, presumably, a race, nation, or religion. Culture is not indelibly imprinted. To be a feminist is proof of that.

Another interpretation of culture refers to group history, the group involved being a group in which membership depends on some kind of heritage. But why should history, heritage, constitute identity? Why should our past define your present? More important, why should *someone else's* past define your present? Why should a *group's* past define an *individual's* present? One possible reason might be in order to avenge and/or to ensure compensation. But to make someone pay for the 'sins' of his or her ancestors is ridiculous. What my greatgrandfather did or

didn't do has nothing to do with me; I didn't even know the man.<sup>2</sup>

A second reason for making group history the basis of one's cultural identity might be in order to preserve what's of value. Surely this is important, but why limit yourself to the lessons of your own group? And while there may be value in being custodians of the past, why should the job be open only to those with a direct genetic line of descent? Why can't I carry the torch for a tradition I value *whether or not* anyone in my bloodline also carried it?<sup>3</sup>

Country of birth, race, ancestral religion, group history — I find it difficult to understand why people choose to identify themselves by such accidents of birth. That I am 5'4" is accidental — I had no choice in the matter and I have no control over it. So why would I choose to trumpet my height as my identity? It seems to me that there is something fundamentally irrational about claiming as your identity aspects of your self that are mere accidents of birth: if you don't choose X, if you have no control over X, then surely you can't justifiably take any credit or blame for X — nor, then, can you take any of the attendant benefits and burdens. It's also a very passive thing, basing your identity on what chance has done to you rather than on what you've done yourself. Perhaps most importantly, it's also

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<sup>2</sup> An exception would be if descendants suffer the consequences of the wrongs done to, or the privileges awarded to, their ancestors. But not only does this assume an inheritance that may or may not have occurred (see note 1), it is incredibly complex and ultimately uncertain: how can we really know for sure which aspects of one's present are due to which aspects of another's past?

<sup>3</sup> This raises the issue of assimilation and appropriation: why do they have such bad reps? After all, isn't conditioning, isn't education, merely assimilation? Weren't we assimilated (i.e., encouraged to conform to the customs and values) into our first cultural group, the one we belong to by birth? Why the foofarah when we are re-assimilated, into a second cultural group, the one we *choose*? And isn't appropriation merely adopting — the customs, practices, beliefs, values, and so on of some group? And what's wrong with that? (Frankly, it's unlikely one would adopt the whole set, since it's likely to be internally inconsistent, but that's another point ... )

unfair, if rights and responsibilities are assigned on such an identity.

Whether we admit it or not, we do choose our practices, our beliefs, and our values. And to identify ourselves according to such rational bases is to be responsible for ourselves. And cultural anarchy, assimilation and appropriation at will, enables, indeed reflects, this choice.

## Government Grants for Grad School to First Nations People

So a colleague at work, another part-timer, who's also going to grad school this September, got a government grant. She'll be getting \$675/month to cover her living expenses. I've spent five years saving \$10,000 to cover my living expenses (hopefully it won't take more than ten months to get my degree).

She's 'native'. Well, she was born in Canada same as me, actually in the same year even, but her parents' parents' parents' parents' parents' parents were living here before the Europeans moved in.

So, the argument goes, the money is compensation for past prejudice. Okay, then let's *establish* past prejudice. I mean, how exactly were her parents and grandparents denied opportunities — that, presumably, my parents and grandparents were not?

She tells me that in high school, she got 50s and 60s. So? She also tells me that she was delinquent. Excuse me, but that's her fault. How can it be her parents' parents' parents' fault? Did what the Europeans do (deny them jobs?) somehow create a culture of laziness among the people who were here first? And they were powerless to resist that? I attended school every fucking day, did all my homework, and then some, and got 80s and 90s. I guess because I'm white. And lower middle-class. Bullshit!! There were plenty others like me who skipped. And got 50s and 60s. My brother, for one.

But I was encouraged, she explains. She wasn't, because school isn't important in the native culture. Yes, I was expected to go to school every day. And my parents were happy, though not particularly enthusiastic about, my grades, but that's about

it. I wouldn't say I was encouraged. In fact, I was *discouraged* from pursuing a graduate degree in Philosophy.

If she attended every class, and did all her homework, and then some, and scored well on a culture bias-free IQ test, and *still* got 50s and 60s, then I'd say, yeah, okay, she's a victim of prejudice.

But even if that were the case, how does \$675/month compensate for the prejudice? How does it equal my privilege? I got As, but that didn't lead to \$675/month. I ended up with the same part-time job she did (she's a colleague, remember?). The same number of shifts, at the same rate of pay. If she had applied for the same jobs as me and *not* gotten them in spite of similar qualifications and experience (and opportunity to get said qualifications and experience), then I'd say, yeah, okay, unfair discrimination.

But still, why just give her \$675/month? Wouldn't it make more sense to give her a job that pays \$675/month? Doesn't the hand-out just repeat the past, which presumably is at fault, for putting her in this awful present of hers?

# Taxing the Rich

Of course the rich people should have to pay higher taxes. Not because of some 'trickle down' principle or some 'sacrifice for the common good' principle or some 'from each according to their ability' principle, but because they don't deserve their money. There, I said it. They don't deserve their millions.

Even if I worked twenty hours a day, 365 days of the year, I wouldn't make anywhere near just one million.

So they must be making ten, twenty, a hundred times per hour what I'm making.

Is what they're doing a hundred times more important than what I'm doing. It's not even ten times more important. (Let's say I'm a garbage collector.)

Is it a hundred or ten times more difficult? No. (Let's say I'm a nurse in the paraplegic ward.)

Does it take a hundred or ten times as much skill or training? No. (Let's say I'm an astrophysicist.)

Rich people have their millions because they've been paid, by others or by themselves, an unfair amount for their work. Or because they know how to work an unfair economic system that, for starters, rewards risk: the stock market.

But why do we reward risk? Because it's a male thing. And males reward themselves for male values.

Actually, though, often it's not a risk. If the company they started, the company they invested in, lost millions, they could declare bankruptcy. And *other* people would pay the price. Not them. Or if they're really big, if they lost really big, the government might bail them out. That is, us.

Furthermore, they're not even risking *their own* money. They probably borrowed the start-up money from the bank. So

it's our money. Or the bank's money (which is just money *they* made by investing *our* money).

Or if it *was* their own money, well it still wasn't. It was inherited from their parents. (Who probably inherited it from *their* parents). Because you can't *have* that much money to invest by working and saving. Even if you work twenty hours a day, 365 days a year ...

## Private Property and Visual Intrusion

There should be regulations about what people can put on their private property that will be in view of their neighbours. Even more than in public spaces, visual material on private property is not easily avoided. If you put a swastika or a pornographic image on your garage door, and that door is right across from your neighbours' living room window, they will have to see it every time they look out their window. Asking them not to look out their window is unreasonable. If you were there first and had the image on your garage door when they were looking for a place, they could have chosen to not move in (and so don't have the right to ask you to remove it) (maybe). But if they were there first, they have a right to ask you not to put the image on your garage door.

But it's not even, or not only, so-called 'offensive' images that I'd prohibit. It's *anything* the neighbour doesn't want to see every day, anything that's *an unwanted intrusion on their consciousness*. It could be a 'Jesus Loves You' sign (unwanted by the atheist), the Canadian flag (upsetting to someone who is well aware of Canada's environmental record), or even an inoffensive and non-upsetting image of an infant playing with building blocks. Who knows? It doesn't matter. The people who are forced to see your house every day are the ones who get a say in how it looks. From the outside. To them. What you put in your back yard doesn't affect them, so they don't have a say. What you put inside your garage, or inside your house, doesn't affect them, so they don't have a say. But what you put in plain view? They should have a say. A reasonable say.

Obviously the effects of such a prohibition increase the more visible you are. If you own a penthouse apartment that can be seen by thousands, guess what. If you own a house on a lake that can be seen by everyone on the lake, guess what.

To provide just one example, I live in a cabin on a lake in a forest and several people consider it appropriate to 'decorate' their property, lakeside, with solar lights that can never be turned off. Some are arranged in a runway fashion to mark a path from their house to their lake; some are arranged in a row along their frontage. Needless to say, the lights really ruin the beauty of the lovely moonlight glimmering on the water, the otherwise dark forest ... I claim that such lights shouldn't be allowed.

First, my right to revel in the natural beauty every night trumps their right to 'decoration' *that isn't even being appreciated* (if they're weekenders, they're back in the city during the week and so don't see their lights; if they live there, they're typically asleep in bed after midnight and so don't see their lights). Second, my right to revel in the natural beauty trumps the marginal utility of the lights even when they *are* there or awake *because there are alternatives* (one can use a flashlight or install motion sensor lights that go on only when one needs to see the way). People with lakeside solar lights are imposing their conception of decoration and utility on everyone else, and they are preventing others from appreciating their own conception of beauty (the dark night, the moonlight glimmering on the water). If your property is in the middle of natural beauty, you have an obligation not to ruin it. And if you don't see that, you shouldn't live there. Similarly, people who don't appreciate Beethoven shouldn't go to concerts and talk all the way through.

And if those lights are blinking, it's even worse: given the way our brains are wired, *our attention is coerced*. No one has a right to force me to pay attention to something I don't want to attend to, and blinking lights do just that.

One may counter by claiming that surely one is allowed to do what one wants on and with one's own property. Well, no. For example, you shouldn't be allowed to dump oil on your property — because it will seep through the soil into other people's property and into the lake. *When your actions affect others, there are limits to what you can do.*

In short, even though your property is 'private', what you put on it is not: as long as it can be seen by others, it's public. And it should therefore be subject to restrictions: you don't have a right to coerce other people's attention, especially if what you're forcing them to pay attention to is something they don't want to pay attention to.

# Noise Trespass

We need a noise trespass law. At the very least, the concept of noise trespass should be as familiar among the general population as physical trespass.

Why is going onto someone's private property without permission (physical trespass) considered a wrong? Because doing so is intrusive (presuming a right to privacy) and potentially damaging. The same goes for sending noise onto someone's private property.

Noise is intrusive because it — the sound of machinery, loud music, screaming kids, even conversations (having to listen to someone have an extended cellphone conversation, for example) — detracts and distracts from whatever one is trying to do, whether that's watching TV, listening to (one's own preferred) music, writing an essay, filling out income tax returns, sleeping ... it doesn't really matter. Surely we have a right to privacy concerning our attention; noise hijacks our attention — it coerces us to pay attention to something we don't want to pay attention to.

Noise is potentially damaging in a number of ways. Depending on a number of factors (of which dB is only one), noise "damages hearing [at least 20% of teenagers now suffer from slight hearing loss], disturbs communication, disrupts sleep, affects heart function, intrudes on cognition ... , reduces productivity, provokes unwanted behaviors, and increases accidents" (Mitra). It can also cause or contribute to "anxiety, stress, nervousness, nausea, headache, emotional instability, argumentativeness, sexual impotence, change in mood, increase in social conflicts, neurosis, hysteria, and psychosis" (Noise Free America).

Noise produced by industry, airports, and so on is already being monitored and regulated. I'm talking here about the noise caused by individuals in residential neighborhoods. Various sound charts put city traffic at around 80dB, the subway at 88dB, a garbage truck at 100dB; lawnmowers and leafblowers can be just as high, at 100dB (and last for half an hour, not just a few minutes), and chainsaws, dirt bikes, ATVs, boat motors, and PWCs are louder still, at around 110dB.

But, one might object, although we own our own property, and so have a right to object when someone trespasses on it, we don't own the air over our property, and sound travels through the air. There are several replies to this: we shouldn't own the land either (and yet physical trespass might still be wrong, merely because of occupancy); we should also own the air over our land (in which case, noise trespass is as wrong as physical trespass); we collectively own the air (and that's sufficient to consider noise a trespass); ownership is irrelevant altogether (occupancy is sufficient). People get upset when a neighbour's dandelion seeds travel through air and land on their property; is there not similar justification for getting upset when a neighbour's sound waves travel through air and 'land' — ah, but they don't land on one's property. No, but they 'land' on one's eardrums: sound is not perceived until the sound waves 'hit' one's eardrums. Surely that's even *more* intrusive: the sound waves actually touch our *body*, not just our property.

In any case, smoke from burning tires travels through air, and if it travels from your neighbour's property *through the air* onto your property, or, more accurately, into the air *over* your property, perhaps even through your open windows into your house, you would, I think, cry foul.

In addition to the intrusion and the damage, most of the annoying noise caused by individuals is avoidable. Manual lawnmowers, rakes, and clippers have enabled people to take care of their lawns for almost a century. I suspect that dirt

bikes, ATVs, and PWCs can be redesigned to be quiet; for starters, could they not use electric motors rather than two-stroke gas-powered motors? They certainly don't have to be modified to *increase* their noise (as they often are), and they can be driven in a fashion that minimizes their noise (as they often are not). And, of course, people could use, *instead*, bicycles, kayaks, canoes, and so on. And landline phones could be used (*inside*).

All of which begs the question: why *don't* we consider noise trespass to be trespass? Are we so unable to consider the invisible and the intangible? If we can't see it or touch it, it doesn't exist? Despite its obvious effects?

Or is it that men *like* noise? (After all, for the most part, they're the ones making it.) And it is the male view, male interests, male values that dictate law and custom, make no mistake about that. This is the view presented at Manly Power Tools. It's also the view endorsed by a certain electronic composer who, when asked why he writes such loud, dense music, replied "Besides the obvious? The desire to fill all this space with sound?" Perhaps men are still being led around by their primitive brain, and all their noise is just a sublimated roar, mistakenly believed to be necessary for survival. (Which begs the question: when will they evolve into *homo sapiens*?)

## On Power Outages

I live in a cabin on a lake in the forest (which you'll know, if you're reading these pieces in order). You'd think that whenever the power goes out, there would be silence. Lovely silence. (And lovely dark.) And there is. For all of thirty seconds. Then everyone's backup generator goes on. And for the next five, ten, twenty, or forty-eight hours, I hear engine noise. Constant engine noise. Like a tractor trailer is parked in my driveway. Idling. Loudly.

Because my god but the world would end if people had to go without TV for five hours! Or without whatever the hell it is they need their generators for.

Two hours in, and they're driving into town. Because 'What about supper?' What? Food is that foremost on your mind? You're not in Ethiopia. You just ate a couple hours ago. And if you're really that hungry, don't you have *anything* in the house that can be eaten raw, out of the box, or out of the can?

Perhaps they can't stand the silence. No, that can't be right, because everyone's generators are on.

Is it that they can't stand the severance from — what, exactly? Civilization? Please. Most people here couldn't care less about their neighbours. When I asked one to join a sort of neighbourhood watch so we could call the fire department whenever, during a total fire ban, some asshole one had a huge, blazing campfire, as was his habit, she refused. Didn't want to stick her neck out.

Quite apart from the fact that a power outage doesn't sever you from civilization. Can't you hear everyone's generators? Everyone's still here.

Is it that people are so fearful they need the illusion of safety that noise and light provide? Hm. Now I understand why people have their TV on all day even though they aren't watching it. And it suddenly occurs to me that most of the people who live here never leave their houses, except to get into their car and go somewhere. I never see them out for a walk, on the road, or in the forest. I never see them down at the water, let alone out on the lake. (Why do they live here?)

Or perhaps it's just that there's nothing going on inside their little heads, so they need the external stimulation to keep them from utter boredom.

Far more than pathetic, it's scary. That people are so dependent on that kind of (external) energy.

## An Open Letter to Weekenders Everywhere

This is not “a recreational paradise” or “a summer playground”. This is our neighbourhood. Those labels are marketing ploys used by real estate agents and business owners eager to make money on sales. They do not speak for us. We live here; they do not.

Many of us have lived here for five, ten, twenty years. Half of us are retired; half of us still work. We live here because we want to live on a lake in a forest. We love to look out at the water and see the sun sparkle, the moonlight shimmer. We love to hear the birds and see the squirrels at our feeders; we stand in awe when we see the occasional moose or bobcat. We sit out in the evening and look up at the starry sky. We open our windows at night to hear the loons as we fall asleep. We love the peace and quiet; we bask in the solitude.

When you weekenders come here, you're not leaving the city and driving to a place where you can 'let loose' — you're simply leaving your own neighbourhood and entering ours. So when you do whatever the hell you want when you're here, of course we consider it an invasion. And of course we want our neighbourhood back.

When we have asked, politely, that you not drive so fast in your pick-ups, we were told we don't own the road. (And to prove it, you sped up as you passed us, spraying gravel in our faces.) When we have asked, politely, that you not come so close to us, paddling or swimming, on your jetskis, you have screamed at us “You don't own the fucking lake!” True enough. But this is not a public campground: it was not empty before you arrive, it does not exist solely for your pleasure. Did you really think no one lives here?

Right. Okay.

Churn up the roads with your ATVs; no one will have to deal with the grooves and gullies until the grader next comes by because no one lives here.

Drive around wherever you want, on the roads, on the trails. (Make new trails if you feel like it.) Do this all day. Because there isn't anyone within ten miles to hear you.

Don't worry about people having to walk through the fume trails you leave because no one but you ever wants to use the trails.

Leave your empty beer cans and coffee cups and cigarette butts and fast food cartons along the roads and trails. No one will see any of it because no one lives here.

Don't bother taking your household garbage to the dump; just toss it. Sure, it'll attract the bears, but you won't be putting anyone at risk because no one lives here.

(And when all of it's gone by the next time you're up, that's because a bunch of little elves came in the middle of the night and cleaned up after you.)

Use those environmentally-friendly solar lights that don't have an on-off switch. Put dozens all over your property; they'll stay on even when you're not here. But they won't spoil the dark and beautiful night, all night, every night, because no one lives here.

Have a campfire even when there's a fire ban. If the fire spreads, that's fine, no one's home will burn down, because no one lives here.

When you turn on the radio, turn it up loud. Open your windows. Better yet, put the radio outside. You won't be forcing anyone else to listen to it because no one lives here. (And if they did, rest assured they like exactly the same music you do and want to listen to it when and for as long as you do.)

Park your party barge in front of someone's house — oops, that's not someone's house. No one lives there. They won't hear

your kids' shrieks or your loud conversations. (And if they do, they will care deeply about whether you remembered to buy marshmallows, where you left your hat, how to do a proper dive, whether the water's too cold, and what to say to Mark when you get back.)

You can also park your fishing boat in front of someone's house — oops. No one will smell your cigarette smoke or your motor fumes. They won't hear your conversations either. (And if they do, they will surely want to know that John's a fuckin' asshole and that you couldn't care less what that bitch does.)

Zoom around on your jetskis, and your large-motored boats, consider the lake an abandoned gravel pit, pretend you're doing the Indy 500. No one will have to go inside and shut their windows, because no one lives here.

Believe Home Depot and Canadian Tire when they tell you that being at the lake on the weekend is all about being a he-man: use all the power tools you want — nail guns, two-speed drills, circular saws, lawn mowers, weed trimmers, leaf blowers, and chain saws. Use them all outside. Use them on the lake side. Use them in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening. No one will hear any of it because no one lives here. (And if they do, they don't want to sit outside anyway. It's not like they've been waiting through six months of winter and another month of bugs to finally be able to do so.)

Don't spend the money to hook up to hydro; use a generator instead. No one will have to hear the motor echo across the lake all day, and all evening, and into the night if you go into town and don't come back until two or three in the morning, because no one lives here.

# Making Certain Words Illegal

Hate speech. Libel. Slander. Threat. Intimidation. Blasphemy.

‘Making words illegal violates our freedom of speech!’ Of course it does. But that freedom, like many others, isn’t absolute. Our freedoms are *limited* freedoms. They are limited by several things (philosopher Joel Feinberg identifies six liberty-limiting principles), one of which is the harm principle. That is, when our action harms another person or society in general, it is limited. It (perhaps) should be illegal.

‘But speech isn’t an action. I didn’t *do* anything. I just said — ’ Saying is doing. Words are speech acts. They are *acts* of speech. And anyway, if the result is the same, does the method really matter?

‘Yeah but the result *isn’t* the same. Words can’t hurt you.’ Well, not physically, no. But they can cause psychological injury.<sup>1</sup> And there’s the heart of the matter: should we make causing psychological injury illegal?

Actually, that’s *not* the heart of the matter. Yes, we should, and we do. The crime of torture includes acts which inflict severe mental pain or suffering (CCC 269.1[1]) — but such acts must be committed *in order to obtain information*.

The heart of the matter is *when* should we make psychological injury illegal? In order to answer that question, we need to figure out what exactly is injurious about psychological

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<sup>1</sup> Assuming, of course, a distinct separation between the physical and the psychological. And most current research indicates no such separation. Even without such research, we know that psychological states can affect our physical states (sorrow and stress make us tired) and physical states can affect our psychological states (running can make us happy.)

injury. I can identify two kinds of injury that can result from speech acts.

First, they can cause pain; it hurts to be called whatever or told whatever.

Second, they can cause a loss. Consider insult. At the minimum, it's annoying, it's irritating, it pisses us off. That's life. But consider *ongoing* insult. That makes life harder; it's exhausting to deal with it, whether you confront it or ignore it, and so you have less energy to deal with other stuff. Such as the pursuit of your interests.

Not only is there a loss of energy, there can be a real loss of opportunity and freedom.<sup>2</sup> When blows to your self-esteem and confidence are ongoing, it's hard not to start believing the insults, and so you start to doubt your worth, your potential, you censor yourself, you limit your options. And of course this could, often does, have economic consequences. You may not pursue a high income career (by not taking any one of the many steps required).<sup>3</sup> Even if you don't believe the insults, you might censor yourself for fear of provocation and violence, and if that happens in the classroom or the workplace, it can affect your grades and your evaluations, which can lead, again, to limited opportunities. Threats, also 'just' words, are even more restricting: if someone has threatened to kill me, I'm less apt to go where, when, and how I usually go.

Both of these, pain and loss, lead us to the next issue: how severe does the injury have to be? For example, do insults cause pain or just discomfort? Are we talking about a little

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<sup>2</sup> Certainly threat and intimidation will have this consequence.

<sup>3</sup> Of course it's this kind of loss that makes libel and slander illegal. Both refer to false statements (libel, written; slander, oral) that injure a person's reputation, and you can bet that the reputation being talked about is that which enables the person to make money. Ditto fraud, misrepresentation and false advertising: money is at stake.

embarrassment or debilitating humiliation? As for the loss, do the insults distract us from our task of the moment or cripple us for life?

It's complicated. Physical blows tend to injure no matter how strong you are or how fit you are. But psychological blows, well, to some extent it depends on your emotional health (on how mature you are, how secure your ego is) and your cognitive health (how intelligent you are, how able you are to evaluate the truth of the words). The more fragile you are, the more devastated you will be when you're called an idiot.

In addition to the argument of psychological maturity, the argument of freedom of speech also provides support for legalizing insult. One might argue that the harm done by restricting freedom of speech is far greater than the good done by eliminating insult. Do we want a society full of people who cannot withstand any offense? Some women may still be socialized to accept the power and authority of men (all men, any man), but if such a woman does not outgrow that and become an independent mature adult, then *she* should pay the price of her immaturity, not the rest of us. The law should not protect her immaturity at our expense, at the expense of our freedom. I value my freedom of speech and accept the risk — in fact, request the right — to be offended. Offense, while it can damage, can also stimulate, challenge, and lead to growth. That said, the pervasiveness of the insult needs to be considered; *ongoing, relentless* insult (which women tend to get in our society) is beyond the offense I'm talking about here.

Furthermore, it is our thoughts, opinions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that determine whether certain words injure us, and we are responsible for our thoughts, opinions, beliefs, values, and attitudes. If your belief in some fairy tale god is such that your blood pressure hits the roof when I say "God doesn't exist" — really, am *I* to blame? So, to some extent, if we *are* injured by certain words, it's our own fault. The same applies to

threats: for example, a threat uttered by someone who's holding a gun and has used it in the past is more likely to be believed and therefore more injurious than a threat uttered by someone who is stoned, giggling and gunless.

Of course it all comes down to the standard of reasonableness. It's reasonable to expect that the other person is not so frail that a gentle shove fractures the spine. Likewise, surely it's reasonable to expect that an insult or blasphemy doesn't send someone into emotional shock. Do we really need to *require, legally*, a minimum standard of physical and psychological health, on the one hand, and a minimum standard of care, on the other? Perhaps. In which case, a combination of intent ('I only meant to scare him, I didn't know he was phobic'; 'I only meant to shove him, I didn't know he had a bone condition') and consequence (he needed to be sedated; he has a broken back) might determine whether certain words should be illegal.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> That said, the standard of reasonableness is fraught with difficulty, not the least of which is that what's a reasonable response for a woman, in our society, differs from that of a man. For example, women *reasonably* fear sexual violence in certain places at certain times; men do not. Another, more subtle, example, is that women, in our society, more reasonably believe what(ever) men say than vice versa.\* These examples also expose the problem with using 'community standards' — which, whose, community? There are subcultures within cultures, each with their own framework of concepts and values ...

That said, we enter a minefield when we *without question* consider group membership: being a woman or a man is more than a matter of anatomy — it's a matter of social construction; and socialization influences people to varying degrees — which woman, and which man, are involved? Further, society is fluid — it isn't either patriarchal or not patriarchal; sexism may be stronger or weaker at any given time and place, in any situation.

Also, we need to be careful not to assume that all women are unable to withstand all insult; that would more than infantilise them.

\* Power, according to Hannah Arendt (*On Violence*), belongs to a group and is the instrument of rule. Strength belongs to the individual. Force, she defines, as "the energy released by physical or social movements" (p. 45). Lastly authority, vested in individuals or offices, is indicated by the "unquestioning recognition of those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed" (p. 45); "to remain in authority requires respect" (p. 45). Is it then that

For this reason, I would exclude from the realm of the illegal words that provoke violence. Let the violence be illegal, yes, but the provocation for the violence? Please. If we expect people to steel themselves against psychological injury from words, surely we should also expect them to steel themselves against making a physically violent response to words. After all, the latter is surely more within our control than the former.<sup>5</sup>

Onto the next issue: does it matter whether the injury is done in private or public? Typically words in the public arena are considered more problematic because you can't avoid the public arena. You can't avoid the subway walls, for example, the same way you can avoid listening to a certain radio station or reading a certain magazine. However, spousal physical abuse, even though conducted in the private arena, is now considered illegal. Does this suggest that words spoken in the privacy of our homes should be as illegal as those written on the subway walls? Perhaps — if they are as severe as the physical abuse and if the person can't avoid them (that is, if they have nowhere else to go — which may well be the case if they have children or are children).

Does it matter whether the words are written or spoken? On the one hand, an insult in writing is easier to avoid (just don't read it), unless, of course, it's written in public. But on the other hand, often, especially if digitally written, it has a longer life.

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insults and threats have power and authority only (or moreso) when they are spoken by a man to a woman? They have power because the individual man is an automatic member of the ruling class in our society, and they have authority because women are 'asked to obey'; and they have strength as well because as an individual, he is a man. So the same insult, the same threat, from one man to another, or from one woman to another, is not (as) injurious, is not (as) violent?

<sup>5</sup> I've always been suspicious of 'crimes of passion' and 'fighting words' — maybe it's just me, maybe it's just me being female, but I simply can't imagine what someone might say that would make me take a swing at them. Tell them to go to hell, yes, but hit them?

Does it matter whether the words are specific or general? Consider ‘You’re a loser!’ vs. ‘Canadians are losers!’ My guess is that the specific insult is more personally damaging. But maybe not. The general insults of slavery and porn have been quite injurious.

Does it matter whether the words in question are true? I’d argue that whether it turns out to be true or not, if there’s good reason to believe a threat, and the threat is serious enough to cause serious emotional injury — a constant state of fear, for example — it should be illegal. As for insults, it seems to me that if it is true, it shouldn’t be illegal to say it. And yet there seems to be something more wrong with a billboard that says “Jane Smith smells” than with one that says “John Smith rapes” — both are an invasion of privacy, but the latter is in the public interest: it’s purpose is to prevent harm to others, so that trumps privacy.

Notwithstanding all of this, a major complication of criminalizing psychological injury from speech acts is establishing cause and effect. It’s easier with physical injury and physical acts. Not only is establishing cause and effect easier, establishing severity is also easier. I’m tempted to suggest that that’s because the physical is less complex than the psychological, but I suspect it’s because we understand the physical more than we understand the psychological: we know all about the heart, the lungs, the nervous system, the sensory systems, the 206 bones in the body, but we have yet to catalogue every sneer, every smirk, the hundred ways of making eye contact ...

Another possible explanation for the current discrepancy,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Which is changing: while the Canadian Criminal Code defines harassment such that fear for one’s (physical) safety is required, the Ontario Human Rights Code defines it such that merely humiliation is required: “a course of comment or conduct consisting of words or actions that disparage or humiliate a person in relation to one of the prohibited grounds” (race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, record of offense, marital status, family status, receipt of public assistance, and handicap); in fact,

between illegalizing psychological injury and physical injury, between illegalizing words and actions, is that in our society, the male mode (still) (sigh) rules. Certainly the lawmakers have traditionally been men. And men have, traditionally, spent more time in the physical arena than in the emotional arena.<sup>7</sup> So perhaps it is not surprising that physical hurts have received more attention than emotional hurts.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, men (more than women) engage in business, income-generating activities — making money is traditionally their role, their legitimator. So injuries to their income-generating activities is important; hence, the laws against libel and slander, words that damage their income-generating reputation.<sup>9</sup>

Further still, loss of income is more measurable than loss of self-esteem; as mentioned, physical injury is more measurable than psychological injury. And men are more engaged in, more comfortable with, quantitative activities than qualitative activities. They like measurement.

A final note, however, notwithstanding the previous discussion, is that physical aggression is considered illegal even when it doesn't injure. It's the action, not the consequence, that determines its illegality. If you punch me, whether I bruise, or break, or neither, I can still charge you with assault. Why doesn't insult have the same legal weight? Because unless there's money or a fight involved, men aren't into words?

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compensation may be awarded for the 'mental anguish' caused (rather than for any physical anguish).

<sup>7</sup> Sports — physical contests — are typically dominant in their lives

<sup>8</sup> After all, 'real' men don't even *have* emotions!

<sup>9</sup> Consider that, especially compared to men, women don't have income-generating reputations. They *do* have sexual reputations. And yet, at the moment, I don't believe they can sue if some guy writes her name on the locker room wall ...

## **“I killed you. Killed you too. Got you.” In the Library.**

So I was working in my local public library the other day — well, *trying* to work. I was distracted by the kid on the computer next to me who was playing a computer game. My first point. Is it appropriate for kids to be allowed to play computer games on the computers in public libraries? I suggest that libraries are repositories of knowledge that people peruse to borrow or access on-site. Given that, playing computer games should not occur in a public library. Libraries aren't entertainment centers.<sup>1</sup> Yes, perusing and accessing knowledge can be fun. But that doesn't mean that that which is fun is necessarily perusing or accessing knowledge.

Furthermore, the kid was continuously commenting, not in a particularly loud voice, but certainly loud enough for me, sitting next to him, to hear. My second point. Goes along with the intense irritation I experienced while in the university library a few weeks ago, unable to search the stacks for what I was seeking (books containing arguments) because someone in one of the nearby carrels was talking on her cellphone. Not an emergency conversation, mind you, but a mundane hi-yeah-so-like-whatever one. Given that libraries are repositories of knowledge that one either peruses to borrow or accesses on site — both of which often require mental effort, requiring concentration, which is

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<sup>1</sup> But what about all that fiction? Okay, but isn't it generally 'serious literature' — fiction that has, presumably, insight — knowledge — about the human condition? Actually, no. Don't a lot of libraries have an extensive collection of genre lit (westerns, romances, mysteries ...)? So maybe they *are* (also) entertainment centres, indoor parks, if you will. But then where or where is the quiet place? Are there no quiet public spaces left??

inhibited by the distraction of talking aloud — both the kid's running commentary and the cellphone conversation should not have occurred.

Further still, the kid's comments were "I killed you. Killed you too. Got you. Killed you." and so on. Not only distracting, but disturbing. My third point? Given that the library is indeed a *public* library, and notwithstanding what I've said elsewhere, I think there may be grounds for censorship — could that be considered "hate speech" or "disturbing the peace"? It's bad enough that the kids' parents are irresponsibly unaware of the damage being done to their kids, not to mention to the rest of us, by allowing such activity (it desensitizes the kid to death, and it forms an association between killing and fun/entertainment), but there is no excuse for public librarians to be so unaware. And, given the public status (and funding) of the library, they have grounds for acting on their awareness.

## What's wrong with selling your organs?

It seems to be morally acceptable to sell one's blood, sperm, eggs, and hair. So what's so unacceptable about selling one's kidney, for example?

And in case people think the forementioned sales are unacceptable, let me make another analogy: it's okay to get paid to play football — why is using your body as a linebacker in order to earn an income acceptable, but using it as an organ store is not?

Is it because the person offering a kidney is doing so due to economic duress? So may be the linebacker. In fact, all of us who *have* to work, to pay for food and shelter, offer our bodies (brains included, sometimes) under economic duress to do so.

Is it that the linebacker is making an offer of service, but the organ seller is making an offer of product? The former is temporary, the latter permanent? But many people, not just athletes, suffer permanent debilitating injury.

Of course, there's a possibility that people will start taking other people's physical resources without consent. But theft and slavery are nothing new.

Will it lead to a black market? More often, legalizing something leads to regulation and a diminishment of black market activity.

Actually, we don't sell blood. Not here in Canada. We give it away. Is it because it's so necessary? Is *that* the difference? One can live without football ... So is it that organs *for sale* violates the presumed equal right to life? But then all the pharmaceuticals and surgeries required to live with an otherwise fatal condition should be free. And food.

# Assisted Suicide and Unassisted Suicide: What's the Difference?

Discussions about whether or not to legalize assisted suicide often fail to take into account the fact that *unassisted* suicide<sup>1</sup> is already legal in many countries. Failure to consider this fact means that unless there is a significant difference between assisted suicide and unassisted suicide that justifies prohibiting the former while permitting the latter, one must either accept inconsistency or reconsider.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I consider *unassisted suicide* to be the regular kind of suicide involving one person, the person who ends his/her life, by actions solely performed by him/herself. I consider *assisted suicide* to describe a situation in which a person wants to commit suicide, but is physically unable to carry out his/her own wishes and so must ask another to perform the necessary actions; in much of the literature, this is referred to as *voluntary euthanasia*.

However, *voluntary euthanasia* is often used to further include situations in which a person wants to commit suicide, *is* physically able to do so, but nevertheless asks for the assistance of another — whether out of ignorance, cowardice, a desire to ensure that the action is successful, or a desire to ensure a certain kind of suicide. I do not consider this situation, but note the importance of accessibility to effective and painless methods that are user-friendly, even for the feeble or disabled.

*Non-voluntary euthanasia* is often used to describe situations in which the wishes of the person are not known for sure, but the 'proxy consent' of another is considered satisfactory justification for a third party to end the life of that person.

Lastly, *involuntary euthanasia* is often used to describe situations in which it is known that the person does *not* wish his/her life to end, and yet another acts to achieve that result. Like many others, I consider this to be indistinguishable from *murder* and do not consider it at all.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between passive and active might be considered here, the idea being that withholding food, for example, is different than providing an injection, the former being passive, *not* considered an instance of assisted suicide. However, first, the passive, an act of omission, can still assist — it's just a very indirect form

There are six reasons typically given for prohibiting assisted suicide: the tragic death; preferred alternatives; the social good; upstaging God; the slippery slope; the possibility of abuse. I argue that these reasons are equally applicable to unassisted suicide; therefore, again, one must either accept inconsistency or argue on the same grounds for prohibiting unassisted suicide.

1. **The Tragic Death.** Some argue against legalizing assisted suicide on the grounds that people will die tragically, acting on a decision made in a despairing moment. But this is as true (perhaps *more* true for one doesn't have to go through the process of obtaining assistance) for unassisted suicide. The consequent death may also be tragic — premature, avoidable, and/or perhaps even the regrettable result of a bad decision.
2. **Preferred Alternatives.** Others argue against legalizing assisted suicide on the grounds that the better solution is to improve the standard of care for the terminally ill and the severely disabled so they won't want to choose death; counselling is another often-mentioned preferred alternative to assisted suicide. But again, this is as true for unassisted suicide: there are alternatives, such as psychological or philosophical counselling, or even, if applicable, employment, that may be preferable to suicide.

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of assistance. Second, the distinction is merely semantic, a matter of description: for example, when I don't shake your hand (passive, an act of omission), I am holding my hand at my side (active, an act of commission). Third, the distinction presumes a supremacy, a priority, a sort of 'right-of-way' to 'the course of nature' (fate, God, whatever) such that an act that 'interferes' is the one considered active; this supremacy is indefensible.

3. The Social Good. There are many variants of this argument, but all conclude that assisted suicide is not to be legalized on the grounds that some social good transcends personal autonomy. Some claim that no one should have the right to unilaterally make a decision that will affect others: "We are individuals living in a society, a community, and the community has rights when it comes to an individual member's behaviour. Our whole society is based on this, and one person's actions can set off emotions or consequences for his family and his immediate neighbours in the community" (Senate of Canada, Dionne, p.56). Making a slightly different case, some claim that legalizing assisted suicide contradicts the social value of respect for life and on that basis argue for prohibiting assisted suicide: "Euthanasia and assisted suicide are contrary to the basic respect for human life which is at the core of societal values" (Senate of Canada, McGregor, p.55). But again, advocates of some social good seem to have forgotten that by allowing unassisted suicide, we already allow personal autonomy to override the social good, however it may be defined.
  
4. Upstaging God. Arguments to prohibit assisted suicide on the grounds that only God gives life, so only God can take it away (see, for example, J. V. Sullivan) are equally relevant to unassisted suicide: whether the suicide is assisted or not, death occurs by a human hand, not by a god's hand. Therefore, proponents of such arguments must go on to argue for the prohibition of unassisted suicide (which, admittedly, they often do) or accept inconsistency.

5. The Slippery Slope. Assisted suicide is often argued against because of the fear that allowing unassisted suicide will lead to the acceptability, or at least the (increasing) occurrence, of involuntary euthanasia. However, there are relatively clear lines on the slope that can prevent us from slipping, notably, the presence of consent.
6. The Possibility of Abuse. Notwithstanding the forementioned relatively clear lines, it is possible that allowing assisted suicide will lead to abuses. But this is true of most activities subject to legislation; consider, for example, driving while intoxicated.

There are, however, two distinctions between assisted suicide and unassisted suicide that may justify illegalizing the one while legalizing the other: assistance and voluntariness. However, in both cases, I find the difference too weak, too problematic, or simply too questionable, to support legal differentiation.

- (1) Assistance. At first glance, it seems that assisted suicide requires the assistance of another person while unassisted suicide does not, and perhaps it is this difference that justifies prohibiting the one while permitting the other.

However, depending on the method used for the unassisted suicide, *the difference of assistance is often merely a matter of degree*. For example, the person who uses an overdose of sleeping pills or morphine needs someone to provide those sleeping pills or that morphine. The same applies to the gun, the razor blade, and so on. Perhaps the only *true* unassisted suicide would be something like jumping off a cliff or swimming out to sea.

This matter of degree can be present in three respects.

- (a) Immediacy. In the case of assisted suicide, the means are usually provided at the moment, whereas in the case of unassisted suicide, the means are perhaps more typically provided somewhat before the moment. But, in the case of unassisted suicide, they may also be provided within minutes of the moment: the drugstore salesperson who sells me the sleeping pills may be a five-minute walk from my apartment, and I may make the purchase, come home, and suicide right away.

While this difference in immediacy is a difference, it is an unclear difference, a fuzzy line difference, and therefore not, I think, strong enough to support a legal distinction between assisted suicide and unassisted suicide. Would we say that provision of the means for suicide within twenty-four hours of the death counts as an assisted suicide, but provision of the means within twenty-five hours does not?

- (b) Directness. Perhaps it is the directness of the assistance that makes the significant difference: after all, feeding the pills to a person until s/he dies is a lot different than simply putting them on a store shelf.

Yes, but again, this difference can reduce to a very small and surely insignificant difference: putting them on the shelf, putting them on the counter, putting them in a person's mailbox, putting them in a person's hand, putting them on a person's tongue — where one draws a line is not that clear. Certainly it is not clear enough to support the weight of criminal difference.<sup>2</sup>

- (c) Awareness. Perhaps a stronger difference between the assistance provided for assisted suicide and that

provided for unassisted suicide concerns the awareness of the provider: for example, in the case of assisted suicide, the person who provides the pills *knows* they are for the purpose of suicide, but in the case of unassisted suicide, the drugstore salesperson reasonably assumes they're for the purpose of a good night's sleep.

But how can this difference be significant? Why should it matter whether or not the pill provider is aware of the purpose for which the pills are to be used? Knowingly assisting is a greater degree of assistance, yes, but typically, such foreknowledge is a problem only when the intended purpose is illegal; in such cases, the provider is guilty of conspiring to commit whatever it is that is about to be committed. But committing suicide is as legal as getting a good night's sleep. Conspiring to commit suicide, then, should be as unproblematic as 'conspiring' to 'commit' such a good night's sleep. *Assisting* a suicide should be as legal as a suicide.

Furthermore, since it is *physical* assistance we're talking about, this element gives a sort of supremacy to the body over the mind: it doesn't matter what the mind wills — if the body *can* (and doesn't require assistance), it's legal, but if the body *can't*, it's illegal. This seems to be inconsistent with current social attitudes: we seem to value the mind more than the body ('It doesn't matter what you look like, it's what's inside that counts'). It also contradicts legal principles that excuse actions of the body when the mind wasn't willing: if one is forced to *do* something against one's *will*, it doesn't 'count'. Even death itself is determined by the state of the brain rather than the state of the heart or lungs: one is pronounced dead when one is

‘brain dead’ — until that time, one can be kept alive with pacemakers and respirators.

On the other hand, illegalizing assisted suicide (and not unassisted suicide) because of the physical assistance may not so much be a nod to the supremacy of the physical, but a nod to the possibility of coercion. Because of the *assistance*, assisted suicide may be understood to be less voluntary than unassisted suicide. After all, although one can choose to swallow or not, one has no voluntary control over one’s veins — one can’t choose to accept or not the morphine that is injected into one’s arm.

- (2) Voluntariness. Voluntariness is the second distinction between assisted suicide and unassisted suicide that may justify the legal difference. To assume that physical assistance increases the likelihood of coercion or, conversely, that lack of physical assistance decreases the likelihood of coercion is to assume a very shallow definition of coercion. For one thing, coercion need not be immediate or direct: suppose someone said to you a day, a week, or a month earlier, that if you didn’t kill yourself, he would kill your children; surely your consequent unassisted suicide could not be considered fully voluntary. It is more difficult to determine the will of the mind than the act of the body (the latter is subject to simple observation), and we are naïve to assume that what we see is all there is to it, that the body is indeed acting according to the mind’s will, that the mind has not been somehow coerced.

It is not unsurprising, therefore, that there are many analyses of consent and coercion that indicate not only that assisted suicide should be as legal as unassisted suicide, but that

it should, perhaps, be *more* legal: with assisted suicide, we can be *more*, not *less*, certain that consent is present and coercion absent. For example, a survey of the medical ethics literature suggests that valid consent is capable (referring to the capacity to understand and so form a judgement), informed (regarding one's condition, the proposed action, its risks, consequences, and alternatives), and voluntary (that is, freely willed by the self). The presence of a third party, as is the case with assisted suicide and not unassisted suicide, can come closer to guaranteeing that all three conditions are met.

With respect to the first condition, a third party can subject the person to a test of mental competence to be sure that the capability condition is met.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A reminder may be in order at this point that I define assisted suicide to exclude what many refer to as non-voluntary euthanasia, cases in which the person is unconscious, comatose, infantile, or otherwise unable to actually request assistance. I believe it is possible, however, to argue for proxy consent; indeed, I suggest that valid proxy consent is what distinguishes euthanasia from murder.

As one might guess, proxy consent is even more slippery than consent. But that has not been, in our legal past, sufficient reason to disallow actions based on proxy consent: parent guardians give consent on behalf of their young children all the time; significant others give consent on behalf of unconscious adults.

The first important question is 'When is proxy consent required?' That is, in which cases do we say consent by the individual concerned is inadmissible and/or impossible? I think we can simply apply the criteria of valid consent under discussion: if the person is capable, informed, and voluntary, then proxy consent is unnecessary. At the extremes, application of this test will be easy: an unconscious or comatose person is clearly incapable of giving/withholding consent; we're also pretty sure about infants and severely retarded people; the line gets fuzzy with older children and moderately retarded people. Perhaps a test of mental competence would keep the line clear — but it had better be a very good test.

The second important question has to be 'What constitutes valid proxy consent?' Certainly it must have the attributes of valid direct consent: it must be capable, informed, and voluntary. Additionally, well, there are a few possibilities. One is to apply the 'reasonable standard' criterion and say that the decision must be what any reasonable person would make. But what is 'reasonable' and who decides?

Another is to say that the decision must be in the best interests of the individual concerned. But this has problems similar to the reasonable standard solution — what is 'best' and who decides?

With respect to the second condition, the third party can provide the person with information, in writing and orally, once or on several occasions, to be sure that she or he understands not only the proposed course of action (the suicide), but also the alternatives, as well as the consequences (to others). The presence of a third party can also help ensure that the decision is not a tragic, 'bad' decision, but rather one in which respect for life and even sanctity of life is preserved.

The third condition, voluntariness, is difficult to determine, depending as it does on free will. I will assume that we do indeed have free will. I will further propose that, barring coercion, the condition of voluntariness is dependent on the forementioned conditions of capability and informedness. That is, if the person *is* capable *and* informed, and coercion is not present, we can assume that his or her action, whether it is the commission of suicide or the expression of the request for assistance to suicide, is indeed voluntary.

But how do we establish whether or not coercion is present? *External* coercion, usually thought to refer to physical force applied by one person to another causing the other to do something, is relatively easy to establish. *Internal* coercion, on

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A third possibility is to say that the decision must be what that individual would make if s/he were able (if s/he were capable, informed, and voluntary). This depends on guesswork, unless a living will exists — though a living will essentially changes euthanasia to assisted suicide.

A fourth possibility might be that since personal autonomy is clearly impossible, a decision should be made on the basis of social utility: why should at least three people sacrifice their lives to save one person? Is that one person worth three? (Round the clock care equals three eight-hour shifts, hence three people. However, since that just accounts for labour and not for food, shelter, and the specialized technology usually required, the 'people equivalent' figure would probably be greater than that.)

Lastly, we could decide on the basis of actual and/or potential quality of life — not its value to others, but its value to the individual. This may translate into specific criteria such as the presence of continual (?) severe (?) pain and/or (?) chance of recovery.

the other hand, usually referring to one's mental states — fears, desires, beliefs, attitudes — is harder to determine. Indeed, a difficult question is 'When do our internal states merely *cause* our behaviour and when do they *coerce* it?'

Johnson<sup>4</sup> notes that in a sense all of our actions are more or less coerced by the reasons for them, but this is not a useful definition of 'coercion' as it would render *all* consent invalid.

Katz<sup>5</sup> presents as broad a perspective: when he specifies voluntariness as a condition of consent, he goes on to say that "any informed consent doctrine, to be realistic, must take into account the biological, psychological, intellectual, and social constraints imposed upon thought and action". Of course, one's neurochemicals can affect one's clarity of thought which in turn affects one's beliefs which in turn affect one's attitudes — which are also affected by the society in which one lives. The lines demarcating regions of control of self by self become fuzzy indeed.

One solution is to adopt Cohen's distinction<sup>6</sup> between (i) narrow or tight coercion, in which case there is a deliberate effort by someone to pressure another to do something, which makes consent invalid by making it involuntary, and (ii) general or loose coercion, in which case one is pressured by the general conditions one finds oneself in or by the desires and needs one

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, Deborah G. "Prisoners and Consent to Experimentation." *Consent: Concept, Capacity, Conditions, and Constraints*. Ed. L. T. Sargent. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1979. 167-179.

<sup>5</sup> Katz, Jay. "Informed Consent in the Therapeutic Relationship: Law and Ethics." *Biomedical ethics*. Eds. T. A. Mappes and J. S. Zembaty. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986. 94-103.

<sup>6</sup> Presented in Turkington, Richard C. "The Role of Institutional Coercion to Full or Informal Consent to Medical Experiments in Prisons." *Consent: Concept, Capacity, Conditions, and Constraints*. Ed. L. T. Sargent. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1979. 193-200.

has, which does *not* invalidate consent. Such a distinction would invalidate the request for assistance made by the disabled person who is being encouraged by next of kin who cannot afford to care for him/her anymore, but it would not invalidate the request made by that same person simply because of the circumstance of disability he/she finds him/herself in. Establishing 'deliberateness' and 'pressure' would not be easy, however; the troubling distinction between 'explicit' and 'implicit' would surely arise.

Perhaps considering both consent and coercion to be matters of degree is the best we can do. So even though we may not be able to establish with certainty whether or not the desire for suicide was voluntary, surely we can establish this with *greater* certainty in the case of assisted suicide, when there are other people involved to validate or confirm the desire. At the very least, we can require a sort of superior suicide note: we could require, for example, that on three separate occasions, in the presence of three completely separate and disinterested sets of people — to include medical, police, legal, and governmental representatives — the person freely and fully expressed consent, to be documented with audiotape, videotape, and signed transcript.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize, not one of the six standard arguments, nor the distinction of assistance, nor the distinction of voluntariness, is sufficient to support a difference between assisted suicide and unassisted suicide with regard to their legal status. (Or, I might add, with regard to their moral status.)

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<sup>7</sup> Such a requirement would have the additional advantage of going a long way toward distinguishing between assisted suicide and murder.

## Rising Above Natural Selection

We need to rise above natural selection. Otherwise, as a species, we will continue to become dumb and dumber.

Who has the family of five? Not the physicist or philosopher. She's chosen not to have any kids. And not the biologist or sociologist. He stopped at two.

And who's having the family of ten? The people in 'developing' countries who either don't have access to contraception, let alone a grade twelve education, or who subscribe to some indefensible religio-cultural belief about family.

How do we rise above natural selection? That's the question no one wants to ask. Because the answer is so clear. And so awful.

But not nearly as awful as a species of idiots.

## The Inconsistency of Not Requiring Parents to be Licensed

The proposal to license parents — that is, to require people to obtain a license, by demonstrating certain attributes and/or abilities, before they produce and possibly rear children — is usually rejected, usually quickly and loudly. I contend that this rejection reveals inconsistent thinking, to the extent that certain other regulations already in place are accepted.

First, let's consider cloning, assisted insemination by donor (AID), in vitro fertilization (IVF), and surrogacy, all of which deal with the production part of being a parent. Anticipating that at some point in the near future, we will be able to clone human beings, one might also reasonably anticipate that such cloning will not be unregulated. For example, I doubt we'll allow someone to create his own private workforce or his own little army. And I suspect we'll prohibit cloning oneself for mere ego gratification. Doing it just because it's fun will certainly be illegal (and I expect it won't even be imaginable to do it "without really thinking about it," let alone "by accident"). I suspect we'll enforce some sort of quality control, such that cloned human beings shall not exist in pain or be severely "compromised" with respect to basic functioning. Actually, I suspect one will have to apply for a license and satisfy rigorous screening standards, and I assume this will include the submission, and approval, of a detailed plan regarding responsibility for the cloned human being — surely we won't allow a scientist to create it and then just leave it on the lab's doorstep one night when he leaves. And yet we accept all of these motives and behaviours when life is created in backseats and bedrooms.

In fact, the National Bioethics Advisory Commission<sup>1</sup> has already recommended “regulating” cloning, to the point of outright prohibition, and it has done so because of the physical and psychological harms that may result, the “severe developmental abnormalities” (p.48) and the negative effects on the child’s self-worth and “experience of freedom” (p.51). Are we not concerned about such physical and psychological harms when they may result from coital reproduction?

In our more immediate present, parenting is also regulated when it involves access to new reproductive technologies (NRTs), such as AID and IVF. The Canadian Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies<sup>2</sup> requires, for example, that all potential sperm donors provide detailed information about their health and the health of their first-degree relatives; this information is to be reviewed by a clinical geneticist and “any indication of serious genetic anomalies or other high-risk factors” is to be grounds for disqualification (p.476). They also require donors to take tests for HIV and other infectious diseases (p.476). It is perplexing that these requirements apply only when sperm is to be used by someone *other* than the sperm producer’s “partner” (p.476).

Furthermore, the Commission recommends that “a license [be] required to perform insemination at any site other than the vagina even if the recipient is the social partner” (p.484). Why, when the vagina is the site, is it “anything goes”, but otherwise, we “proceed with care”?

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<sup>1</sup> National Bioethics Advisory Commission, “Cloning Human Beings” in *Flesh of My Flesh: The Ethics of Cloning Humans*. ed. Gregory E. Pence (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies, *Proceed with Care* (Ottawa, ON: Minister of Government Services Canada, 1993).

The Commission also recommends that the woman seeking to become impregnated through various assistive NRTs sign a statement indicating that she has “received, read, and understood” not only information outlining “the risks, responsibilities, and implications of donor insemination ... ” (p.481), but also the sperm screening and medical test results (p.476). Why shouldn’t women be required to provide such informed consent for “unassisted” reproduction as well?

Counselling should also to be provided, the Commission goes on to say, that addresses “information about alternatives ... such as ... living without children; avoidance of exposure to risk factors ... ; [and] some exploration of questions related to values and goals that patients may wish to take into account when making their decisions ... .” (p.571). Again, why shouldn’t we also require this of those intending to “access” “old reproductive technologies”?

Regulations concerning “surrogacy” reveal a similar double standard. Susan Ince<sup>3</sup> describes the various tests one needs to pass before being accepted for a gestational contract: a thorough medical exam, genetic screening if indicated, intelligence testing, and psychological evaluation. She also describes the “extensive behavioral controls over the surrogate” which include prohibitions on smoking, drinking, and illegal drugs, as well as mandatory medical, psychological, and counselling appointments (p.105); “any action,” she says, “that ‘can be deemed to be dangerous to the well-being of the unborn child’ constitutes a breach of contract” (p.106). Why should children born of surrogates be privileged to a higher standard of care in their creation than children not so born?

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Ince, “Inside the Surrogate Industry” in *Test-Tube Women*. eds. Rita Arditti, Renate Duelli Klein, and Shelley Minden. (London, UK: Pandora Press, 1984).

Lori Andrews<sup>4</sup> has pointed out that “surrogacy contracts contain lengthy riders detailing the myriad risks of pregnancy, so potential surrogates are much better informed on that topic than are most women who get pregnant in a more traditional fashion” (p.172). Why do we not require this of *all* those who intend to gestate?

Next, let’s consider custody, fostering, and adoption, all of which deal with the rearing part of being a parent. When a married-with-kids couple separates, the parents usually try to demonstrate to the court their parental competence in the hope of being granted custody of the children. Such competence is taken to include their knowledge of child-rearing, various personal qualities such as patience and sensitivity, their availability to the children, and so on. As long as they do not separate, however, such competence is apparently irrelevant — they are granted custody of the children, whatever their level of knowledge, skills, and commitment.

People who want to foster or adopt children must undergo similar “tests of competence,” including a home visit and a background check. Roger McIntire<sup>5</sup> pointedly asks what would happen if this were not so, if adoption agencies used instead a first-come, first-served basis: “Imagine some drunk stumbling up and saying ‘I’ll take that cute little blond-haired girl over there’” (p.133). And yet that’s pretty much what we currently allow with regard to non-adoptive parenting. Why do we cling to the irrational belief that biological parents are *necessarily* competent parents — in the face of overwhelming evidence to

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<sup>4</sup> Lori B. Andrews, *New Conceptions: A Consumer’s Guide to the Newest Infertility Treatments* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Roger McIntire, “Parenthood Training or Mandatory Birth Control: Take Your Choice,” *Psychology Today* (October 1973).

the contrary? Indeed, as Elizabeth Bartholet<sup>6</sup> asks, “Why would anyone think that those who consciously plan to adopt someone else’s child pose *more* of a risk than those who fall unwittingly into pregnancy?” (p.69, emphasis added).

Daycare workers and teachers — people to whom we entrust the care and nurturing of children for up to 8 hours a day — must be licensed. They must actually study full-time for months, if not years, and pass several examinations before the state allows them that responsibility. And yet someone can be responsible not only for a child’s education, but for virtually everything about the child, for twenty-four hours a day until that child is six years of age — that is, for the duration of the critical, formative years — and he or she doesn’t even have to so much as read a pamphlet about child development. Why not?

Why *are* we are so inconsistent — why *don’t* we license parents when parenthood occurs as a consequence of sexual intercourse? Perhaps it’s because we don’t take parenting seriously. And yet we *do* take it seriously when it occurs *apart* from sexual intercourse, when NRTs and foster arrangements are involved.

Perhaps, as Jack Westman<sup>7</sup> claims, it is because parenting doesn’t have any economic value in our society (p.3). Surrogates and foster parents *are* paid, so perhaps it’s that regulation is warranted when money is involved. However, not only does this explanation suggest we’re more concerned about our money than our children, it doesn’t account for our evaluations of competence when co-parents divorce (and not, for example, when they marry).

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Bartholet, *Family Bonds* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Jack C. Westman, *Licensing Parents: Can We Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect?* (New York: Plenum Press, 1994).

Perhaps we don't license parenting because it's considered a *private* matter. When parenting involves NRTs and fostering, however, it fails to be private — perhaps *that's* the element that warrants regulation. But it's unclear why the involvement of others should have that effect. Further, perhaps the more important point is not whether parenting *is* private, but whether it *should be* private; we used to think one spouse hitting another was a private matter, but, fortunately, we have changed our minds and now consider state involvement, including regulation, to be warranted in such cases.

Or perhaps the difference is that children are considered to be the private *property* of their parents. However, given the time, effort, and resources involved, children produced through NRTs would be even *more* so the private property of their creators — and yet there we have regulation. More importantly, especially since the anti-slavery movement, we have established good grounds for rejecting the notion of people as property.

One last possible explanation for our inconsistency is that we have a *right* to have children, and regulation would interfere with that right. But then don't the scientists cloning embryos in their labs have a right to have those children? What about the women seeking AID and IVF? What about the men seeking surrogates? What about the people wanting to adopt? If we have a right to have children, and if regulation interferes with that right, then regulation in those cases should be rejected. To be consistent, one would have to modify the rights claim to say something like 'We have a right to engage in reproductive sexual intercourse and to rear the results.'

But on what grounds can we claim this right? Merely *having* a capability does not entail the *right to exercise* that capability. Some argue that the right to reproduce is a natural right (see S. L. Floyd and D. Pomerantz for a critique of this view), some refer to its importance to personal well-being and identity (see

Dan Brock and John A. Robertson), and some point to the need or desire to have a child (see Chadwick for a critique of this view). But whatever the nature or justification for the right to “have children,” rights are seldom considered absolute: they may be overridden by competing rights — the rights of another individual or the rights of society.

So we come back to the question of whether there are relevant and significant differences between, on the one hand, parentage involving NRTs and parenting involving fostering, and on the other hand, parentage and parenting involving sexual intercourse — differences that warrant regulation on the one hand but not on the other. One possibility is that NRTs and arrangements in which the children one nurtures are not one’s own biological issue are unnatural. But the biological material is natural — why does it matter which cells are involved or how they get into a uterus? Furthermore, it’s unclear why ‘unnatural’ should imply ‘subject to greater regulation.’

Another possibility is that with NRTs and the other arrangements, people are asking for society’s help, they are asking for the use of societal resources — and that’s why permission is required: not only to *use* those resources, but to ensure they’re not *misused*. But people reproducing without NRT assistance *also* use societal resources, most notably through the healthcare system for prenatal, natal, and postnatal care. Furthermore, in both cases, the resulting child certainly uses societal resources.

So it would seem there are no relevant and significant differences. There is, however, one relevant and significant *similarity*: the potential for serious harm to those who have a right to be free from such harm. Parentage, however it occurs, involves the creation of a life, a life that is sensitive to the various harms and goods that its creators can bring about. This power alone entails responsibility, by the individual and by the state (to ensure the individual meets that responsibility).

And parenting, however it occurs, involves the development of a person who will interact with the rest of the world, taking and giving, for good and for bad. So whether framed as a consequentialist argument or as a rights argument, I contend that the consideration of harm is sufficient grounds for at least some sort of parent licensing program.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, consistency, wouldn't be the only benefit of licensing parents. As Joseph Fletcher<sup>9</sup> says, "It is depressing, not comforting, to realize that most people are accidents" (p.36). And insofar as intended children are more apt than unintended children to receive love and adequate care, licensing, by requiring intentional action prior to birth (application, at least, and perhaps also the acquisition of certain capacities and competencies), could increase the odds that children are indeed loved and cared for. As Margaret Battin<sup>10</sup> suggests, licensing would have the same effect as mandatory contraception: "Our ways of thinking about pregnancy and childbearing would undergo radical change — from something one accepts or rejects when it happens to something one chooses to begin" (p.30).

Another benefit, insofar as a licensing program would include an educational component, is described by Philip Kitcher<sup>11</sup> (who proposes education *instead* of licensing, not *as*

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<sup>8</sup> True, a license would restrict rights *before* harm is done (that is, *in order to prevent* harm), rather than *because* harm has been done, so to some extent the proposal to license parents suggests the presumption of guilt rather than innocence. However, restricting one's rights need not be perceived as punishment for some as yet undemonstrated wrongdoing. Furthermore, the same preventive rationale is used for issuing other sorts of licenses, such as drivers' licenses.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Fletcher, *The Ethics of Genetic Control: Ending Reproductive Roulette* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Margaret P. Battin, "Sex & Consequences: World Population Growth vs. Reproductive Rights," *Philosophic Exchange* 27 (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Philip Kitcher, *The Lives to Come* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

*part of licensing*): “People would make ... *right* decisions because they would understand the consequences of their decisions, both for their offspring and for society” (p.202, emphasis added). (Although we’d like to believe there is a connection between education and ethics, perhaps this would apply only some of the time to some of the people.)

Yet another benefit of licensing parents is that which Gregory Kavka<sup>12</sup> identifies as a benefit of genetic engineering but which could apply to *parenting* as well as *parentage*: “We might come to view parents as being more responsible for how their children turn out than we now view them” (p.172-3). Kavka goes on to describe this responsibility almost existentially, as “awesome, possibly overwhelming” (p.173) — perhaps that response to parenthood is overdue.

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory S. Kavka, “Upside Risks: Social Consequences of Beneficial Biotechnology” in *Are Genes Us? The Social Consequences of the New Genetics*. ed. Carl F. Cranor (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

# Legislating Prenatal Care

Prenatal abuse may not be new; after all, tobacco and alcohol have been around for a long time. Our awareness of it is relatively new, however: perhaps because the tendrils of our social system have lengthened; perhaps because medical technology has made it more possible to keep debilitated newborns alive. In any case, legislating prenatal care has become an important issue. And perhaps this is especially so because of increases in both the use of illegal drugs (which can *cause* harm) and the availability of fetal therapies (which can *prevent* harm).

Use during pregnancy of illegal drugs (such as crack cocaine and heroin) as well as legal drugs (such as alcohol and nicotine) can cause, in the newborn, excruciating pain, vomiting, inability to sleep, reluctance to feed, diarrhea leading to shock and death, severe anaemia, growth retardation, mental retardation, central nervous system abnormalities, and malformations of the kidneys, intestines, head and spinal cord.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Refusal of fetal therapy techniques (such as surgery, blood infusions, and vitamin regimens) can result in respiratory distress, and various genetic disorders and defects such as spina bifida and hydrocephalus.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Proudfoot, Madam Justice. "Judgement Respecting Female Infant 'D.J.'" in *Contemporary Moral Issues*, edited by Wesley Cragg. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992, pp.57-59.

<sup>2</sup> Mathieu, Deborah. *Preventing Prenatal Harm: Should the State Intervene?* Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> See also Kathleen Nolan ("Protecting Fetuses from Prenatal Hazards: Whose Crimes? What Punishment?" *Criminal Justice Ethics* 9/1 (1990):13-23) for a description of prenatal hazards and adverse effects of illicit drugs, tobacco, carbon monoxide, lead, alcohol, genetic conditions, infectious diseases, low birth weights, and treatment refusals.

One task is to sort out the difference, if any, between legally insisting that a pregnant woman *not* do X (e.g., drink alcohol) and legally insisting that she *do* X (e.g., take certain vitamin supplements). Rachels<sup>4</sup> examining the similar passive/active distinction in euthanasia, argues that because the intent (relieving suffering) and consequence (death) are the same, there is no moral difference. So too with prenatal care: because the intent (producing a healthy newborn) and the consequence (a healthy newborn) are the same, there is no moral difference between legislation that *prohibits* X and legislation that *requires* X.

However, there is not necessarily a relationship between morality and legality. Canada and the U.S., unlike several European countries<sup>5</sup> does not have 'Good Samaritan' laws: we are legally bound, generally speaking, not to harm others, but we are *not* legally bound to *help* them. Therefore, as far as consistency is concerned, one can more easily justify legislation against abuse than legislation in favour of care. However, this may simply make us consistent with an already poor situation — perhaps Canada *should* have 'Good Samaritan' laws.

This does, however, lead us to the crucial question 'When does lack of help become harm?' — 'When does lack of care become abuse?' If we could establish an acceptable baseline, perhaps we could say that action less than that is illegal, more than that is optional. Such is the case with child abuse: beating a child is illegal, but allowing it to watch four hours of violent television programming every day is not. (Go figure.) Accordingly, one could argue that personal sacrifice should not be legally

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<sup>4</sup> Rachels, James. "Active and Passive Euthanasia" in *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues*, edited by Barbara MacKinnon. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1995, pp.123-127. See also Thomas D. Sullivan, Philippa Foot, and others for discussion of the passive/active distinction.

<sup>5</sup> Such countries include Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, U.S.S.R., and Turkey.

required in this case when minimal decency is all the law requires in other cases.<sup>6</sup> The woman should not be required to do *all* that is in the *best* interests of the zygote/embryo/fetus, but only what's 'reasonable', conforming to what Mathieu (p. 43) refers to as a 'minimum needs' standard.<sup>7</sup>

Another approach would be a sort of 'cost benefit' analysis. For example, giving up alcohol is little to ask to ensure a newborn free of mental retardation,<sup>8</sup> but giving up one's job may be too much to ask to ensure the newborn is not a little premature.

*Before* we define what legislation is *reasonable*, however, we have to establish the right of the state to legislate in this case in the first place. How can we say on the one hand 'This is my body and you have no right to deny me an abortion' and on the other hand 'You *can* tell me what to drink and what not to drink when I'm pregnant'. To state the contradiction in other terms, how can we say prenatal abuse is a crime, is harming a person, but abortion is *not* a crime, is not killing a person. Obviously, one can't have it both ways: either women do or do not have the right to control their own bodies; either the fetus is or is not a person.

However, permitting abortion while prohibiting prenatal harm need not be contradictory. One, there are grounds other than the right to control one's body that justify abortion; for example, abortion could be permitted because the fetus is not an actual person. Even if it *is* a person, abortion may be permissible: it is sometimes acceptable to kill persons, most notably in cases of self-defence. Furthermore, there are other kinds of rights, dependent or not upon the personhood of the fetus, that can be

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<sup>6</sup> See Thomson for a discussion of 'minimally decent' and 'good' Samaritans.

<sup>7</sup> See Bayles for discussion regarding the weighing of the prevention of harms against women's rights. See also Mathieu (52-54).

<sup>8</sup> Streissguth, A.P., H.M.Barr, P.D.Sampson, et al. "IQ at Age 4 in Relation to Maternal Alcohol Use and Smoking During Pregnancy." *Developmental Psychology* 25, no.1 (1989): 7-9.

invoked to support abortion (see Thomson and English).

And prenatal harm can be prohibited even if one does have the right to control one's body; after all, non-pregnant people presumably with the right to control their bodies are not permitted to cause *postnatal* harm. And personhood again may be irrelevant: the fetus may *not* be a person and still it may be *unacceptable* to cause it harm; the arguments of animal rights advocates such as Regan and Singer may be applicable in this case.

Two, one can argue for a continuum of rights. The right to control one's own body is not an 'all or nothing' right: not everything one does with one's body is legal or morally acceptable. For example, it's generally illegal for people to use their bodies to break other people's legs. With respect to the contradiction in personhood terms, well, in our society, not all persons have the same, or even equal, rights. An institutionalized person (whether in a hospital or a prison) doesn't have the same rights as a non-institutionalized person. More relevantly, a two-year old infant doesn't have the same rights as a twenty-year old adult. As Callahan and Knight<sup>9</sup> and Mathieu point out, many rights are attached to age in a rather arbitrary fashion because the development of abilities is continuous rather than discrete. So while a fifteen-and-three-quarters-year old might argue that she is just as mature as her sixteen-year old friend and therefore should have just as much a right to get a beginner drivers' licence, a six-year old could not make the same argument.

With similar arbitrariness — and with similar justification because the continuousness of development *demand*s such arbitrariness — we could argue that an eight-month old fetus person doesn't have the same rights as a one-month old infant

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<sup>9</sup> Callahan, Joan C. and James W. Knight, "On Treating Prenatal Harm as Child Abuse" in *Kindred Matters: Rethinking the Philosophy of the Family*, edited by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Kenneth Kipnis, and Cornelius F. Murphy, Jr. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, pp.143-170.

person, and that a one-week old zygote person doesn't have the same rights as the eight-month old fetus person.

The two important rights that concern us here, the right to life (or the right not to be killed) and the right not to be harmed, can be placed on the continuum such that, for example, only old fetus persons (and not young fetus persons, embryo persons, or zygote persons) have both the right to life and the right not to be harmed. Or we could say that all persons have the right not to be harmed but only fetus persons have the right to life. Thus one could condone (certain) abortion *and* condemn (certain) prenatal harm without contradiction (depending on where the lines are drawn).

Three, one can argue for a continuum of body: while the woman does have the right to control her body, what is considered 'her body' changes through the pregnancy parallel to the changes in the personhood of the zygote/embryo/ fetus: the less it is a person, the more it is her body; the more it is a person, the less it is her body. Likewise, one can argue for a continuum of personhood: rather than assuming that the zygote/embryo/fetus is or is not a person, as if personhood is an 'all or nothing' attribute, it may be more reasonable, more reflective of our reality, to consider the many possible criteria — human genetic material, brainwaves, heartbeat, quickening, sentience, viability, social visibility, ability to communicate, self-motivated activity, capacity for rational thought, consciousness, interests of one's own, etc. — and establish some sort of continuum of personhood. One can then 'assign' fewer rights to 'lesser persons'. The acceptability of aborting a being with minimal personhood would not then contradict the unacceptability of harming a being with considerably more personhood.

Four, one can distinguish between the potentially born and the preborn according to the woman's intent. A little background is in order for this solution. The notion of 'potential person' figures prominently in the discussion about abortion. To some, it

is the fact that a fetus is a potential person that justifies an anti-abortion stance. To others, potential persons have only potential rights.<sup>10</sup> And the notion of 'future persons' is prominent in environmental ethics (though discussion tends toward 'duties toward' rather than 'rights of').

Adding the notions of 'actual persons' and 'conventional persons', Callahan and Knight make the following four-tiered distinction. *Actual persons* are human beings with those characteristics such as "a concept of oneself as an ongoing being with at least some kinds of plans and stakes" (p. 145) that compel us to recognize strong moral rights; full emergence of these characteristics occurs long after birth. *Conventional persons* are human beings that are not yet actual persons but that have been born. "A prenatal human being is a *potential person* when it is the case that (1) it has the capacities to develop the kinds of characteristics that are relevant to compelling a recognition of a being as an actual person and (2) if its life were supported, it would be born, gaining conventional entry into the set of persons at birth" (p. 152, my italics). Lastly, "a prenatal human being is a *future person* if (1) it is a potential person and (2) it will, in fact, gain conventional entry into the class of persons through birth" (p. 152, my italics).

I accept Callahan and Knight's definitions of a potential person and a future person, but I want to emphasize, indeed *specify*, that it is the woman who decides whether or not a prenatal human being will, in fact, 'gain such entry'. That is to say, the single determinant differentiating between potential persons and future persons is the woman's intent: *if she intends to carry the being to term and give it birth, then it shall be deemed a future person; if she does not intend to carry it to term and give it*

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<sup>10</sup> Feinberg, Joel. "A Question about Potentiality" in *Moral Issues*, edited by Jan Narveson. Toronto: Oxford, 1983, pp.234-238.

*birth, it shall be deemed a potential person.* To underscore birth as the difference, and to eliminate the impression that a potential person is indeed some kind of *person*, I will henceforth refer to potential persons and future persons as, respectively, the ‘potentially born’ and the ‘preborn’.

One can then argue that a woman has full/usual rights over her body when the potentially born are involved, but she has restricted rights when the preborn are involved. Her intent to carry the zygote/embryo/fetus to term and give it birth constitutes consent and entails a forfeiture of certain rights. The extent of forfeit or the nature of restrictions can be worked out according to the cost benefit strategy mentioned previously. Or, one can assign rights to the potentially born and the preborn such that permitting abortion and prohibiting prenatal harm are not contradictory.

One could also argue that the woman’s intent that the potentially born be born (i.e., be a preborn) constitutes a promise and that this promise is the basis for its right not to be harmed or killed — or at least for moral obligations on her part both not to harm it and to provide it with the life she has promised.<sup>11</sup>

Another approach is to argue that unlike a potentially born, a preborn does have a future — it does have interests that can be jeopardized. This may be further grounds for granting it the right not to be harmed, or more specifically, the right to begin life with a sound mind and body. If it’s illegal to drive while intoxicated, that is, to so put the lives of others at risk, surely it should be

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<sup>11</sup> To say that a preborn has a right to life would mean also that I have a right to one of your kidneys (you promised). Or in the case of post-viability and Caesarean sections, it would mean also that I have a right to a kidney dialysis machine (the equivalent of the required life-sustaining incubator). On what grounds? Because I need it? I’m not convinced that needs can establish rights. Because you promised? Promises can’t establish rights either (we don’t usually have a right to receive that which we’re promised). But promises can establish moral obligations: one is simply morally obligated to keep one’s promises. (The stronger promise of a contract might establish rights but contracts usually required two consenting parties.)

illegal to gestate while intoxicated, to similarly put the life of another at risk.

Such protection from harm and death would apply to third party actions as well. While not bound by promise, third parties are bound by the definition of the zygote/embryo/fetus as a preborn according to the woman's intent. Thus the hysterical husband-father who kicks a preborn through (and) a pregnant woman and who so kills it should, it seems to me, be held accountable for murder (as well as assault) — murder of a preborn, a new class of murder perhaps, but murder nevertheless. And the drunk driver who kills a woman and the preborn she was carrying should be accountable for *two* deaths.

Third party harm, especially when cumulative, would be harder to ascertain. For example, what about the second-hand cigarette smoke that causes harm? One person, one cigarette, does not cause significant harm; the amount that *does* cause significant harm will have come from various third parties. Do we hold the pregnant woman solely responsible? How reasonable is it to require that she leave the area? How reasonable is it to require that people refrain from smoking in the presence of a preborn? If 'the area' is her workplace, I believe the third parties' rights should be restricted — they should refrain from smoking. If 'the area' is the local pub, then the woman's rights should be restricted — she should not go to the pub.

The potentially born, on the other hand, would have no such rights. To say something is 'a potential X' is merely to state a possibility. It is not to predict; it is not to promise. Further, it is to state one possibility among many: a potential X is also a potential Y, or at the very least, a potential not-X. There are no grounds for claiming, then, that a potential X has *the right to become X* any more than it has the right to become Y

or not-X. Thus a *potentially* born has no right to *be* born.<sup>12</sup>

However, given that a potentially born *may become* a preborn, I think we have the same moral obligation not to harm it — at least until the decision has been made.<sup>13</sup> An exception should be made, however, for harm that causes pain to a potentially born that is sentient:<sup>14</sup> I think sentience alone provides sufficient grounds for the ‘right’ not to be subjected to unnecessary pain.

Lastly, considering abortion and prenatal harm together is *not* considering apples and not-apples together (a contradiction); it’s considering apples and oranges: in the case of abortion, we’re discussing quantity (of life — to have or not to have), but in the case of prenatal harm, we’re discussing quality (of care — better or worse).

Having established the logical permissibility of legislating against prenatal harm without also having to legislate against abortion, I now turn to justifying such legislation. The strongest grounds for such legislation are consequential. One solid ground in favour of state rights at the prenatal stage, at least in Canada, is that the state has responsibility at the postnatal stage. Rights and responsibilities must go together: whoever has the *right* to do or not do X must be the same person who takes the *responsibility* for doing or not doing that X. Therefore, if one is unwilling to let the State say what a woman must or must not do for a child as a

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<sup>12</sup> As for the ‘future loss’ injuries caused by abortion (the accusation made by Don Marquis), Narveson (*Moral Matters*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1993) responds quite capably: “For if you abort fetus x, then there will not be, later on, some person who is worse off than she would have been had there been no abortion. If an abortion is performed now, there is later no person at all who grew from that fetus. And so there is no later person who is now harmed, by comparison with how she would have been had an abortion not taken place, no person whose right to life was violated very early on” (p. 184).

<sup>13</sup> If the potentially born is to become an unborn/nonborn, then it seems odd indeed to even speak of harm — see previous note.

<sup>14</sup> In an ideal world, a potentially born that is not to become a preborn would be aborted before sentience developed.

preborn (and recall that since the decision has been made to carry the fetus until it is a child, these terms can be used<sup>15</sup>), then one must also be unwilling to let the state do anything after for the child once it is born. Sole rights entail sole responsibilities. If the woman takes crack while pregnant (i.e. the state has no right to intervene), then the full cost for all medication, surgery, special schools, etc. needed for her brain-damaged child must be borne by her (i.e. the state has no responsibility to assist).<sup>16</sup> This is a very contractual analysis and one that I think is fair — in theory.

In practice, however, my guess is that a woman who so ‘abuses’ her preborn child is not going to suddenly stop once it’s born; she will *not*, therefore, pay for the necessary medication, surgery, etc. And so the child, clearly an innocent victim, will suffer — unless the state takes responsibility at that time. But it’s quite unfair to expect the state ([and] the taxpayers) to stand idly by and watch the abuse and then expect it to clean up the mess.

Thus, when it cannot convincingly be shown that the mother will indeed take full responsibility for her actions toward the preborn, the State should be able to intervene, temporarily denying her full and usual rights, in the interests of justice *and* the child. If that requires institutionalizing the pregnant woman for nine months to ensure that she doesn’t take crack and that the preborn does, in fact, become a healthy newborn, then so be it: that’s the price she pays for her choice — she could’ve aborted.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Normally, in abortion discussion, I object to ‘preborn’ ‘child’ as such terms load the argument.

<sup>16</sup> The neonatal intensive care alone may cost \$31,000; “estimates of the cost of life-long care for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome babies range from \$600,000 to \$2.5 million” (Oberman, Michelle. “Sex, Drugs, Pregnancy, and the Law: Rethinking the Problems of Pregnant Women who use Drugs” *Hastings Law Journal* 43 (1992):505-548).

<sup>17</sup> She may well lose the child anyway — if she continues to use drugs which make her a negligent/abusive parent who causes harm to her child.

# Telling our Members of Parliament What to Wear

So I recently found this on the Parliament of Canada website:

While there is no Standing Order setting down a dress code for Members participating in debate,<sup>84</sup> Speakers have ruled that to be recognized to speak in debate, on points of order or during Question Period, tradition and practice require all Members, male or female, to dress in contemporary business attire.<sup>85</sup> The contemporary practice and unwritten rule require, therefore, that male Members wear a jacket, shirt and tie as standard dress. Clerical collars have been allowed, although ascots and turtlenecks have been ruled inappropriate for male Members participating in debate.<sup>86</sup> The Chair has even stated that wearing a kilt is permissible on certain occasions (for example, Robert Burns Day).<sup>87</sup> Members of the House who are in the armed forces have been permitted to wear their uniforms in the House.<sup>88</sup>

What could possibly justify this Speakers' rule?

Could it be that our Members of Parliament can't dress themselves? The people we've voted into positions of power? Doubtful. They're adults. Many of them even have a university degree. (Okay, I know ... )

Could it be somebody in a higher position of power is prioritizing appearance over reality? What you *look* like is more important than what you *are* like. That bodes well for — the world.

Could it be someone in a higher position of power is making a series of non sequiturs from clothing to behaviour and character? If you wear a business suit, you must be honest, hard-working, mature — respectable. Say what?

Could it be someone wants to maintain classist standards? Generally speaking, the prescribed attire is more expensive than jeans and a t-shirt.

And the other thing to note? There's no mention of what exactly female members must wear.<sup>1</sup> Because there's no standard business attire for women?<sup>2</sup> No, that can't be right. Oh, oh, I know! Because there aren't supposed to *be* any women in Parliament!

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<sup>1</sup> “... male Members wear a jacket, shirt and tie” (what, no trousers?)

<sup>22</sup> The men must wear, essentially, a business suit. Because, or so, government is dominated by business (values, practices, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Imagine if our members of parliament wore all sorts of attire (formal, casual) in all sorts of colour (yes, business is typically grey, black, brown, and navy). We'd get the sense of being represented by real (and diverse) people (not just profit puppets)  
...

# The Problem with Democracy

The problem with democracy is that it's just an appeal to the majority.

And most people, the majority, simply want whatever's in their *own* best interest. We are a nation of egoists. Average life span what it is, personal interests are necessarily short-term. Average intelligence what it is, personal interests are also immediate and concrete. So what's good for the whole, the whole country, never mind the whole planet, will never happen.

So talk about the need for an informed citizenry is irrelevant. True, at any given time, the majority doesn't know diddlyquat. But also true, they have no interest whatsoever in finding out. Because all they care about is themselves. And they're convinced they already know all there is to know about what's best for themselves. And they're probably right, because their interests are so directly and immediately served.

Worse, many of the few to whom one might speak about the problem with this state of affairs believe that the good of the whole is equal to the good of the parts; so, they reason, this state of affairs, each individual voting for what he or she personally wants, is the best state of affairs.

I suppose it might be the most fair, the most just, state of affairs — which only means that when our world stops working, we will have gotten exactly what we deserve.

We, the majority, that is.

## Snowmobiles Rule — Only in Canada. Pity.

Snowmobilers are often presented as people who enjoy the natural beauty of the North. Oh please. Not while their exhaust pipes spew fumes into our air. And their tossed beer cans litter the trail until someone else picks them up. Not at the speeds they drive. And their engines roar at a volume that must be endured by everyone within five miles.

What snowmobiling *is* all about adolescent males going VROOM VROOM.

Which means that our government has handed over thousands of miles<sup>1</sup> of crown land — designated snowmobile trails — to a bunch of young men to use as their personal racetrack. How fair is that? And did they ask us first?

When a friend of mine contacted the MNR to ask about putting up signs at each end of a path through crown land that snowmobilers are using as a short cut to get to their trail and, in the process, making it dangerous (not to mention extremely unpleasant because of the fumes and the noise) for the rest of us to use (for walking and cross-country skiing), she was told no, they can't put up signs prohibiting snowmobilers from using it because everyone has access to crown land. Right. Then why do the signs on the snowmobile trails say 'No Trespassing — You must have a permit to use this trail'?

Why has the government done this? Because they're adolescent males themselves. Who still want to go VROOM VROOM.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario alone has 18,641 miles (30,000 km) of designated snowmobile trails, though some of that goes through (with permission) private and municipal land.

And because local businesses asked them to, because they want to make money from the snowmobilers.

Snowmobilers are a minority. Local business owners are a minority. Why do they get to determine policy and practice? Policy and practice that affects other people?

When snowmobilers (and ATVers and dirtbikers — essentially, all motorized recreational vehicles) use crown land the way they want, no one else can use it the way they want. Consider the trails, mentioned above, that are now unsafe and unpleasant for hikers and skiers. Consider the lake we all live on; in winter (and in summer too — jetskis, another motorized recreational vehicle), our properties may as well be backing on, well, a racetrack. (So much for sitting outside and — well, so much for sitting outside. Not to mention canoeing or kayaking.) Consider all the backroads we live on, the ones without sidewalks. It's nice that we can hear a snowmobile coming from miles away so we have time to get off the road, but it's not enough to get off to the side (assuming that's not where we already are), because that's where the snowmobiles drive. It's not even enough to get *off* the road and up onto the snowbank, because they like to ride the banks. You have to climb up and *over* the snowbanks to be safe. In some countries, pedestrians have the right of way. In Canada, fume-spewing (and gas-guzzling), noise-farting, male-driven snowmobiles do.

## Rich Rednecks

I think it's about time we toss out the idea that those in manual labour are lower class — not quite as 'well off' as those in, say, management and the so-called 'professions'.

He's got a new pickup. They're not cheap. About \$40,000. My used Saturn cost \$9,000.

His truck gets about 15 mpg. My Saturn gets about 40 mpg. And gas isn't cheap. (And yet he seems to get in that truck of his at the drop of a hat. I ration my trips into town.)

He's got an ATV. And a snowmobile. And a jetski. Let's say \$10,000 each, give or take, that makes \$30,000. I've got a used laptop and high-speed internet. \$1,000.

He smokes. And drinks. (I've never actually seen him do either, but I've been picking up his beer cans and cigarette butts on the trails for years now.) That's gotta add up.

Oh but he can't afford to send his kid to university. And he's in debt, eh, 'cuz he hasn't got one of them high-paying jobs, right, so give him a break!

# Rules of Combat

Why are there rules of combat? Rules apply to civil interactions and games. Combat is neither.

Rules give the impression of fairness, decency, civility. They thus make war permissible.

But if war is really about defending your loved ones, wouldn't you do whatever is necessary? Wouldn't you 'fight dirty' if that's what it takes?

Rules of combat suggest, therefore, that war isn't about defending your loved ones. Or even your land, your water, your resources. As Allan G. Johnson points out, in the best analysis of men and war I've ever read (*The Gender Knot*, p.138-142), "war allows men to reaffirm their masculine standing in relation to other men ... . It is an opportunity for men to bond with other men — friend and foe alike — and reaffirm their common masculine warrior codes. If war was simply about self-sacrifice in the face of monstrous enemies who threaten men's loved ones, how do we make sense of the long tradition of respect between wartime enemies, the codes of 'honor' that bind them together even as they bomb and devastate civilian populations that consist primarily of women and children?" Good question. So (and this explains the response to women in the military<sup>1</sup>), war is really all about men getting together and hating, hurting, killing women.

Same old same old.

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<sup>1</sup> Exclusion. Rape.

## We Won!

"We won!" a neighbor crows to me. Apparently she'd watched a game of some kind on television the night before.

"What 'we'?" I snort. Okay, scoff. "*You* had nothing to do with it." She probably spent the whole game, and much of her life, eating potato chips and drinking beer.

The conversation ends. She can't think about it.

She can't see that her enthusiasm is manufactured. That her 'support' for her team isn't support at all. That 'her' team isn't her team at all. She can't see that she's been deluded into thinking that she's somehow part of it, and that she somehow has a stake in it.

Another neighbor, who'd been watching the Olympics, says the same thing. "We won!"

I point out to her as well that she had nothing to do with it.

"Well," she makes a lame attempt to justify her feelings, "we're Canadian." Right. It was the Canadian team that won.

"I'm Canadian. But when I get a book published, you don't cheer 'We got published!'"

And if you did, I'd smack you upside the head.

How can she feel even a little bit of pride and achievement for the team's victory? She did nothing! Not one push-up, not one lap around the track.

"Well," she tries again, "I support the team with my taxes."

"And you support my writing with your taxes as well. Whenever I get a grant from the Arts Council," I explain.

She still doesn't see it. (Or simply *won't* see it.) She doesn't see that her emotions are being manipulated by the sports corporations, who want to deliver as many potential customers as possible to the companies who buy the advertisements that

pay their salaries, because the more viewers, the more they can charge for those advertisements.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quite apart from that, it's no coincidence that sports are dominated by men. (Which makes *her* 'We won!' just a little bit ironic.) Or, rather, it's no coincidence that it's predominantly men's sports that get television coverage. It's just another way of making sure men are the center of the universe. My god, how many television stations are devoted to *just* sports? Why in god's name does sport get a regular time slot in the daily news? As if men playing a game is as important as a war! And *more* important than the destruction of our environment (which *doesn't* get a regular time slot in the daily news)!

# Congratulations!

'Congratulations!' Now there's a word we misuse a lot.

'I'm getting married!' 'Congratulations!' Why? Why should this be cause for congratulations? Is it a good thing? Half of all married couples end up divorced. (The other half just couldn't be bothered.) Is it an achievement? There are no qualifications except being a certain age. Which generally happens without any effort. So you're entering into a legal contract with another person. Big deal. Bet you haven't even read the contract. So you're going to a church for some obscure sacrament. What, Christmas and Easter wasn't enough?

What's getting married really about? Proof you're not gay after all. Proof that you're all grown up, gonna settle down, maybe start a family (like having a kid means *you're* no longer a kid is the logic, I guess). Proof that someone somewhere somehow found you loveable long enough to agree to marriage. Yeah right, whatever.

'I'm pregnant!' 'Congratulations!' What? Again, is this necessarily a good thing? 'Cause it can seldom be called an achievement. I mean I'm sure you have succeeded at sexual intercourse before. So you got lucky. Should we congratulate for luck?

'I won the lottery!' 'Congratulations!' It sounds right. But it sure takes the wind out of the congratulations we give to the person who wins a triathlon or a Beethoven competition.

# Getting Married

When you 'get married' you are entering into a legal contract. You might be doing a few other things (promising your love to someone, making a deal with a god), but you are most certainly entering into a legally binding contract with another person. There are rights due to and responsibilities incumbent upon people who enter into a marriage contract. Some of these have to do with money, some have to do with children, some have to do with sexual services, and some have to do with other things.

What I find so extremely odd is that even though well over 90% of all people in the USA and Canada get married, almost none of them read the terms of the contract before they sign. (Most people find out about these terms only when they want to break the contract.) Probably because the contract isn't presented when their signatures are required.

Although this begs the question 'Is the contract, therefore, still binding?', the more interesting question is '*Why* isn't it presented?'

## Reading/Watching the News: A Bad Habit

Why do you read the paper (or watch the news) every day? Certainly not for an objective account of what's going on in the world. Because surely you're aware of editorial bias: what gets in (or not), where it goes, and how much space it gets there. And reporter bias: who gets interviewed, what gets asked (or not), what gets put at the beginning of the piece, and how it's said.

To describe an incident with complete objectivity is to give a phenomenological account. And anyone who's taken Phenomenology 101 knows how difficult that is. Even to say "There is a brown house" is to have made an assumption, is to have imposed your subjectivity. You can't see the house. From your perspective, standing in front of it, all you see is one, or maybe two walls. You *assume* there's a third and a fourth. Your subjectivity fills in the gaps. *All the time.*

It gets worse. Is the glass half empty or half full? One description is positive, the other is negative.

And worse still. Consider something as simple as an accident report. You begin with "A serious accident occurred ... " Well, right away you're in trouble. Who says it's serious? How serious *is* serious? Serious to who? You've expressed your opinion. Furthermore, you've assumed it was an *accident*. My guess is that you didn't speak to the drivers. Maybe it was intentional.

Try again. To say "A *ran into* B" is to put it in rather aggressive terms. "A *hit* B" is almost as bad. "Car A hit Car B" is a little better. "Car A *collided with* Car B" is even better, but still you've suggested that A is to blame (because it did the doing —

colliding or whatever); maybe Car B got in the way of Car A. “Car A and Car B collided” is better still, but only “Car A and Car B occupied the same space at the same point in time” is really objective.

Now consider the difficulty of reporting something involving more than inanimate objects. For example, people. Consider “The fight continues between the Board and the Union ... ” To call it a *fight* is to describe a whole set of attributes (animosity, competition) which may or may not be present. And, in any case, I don’t think everyone agrees on when an interaction involving those attributes actually becomes a *fight* — again, it’s a subjective call. “The struggle to find a common ground continues ... ” is better, but still, you’ve called it a struggle, you’ve again put your own opinion into the report. To say “The negotiations continued ... ” is perhaps most accurate, most objective. But you’d better stop there: even to add “for yet another day” suggests it’s going on too long — an opinion. The thing is this: purely objective reports are boring; to make the news interesting, to sucker you into reading it, it’s made subjective.

It’s also made exciting. Loud noises are exciting. At the very least, they get our attention. And conflict, more than resolution, seems associated with loud noises. So conflict gets covered more than resolution. And things involving neither get covered *as if* they were conflicts, as if there is some problem, some difficulty. (And certainly any problem or difficulty that is there gets emphasized, even exaggerated.) So you read the paper for excitement (get a life) — but not only is it *vicarious* excitement, it’s *fabricated*, *fake* excitement.

Even if the news accounts were objective, why do you read so many of them every day? (Now *commentary*, that would actually be useful — it could make sense of the accounts.) I just want to know what’s going on, people say. But why? Does it give you a feeling of control to know? Anyone who gave it half a

thought would feel less, not more, powerful knowing about problems they could not or would not solve.

Perhaps you mistake passive participation for active participation. Reading about something exciting or important makes you feel exciting or important.

Truth is, people read the paper because, well, people have always read the paper — it's what you do, every morning at the breakfast table or every day after work with a drink. People in general are a rather thoughtless bunch. And they pay with the skewered world view they thereby acquire.

## Vote? WTF?

So I noticed the “Question of the Day” feature on the Weather Network website, which typically poses a question along with four response options, inviting site visitors to “Vote”. I haven’t done a survey, but I suspect this sort of thing is not unusual.

Which makes it all the more disturbing.

Why? Because often the question is a matter of fact. For example, on September 5, the question was “Which of these animals is Saskatchewan’s provincial animal?” And four options were provided: Caribou, White-tailed deer, Bison, Spirit bear, Big horn sheep.<sup>1</sup>

To vote means to express your preference as part of a *decision-making* process. Voting *on facts* is an oxymoron. (What, if the majority believe the world is flat, it is?) The feature should be titled “Test your knowledge” and invite site visitors to indicate the correct answer.

It would be disturbing enough if it was just an incorrect use of our language. Or, if not evidence of ignorance, then evidence of sloppiness, of inattentiveness. Because this is not some obscure little site. This is The Weather Network.

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<sup>1</sup> Other times, the question is something like “Did this summer feel longer, shorter, or the same as other summers?” And site visitors are invited to “view the results”. What self-respecting adult cares or is even curious about such a thing?

And along with such relentless requests for feedback at every second site and the ubiquitous 'Like' feature, the effect of such 'voting' is to make us feel engaged with the world when we are so not. It instils a false sense of self-worth in people who are, let's be frank, pretty worthless.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Only in part because they're taking the time to express their opinions on such trivial matters. And probably *not* taking the time to develop and express informed opinions on matters of importance.

## Speaking in Code

“I just can’t give any more, sorry.” But of course he can. He just doesn’t want to. By saying “can’t” instead of “won’t”, however, he appears powerless and thus absolves himself of responsibility; as a result, we don’t even consider the matter of blame.

“That’s not gonna happen.” Okay. So informed, we move on. But in most cases, the accurate, honest, statement would have been “*I don’t think that’s gonna happen*” or “*I don’t want that to happen.*” By presenting an opinion as fact, the speaker has diverted our attention from evidence and reasons. *Why* don’t you think that’s going to happen? *Why* don’t you want that to happen?

“We need to bring our product in line with contemporary standards.” The royal “we” effects a diffusion of responsibility, deflecting accountability from the individual who’s speaking. “Need” is a lie: we won’t die without it. But “need” is far more *compelling* than “want” — it’s harder to refuse. To “bring in line” suggests cooperation, rather than obedience. “Contemporary” sounds so much better than “common” or even “current”, and “standards” implies something that’s received official, i.e., expert, approval. Really, he’s just saying “I want you to do what I want: this.” And *that* would be much easier to say “No” to.

“Hey now, what kind of way is that to talk?” Code for “I don’t want to hear those words” — to which the person might simply respond, “So?” Instead, he or she feels chastised.

These manipulations are done so smoothly, it’s impressive. I have enough trouble getting clear about my true meaning, I couldn’t possibly engage in the simultaneous translation these

people seem to do so effortlessly in order to cover their truth and manipulate us into assent, or at least out of dissent. They load their language without even thinking. How can they be so quick, so clever?

They're not. They *are* doing it without even thinking. They're not translating from A to B — they're going right to B; they're not even aware of A. I've been attributing far more consciousness than is warranted. It's not that they're thinking more (let alone more quickly) than me — they're thinking less: they're not thinking at all about what they're saying, about how they're saying it. Consider that when I point out what I think they *really* mean, when I decode what they say in order to challenge or simply clarify, they insist I'm reading too much into a simple choice of words — I'm over-analyzing. Truth is, they're not analyzing enough. Or at all.

But still, how is it they are so unconsciously manipulative? It just comes naturally. And that's far scarier than doing it intentionally. All those manipulative phrases — these people are simply saying it the way they've been conditioned to say it, or, more accidentally, just the way they've heard others say it.

So it's not that I'm a relative moron at strategic behaviour; it's that somehow I missed out on that conditioning. Probably because I'm not male. And I consciously rejected any parallel conditioning directed to females.

So here I am. Either taking what people say at face value and being manipulated left, right, and centre, or trying to decode everything. Of course, by the time I decode what they've said, B into A, they've said something else. And when I respond directly to A, they think I've gone off-topic. So I have to explain that their B is a translation of A. But they don't want to hear it. I suppose I could just respond to their B with a B of my own — but to do that, I have to decode their B into A, figure out my response to it, then encode my A into a B. And by the time I've done that, they've left. Which is just as well.

## If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.

What? Why is honesty rude? What kind of society considers honesty, *truth*, to be less important than — what? Social cohesion?

Furthermore, that assumes that people will be offended by the truth. If the truth is about them, I suppose that's an accurate assumption. But what does *that* say? About people.

And actually, even if the truth *isn't* about them, I suspect many people would be offended by the truth *when it challenges their own views*. And what does *that* say?

More likely, truth has simply been trumped by self-interest. Because if honesty *does* offend, for whatever reason, then the truth-speaker will be alienated, ostracized — a social outcast. (Though, as far as I'm concerned, social inclusion is of dubious value ... )

But if we'd've been honest every time rights collide, speaking up about the limits of freedoms, perhaps everyone wouldn't feel so frickin' entitled all the time. To everything.

And if we'd've called each other out, on anything, on everything, we'd be leading more authentic lives.

Many of my neighbours have their TVs on all the time; as a result, they do very little thinking on their own. Not only because there is no silence, typically required for thought, but also because they're exposing themselves so relentlessly to a worldview censored by a handful of conglomerates motivated primarily by self-interest. And then, *because* there's nothing going on in their heads, they can't stand the silence, so they keep the TV on all the time ... But do I say 'Shut that thing off and wake the fuck up!?' Of course not. That would be rude.

A couple of them also take RV trips. Do I point out that they're leaving a *huge* ecological footprint, that they've contributed to climate change, that they're partly responsible for the increasing number and severity of storms, and that, therefore, they've been rather selfish and inconsiderate? No. I ask whether they had a good trip. Pleasant superficiality has become a habit.

When I see a woman performing femininity, do I tell her she's making it hard for those of us who'd like to be taken seriously, for our knowledge and our skills, not for our clownface and fuck-me-heels? No.

Those of us with half a brain, who are trying to live a true and morally responsible life — we've been polite too long. We've been silent too long. We've been *dishonest* too long.

## In Praise of Dead Air

People are uncomfortable with silence. On the radio, over the telephone, in person. It's a curious thing.

We are obsessed with filling up the air space. That sounds very male — the need to occupy territory (take a look at how men sit, their legs wide apart and their arms resting on the backs of the adjacent chairs, compared to how women sit, legs close together and their hands in their laps) — but women too consider dead air problematic.

Is it that we're afraid to say 'I'll have to think about that'? Because thinking about it is for philosophers, contemplatives, monks? Ordinary people who think are so odd, they're commented upon — 'a penny for your thoughts'. (And so poor at thinking, their thoughts are worth only a penny?)

Or is it that we're afraid to say 'I don't know'? Men especially seem unable to get those words out. (I assume this is related to their inability to stop and ask for directions.) Better a poor response than no response at all. More often than not, better a lie.

So we don't say these things. We chatter instead. We fill the air with small talk. Is it that noise suggests activity? If you're a child, I guess you think so. But even so, activity is not *necessarily* good. Am I back to the male thing? *They're* the ones obsessed with *action*: they start with action figures, then go on to action movies, and big team action sports, and finally it all gets sublimated into the task-oriented Type A personality. But it's women too. Rule #4 of 'How to be a Good Date' is all about the art of conversation, i.e. *how to keep it going*. Dead air is embarrassing. Dead air is rude.

I suggest not. I suggest that the *absence* of dead air is what's rude. Nonstop patter allows no time to think; in fact, it discourages thought. So when you aim for a conversation, what you get is very superficial. You can't ask good questions if you're trying to get instant responses. And if, by mistake, a good question *is* asked, you can't take time to consider it if you're afraid of dead air — so you *don't* really consider it. And isn't *that* rude? Not taking the other person's comments and questions seriously?

Perhaps those who call it dead air are themselves dead — unable, or worse, unwilling, to think. Dead air can be alive, bustling with the work of understanding what was just said, and then of judging it — right? wrong? important? trivial? Can I add to it? change it? use it? Only those unaccustomed to mental activity would mistake silence for *inactivity*.

# YouTube: 300 hours per minute<sup>1</sup>

300 hours are uploaded to YouTube per minute. *300 hours every minute!* How is it that so many people think so much of their stuff warrants public attention?

On the one hand, I love the absence of corporate and editorial control at the gate: the former motivated almost exclusively by personal financial interest (i.e., selfish greed), the latter only somewhat less so (it has the dubious advantage of being motivated also by someone's definition of artistic value, at least in the case of artistic performance), both bound to be unfair to many individuals and detrimental to society as a whole.

But geez louise, people, use a little self-censorship! *Not everything you do deserves everyone's attention!* Have you no standards? Or just no respect for others? (I really lose it when I see videos of performances *known* to be flawed — “This is just my first try” or “I know I made a few mistakes, but ... ” Then redo it! Do it again and again until you get it right! Practice! Revise! Spend the time it takes, make the effort required, to achieve excellence.) (In the meantime, shame on you for wasting my attention, wasting my time, with your mediocrity.)

But then, “*everyone's attention*” — maybe most people who post to YouTube are really doing it just to show family and friends. But then why don't they post on their limited access Facebook page?

And, too, “*deserves*” — is that an anachronistic view? Appropriate only when resources are limited, and so justifiably

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<sup>1</sup> When I first wrote this piece, it was 13 hours per minute.

reserved for the best? No, I don't think so. Because even when space is unlimited — perhaps *especially* when space is unlimited — if a pearl is buried in a pile of shit, who's going to spend time looking for it? The bigger the pile, the more difficult, and eventually we'll stop looking. Which defeats the purpose. (Doesn't it? What is YouTube's purpose?)

# Digital Thought

On/off, yes/no, either/or, for/against, male/female, win/lose, true/false, right/wrong, black/white, all/nothing, 0/1.

Why have we become so enamoured with digital thought? What's the attraction?

It's precise. Precision is good.

It's fast. We like that.

It's easy. We like that even more.

But any educator will tell you that T/F tests are the sparrows of measurement. They can handle knowledge, and maybe comprehension.<sup>1</sup> But that's it.

And yet, because it's the only thought that computers, including the ubiquitous automated answering systems, are capable of, digital thought is becoming even *more* dominant.<sup>2</sup>

But knowledge and comprehension are the lowest levels on Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills. What about application? Analysis? Synthesis? Evaluation? What, no time for *critical* thought? Too busy surfing the net to notice you're in an ocean of shit?

Most of life isn't subject to precision, isn't true or false, black or white. One of the many errors in reasoning is the false dichotomy: it occurs when one assumes, *erroneously*, that there are only two possibilities. So digital thought leaves out a lot. It's woefully incomplete.

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<sup>1</sup> Multiple choice tests, the robins, are just one step better. (Except for the LSAT, the smartass bluejay, which is designed by demented geniuses who have made a science of turning a curve ball into a triple helix and figured out how to get paid for doing it.)

<sup>2</sup> Did I say 'dominant'? I meant 'domineering'.

And it encourages extremism. Because it ignores the richness of a continuum, a spectrum. Between all and nothing is something. Lots of somethings.

*And* it fosters competition. It has no room for compromise, for combination.

In short, it's two dimensional. Frogs do it: if it moves, it's food; if it doesn't, don't bother. Are we frogs? Yes/No.

# Asking the Right Questions

Never has it been more important to ask the right questions. Not as philosophers, in the clearest, most explicit, terms, but in terms most likely to be used by the arrested-development minds of computer programmers. Because phone conversations, for example, aren't with people anymore; they're with AI programs that are, let's face it, stupider than most people. (Which is saying a lot.)

And that's because they're designed by people with no philosophical training,<sup>1</sup> by people who think in terms of black and white, people whose imaginations seem to be severely limited. Which means you have to stay within a severely limited range of possibilities in order to be understood; you have to anticipate how such a simple mind might say something.

I imagine a very near future in which the stupid people succeed because they're the only ones able to communicate with all our 'smart' programs<sup>2</sup> — because their minds are unclouded by complexity and subtlety.

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<sup>1</sup> It takes a lot of skill, a lot of knowledge and intelligence, to craft an exhaustive menu of options, and one whose items are mutually exclusive.

<sup>2</sup> "Welcome to FedEx! In a few words, please tell me what you're calling about."  
Took me ten tries.

## Good Intentions: The Road to Hell (and justifiably so)

I've reconsidered intent-based moralities. They're bloody irresponsible. I'm giving new meaning to "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" (or maybe I'm just finally understanding it). Intention-based moralities are for people too stupid or too lazy to consider the consequences of their actions. "But I didn't mean to" is the cry of an idiot. (What did you think would happen when you put a firecracker in the dog's mouth?) "I was only trying to help" is an attempt to absolve oneself of the burden of figuring out the effect one's behavior has on others. (In what universe is *that* helpful?) If you only meant to have a bit of fun, getting in your car drunk out of your mind and driving down the 401, if you didn't intend to hurt anyone, well then, okay, you can go (you *should* go) — to hell.

## Planning is Sinister?

In *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein makes an interesting observation, intended to explain why we *aren't* building the kind of economy we need: “ ... there is something sinister, indeed vaguely communist, about *having a plan* to build the kind of economy we need, even in the face of existential crisis” (125, my emphasis).

Is that why we don't plan?

At the individual level. People are so *que sera* even about creating other human beings. ‘You're pregnant? I didn't know you wanted to spend twenty years of your life looking after someone.’ ‘Oh, it just happened ... .’

And at the community level. If, for example, lakes were zoned according to use — jetskiers and motorboats here, people-with-screaming-kids-who-need-to-be-safe here, and canoeists and kayakers here — everyone could be happy. But as it is, there's a lot of anger going around.

This lack of planning — it's all *because it's communist? Because a pre-determined society is somehow against individual freedom? Not planning is against individual freedom. Not planning is allowing yourself to be tossed about at random, by chance — and that's not being free.*

I wonder if there's also a religious element involved. To plan, to choose your future, is to reject, or at least challenge, God's plan. For you, your future.

Also, planning requires foresight, and foresight requires imagination. Which, I'm realizing, most people don't have.

Planning also requires strong desires, for X over Y. Again, I'm realizing that most people — don't really care. (Which means they get in the way of those of us who do.)

## Every Day in Every Way

Every day in every way the world is getting better and better. Yeah right.

Well why isn't it? Every day there's a whole new batch of young adults just chafing at the bit to change the world. What happens?

They become parents.

So first, there's the matter of money. Nutritious food and a constant supply of clothing that fits cost money. Leaving little for the revolution.

Then there's the matter of time. To get the money, you need to work. So that pretty much makes the day a write-off. And much of the evening is taken up with parenting. It's nine o'clock: do you have time to change the world — before you go to bed?

Better question: do you have the energy to change the world? Getting up at six or seven, hustling the kids and yourself to daycare, school, and work, putting in eight hours that is, no doubt, laced with at least a little stress, making your way home, perhaps detouring to pick up a kid or two, making supper for several people, doing the dishes, then slogging through a bunch of chores like washing everyone's clothes, or cleaning the house or apartment a little, or preparing lunches, all the while spending quality time with the kids — it's nine o'clock: do you know where your bed is?

But more significant than any of that is this: parents don't take risks. You can't afford to get fired — so you don't stand up at work. You can't afford to go to jail — so you don't stand up anywhere else. You're responsible for your kids, they depend on you, you have obligations to them — to be there and to provide

them with what they need. You can't afford to be reckless anymore; you become cautious — about everything.

Because you love them so much — if anything should ever happen to them — So you don't make enemies; at least, none that really count. Love holds you hostage, it makes you vulnerable; it makes you — oh dear — conservative.

And *that's* why young radicals become middle-aged sell-outs overnight: they have kids.

And parents don't change the world.

(They hope their kids will.)

(But, of course, their kids will grow up and have ...)

## Oh the horror.

On yet another occasion during which I was stunned by one of my neighbour's stupidity and ignorance, it suddenly occurred to me that the person I was speaking with probably hadn't read a book since high school.<sup>1</sup>

*Then* it occurred to me that that was probably true for *most* people.

I tried to imagine what that would be like. What my mind would be like if I hadn't read a book, not one book, in the last, say, forty years.

*Oh the horror.*

Because what could possibly go on inside such a mind?

In addition to their high school history and geography textbooks, through which they might have plodded here and there, they might have read, perhaps, a dozen novels, in all. Library books for the annual book review assignment in English class. Who is the main character? Describe the setting. What is the main conflict?

They may as well be illiterate. They *are*, essentially. They're *functionally* illiterate. Because yes, they can and probably do read package labels and price tags, but *what else?*

The newspaper. Which is pretty much nothing but exposition. Low-level description. No analysis. No critique.

What if everyone read just one non-fiction book a week? What if employers rewarded them for doing so, as many of them do now for physical exercise: in addition to so many points per kilometer, because it reduces their healthcare costs,

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, it then occurred to me that s/he probably hadn't read a book *during* high school either.

so many points per page, because — Ah, there's the rub. What's in it for them? Nothing. In fact, on the contrary, it's to their advantage *not* to have their employees develop knowledge, understanding, critical ability.

Okay, so what if the *government* implemented such a reward program? Well, it's not really in their best interests either. Which explains, perhaps, why the education system doesn't mandate critical thinking courses.

Of course, if *parents* ... But every time they say 'Because I said so,' they stomp on critical thinking. It's just easier that way, I guess.

So in whose interests *is* it be critical? Our own, of course. Otherwise, we're suckers to manipulation by media. Corporations. Government. Anyone who puts their own self-interest before yours.

But in our society, the word 'critical' has negative connotations. It's bad to be critical.

*Oh the horror.*

## **Calm down. Don't think about — Don't think.**

One day when I was talking to a neighbour about something that I wished we could do something about — someone tossing their garbage out of their car onto the road where we walk every day, someone letting their kid drive a dirt bike with no muffler throughout the neighbourhood, someone burning leaves and sending toxic smoke everywhere, can't remember — she said something like 'Calm down, your blood pressure's going up!'

Well, it wasn't (ten years after I stopped running forty miles a week, my blood pressure has finally crept up into the normal range), but I realized then that she wasn't distinguishing between what I was doing — making a point about civility, and respect for others, and the difference between public and private space, and speculating about the possibility of change — and some emotional rant that might end in screaming and slamming doors. I suppose the latter *can* elevate one's blood pressure, and if it's high to begin with, high enough that you're on blood pressure medication (as she is), then yeah — calm down. You're giving yourself a heart attack.

Later, it occurred to me that a lot of people today have high blood pressure, and probably half of the people I'm likely to talk to (my neighbours) are probably on high blood pressure medication, no wonder they, people, develop a sort of blind and deaf veneer. No wonder they just 'go with the flow' and never object. No wonder they avoid thinking about — Well, thinking. It's literally bad for their health. Life-threatening, even.

But what this means — this inability to distinguish argument from rage, along with the increasing number of

people with high blood pressure — is that the more we eat at McDonald's, the less we'll get angry about McDonald's. The more zombied out people are, sprawled on the couch in front of the TV, the more zombied out people will strive to remain. Sprawled on the couch in front of the TV.

Not thinking.



## **Preface to the 2nd edn**

Although the pieces from this point on are additions to the first edition, not all of them were written since the first edition (in fact, some of them date back to the '80s), and I don't know why I didn't include them in the first edition. But they're here now!



# Grade Ten History

Remember grade ten history? Okay, quick question: history of what? Of ideas? Of art? Of really stupid jokes? No! Of conflict! And mostly interpersonal conflict charading as intergroup conflict. *That's* what grade ten history was all about.

And grade eleven history and grade twelve history too.

So first, let's call it what it is. And this is not a minor point. It's like teaching nothing but limericks in a course called 'Poetry'. It would be bad enough for kids to grow up thinking that's all there is to poetry, but if they grow up thinking that's all there is to history, well, Houston, we have a problem. No history of ideas, or art, no history of discovery, no history of cultural development — what an incredible disservice not only to those who made such history, but of course to those denied that knowledge.

But that's minor damage compared to this: by focussing solely, relentless, on *that* history — on conflict, on fighting, and winning or losing, and more fighting, competing for this and that, again and again, fighting — we grow up thinking it's central to life. Fighting, competing, winning or losing.

And we grow up thinking it's inevitable.

So first, let's call it what it is: 'History of Conflict'.

And second, let's make it an elective, not a compulsory, course.

*Unless*, third, we teach it like this. Every student starts with 50 marks. So if they do nothing, if they remain neutral, they pass — barely, but they do pass. Now for every act of violence, direct or indirect, covert or overt, implicit or explicit, physical or psychological, they lose marks. A week can be spent just coming to a consensus about how many marks for which acts.

And for every act of peace, mediation, or compromise, students gain marks. Again, a week to come up with a fair, and comprehensive, marking scheme.

Then spend two weeks per conflict: two weeks on World War I, two weeks on World War II, on Korea, Vietnam, South Africa, the Gulf War, Yugoslavia, etc. One week to cover the background, the context, the events giving rise to the conflict. And one week, here's the crucial part, for the students to role play, each student assigned-out-of-a-hat to be one of the key figures, or backroom powers, or soldiers, or civilians. The assignment for the second week is *resolve* the conflict — *avoid* the war, *avoid* the pain, the suffering, the killing.

Mind you, this will only work in a school with metal detectors.

## A Licence to Parent

We have successfully cloned a sheep; it is not unreasonable, then, to believe that we may soon be able to create human life. Despite Frankenstein visions of a brave new world, I'm sure we'll develop carefully considered policies and procedures to regulate the activity.

For example, I doubt we'll allow someone to create his own private workforce or his own little army.

And I suspect we'll prohibit cloning oneself for mere ego gratification.

Doing it just because it's fun will certainly be illegal. And I expect it won't even be imaginable to do it 'without really thinking about it', let alone 'by accident'.

I suspect we'll enforce some sort of quality control, such that cloned human beings shall not exist in pain or be severely 'compromised' with respect to basic biological or biochemical functioning.

And I suspect one will have to apply for a license and satisfy rigorous screening standards. I assume this will include the submission, and approval, of a detailed plan regarding responsibility for the cloned human being; surely we won't allow a scientist to create it and then just leave it on the lab's doorstep one night when he leaves.

Thing is, *we can already create human life*. Kids do it every day.

And though we've talked ourselves silly and tied ourselves in knots about *ending* life — active, passive, voluntary, coerced, premeditated, accidental, negligent — we have been horrendously silent, irresponsibly *laissez-faire*, about *beginning* life.

We would not accept such wanton creation of life if it happened in the lab. Why do we condone it when it happens in bedrooms and backseats?

It should be illegal to create life, to have kids, in order to have another pair of hands at work in the field or to have someone to look after you in your old age.

It should be illegal to create a John Doe *Junior* or someone to carry on the family name/business.

It should be illegal to have kids because, well, it just happened, you didn't really think about it.

And it *isn't* possible to create life 'by accident' — men don't accidentally ejaculate into vaginas and women don't accidentally catch some ejaculate with their vaginas. (As for failed contraception, there's follow-up contraception.)

And it should be illegal to knowingly create a life that will be spent in pain and/or that will be severely substandard.

As for the screening process, we already do that for adoptive/foster parents. Why do we cling to the irrational belief that biological parents are *necessarily* competent parents — in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? We have, without justification, a double standard.

Oh but we can't interfere with people's right to reproduce! *Right* to reproduce? Merely *having* a capability does not entail the *right to exercise* that capability. (Re)Production, with its attendant responsibilities, should be a privilege, not a right.

And yes of course, this proposal, this argument for parenting licenses, opens the door for all sorts of abuses. For starters, who will design and administer the screening process? But look around: it's not as if the current situation is abuse-free. In fact, millions of the little human lives we've created so carelessly are being starved, beaten, or otherwise traumatized. Millions.

To be succinct: the destruction of life is subject to moral and legal examination; so too should be the creation of life, whenever and however it occurs.

## Drugs and Sports: What's the Problem?

Here we go again — drugs and sports. What's the problem? No really, what exactly is the problem?

Some say those who've used cocaine should be banned from the Olympics because it's illegal. Well, there are many things that are illegal — shouldn't we therefore ban every athlete who's ever done something illegal?

But why? Haven't they already paid the penalty determined by whatever country they live in? The IOC is not a criminal justice system.

Then some call upon the moral character point: athletes are expected to be of high moral character, or at least of higher moral character than the rest of us. Why? Well, they're expected to be role models. Why? Why shouldn't we put the same expectations on, say, artists? Or CEOs? Or you and me?

And if we're going to call drug use immoral, well, let's consider reckless driving, negligent parenting, and a whole bunch of other questionable behaviours as well.

All of which is completely separate from the performance enhancement argument. But, like marijuana, cocaine is hardly performance enhancing.

So let's consider steroids. And vitamin C. And spinach. All of which enhance performance. Is it a question of natural/artificial? But vitamin C tablets don't exactly grow on trees either.

Is it a question of degree? Okay, have we figured out exactly how much is too much? (Consider here flu medication and allergy puffers.) And too much for what?

For fair competition? Is that it? It's a question of fairness? Okay, what's fair? Equal access to enhancements? Well then it's

hardly fair for American athletes to compete with Ethiopian athletes.

Equal physical capacities? Well size 17 flipper-feet in the pool are hardly fair when others have only size 10. (Maybe there should be different classes of swimmer, according to foot size, just as there are different classes of wrestler, according to weight.)

Yeah, but that's hardly his fault, he was just born that way. Hm. Would it matter if his parents had intentionally chosen the big feet gene? What if *he* intentionally chose to grow bigger feet? Or, um, to grow bigger muscles?

But merely by working out every day, one makes that choice. So are we back to the arbitrary line of artificialness? Or the very grey line of degree?

It makes one think that the whole idea of basing the win/lose decision on hundredths of a second and tenths of a centimetre may be just a little bit ... silly.

# The Olympians

Insofar as competition is the measure of oneself against another, it entails the view that the other is more important than oneself. Otherwise, it would be sufficient to measure oneself against oneself (a past self or a hoped-for future self) or against some absolute standard not necessarily related to any self. Such an other-regarding view usually indicates low self-esteem.

It does no good to claim that one competes, rather, to better one's own best: it must be asked why one needs to perform alongside another in order to better oneself; a stopwatch or tape measure or videotape should suffice. That such competing against oneself is *insufficient* to bring out one's best suggests, again, that what matters is what the other does, thinks, etc.

This seems odd, though: most world class athletes have such self-discipline and have achieved such a high level of excellence that for their self-esteem to remain low, they'd have to be quite out of touch with reality. Bingo.

The hierarchal nature of competitive sport is such that the context for comparison keeps getting smaller: as one excels, one compares oneself to a smaller and smaller pool of others who also excel; and the measure of difference becomes equally smaller and smaller. So unless the competitor keeps in mind the larger left-behind contexts, or the similarities of amazing achievement, one's self-esteem ends up depending on a mere ten or twenty out of six billion people, and a mere two seconds in a four-minute race or a few hundredths of a point out of ten.

I don't mean to suggest, however, that this display of low self-esteem is *all* there is to competition. Surely there is much

more, especially when the competition is as big as the Olympics: a chance for businesses to advertise unnecessary or exploitive products, a chance for petty nationalism to strut its stuff, a chance to mispend resources (surely clean water matters more than whether John can jump 1 cm higher than Jim), and so on.

Nor do I mean to suggest that I won't be watching the Olympics. I fully applaud the pursuit and display of excellence. But why doesn't sport, like art, have non-competitive events? True, the arts also have their dance competitions and their music competitions, but more common are simply the performances: the pure celebrations of excellence.

## Profit and Loss — and Marbles

Years ago, Joseph Schumacher examined the ethics of unlimited growth and concluded that “Small is beautiful.” The business world, with no shortage of conglomerates and an increasing number of mergers, seems to have missed the message.

One might quip ‘Well, that’s because hedonistic greed governs the business mind,’ but a quick survey of a second year Business class — in which not one student answered the question ‘Why is profit good?’ with ‘Because it gives me pleasure, it makes me happy, I wanna be a rich sonovabitch’ — suggests that either denial starts early or something else is going on. (Or both.)

Most students responded with something like ‘Profit is good because it enables you to expand — to hire more people, to establish branches in other cities, to increase production.’ ‘And why is this expansion good?’ ‘Well, because then you can make more profit.’ (Can you say ‘circular’?)

This concept of limitlessness is ingrained in business policy and practice. Why is this so? Because profit is idealized in business policy and practice. People in business assume that making a profit is their purpose. (‘Non-profit business’ is an oxymoron, apparently.) Some even assume that making a profit is their *right*.

Defence of maximizing profit/growth often includes an appeal to the responsibility to shareholders. (Can you say ‘pass-the-buck’?)

I put aside, for a moment, the question of why a business has more responsibility to its shareholders than to its stakeholders. (Distributive justice according to contribution is not the only option.)

It is explained to me that if someone invests in your company, giving you money to use, you have an obligation to give them the best return on their money. The best? Again, this notion of *unlimitedness* appeared. Why not, I suggest, set a *fair* rate of return, and then include that as an expense, rather like the interest on a loan?

‘Well, why should people invest in your company if they can make more with another company? They’re taking a loss then.’ Thus was I introduced to the strange definition of loss.

In business, apparently loss is defined as the difference between what you got and what you might’ve gotten. The baseline is not an actual amount but rather some ideal amount. (And they say business people are realists.) The measure of all things is the maximum potential.

For the rest of us, loss is the difference between what you have at Time 1 and what you have at Time 2. Yesterday, I had 10 marbles; today I have 7; so I lost a few — 3, to be exact.

Business people have a different arithmetic: if they get 10 marbles and they think they could’ve gotten 100, they ‘suffer a loss’ of 90 marbles. (I’d like to point out, by the way, that by their own reckoning, they’ve lost quite a few more marbles than I have.)

All of a sudden, someone’s comment to my purchase of a CD player — “How much did that set you back?” — made sense. At the time, I was puzzled by his use of ‘set you back’. It didn’t *set me back* anything; it *cost* me \$300. But if you use as a baseline some imagined million dollars you could make this year, buying the CD player will set you back \$300 from that million.

It’s a very strange definition. It’s a very dangerous definition. First, because it’s not reality-based. (That in itself begs for the label ‘schizophrenic’.) ‘Could’ is not the same as ‘would’. And even ‘would’ is a far cry from ‘will’.

Second, this definition of loss is simply illogical: you cannot

lose what you never had. What is actually being lost is not a certain amount of money, but the *opportunity* to make a certain amount of money.

Third, it's very manipulative. The word 'loss' typically suggests cause for condolence: it suggests you do not have what you *should* have. But this definition entails a rather suspect sense of 'should have', it presumes some sort of entitlement that is, at least in my opinion, completely unjustified.

The classic symbol of business success is a graph with a jagged line on the diagonal up to the right: growth — unlimited growth. But surely there is a point at which we have enough. Don't we all learn, when we're about two years old, to 'say when'? (At that, I hear a student in the back quip, 'No, we didn't learn that lesson. That's why we're in Business.')

## Being There

I recently read a lament about work attitudes, about how more and more people seem to think that just being there is enough, that their paycheck is for putting in time rather than for actually doing anything, let alone for doing a *good* anything, that people feel no guilt about the mistakes they make, nor do they feel any desire to do better.

I'd like to offer some comments in defence, or at least in explanation, of that position. First, teachers give marks for attendance: for just being there. And no matter how many mistakes you make, you'll still pass. So, hey, who says the students don't pay attention?

Second, the job you've been hired to do is probably so trivial and boring, it's impossible to keep it without sending your brain out to lunch while you're there.

Third, showing initiative has, in my experience, backfired more often than not. Do a good job, yes, but be careful not to do *too* good a job, be careful not to do, or even point out, what your supervisor should've done. That's called insubordination and it's just cause for dismissal. Seriously. For example, when I worked at a detention centre, I noticed one night that the previous shift's reports had several spelling errors. I corrected them. For this, I was reprimanded (because the reports were used in court and, I was told, any changes would be suspect). So, later, when I saw a coworker collecting statistics in a most onerous fashion (not only without computer assistance, but without using a symbol key — he'd write out the full referral agency every time rather than assigning, say, numbers to each of the six possibilities and providing a key), I did *not* make a suggestion to our supervisor. I guess you could say I showed no

initiative; I guess you could say I displayed no desire for improvement.

Gone are the days when one gets a raise or a promotion for a job well done. The salary grid and the advancement ladder are based solely on number of years, on seniority — on how long you've *been there*.

# Wedding Leave

I recently discovered that my workplace has ‘wedding leave’: apparently you can get up to three days off — *with pay*. What the fuck is going on here?

I mean, what’s a wedding? It’s just a big party. Should employees be allowed to have personal parties on company time? I think not.

Oh, but it’s a once-in-a-lifetime party. Well, no, there’s a fifty-fifty chance the marriage will end in divorce, and the happy couple may well try again (presumably after shouting ‘Switch!’). But even allowing *one* party on company time is wrong — unless, of course, *every* employee is so entitled, not just those who choose to marry. Remember, it is a choice: getting married is not like getting sick. (Well, actually, it is, but that’s a separate point.)

So what’s so special about *this* choice? Getting married is just entering into a legal contract. Why isn’t everyone who enters into a legal contract allowed three days off to celebrate? Why is *this* legal contract cause for exception?

Perhaps because of what else getting married is: it’s a religious ceremony. Well, surely mixing religion and the workplace is a very contentious thing. Can I have three days off to celebrate *my* religious ceremony, the It’s-Time-To-Worship-The-Purple-Platypus-Weekend?

It seems to me that wedding leave is discrimination pure and simple — if not on religious grounds, then on grounds of marital status-to-be.

But perhaps I shouldn’t be so surprised. Our society has lots of customs that reward those who marry. Both of my siblings got married and therefore had their apartments half-

furnished with everything from blenders to stereos before they even moved in. I, on the other hand, have had to buy every single thing I wanted (and I still don't have a blender). Being married also means that your best friend can get medical benefits through your employer (gee, that's way better than a blender); I'm referring, of course, to spousal benefits, another policy that just doesn't stand up to contemporary scrutiny (based, as it is, on the single breadwinner, half-the-nation's-adults-are-and/or-need-to-be-'kept', premise). In truth, wedding leave is just one more perk for maintaining the status quo ("Settle down, get a job, find a girl you can marry ..." Cat Stevens).

Now, I haven't actually asked about wedding leave, and the fact that most weddings can and do happen on Saturday (one day, and not usually a work day) suggests that I could be mistaken: maybe the three days' leave with pay is intended for the honeymoon. (Oh, so only if I sanctify my sexual-domestic partnership with state permission or superstitious ritual am I allowed to take a holiday with my love on company time? What the fuck.)

## What's in a Flag?

I noticed at the beginning of this summer, when I was out on the lake, that one of the summer people had hung a rather large Canadian flag in a window. And two of the year-rounders had Canadian flags on poles. By the end of the summer, there were about fifteen. I was surprised. This is Canada. We aren't American. What's with the flags?

Well, maybe that's it. It's to say we *aren't* American. Many Canadian tourists wear a Canadian flag on their knapsacks for the same reason American tourists wear a Canadian flag on their knapsacks. But then why not just fly an American flag with the red slash of "No!" through it? Maybe because that wouldn't be very nice. And, well, we're Canadian. Also, it's a small lake. Everyone here already knows these people are Canadian. (Though I don't actually know about the summer people — *they* could be American.)

So again, what's with the flag? Are these people just saying they're proud to be Canadian? Well, they can't. They can't do that. I mean, how can you be proud to be Canadian? You can be proud of running a marathon in under four hours. That's an accomplishment. Being Canadian is just an accident. In order to be proud of something, you have to have had something to do with that something. It's nonsense for me to say I'm proud that we've walked on the Moon. Who's this 'we'? I had nothing to do with it. I certainly can't take any credit for it. So I can't possibly be proud of it.

So how can you be proud to be Canadian? Did you make Canada what it is today? I don't think so. But, then, what is Canada? What does it actually mean to be Canadian?

At one level (and to my mind, the only level), to be Canadian means to have been born within certain geopolitical boundaries. No one can take credit for where they were born. They weren't born yet. If you were born here, you haven't even had to pass the citizenship test and memorize the oath of allegiance. (Does Canada have an oath of allegiance? I have no idea. I was born here. I guess my allegiance goes without saying.)

Alternatively, being Canadian means to have lived within these certain geopolitical boundaries for a certain period of time under certain conditions. (They're the ones who have had to pass that citizenship test.) For some, getting here, becoming a Canadian, is certainly an achievement, something to be proud of. But *being* Canadian is a little different than, I guess, *becoming* Canadian.

Some might say that being Canadian means you have certain values. Oh yeah? Like what? Well, Canadians are friendly. Right. Our government sells weapons. The guy who sets traps in the forest won't mark them, doesn't care if my dog gets hurt or killed by one. And even if it were true that everyone, or even almost everyone, who lives here *is* friendly, well I'm sure a lot of people who live in other countries are also friendly. Furthermore, a lot of people who don't live in Canada drink beer and get stupid over hockey. And a lot of people who do live in Canada don't. My point is there are no *uniquely* Canadian values. And even if there were, does subscribing to them mean I can take credit for them? An odd sort of question, isn't it.

When people say they're proud to be Canadian (or whatever), maybe what they really mean is that they're *happy* to be Canadian. Well. Being proud and being happy are two different things. And frankly, I don't see the point in making a public proclamation of either one. The first is just bragging and the second is just stupid.

Unless it's like a gang colours thing. (In which case it's even more bragging and more stupid.) I'm Canadian means I belong to this gang, this tribe. Yeah so? Are you trying to make me say what gang I belong to? Are you trying to pick a fight?

Still, why not proclaim that you belong to any one of a number of groups you surely belong to? Why not fly the Horticultural Society's flag? Why the *Canadian* flag? Because a nation has more power than a horticultural society and you want to be sure people know you belong to the *big* gang, the *tough* gang? Why? I guess if someone's threatened you, you might want to announce that you're not alone, that someone's got your back. But I doubt anyone's threatened these people. And I doubt Canada's got their back. (*I* sure don't.) And anyway, if they really want to make someone think twice about attacking them, wouldn't they fly, say, the Hell's Angels flag? (Or, well, the American flag?)

## Vested Interests and Cancers

*Vested interest.* It sounds so solid. So respectable. So endowed with authority. Like a three-piece suit with a watch on a chain. But what does ‘vested interest’ mean? It means ‘self-interest’. A vested interest is nothing less than a self-interest. And nothing more.

But say ‘vested interest’ and, well, say no more. Literally. If I object to a zoning bylaw change that will probably lead to more traffic and tourists because that will destroy the silence and solitude of where I live, well, I’m just expressing my own personal interests. But if the guy who runs the gas station says the change should be approved because it will be good for business, well, that’s different. He has a business — he has a vested interest in the zoning bylaws. So suddenly his opinion, his desires, count more. It’s magic. It certainly isn’t rational.

Because it *isn’t* different. I want silence and solitude; he wants money. We’re both expressing what we want for ourselves, what we’re interested in: we’re both expressing self-interest.

‘But he has all that money invested in his business!’ Which just means he spent a lot of money expecting a certain future. Well, so did I. I bought a house, expecting a certain future. ‘Invest’ is just a business word for ‘gamble’ — you do X now hoping for Y in the future.

But say ‘business’ and the red carpet rolls out. (Rather like saying ‘religion’ or ‘kids’.) ‘I’ve got a business to run!’ can legitimize almost anything. Business is important. Business gets special treatment. It gets the right of way. Quite literally — we are to step aside and let business proceed unimpeded, unchallenged.

I think this is partly because business has a ‘social good’ aura. Business is good for the economy. It creates jobs. It provides us with much needed goods and services. Yeah right. Business ‘provides’ jobs the way people ‘provide’ labour. There’s no charity or social service on either end. Business people expect to be paid for those goods and services. They don’t contribute their stuff to society; they sell it. So business isn’t doing anything for the social good, for society — it’s doing for the self. Despite attempts to convince us otherwise.

For example, ‘We’re just following consumer demand.’ But society is not just a conglomerate of consumers, so even if you *are* just following consumer demand, you’re still not acting for the social good. Depending on *what* exactly consumers demand, you could be doing just the opposite. (And note the use of ‘demand’. It makes it sound like their behavior is *required*. It’s not. They have a choice. But ‘demand’ is far more compelling than ‘desire’, implying that resistance, their resistance, is futile, implying that they are without power here, and hence without responsibility. So even what they do *is* correctly identified as self-interested, well, they can hardly be blamed.) And of course consumers ‘demand’ lots of things, but companies provide only those that generate profit *for the company* — that is, for the owner/s of the company. (And there’s another one: ‘Our shareholders demand high returns.’ It’s yet another way of saying ‘Hey don’t blame us, we’re just doing what’s demanded of us, and we’re not doing it for ourselves, we’re doing it for our shareholders.’ As if you don’t own any shares. As if pleasing shareholders isn’t in your own interests.) Actually, companies provide things that they expect to generate profit even if consumers *don’t* demand them: if people really wanted product X or service Y, companies wouldn’t (have to) spend millions of dollars on advertising (to persuade them to buy it). Quite simply, many of those goods and services are *not* ‘much needed’.

The CEO of a bank once said “Return on equity is [an] important measure of a bank’s success.” Not the amount of good it does, not the amount of happiness it creates, no, these things don’t matter. Success isn’t even justice, it isn’t even getting back what you put out, no, success is getting back *more* than you put out. Self-interest. Literally, *interest*. For oneself.

The same CEO also responded to a question about the obligation to create and maintain jobs with “If we are to attract ... we need to create exciting new job opportunities ... to keep top talent ... and move forward ...” Embarrassing is his assumption that the question referred just to his bank — he understood ‘obligation’ to mean obligation *to the bank*, to the interests of the bank. I don’t think the phrase ‘society as a whole’ was even in his vocabulary.

Lurking somewhere in here is the notion that those with a vested interest in something will take better care of it, and *that’s* what justifies the greater weight to such interests. But first, that assumes a very ego-centered view of human beings; some of us are capable of taking good care of things for others. Second, it assumes a certain wisdom on the part of the self in question; there are a lot of people who don’t take good care of stuff even when it’s their own. Third, *self-interest* tends to be *short-term* interest, if only because the self is a very short-term enterprise. And much of what we’re talking about is long-term stuff, like natural resources, so taking good care of it requires a long-term perspective that by definition is precluded by self-interest. For example, that same CEO referred to “every stage of the life cycle” as “right through to start-up and then growth”. Excuse me? What about stasis? What about decline? They are stages of the *entire* life cycle. Unless, of course, you’re a cancer.

## On Demonstrations

Though I consider myself to be rather socially conscious, and while I have written many letters and cheques, I've never been part of a demonstration. For a number of reasons.

Let's consider first to whom the demonstration is directed. Perhaps primarily, it's meant for the people in power. It's meant to send them a message. But what possible message could be sent by a mass of people, some carrying signs, many shouting their contents. What's in a phrase, or even a complete sentence? If the goal is change, presenting claims without evidence, without argument, is surely insufficient. Do we really expect others to change their minds, their policies and practices, *without* evidence or argument? Do we really *want* them to be so stupid?

Perhaps the message is not in the signs but in the masses, in the show of numbers. Why are numbers important? Are we thus insisting the majority should rule? First, a demonstration, consisting of self-selected people, is hardly representative enough to justify claims of being *any* majority. Second, why should the majority rule? I know that our system of democracy is based on this principle, but consider it for a moment. 'Majority rule' is really an appeal to popularity, a bandwagon appeal. Should the opinion of the majority rule, no matter how ridiculous, immoral, or simply unsupported it is?

The only message masses can send is one of intimidation, one of threat: 'Listen to us or we'll beat down your door!' And the answer is Kent State or Tiananmen Square.

Perhaps the intended purpose of the demonstration is not to convert the people in power, but to convert others in the general populace to the cause. By merely proclaiming a

position? I want people to agree with me for good reason. But the tool of persuasion here is not reason, it's peer pressure. (Or the promise of party time.)

In any case, demonstrations tend not to increase social responsibility among their participants but to decrease it. When three or more human beings are gathered together, something called the diffusion of responsibility kicks in and the chance of people/property damage increases. Unfortunately, many riots start as demonstrations. But then what can you expect, given that mass gathering facilitates *emotional* expression rather than, as argued above, *rational* expression — *and* given that the motivating emotion in the first place is anger and frustration.

To consider a third possibility, perhaps the intended audience of the demonstration is the media. Thus, we encourage their bad habit of responding to and reporting about (only) spectacle. Aren't we tired of such sensationalist coverage? And while a picture may be worth a thousand words, most of those words will have to be fairly superficial. After all, to demonstrate is to show. It is not to tell.

## Politics in Government: The Problem with Representation

Long ago and far away, I was one of several high school students to participate in a Federal-Provincial Government Simulation. Each of us took on the role of a provincial or federal minister and met for three days of plenary sessions, committee meetings, and caucuses.

I was the federal Minister of State for Science and Technology, and I remember well the instructions of our Prime Minister: be vague; don't commit yourself to anything; if you don't know what they're talking about and have never heard of it before, tell them they're out of order; constantly assure them with such phrases as 'We will consider that', 'You have our support', and 'That will be discussed at a later date' — in other words, *don't* say 'I don't know', 'That's a good point', or 'This is a weakness with our policy, any suggestions?'. I was to represent and defend the federal government's position. Period. (That and always disagree with the opposition's position.)

I did my job well. And I guess because so many others did the same, it was three days of go nowhere, achieve nothing head-butting and face-saving. Any strategizing at caucus was not to solve a real problem, but simply to protect ego: insist, and be confident about it, that our way is the best way. Obviously there weren't any real discussions.

I went away disillusioned and discouraged. But I realize now that it was a *political* simulation, not a *government* simulation.

Then again, who am I kidding: after reading one *Hansard* or watching one televised parliamentary session, I knew it *was* a government simulation. So my question is, how did government ever get mixed up with politics?

Let me approach the problem from a different angle. I remember clearly a feeling of 'You're not playing fair!' at one meeting during which some other students started arguing with me as themselves and not as provincial representatives. I wanted to shout 'I know this is stupid, I'm not an idiot, but I can't say it's stupid, and you're not supposed to say it's stupid either because your province *supports* the federal government on this issue; and you, you're supposed to disagree, but not for the reasons you are — what you're saying is right, but it's not in your party position paper!'

So the problem is this: if we're all duty-bound to represent pre-determined positions, who's free to really discuss the problems and come up with a solution? I never thought I'd be saying representative government was bad, but that seems to be the case. (But then I've always thought that representative government meant representative of *constituency*, not representative of *party* — my MP corrected my error just recently.)

So perhaps we should elect to the House some people responsible to neither party nor constituency — just a bunch of intelligent, analytic, and creative people (and multidisciplinary too, no more lawyers or CEOs please). While I hesitate to suggest adding *more* people to the process, I think the presence of such free agents would do wonders for the quality of the discussion. Having such independents present might take the face-saving obsession down a few notches, as it might be easier to be corrected by a no-name, a neutral, than by the opposition. And new ideas might actually be judged on their own merit if they came from nowhere, so to speak.

However, while this is all very good for parliamentary discussion, what about parliamentary voting? I mean, *shouldn't* the people elected by constituencies vote according to their constituency's wishes? Well, yes, only if constituents hear, and understand, the discussion. (Otherwise, what's the point in

improving the discussion?) But by the time a representative polled the members of his/her constituency, well, we might as well have had a binding referendum. Which may not be a bad idea actually.

## Food Fight Breaks Out in the House of Commons

Have you watched the House of Commons proceedings lately? It's unbelievable. I haven't seen such petty bickering, name-calling, and tongue-sticking-outting since Dicky called Peter a wuss at recess back in grade two. Then Johnny, who was on Dicky's side, started throwing clumps of dirt at Dougie, who was on Peter's side, and a bunch of other boys started yelling and kicking and when the teacher came out, they all accused each other, pointing fingers, 'He started it!' 'No I didn't, *he* did!' 'Oh yeah?' 'Yeah!' and it started all over again.

But they weren't grown-ups, wearing suits-and-ties and saying "Mr. Speaker, I humbly submit ...". And they weren't being paid to run the fucking country.

It's hard to believe they can be so immature. So instead, I believe it's all a charade. To further convince us that there's simply no point in voting, let alone calling our MP or lobbying for this or that, no hope in hell of *any* participation in the process making *any* difference at all. That way the corporate agenda can proceed, with nothing whatsoever in its way.

# God Promised!

With such regularity, it really should be the refrain of every national anthem, we hear something along these lines: ‘The land is rightfully ours. God promised it to *us*.’

Yeah well, God lies. Or at least he changes his mind.

Consider this: “And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying ...’And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession.” It’s from Genesis 17:3,8. Genesis 13:15 and Exodus 32:13 say pretty much the same thing. But check out Acts 7:5, which says “And he gave him none inheritance in it ... yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him ...” Promises, promises, eh? But of course the retraction is in the New Testament, which isn’t recognized by those of the Jewish faith.

No matter, there are lots of lies and changing of God’s mind in the Old Testament:

- God said that Adam would die on the day he ate the apple (Gen 2:16,17), but he didn’t — read Gen 3:17 and Gen 5:3.
- Jehoiakim was told that he wouldn’t have a son (Jer 36:30), but he did — read 2Kings 24:6.
- God promised Jacob that he would return from Egypt (Gen 46:3,4), but he didn’t — he died in Egypt (Gen 49).
- Nebuchadnezzar was to have captured and destroyed Tyre (Ezek 26:3-5,7,10,13-14). He didn’t (surprise!) — Alexander the Great did.

- “‘I am merciful,’ saith the Lord, ‘and I will not keep anger for ever’” (Jer 3:12); “Ye have kindled a fire in mine anger, which shall burn for ever” (Jer 17:4). Well, which is it?
- Israel shall rise again (Jer 31:4); Israel shall not rise again (Amos 5:2). She loves me, she loves me not.
- “They shall seek me early, but they shall not find me” (Prov 1:28); nope, I lied — “these that seek me early *shall* find me” (Prov 8:17).
- “Every living thing that liveth shall be meat for you” (Gen 9:3); wait, changed my mind — “these shall ye not eat of them that chew the cud or of them that divide the cloven hoof” (Deut 14:7).

Need I go on? To start a war on the basis of what God said is about as ridiculous as you can get. It’s quite possible that he lied when he said the land was yours. It’s quite possible that he changed his mind. Give it up!

Don’t misunderstand. I’m not just picking on the Jewish people. I’m picking on *anyone* foolish enough to claim such supernatural support. ‘God said so’ is not exactly a strong premise for anything, let alone for going to war. ‘Whose God?’ is a reasonable response to such a claim. So is ‘Oh yeah? Prove it!’

For better or worse (and my vote is on worse), our society (well actually, the U.S., aka the U.N.) distinguishes between just and unjust wars. One of the criteria for a just war is that there must be a just cause, a valid reason that justifies the war. Isn’t it about time, then, that we consider all religious wars to be *unjust* wars?

## In Commemoration of the Holocaust

I'm not saying it didn't happen.

I'm not saying that, in *any* way, it was okay.

But I'd like to point out that a devout Jew would've done, would do, the same thing to the Germans if God told him to.

'Oh but God would never command such a thing.'

Take a better look at your *Bible*:

- "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:8). (Eight million innocent people were put to death because of this command alone — but do read on.)
- "Seven nations greater and mightier than thou; and when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them ..." (Deuteronomy 7:1-2.) (This meant genocide for seven nations: the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Deuteronomy 7:1.)
- "So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded" (Joshua 10:40). (This included Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir — in each of these cities he "utterly destroyed all the souls that were therein; he left none remaining .. as the Lord God of Israel commanded" — Joshua 10:28-40.)

- “And he [Moses] said unto them, ‘Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, “Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man, his companion, and every man his neighbour.”’ And the children of Levi did...and there fell of the people that day about 3,000 men ...” (Exodus 32:27-29).
- “Samuel also said unto Saul ... “Thus saith the Lord of hosts ... Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling ...’ And Saul smote the Amalekites ... and utterly destroyed all the people...” (1 Samuel 15:1-3,7-8).
- “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, ‘Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites ...’ And they warred against the Midianites as the Lord commanded Moses; and they slew all the males” (Numbers 31:1-2, 7).
- “And the Lord God said unto Joshua ... he [Achan] that is taken with the accursed thing [he stole something] shall be burnt with fire .... And Joshua ... took Achan ... and his sons, and his daughters ... and burned them with fire ...” (Joshua 7:10, 15, 24-26). (This one in particular reminded me of the gas ovens. Can you spell ‘ironic’?)
- “And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him [Samson], and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men ...” (Judges 14:19).
- “And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him [*mightily* this time]...and he...slew a thousand men ...” (Judges 15:14,15).

Need I go on? Religions are full of commands to kill, and the Jewish one is no different. In particular, ethnic cleansing (such as that of the Holocaust) has strong religious support. And, of course, the faithful are compelled to obey their God's commandments. So if God had said, were to say, "Go ye and slay all who hath been born of the land that is Germany," well, "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones" (Psalms 137:9).

## John Smith and his Biochem Cubes

Suppose John Smith makes biochem cubes: biological-chemical cubes about one metre by one metre with an input for resources required for sustenance and an output for unusable processed resources. Why does John Smith make biochem cubes? Good question. Truth be told, they're unlikely to make the world a better place. And he doesn't sell them.

Should we make allowances for John Smith with regard to money (salary, income tax, subsidies, etc.)? After all, he has, let's say, ten biochem cubes to support. If they are to stay alive, he needs to provide sustenance. He needs a bigger house. More electricity. More food.

Should we encourage his 'hobby'? Perhaps consider it respectable, or a rite of passage to maturity?

Or should we censure it? Because once his biochem cubes become ambulatory, the rest of us have to go around them in one way or another. And when we're both dead, his ecological footprint will have been at least ten times mine. (More, if the biochem cubes he made go out and make other biochem cubes.)

## The Concept of Swearing

I filled in for a high school English teacher one day who had left the following instructions: “Have the students rewrite one of the two scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* — either the balcony scene or the fight scene — into contemporary English.”

“Okay,” I said to the class, “this can be lots of fun, let’s take a look. Open your books to the fight scene, please, and imagine it: you have these guys raging at each other, and they’ve been doing it for years; they’re going to fight now, and they’re going to fight so hard a couple of them end up stabbed to death. Now instead of shouting ‘A plague o’ both your houses!’, Mercutio would say, if it were today, he’d say maybe ‘Fuck you!’, right? Okay, go ahead, see if you can translate the whole scene.”

The students did indeed have lots of fun. And the principal had hysterics. Why did you take it upon yourself to introduce vulgarities into a lesson, he asked. I didn’t ‘introduce’ anything, I responded, we were translating Shakespeare. ‘Zounds, Shakespeare uses vulgarities all the time, I added, seeing the need for further explanation. No matter, the principal asked me to promise never again to swear in class. But I didn’t swear in class; I quoted a character who swore. He smiled at me as if I were being silly. It’s what men do when they don’t understand what a woman has says. An hour later, exhausted by the attempt, I agreed never again to quote a character who swears. I then asked the principal to provide me with a list of words he considered swear words. He smiled at me again. Look, I persisted, I’m promising to abide by your rules — but I’ll need to know what they are, *specifically*.

Because it seems to me that what is and is not a swear word is rather arbitrary. True, most of our ‘bad words’ refer to

religious characters ('Christ!' 'God damn it!') or bodily parts and functions ('Shit!' 'Fuck!'). But if we had any shred of consistency about us, yelling 'Angels!', 'Mucous!', and 'Birthing!' would be just as bad.

Trying to find some semblance of logic, I once thought that our swear words are those words which refer to things we fear, hence the horror when they're invoked in anger. That may explain 'Jesus Christ!' (at least, for Christians) but, well, I don't know about you, but *I* don't live in fear of shit.

Then I thought perhaps swear words are things we want to keep special, sacred, and the offence is in the mention, the making common. Again, this works for the religious terms and maybe even the sexual terms, but defecation is not exactly a holy ritual.

To say they're things we want to keep private, hence the offence at proclamation loud and clear, also doesn't work. That taking prayer out of public schools was a battle suggests that religious words are *not* to be spoken only in private. Conversely, haemorrhoids, at least until Preparation H came along, have been a matter of some privacy, but that word never made it to the bad word list. And to say that swear words are our society's unmentionables simply begs the question. Besides, yeast infections are pretty unmentionable too, but they don't have swear status.

So I gave up. There is simply no rational explanation for what makes a word a swear word. Swearing, amazingly high on the social 'Shalt Not' list, is defined at best by custom, at worst by whimsy. (And I doubt that I followed the same customs as the principal; certainly our sense of whimsy was different.)

Even more irrational is that context seems to be irrelevant. Swearing in anger, pain, or frustration, at no one in particular, seems to be as reprehensible as swearing at a specific person. I should think that the 'Fuck!' I yell when alone (say, whenever I hit my thumb with a hammer) is trivial compared to the 'Fuck

you!' I yell at my neighbour (say, whenever he looks at me). But they're both swearing; they're both bad.

And yet, context *is* relevant: words are not intrinsically good or bad — it's how we use them that makes them so. Consider 'ass'. 'The ass is a noble creature.' In that case, the word's okay. But if I say 'You're such an ass!' then the word is offensive, and, if you like, a 'bad' word, a 'swear' word. Context creates meaning, and meaning is what matters.

*Sometimes.* Not only is the concept of swearing irrational, it's terribly inconsistent. Consider the word 'girls'. 'The girls are here.' That's okay. But if the coach is reaming out his losing senior boys' basketball team at half-time in the locker room and he says with disgust and derision, 'Now *girls*, you've got to play with your eyes open!' then doesn't the word 'girls' become a swear word? Isn't it offensive? Of course it is. To girls everywhere. (As well as, unfortunately, to the boys — except the ones who value girls and consider it an honour to be called one.)

At the end of the day, I saw the principal's secretary flipping through a dictionary with some frustration. Poor man probably thought if it's in the dictionary, it's okay. And then realized that the words 'god,' 'damn' and 'it' are in the dictionary. As are 'ass' and 'hole'.

# Land Ownership

I've somewhat unthinkingly agreed with indigenous claims that they got ripped off with regard to their land, that they didn't get paid a fair price. But suddenly it occurred to me: what gave them the right to ask a price in the first place? That is, on what basis was the land theirs to sell? On what basis did they *own* it? People seem to accept that since they were there first, they own it. But one, *were* they there first? Weren't the Clovis people there first? And even if they were, so what? We don't use 'there first' to establish ownership of other things.

Typically, we own, and therefore can sell, what we make, what we add our labor to (leaving aside, for the moment, the question of how we came to own the raw materials we added our labor to, because it's really the same as the main question here). But no one made land.

So, is the basis for ownership occupancy? But a person can technically occupy no more than, say, two cubic meters at a time. So how are we defining 'occupancy'? By a broader definition of spatial occupancy? Or by some temporal occupancy? Surely anything we come up with in this regard will be relatively arbitrary.

So, is improvement the critical element? When one improves the land, one gains ownership over it? 'Course, then one has to define 'improvement'. My neighbour thinks cutting down trees and putting buildings on the land is an improvement. 'Improvement for whom?' is but one question that needs an answer here. 'Improvement to do what?' is another.

Maybe the matter is better solved by focusing not on how one comes to *own* land, but on how *one* comes to own land. That is, if we look not at individuals, but, instead, at groups,

maybe we can define 'occupy' more effectively. 'Course, *then* we have to define the sort of groups we consider legitimate for this purpose. And, I'll anticipate here, why should *genetic* heritage count more than any other criterion of group membership?

# **Income Tax Deductions: Financial Reward for Dependence and Reproduction**

In Canada, if one agrees to pay someone else's way in life, one gets to pay \$7,500 less in income tax. I'm referring, of course, to the spousal deduction.

If one decides to make some people and pay their way, one gets to pay \$7,500 less per person in income tax. The deduction for kids.

What's the ethical basis for these deductions? If you've agreed to pay someone else's way in life and therefore pay less income tax, who picks up the slack? Someone else! (Me!) How is that fair?

Maybe we can answer that question if we first answer the question 'Why are there any deductions at all?' That is, why shouldn't we all just pay a percentage of our total income, period?

Are the deductions corrections for other errors? University tuition is too high, so those who pay it get to deduct a certain amount on their income tax as compensation? Well, fix the high tuition! And in the case of spousal and dependent deductions, what error is being corrected?

Or are deductions a sort of social engineering? Is the spousal deduction meant to encourage men to have wives? Why? Why is it such a good thing to have, or to be, a 'kept woman'? And is the species in danger of becoming extinct? Is that why we need to encourage people to reproduce? Don't think so ...

## A Fun Run

I happened to experience once upon a time a provocative juxtaposition: I watched the IAAF World Cross Country Championships, with Kenyans in the lead of course, just after I saw the news about a famine in east Africa, in particular, in Kenya.

So it occurred to me that any one Kenyan runner (there are always several leading the pack) would have had to eat the entire village's food just to develop the strength and stamina to become a world class runner. Should a village make, or be made to make, such a sacrifice? I mean, how does a country full of bloated bellies, with half its population under fifteen, and so malnourished they're brain-damaged, how can such a country produce and sustain a team of elite athletes? (Then again, with first prize at \$40,000 and a clean team sweep, not unusual for Kenya, totalling almost \$100,000, how can it not?)

Seeing a Canadian with the front runners, I wonder on what grounds could it be morally acceptable for that Canadian, who probably has a job that pays about \$30,000, to beat the Kenyan, whose annual income is more like \$3,000? I mean, that's 15 years' wages waiting at the finish line for her. (Would winning and turning over the prize money to the Kenyan be any better?) (Should such races be segregated by economic status?)

The Canadian runner, looking terribly overfed, falls behind, and I realize that the Kenyan may well have had to spend a whole year's salary just to get to the race. Though of course maybe her airfare and accommodations were paid for. And I rather suspect she won't keep the \$40,000 for herself. (Would it be wrong if she did?)

And as the Canadian runner falls further back, I see another runner move ahead, and realize Kenya and Ethiopia are racing against each other for the gold. How sick is that? Now I know there are a number of reasons for the starvation and some of them, such as overpopulation, are their own fault. But some of them are not. They don't control the climate (and if anyone does, we, the first world countries with our climate-changing industry, do). And then there's the interest on third world debt that I keep hearing about — the principal has been paid back over and over, but still, due to the wonder of compound interest, standard bank loan policy, they're supposed to keep paying and paying.

It's a commercial break now, time for a word from the sponsors: a bank — a big bank. (Is there any other kind now?) Of course. So let me summarize: one of the largest and most powerful financial institutions has staged a race, has dangled \$100,000 at the finish line, and then watches representatives of two starving countries, starving *because* of the bank, compete for it. (How sick is that.)

The Kenyans win. Easily. And I wonder now whether the immorality lies not in having these races, but in not having more of them.

# Quarantining People with AIDS

*This was written, obviously, back in the 80s when ‘we’ first ‘found out’ about AIDS. Don’t know that I’d change much, given the COVID pandemic — which became pandemic because whole countries refused to quarantine themselves (by refusing to let anyone in or out). And almost a year later, into the second wave and seeing mutations, people are still ignoring ‘advice’ to isolate themselves, wear masks, etc. At least it’s not fatal. For most of us.*

What does a clear-thinking society do when a contagious and fatal disease breaks out?

- (a) shoot everyone who gets it
- (b) worry a lot and hope like hell you’re not next
- (c) quarantine those affected and help them make the best of what’s left of their lives

To our credit, we haven’t chosen (a). To our discredit, we haven’t chosen (c). (And if you’ve read the How-Not-To-Flunk Guide to Multiple-Choice Tests, you know that (c) is the correct answer because it’s the longest.)

I am, of course, talking about AIDS.

Quarantine? Are you serious? Well, yes. It was good enough for the Bubonic Plague, tuberculosis, and the Ebola virus. Why shouldn’t it do for AIDS? We don’t have to *shoot* them. Some of them are very nice people. A quarantine is the obvious solution.

So why haven’t we done the obvious? Why haven’t we put our people with AIDS in quarantine? I think it’s because we made two mistakes early on, and we’re stumbling over ourselves

to make up for them. One, we associated AIDS with sex, most especially homosex. Two, we associated sex, most especially homosex, with morality. And so we associated AIDS with morality: getting AIDS was a sure sign of sin.

But, with a little help from the Red Cross, we've grown up since then. We *know* now that some of them are very nice people. And, well, if we quarantine them, that would make them feel like outcasts. And we're trying so hard to accept them now, to apologize for our past stupidity.

Yeah, with our present stupidity! It could prove to be a very costly apology. Evil or not, people with AIDS *are* contagious, *fatally* so, under certain specific conditions. Just like —

But but but, you stutter, it's *not* the same, you can't get AIDS just by breathing. Good point. Though for many people, having sex *is* pretty much the same as breathing. (And certainly for a good number, shooting up is just as *important* as breathing.)

But you're quite right, it's not quite the same, AIDS is not quite as easily spread. Which is why (d) is *really* the right answer: mandatory testing and a tattoo.

But but but, you gasp this time, that's what they did to the Jews in Nazi Germany, they were 'branded' with the yellow Star of David, that's discrimination!

But but but, I butt back, this is *justified* discrimination — justified because of one important difference: sex with a Jew won't kill you. (Well, okay, I suppose it depends on the Jew. I wouldn't screw around with Abraham.)

It doesn't have to be a big thing, no scarlet letter on the forehead (though of course an 'A' turns out to be appropriate). In fact, it doesn't even have to be that visible. Maybe something discreetly placed on the hip, a little warning sign of the danger ahead (or below, as the case is). First Aiders, however, might prefer it to be a little *less* discreetly placed, maybe something on the chest would suffice; most people don't walk around with a pair of latex gloves in their wallet.

Only the unenlightened would see it as a brand. (And the unenlightened have *already* branded people with AIDS.) The rest of us could see it simply as a warning sign. Or maybe as a fashion statement: I'm into dry sex. In any case, a tattoo would enable people with AIDS to walk among us, without endangering us: as long as we knew who they were, we'd be safe: we could choose to avoid the exchange of bodily fluids.

Unless, of course, they forced themselves (and their fluids) upon us. But not even a quarantine would prevent that; we've tried it — we call it prison. So maybe we *should* consider (a): maybe we *should* shoot them. Or maybe, we should shoot just the ones with a history of such forcible contact: people known to have raped or initiated blood-spattering fights. Well, no, let's be humane about it: let's wait until a person with AIDS actually rapes or gets into a fight with someone and then charge them with first degree murder — and *then* shoot them. And in the meantime, we can do (b), just worry a lot and hope like hell we're not that someone.

## Poor Little Kids

So I heard on the news the other day about the poor little kids whose school backpacks are so full of books they're developing debilitating back pain ... Oh please.

If they'd worked on their homework during the time allotted for just that purpose, instead of text messaging the person next to them, one painstaking letter at a time, to send the monumentally important query 'hey brittyny ow r u', they wouldn't have so much left over to take home.

If they'd paid attention during class, engaged their minds in the mental effort required to learn something, they might have even finished it during that allotted time.

If they wore their backpacks properly with both straps over their shoulders and high up, instead of oh-so-fashionably slung low over one shoulder, they wouldn't develop such back pain.

If mandatory physical education hadn't've been cancelled, or if they actually played outside after school instead of watching tv, or walked the five blocks to and from school instead of getting chauffeured by mom or dad, they might have enough strength in their little backs — wait a minute — are these the same kids for whom pens with rubberized grips are designed because their thumbs and forefingers are just too weak to hold onto them otherwise?

# Guns

Guns have a tendency to kill people. Usually when injury would have sufficed. What to do. (Assuming killing people isn't always a good thing.) Hm. I know! Let's replace bullet guns with dart guns. Darts filled with something that temporarily disables or immobilizes the person, causes an hour of paralysis or unconsciousness. Or severe nausea. Or diarrhoea.

Nah, that's too humane. It's okay for elephants, but for people?

Or probably, more importantly, it's too expensive. I would guess that a dart costs more than a bullet. But probably only because of supply and demand. And surely if we add in the lawsuits for accidental injury and death, the price of bullets increases substantially. (We won't add in the loss of limb or life because apparently that doesn't count for much — otherwise we wouldn't have so many bullet guns in the first place.)

Or well, it wouldn't work. What if you missed, what if, in a shoot-out, the police shot some innocent bystanders instead of the bad guys? *They'd* be the ones lying there unconscious. Well gee. Some might think better that than lying there dead.

The police might even think that. Even for the bad guys. In fact, I can't think of any policing situation in which instant and total, though temporary, disability wouldn't serve the purpose. (Reluctant cops might want to take a minute here to review that purpose.) Permanent injury and death is simply unnecessary. (Well, except for the *really* bad guys. That's why we'd bring back the death penalty right after we ban all the bullet guns.)

And as for non-police situations, well, again, a dart gun would be sufficient: if attacked, one could just fire the thing and

then watch one's assailant collapse; an hour should be long enough to escape and arrange for police to be present when he or she regains consciousness. (And if not, well, let's make it for two hours. We surely have the technology — the elephants, remember?)

As for illegitimate uses, well, first, any adult who without just cause uses a dart gun would probably have done the same with a bullet gun. Second, such an idiot could safely assume that his or her victim would return fire later. Probably on more than one well-timed occasion.

What if said victim didn't have a dart gun with which to return fire? Well, why wouldn't he or she? I mean, why not allow every adult to own one? Most men already have the ability to knock someone unconscious for an hour. So do most women, but they tend to be crippled by socialization. This would just even things out.

But it would make fighting so easy, surely violence would triple overnight. Hm. One, to judge by young male behaviour, fighting is already pretty easy. Two, my guess is that a fight in which one of the guys goes unconscious immediately, and stays that way for an hour — or starts vomiting copiously or suddenly gets severe diarrhoea — I don't think that's going to be a very fun fight. So I don't think dart guns will detract from the popularity of fists, knives, or baseball bats.

## To Wail like a Brat — and Advertise

On what basis do you claim the right to publicize your desire for money — at my expense? You use forests full of trees for unsolicited mailouts, you produce and then dump tons of nonbiodegradable plastic for oversized packaging aka advertising, you destroy beautiful landscapes with your ubiquitous signs, you stuff my mailboxes with your shouting which forces me to expend time and effort to shut you up, you intrude on my consciousness with your insistent voice — all because you want me to buy your product or service, so you can make some (more) money.

Listings in directories, by category of product, service, and so on, should be free of charge; when we want to purchase something, we'll find you in the directory. Any other advertising should be illegal. Frivolous depletion and destruction of the planet's resources is irresponsible. Shouting "I want I want I want" in someone's face is invasive and assaultive. In short, advertising is immature.

## Intelligent Design vs. Evolution

It's ironic that the stupid people are backing intelligent design, and the intelligent people are backing dumbfuck non-design. That's essentially what evolution is: whatever traits lead to increased reproduction, those are the ones that survive.

And what traits lead to reproduction? Not intelligence, that's for sure. Intelligent women don't want to have ten kids. They'd rather be doing medical research, composing sonatas, studying society. And intelligent men? They're not cruising the bars. They're home with a good book if they're not still in the office or the lab. It's stupid women who forget to take the pill or don't get a tubal ligation. And it's stupid men who don't use a condom or get a vasectomy. And it's stupid brute force that rapes. And those men aren't targeting the intellectuals. So we're evolving all right. Right into propagated species-wide stupidity.

But isn't evolution all about survival of the fittest? Yeah ... fittest to the environment. And since stupid people, the ones reproducing, don't even know what an 'ecological footprint' is, let alone have the character (and here I include both a certain morality and self-discipline) to minimize their ecological footprint, we're *not* going to survive.

Which means maybe evolution is intelligent design after all.

## A New Three-Strike Law

There are over 2 million people in prison. Each week, there's another thousand. We pay for their housing, food, medical care, education — about \$30,000 per year per prisoner.

So I propose a new three-strike law: first crime, you get rehab (maybe it was truly an accident; maybe you'll change your mind about stuff; maybe you'll grow up); second crime, you get imprisoned (okay, this is punishment, pure and simple, because if that's what it takes ...); third crime, you get exiled — kicked out.

Given your inability or unwillingness to follow the rules of this society, you should live in some other society, yeah? If you have found another society willing to take you, great. Bye. If not, we will escort you to a remote designated area. You're on your own.

Really, it's not as if the bar is set that high. Basically, you just have to pay for the stuff you use (via taxes for the stuff in common, such as roads and parks, and at the check-out for everything else) and abide by a bunch of laws, most of which are pretty reasonable. Sure, some of our taxes are unjustified and some price tags are too high, but we don't have to say we agree, we don't have to serve in the military, we don't even have to engage in that bare minimum of participation, voting. And a lot of price tags are too low, given the actual materials and labor. So geez loueez if you want a free ride and you can't abide by a few rules, then I say get the hell out. We're tired of carrying you.

I wonder if the overwhelming sense of entitlement, which is what, I think, justifies much lawbreaking in the eyes of the lawbreakers, comes from a life of getting what you don't deserve and not getting what you do deserve (and, conversely, seeing

others get what *they* don't deserve). For example, most 'kids' who live at home — do they still have to do daily chores to earn their allowance, not to mention their food and shelter? Every time I hear that they expect their parents to just give them money, for everything, I think, wait a minute! You want it? You work for it! Slave at a minimum wage job for a year and save up for it.

As for not getting what you deserve, yeah it's hard knowing that people with ten times as much didn't work ten times as long or ten times as hard. They either had it given to them or they got it through grossly unfair salary differences (bonuses at work, golden parachutes, severance pay). I've been declared redundant, I've been fired, and I've quit, but I've never gotten more than a — well, actually I never got a farewell party either. But that injustice doesn't justify the other injustice. And anyway, all this addresses just theft and property damage in all its manifestations — economic violations of the social contract, if you will.

Other violations of the social contract, such as personal damage in all its manifestations (assault, manslaughter, and so on) are harder to explain. And, truthfully, I find these people easier to exile. If you have so little control over yourself or so much disregard for me, for my life, I'd rather you be somewhere else. Far away.

So, go! Let us escort you to our border. Cross over into this designated non-country, and you can do whatever you want. If you're not killed first by others like you. Or by just trying to live without society, without the benefits of a couple thousand of years of others' work. Work that has given us dvd players and ipods, not to mention medical treatment, and shoes, and light bulbs, and flush toilets. But hey, you gave all that the finger. So make your own damn shoes. And be careful not to step in your own shit. (I dare say you'll miss us a lot more than we'll miss you.)

# The Illegality of Assisted Suicide

Let's say assisted suicide is illegal because it's often a tragic, premature, perhaps even ill-informed, death. Well, so is unassisted suicide.

And there are alternatives to assisted suicide: better pain management, for example, or counselling. Same goes for unassisted suicide.

Assisted suicide violates our social values, our respect for life. And yet unassisted suicide is legal *because* 'It's *your* life'.

So it seems it's the *assistance* that's the problem, perhaps because involving someone else opens the door to possible abuse, to coercion. But *unassisted* suicide can also be coerced: 'If you don't kill yourself, I will.' And really, allowing unassisted suicide already puts us on a slippery slope. Today, it's okay to kill yourself. Tomorrow, it's okay to kill someone else.

It's *not* a slippery slope though because we draw lines. For example, the person has to consent.

And actually, the line can be more certainly drawn in the case of assisted suicide than unassisted suicide because of the presence of disinterested third parties to determine said consent, and to *make sure* the consent is competent, informed, and voluntary.

Furthermore, the assistance is not as distinguishing as you might think. Most 'unassisted' suicides also require assistance: the provision of a gun, a razor blade, a bottle of pills. A bridge.

Oh but the 'assistance' is provided without the intent to bring about the other's death. So? Unassisted suicide is legal. How can intentionally assisting something legal be *illegal*?

Lastly, assistance is typically required in two cases. Either the person is physically incapable — in which case prohibiting

assistance is clearly discrimination on the basis of physical ability (suicide is a right but only for physically capable people). Or the person just wants to get it done right — in which case assistance wouldn't even *be* required if reliable, painless, user-friendly even-by-the-feeble methods were available.

## What's Wrong with Profit?

Many would say it's simply undeserved. By any standard. Be it need, ability, effort, or accomplishment/contribution. In this respect, one might be tempted to compare profit to the ridiculously high salaries of sports stars. And senators. But salary is not profit. Even if a salary is ridiculously high, it is still a salary, a payment for services rendered; and as such it is, in theory, deserved. Or at least earned.

Profit, on the other hand, is, by its very definition, in a separate, completely gratuitous, *undeserved* category. It's the difference between how much X cost you to make or do and how much you were paid for it when you sold it. Profit is getting more than you give.

It is, therefore, perhaps more like lottery winnings: you put out a dollar and get back a million. One might argue that at least with a lottery, everyone has an equal chance at that undeserved excess; at least it's fair. But everyone has an equal chance with profit too. Anyone can open a business. And with a little luck, you can put out a dollar and eventually get back a million. At least with profit, it's not *just* a matter of luck: one needs to do a little more than scratch a ticket. And don't forget that Bozo could take his million-dollar lottery win and purchase a million tickets in the next lottery, the one with the five million pot. So much for equal chance.

Perhaps the problem with profit is that it seems like such a selfish thing. But that's making an assumption about what the profit will be used for. What about Carnegie? (When was the last time Bozo set up a public interest foundation?) What if the profit were used not for philanthropy, but for research and development? Or expansion? What if the company is in the

cure-for-cancer line of business? Is profit okay then? Do the ends justify, excuse, the means?

Maybe the problem isn't profit per se, but the amount of profit. One could argue that ridiculously high profits could not have been acquired without some exploitation, some wrongdoing: if there's that much profit, that much difference between expense and revenue, then either your wages are too low or your prices are too high. In a perfectly fair world, there should be *no* difference between expense and revenue: X should cost exactly what it cost.

And there's the problem: rather than establishing an absolute standard, a rule of *ought*, prices and expenses are set by rules of *can*; further, prices and expenses are determined independent of each other. The result is a difference, a profit — or a loss. Ah. Imagine a world without losses. Easy. just imagine a world without profits. Imagine fixed values.

On what basis could we establish fixed values? Not need, because need fluctuates. Earthquake victims will pay \$25 for a \$10 two-by-four, and the otherwise unemployed accept jobs at \$2/hour.

Ability and effort would likewise lead to unfixed figures. If Person A has to work twice as hard as Person B to type a letter, he would get paid twice as much; the price of the letter would thus vary according to who typed it.

Using contribution or accomplishment as a standard might work. A perfectly typed letter could be worth \$5. And a perfectly-placed brick could also be worth \$5. And a perfectly-repaired ruptured artery could be worth \$500. If you find typing letters difficult and time-consuming, you should go into brick-laying instead. And if the person next to you is able to lay bricks twice as quickly or with half the effort, why shouldn't they get paid twice as much or put in half the hours? Chances are if they find it that unchallenging, they'll be happier doing surgery anyway.

One last note, though, about loss: even if the prices and expenses are fixed and fair, a loss can be incurred. But only if products already made are not purchased. Note that this can't apply to services: you can't perform a service and then find no one willing to pay you for it. Well you can. But that would be really stupid. Well, couldn't we say you were just as stupid to make a hundred thousand cars before you had a hundred thousand orders?

# Tax Exemptions for Charitable Institutions

If you believe in the supernatural and on that basis obtain a paying job, as a minister, priest, pastor, whatever, you don't have to pay income tax. If you establish a group of like believers and buy a piece of land and/or a building for meetings, you don't have to pay property tax. And if your group buys stuff, like computers, billboards, and so on, you don't have to pay sales tax. You're a charitable institution.

What's charitable about killing people who don't believe what you believe? What's charitable about telling half of your group that they're subordinate? What's charitable about telling another portion of your group that they're sick? What's charitable about discouraging rational thought unless it supports your beliefs? What's charitable about telling all of them they're sinners just by virtue of having been born?

If we're going to exempt people from contributing to the upkeep of our roads, hospitals, schools, and so on because of their (presumed) ethically good behavior (an interesting idea, by the way), then let's at least be consistent: let's also exempt snowplow operators, doctors, nurses, teachers, firefighters, police officers, counselors, plumbers, electricians. And so on.

# This Weather

A deep freeze continues to sweep through Europe, mudslides and avalanches caused by heavy rains and snowmelt in Oregon and Washington have prompted evacuation notices, prolonged drought continues to devastate much of the American Midwest, Texas, and Mexico, with many areas now being without rain for over 200 days, and flash fires continue to rage throughout those areas, a heat wave in Australia continues unabated with temperatures well over 100 degrees, there are tornado alerts for regions throughout Tennessee and Oklahoma, Hurricane Gordon has touched down in Florida, swift on the heels of Hurricane Florence, flash floods are rampant in southern parts of Africa, and torrential rains have Brazil still in a state of emergency.

This weather brought to you by everyone who's driven a gas-guzzling minivan, pick-up, SUV, or RV in the last thirty years, everyone who still makes unnecessary trips, especially trips by air, snowmobile, ATV, and jetski, and everyone who still lets their vehicle idle while they're somewhere else doing whatever the fuck they're doing. And everyone who still eats meat.

## Free to be — Offensive (You are *such* an idiot.)

What does it mean to say you're offended? If it means merely that you disagree with what I have said, then surely we have a right to offend. Surely the freedom of speech allows the expression of dissent. Even if your disagreement includes any number of unpleasant emotions (embarrassment, shame, displeasure, irritation, annoyance, anger, distress, outrage, shock, fear, disappointment, frustration, envy, humiliation, guilt, sadness, anxiety, discomfort, disgust, a vague sense that my words are inappropriate or indecent, whatever the hell that means). Though it must be said that often there is no awareness of disagreement; there is only the unpleasant emotion.

If 'offend' is the verb form of 'offence' as in 'offences', then to offend is (also) to do wrong. But, why, how is it wrong for me to express a view with which you disagree? Are you hurt by dissent? Harmed in any way? Disagreement aside, *can* words harm? Well, yes. Insults, in part, can cause psychological injury, which in turn may or may not cause physical distress. If I call Dick an idiot, and you disagree, do you feel hurt? Probably not. (Though I suppose it depends on whether Dick is your boss or your son.) But if I call *you* an idiot, you may feel hurt. Your blood pressure may rise. (Though that may depend on whether I'm your boss.) (Or your son.) So the real questions are do you have a right not to hurt in such a way, do I have a duty not to call you an idiot, is it wrong for me to do so?

Okay, but are we talking about a *moral* right, duty, and wrong or are we talking about a *legal* right, duty, and wrong? Because it may be morally wrong to do X and yet we may want

to retain the legal right to do so — some moral wrongs are not ‘worth’ illegalizing. Is my calling you, or Dick, an idiot one of these?

We might want to distinguish between dissenting opinions (‘Dick is an idiot’) and insults (‘You are an idiot’). After all, the latter are generally characterized by *intent* to harm whereas the former, generally, are not. But perhaps all we need do is distinguish on the basis of severity (rather than on the basis of kind). That would cover threats as well. (‘If you continue to be an idiot, I’m going to kill you.’) If I’m your mom (or otherwise important to you) (let’s just say) and you are young (or perhaps otherwise psychologically weak), then my calling you an idiot, especially on an hourly basis, is likely to cause permanent damage. You’ll never develop sufficient confidence or esteem to become a rocket scientist.

But surely at some point we are responsible for our psychological weaknesses. If you are an adult and such an idiot that you take to your bed at being called an idiot, or at hearing Dick called an idiot, surely the blame for such severe injury is not all mine. (And if instead you take up arms, then it is *I* who is the idiot.)

What if you don’t take to your bed? What if you continue to show up for work, but my continuous insults (or dissenting opinions?) just annoy the hell out of you all day, but so much so that you become exhausted by the effort not to take up arms against me and so become less exceptional at your job? Which means you don’t get the promotions or commissions that would’ve meant you could send your son, Dick, to college. So he could become a rocket scientist. Surely I’m in the wrong here. Should you therefore have legal as well as moral grounds for — something short of taking up arms? Even if — and perhaps *especially* if — I’m unaware that my remarks (jokes, taunts, full-page ads and billboards) are causing you such distress?

And surely we are responsible for our own opinions and beliefs. I know people say they were ‘born Catholic’ or whatever, but don’t they really mean they were born to Catholic parents? You can’t be born *believing* anything, let alone the tenets of Catholicism. Our opinions, our beliefs, values, attitudes — these are within our control, we *voluntarily* hold them.

Does it matter whether or not you actually *are* an idiot? Taking to your bed, or taking up arms would seem to prove its truth — but does truth put me wholly in the right?

Another consideration is the practical consequences. If we prohibit offense — My god, if every time I opened my mouth I had to be sure not to offend, not to in some way challenge any opinion, any belief, any value, any attitude, even if said opinions, beliefs, values, and attitudes are held unconsciously such that disagreement is bypassed and the unpleasant emotion is just a sort of psychological ... I don’t even know what to call that unawareness, that mental laziness, that apparently vehemently felt response whose cause is unknown to the one experiencing it, perhaps usually occurring with ‘offenses to one’s moral, religious, or patriotic sensibilities’ (what the hell are ‘sensibilities’?) — Well, I wouldn’t gotten past ‘My god’.

Which brings us to another consideration: the standard of reasonableness. If because of your unreasonable beliefs, you are offended by my expression of a reasonable opinion, doesn’t that put *you* in the wrong? As well as make you an idiot?

## Better than Speech Codes

Instead of prohibiting ‘hate speech’, we should just prohibit all claims made without reasons.

Oh how our society would change! If we were legally compelled to provide reasons, justifications, evidence, for every claim we made in public ...

No exemptions for politicians — every speech, every statement to the press ...

No exemptions for business — every ad, my god, that one alone gives one pause ...

Go ahead. Say whatever you think. But only if you also say *why* you think it.

How ridiculous most of us would sound most of the time. Our almost complete dependence on immature appeals to emotion, our thin and pathetic appeals to custom, tradition, past practice majorities, questionable authorities — all would be exposed by expression. How silent we would suddenly fall after the unwarranted, self-righteous ‘because — ’ How quickly we would just — shut up.

# Seniority

At one of my previous workplaces, we had a little ceremony each year honouring employees who had worked there for five, ten, or fifteen years. I used to go. (There was free pizza.) But then I stopped. (After three years, I could afford my own pizza.)

It's a curious thing, this esteem we have for longevity. Why is an anniversary cause for celebration? I can see it in some Purple Heart sense — congratulations for surviving — but that doesn't seem to be the spirit in which such celebrations are intended. (Then again ...)

So what's the big deal about being married to the same person, or working for the same company, for so many years? Is it supposed to be some expression of loyalty, which is then rewarded? What's loyalty? And why is it good? Is it trust? In a person, or company, no matter what they do? Excuse me, but the day my partner or my employer starts making weapons or selling unsafe products, I'm outta there.

Let's admit it, 'seniority' rewards quantity rather than quality. I mean, what if it were a shitty marriage? Why applaud someone for staying in it? (Do you want fries with that?)

And what if the person's a mediocre employee? We give them a raise every year just because they've been there one more year. But we don't give a raise to the guy who's doing a good job. Is it any wonder then that so many employees develop a clock-punching mentality, that they figure just being there, just putting in time, is enough? Because apparently, it is. If they put in enough time, they get a wage increase, extra holidays, protection from lay-off, and eventually, so very appropriately, a gold watch.

Granted, sometimes there's a connection between quantity and quality: the longer you work at it, the better you get, the more you know. Sometimes. (So why not just reward that increase in quality. Directly.) But unless you get moved to a different position, the level of mastery is often achieved before five years, certainly usually before ten or fifteen years. So seniority means stagnation, complacency. It could also mean cowardice, fear of trying something new. (Or simply the lack of other opportunities.) And of course, if one hangs on *because* of the rewards, it means self-interestedness.

My guess is that after a certain point, performance *declines*, rather than *inclines*, with seniority. You know you can't be easily fired, you feel secure, you feel comfortable. So you don't try as hard, you get a little lazy. And you get a little bored, you get a little dull.

So seniority should not be rewarded. And rather than penalizing the person who's changed jobs every few years, we should be recruiting them.

## People Skills

I've always been rather proud of not having any 'people skills'. Of not being able to 'talk to people', smooth things over, talk them out of their way of seeing things, talk them over to my way, persuade, influence, manipulate, control. No wonder supervisors, salespeople, and customer relations people need good people skills. And no wonder I resent them: I've always been the subordinate, the consumer, the customer. I'm the one the people skills are used on.

Of course, subordinates are expected to have good people skills too, but what's meant *then* is the ability to get along, follow, fold, obey. And, well, as I said, I'm not very good at that.

But no, no, I'm told, you've got it all wrong. People skills are *communication* skills. Hm. And what might skilful communication be? Putting your message in words the other person will most likely understand, instead of in words that most easily come to mind? That's okay. That's just courtesy. But choosing your language, your vocabulary and sentence structure, to increase the likelihood not of *understanding*, but of *agreement* — that's manipulation. (And if you abandon the meaning in order to get that agreement, that's just plain lying.)

There's a difference in intent. And loading your language shows that you don't respect the other person's rationality. (Nor do you respect your own: if your reasons were good, you wouldn't have to resort to manipulation.) Such willful discouragement of dissent also slows little respect for their autonomy. (What exactly are you afraid of?).

But no, again, it seems I've got it wrong: communication skills just refer to the ability to listen to what the other person is saying, and the ability to express yourself clearly. Still thinking

about control, and insecurity, it occurs to me that *men* must've introduced the term. Because women grow up with *those* people skills. It's such a no big deal, we don't have to name it. And if we did, we'd call it maturity, and self-knowledge.

# Having Kids and Having Religion

Most people associate pronatalism with religionism. Either because of its 'go forth and multiply' view, its 'sanctity of life' view, or its 'we have to outnumber *them*' view. I agree there's a relationship, even a causal one. But it's not that religion 'causes' pronatalism; rather, some other thing causes both religionism and pronatalism.

What is this other thing? An inability to find fulfilment in the here and now. The sci-fi stories featuring a last generation always seem to show some sort of widespread malaise, even despair. What, no kids? Many, not content to die in a few years, decide to kill themselves immediately. Having kids is a poor solution to their existential crisis. One not handled very well. 'I'm too unimaginative or too lazy, or both, to have made my life worthwhile. I know! I'll have kids — *they'll* make my life worthwhile!' (And then in a really clever leap of logic, they even blame the kids for their existential black hole — 'How can I be out following some dream when I gotta put food on the table for you kids?')

The same people insist on believing there's a heaven no matter how many photographs of 'up there' they're shown. (Never mind the extensive non-visual physical evidence against the possibility.)

In short, those of us who have purpose and value in our own lives have no need of kids. Or heaven. Those of us who don't, pass the buck.

## Dr. Frankenstein, meet Dr. Spock

Thanks to genetic research, we may soon see people with the money to do so making sure their kids are born-to-succeed — parents paying to guarantee their kids have the right stuff. I'm not talking about a straightened spine or a functional optic nerve. I'm talking about designer kids: those made with healthy bodies, intelligent minds, and perhaps a certain specific ability to boot.

First, success isn't happiness. Let's be clear about that at the start.

Second, having intelligence or ability is not nearly as important as knowing what to do with it. So success isn't necessarily goodness either.

Third, this ain't a meritocracy. Sure, there are certain attributes that are favoured, but as far as I can tell, intelligence and ability aren't among them. Sex is. Colour is. And a certain freedom from physical abnormality. And yes, tall men, especially those with deep voices, get more respect than short ones who squeak. But *at best*, these are *necessary* attributes. They are certainly not *sufficient* attributes.

Success more often depends on being in the right place at the right time. Have we found the good luck gene yet? Success also depends on who you know. The schmooze gene? And who you know often depends on how much money you have. In which case, the kids of people rich enough to design them don't need to be designed.

The thing is this: only to the extent that our genes control us should we get excited about controlling them. Those advocating, and fearing, genetic engineering for its designer kids

application seem to be forgetting that we are products of both nature *and* nurture. There are many whose natural intelligence remained undeveloped for lack of encouragement or crippled because of excess criticism. There are many with great bodies who were not even allowed to try out for the team. How many Beethovens have we lost because a kid with musical ability was introduced to practice as punishment? How many recess geniuses were never told on career day about life as a diplomat?

True, if everyone's going to be creating tall, smart, white men, then we will experience loss of diversity — which is the kiss of death for any species. But we're way past kisses. As a species, we've been fucked for a long time.

To judge by what comes out of our education system, as well as (listen to any grade one teacher) what goes into it, we don't have the nurture bit under control. At all. So why jump up and down about controlling the nature part?

Ah. *Because* we don't have the nurture bit under control.

# Lionizing Shakespeare in the High School Curriculum

*I almost decided not to include this piece because Shakespeare is no longer required in every high school English course (Yay! Things can change!), but since he is still considered by many to be a sort of literary god, I thought, what the hell.*

To include Shakespeare in a course in any given year is acceptable (marginally), but to spend on his work one or two months, year after year, is irresponsible, and to declare him compulsory is simply indefensible. Even so, Shakespeare is taught in almost every academic classroom in Ontario.<sup>1</sup> No other single author gets this big a piece of our action. And, not surprisingly, no other single author has ever, to my knowledge, been accorded a special section in the Ministry's Curriculum Guidelines.<sup>2</sup> This, then, is lionization — and this is what I object to.

To support my position, the following questions need to be answered: (1) What are our purposes for teaching 'English'? (2) Does the study of Shakespeare (a) fulfil these purposes? (b) better than the study of any other playwright/poet? (c) so much better as to warrant the disproportionate amount of time and effort expended by us, and especially by our students, to deal with a foreign language and a foreign cultural context?

According to the most recent Curriculum Guideline,<sup>3</sup> we

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing.

<sup>2</sup> Intermediate Division, 1977

<sup>3</sup> Intermediate and Senior, 1987

The 2007 Curriculum states the following goals for "successful language learners": understand that language learning is a necessary, life-enhancing,

have nine reasons for teaching ‘English’. The first three deal with literature and reading. First, students are intended to “develop a lifelong love of reading.” By having to *struggle* with every line because its grammatical construction is so strange? And by having to look to the bottom of the page for a translation *five to ten times per page*? It’s tedious reading, surely, and while some of us, adults with *established* literary passions, consider it worth the effort, having to expend such effort is not the way to *develop* such a passion! Mysteries, adventures, and romance novels are more likely to get a student ‘hooked on books’!

Students are also intended to “understand and enjoy literature and appreciate its significance in the history of human experience and imagination.” As intimated above, given the strangeness and complexity of the language and the cultural context, Shakespeare’s work is *less* likely to be *understood* and *enjoyed* than a lot of other literature. And, since *appreciation* of its historical significance depends on understanding it in the first place, this goal is unlikely to be met as well.

I, for example, do not find his plays *enjoyable* (I barely find them *understandable*), mainly because his characters are so unlikeable: Ophelia is just Hamlet’s girlfriend — she apparently goes insane and kills herself; Juliet also kills herself, silly in love with a boy; Lady MacBeth is one of the few women to have any ambition, but she can’t handle it — she too goes insane and kills herself; Portia has to pretend to be a man in order to be taken seriously for her mind; Kate is a battered

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reflective process; communicate — that is, read, listen, view, speak, write, and represent — effectively and with confidence; make meaningful connections between themselves, what they encounter in texts, and the world around them; think critically; understand that all texts advance a particular point of view that must be recognized, questioned, assessed, and evaluated; appreciate the cultural impact and aesthetic power of texts; use language to interact and connect with individuals and communities, for personal growth, and for active participation as world citizens. However, there is no longer a special dedicated to teaching Shakespeare.

wife; Desdemona is a murdered wife. As for the men, mostly they're selfish, power-hungry, and prone to be violent.

Furthermore, there is really very little but dialogue: Shakespeare's plays are notoriously scant in stage direction, costume description, set description, speech delivery cues, and the like; in fact, his scripts read more like radio plays than stage plays. Especially for some students, this is a definite deficit.

Granted, Shakespeare's language can be considered a thing of beauty, something to be savoured — but then wouldn't a study of his soliloquies or sonnets suffice? That way we could also savour the linguistic beauty of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dorothy Livesay, Lillian Allen, Betsy Warland, and so on.

As for the rest of this particular aim, the significance of Shakespeare in the history of human experience and imagination is, I propose, minimal. Certainly, it's too minimal to justify the time and attention it requires to achieve such appreciation.

The experience Shakespeare describes is, by and large, that of 16th century Britain. But, the 16th century is only one century in our past: what about the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries? Why don't they get studied in almost every classroom? And Shakespeare is not even representative of the 16th century; he is, if he's anything, representative of 16th century *England*: what about French, German, Russian, Asian, South American, and Indian literature?

And of course *human*, as in 'human experience and imagination' includes both male and female. First, Shakespeare usually ignores female experience. And when he does attend to it, his portrayal is not very accurate. I can find neither myself nor any of my female friends in any of Shakespeare's female characters, except perhaps for a bit of Juliet and a bit of Portia. (See Chris Wind's *Soliloquies: the lady doth indeed protest*.) I find more of myself in Hamlet. (And I find most of myself in Lear's horse — who is apparently off stage somewhere.)

Now, of course, perhaps Shakespeare is significant in the history of ‘human *imagination*’ as opposed to ‘human *experience*’. To be honest, I’m having trouble with the very concept of ‘a history of human imagination’. Surely the history of human imagination entails all of human art and science. Shakespeare is *significant* in this history? Lionizingly significant? More significant than thousands of other artists and scientists? More significant than Michelangelo and DaVinci? Than Galileo, Copernicus, Bacon, and Newton? Than Bohr, Einstein, and Heisenberg? Than Darwin? Than Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Mill? Than Bach and Beethoven? Than Rawls and MacKinnon? Wow. Some guy.

To conclude on this point, the value of Shakespeare for understanding literature’s significance in the history of human experience and imagination is, at the very least, questionable: I suggest that this aim is better served by studying a range of literature, a range of dramatic literature even, rather than the same author, the same century, the same country, the same style, year after year.

The third aim is that students “become aware of themselves as readers and come to realize the worth and uniqueness of their own responses”. It’s hard to respond to something you don’t understand. And it’s hard to be aware of yourself as a reader when you’re concentrating so hard on just figuring out what it is you’re reading.

The next two aims of teaching English focus on language. First, students are to “become proficient in the mechanics of written language and in the use of oral and written language to think, learn, and communicate.” Very good. But, to begin, let me say that whatever’s being done now clearly isn’t working. It is not at all unusual for half of Nipissing University’s incoming students to fail our Writing Competency Test. That is to say that most students coming from high school to university (at least, to Nipissing University) cannot write 500 words on a

given topic clearly and correctly enough to be deemed 'competent'. Failing papers often have an error, be it with spelling, punctuation, or grammar, in *every* sentence! In a word, their ability to use the written language is appalling.

Now, of course, it's an error in reasoning to assume that Shakespeare's to blame. But it does stand to reason that if students have not mastered plain and simple English, having them spend *any* time on subtle and complex English (Shakespeare) is misguided.

And as for developing the use of oral and written language to think, learn, and communicate, well, Shakespeare's language is no longer used, orally or in writing, for *anything* — and certainly not for thinking, learning, and communicating. When was the last time you said to yourself anything like, "Two things are to be done: My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress, I'll set her on, Myself the while to draw the Moor apart and bring him jump when he may Cassio find soliciting his wife. Aye, that's the way." And when was the last time you said to someone else, "A plague o' both your houses!"

Further, students are to "use language to express and achieve personal, social, and career goals". Declaring one's love with a Shakespearean sonnet, borrowed or one's own, may achieve a personal goal. But spouting off in Elizabethan English will not necessarily make you the life of the party. And a resume written in blank verse will surely not get you a job.

The next aim of the Intermediate Senior English deals with values and ideas. Students, through the English program, are to "understand the role that language, literature, and the media play in the exploration of intellectual issues and in the establishment of personal and societal values." The study of Shakespeare enables this? *Whose* issues? *Whose* values? Not mine, despite claims about Shakespeare's universality, such as

“Accordingly when we read Shakespeare’s plays we are always meeting our own experiences ...”<sup>4</sup>

When I read Shakespeare, I am *seldom* ‘meeting my own experiences’: I cannot identify with a man or woman who wants badly to be the most powerful person in the country (*MacBeth*); I have never felt the kind of ‘love’ for another that would move me to suicide if that other should die (*Romeo and Juliet*); I cannot say that I too have felt moved to murder for the ‘honour’ of my father (*Hamlet*); and I have never had the experience of being married off as chattel (*Merchant of Venice* and *Taming of the Shrew*). Shakespeare’s plays do *not* express *my* experience — nor do they express the experience of the 10% of my students who are gay, the 30% who are non-Christian, the 40% who are non-White, or the 50% who are female: these students will not be able to see themselves in Shakespeare. Nor, I venture, will most other teachers and students. In *The Tempest*, a man and his daughter are living alone in exile on an island. Gee that happens a lot. Many characters in many plays have servants. Do you have a servant? Hardly anyone in Shakespeare’s world even has a job they have to go to every day.

Simply put, Shakespeare fails to be universal; his view of reality is hopelessly incomplete and unbalanced, and thus can be of little help to our students in the exploration and development of personal and societal values. In fact, not only does his view fail to help, it *hinders* that very process: it is a view grounded in the past and our students will be living in the future. Surely, then, examining the possible futures instead of the possible pasts will be of greater value to them.

Even if Shakespeare *were* universal, one might ask why study his work and then *transfer* from 16th century England to 20th century Canada when one can, with more ease, study

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<sup>4</sup> G. B. Harrison in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*

those same universalities in a 20th century Canadian piece, without the need for transfer? *MacBeth* examines the corruption of power, a universal theme, you say; yes, but then why not study *All the President's Men*?

The last two aims of the Intermediate Senior English program focus on social and community development. Students are to have the opportunity to “prepare for productive community membership by taking personal responsibility for their progress towards self-directed learning”. Only the very *very* unusual students will be motivated by the study of Shakespeare to take personal responsibility for their progress towards self-directed learning. The study of Shakespeare often acts as an obstacle to *teacher*-directed learning; how can it act as a stimulant to *student*-directed learning?

Further, the students are to “discuss ideas, attitudes, and feelings expressed in literature, language, and media in order to understand the contribution of individuals and communities to Canada’s multicultural heritage”. Surely the study of a 16th century British playwright contributes little to the understanding of Canada’s multicultural heritage. For the most part, the values portrayed are of straight white male Christian British society. In the Shakespearean plays commonly studied in high school, there are no gay/lesbian people; there is one Black (Othello); there is one Jew (Shylock), and no Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims; there are no Native Indians, no East or West Indians either, and there are no Asian people. In short, there is no multiculturalism in Shakespeare, Canadian or other. It cannot therefore be instrumental in achieving this aim.

One last aim of the Intermediate-Senior English program is to “develop critical skills and use them to respond to ideas communicated through the various media”. Now here perhaps is the best reason yet for studying Shakespeare: there is indeed much to criticize — Shakespeare makes an excellent target for novice critical thinkers.

To go back now to my opening questions, I think in too many cases, the study of Shakespeare does *not* fulfil our purposes. And in the few cases in which it does, the study of others is just as, if not more, valuable: at the high school level, the study of Shakespeare is simply not worth the trouble it takes. So, while Shakespeare should be *included* in the high school curriculum, he should not be *lionized*.

## Death for Willy?

I was sort of attacked by a dog a while ago when I was out running. It wasn't really a severe attack: I was simply taken down, like a deer, in a well-executed stealth manoeuvre by a large German Shepherd; he did not, nor did his companion, come in for the kill, or even the maul. I was left with a single but deep and ragged bite requiring half a dozen stitches.

It wasn't provoked — well, perhaps it was — in the way a red miniskirt provokes an assault: I was running, which in itself is provocative to most canines for at least accompaniment, if not pursuit; and I was running past (but not on) his property, so I was, given the canine propensity to extend legal boundaries by a few miles, 'in his face'.

Thing is, almost everyone I've spoken to encourages me to report it to the police so the dog can be 'put down'. Now, true enough, while my thick thigh survived the bite and I'm not now traumatized for life regarding all furry brown and black things, a child would not have fared so well. I understand that.

But dogs can make mistakes, and I don't think we should necessarily be killed for our mistakes. Again, true enough, this doesn't sound like a mistake, but I decided to meet Willy and Axel before taking any further action. I did so and concluded that Willy is not a psychopathic killer or even a beaten and abused dog with an understandable but incurable 'attitude': I had both he and Axel eating out of my hand — those little doggie treats shaped like little letter carriers (or, come to think about it, like little joggers); Axel even licked my face (Willy gave me a look that seemed to discourage that sort of invitation, though he could have been remembering at just that moment that cellulite tastes yucky); and both dogs were quite obedient

to their owners' commands to lay down in their corner. So, I concluded instead that Willy is 'simply' a big, rough, strong dog who hasn't been taught that Biting is Unequivocally Unacceptable.

Where am I going with all of this? Here: we routinely let live people who have done far *far* worse than Willy. Are we just inconsistent or is our distinction between human and not-human/dog justified? Frankly, I don't see the merit of the distinction. I think there's as much likelihood that Willy can be rehabilitated as there is that the forementioned people can be. Perhaps even a greater likelihood, given the (relative) simple clarity of Willy's mind. (Furthermore, the human's greater potential to control natural tendencies with reason make such assaults less excusable and therefore more punishable than Willy's assault.)

Rehab aside, is Willy more likely to repeat the attack? I don't think so. It was a fluke of timing and circumstance (I happened to run by his property when he'd just been let out of his kennel after a day penned in *and* left unsupervised for a few minutes; it was the first time in five years this had happened). Furthermore, fencing the entire property (the solution I advocated to the owner) would reduce the likelihood of repeat attacks. Unlike Willy, most of the forementioned humans know how to open a gate.

Lastly, Willy *has* an owner, of whom I can request a remedy short of death. Alas, the forementioned humans don't.

Am I wary when I pass by now? Of course. But I'm still more afraid of the camouflage-clad hunters with their beer and rifles, and the half-wandering drivers with their cell phones.

## Fragrance-Free or Shirtless

*This was written quite a while ago, and I'm happy to say that many public places are now 'fragrance-free'.*

The request for fragrance-free environments has once again been in the media. And our reluctance to grant the request once again exposes our inconsistency. We have laws prohibiting nudity because it offends some people to see naked bodies. Why do we respect visual space more than we do olfactory space, and acoustic space, for that matter?

In fact, if we're going to rank order these things, it makes a lot more sense the other way around. Consider ease of avoidance: if you don't want to see something, you don't have to look. But we can't close our ears, and it's a lot more inconvenient to keep putting in and taking out earplugs than it is to just turn the other way for a few moments. As for plugging our nose, that's even more inconvenient.

True, it depends on the situation. If the visual offense is on the wall across from your desk at work, you can hardly be expected to quit your job in order to avoid it. And if the offensive Chanel No.5 is only in your neighbour's home, well, don't go visit. However, it is currently illegal to be nude even on your own property. And it is not illegal to wear Chanel No.5 at work. As I said, inconsistent.

But, you may say, it's not just that nudity is offensive, it's immoral. Okay. That's a new point. (Though I'd really like to hear why it's immoral for me to bare my chest, but okay for the guy next door to do so.)

However, I'll respond that it's not just that fumes are offensive, they can be harmful. And I think a health risk trumps

an immorality. Why? Because you choose your values: if you don't want the pain of immorality, you can just change your values. If I don't want the pain of inflammation with its headache, itching and teary eyes, etc., I can hardly just change the biochemical composition of the stuff involved.

For me, it's acoustic space that matters a lot, and I'm tired of people trespassing. Every time my neighbour works around his house, he sings — loudly enough for me to hear. I don't want to listen to him sing. But I have no choice. And oh he must have a lawn (we live in the middle of a fucking forest, for god's sake), and he *must* maintain it with a noisy lawnmower and a noisier weed trimmer. Guy a couple lots down even has a leaf blower. (We're on a small lake; sound travels remarkably well across water.) I don't want to listen to it. But I have no choice. Short of leaving my home. *He's* intruding on *my* space — why should *I* be the one who moves?

Frankly, I support the fragrance-free request, if only because it shows us that our attention has been generally limited, to *physical* space, which we value most of all (consider trespassing laws and the many 'no touching' laws). But, as we are now understanding, that's not the only private space to be respected. And as we struggle to balance our various freedoms and rights, let's at least be consistent: if she can wear Chanel, and if he can sing, I can go shirtless.

# Property Tax

Property tax (money one must pay to the government based on the land, and the building/s on the land, that one owns) is odd in that unlike sales tax (money one must pay to the government based on the goods and services one purchases), it is payable every year, not just once when you buy the thing. It is, in this respect, more like income tax, which is payable every year. But if you don't pay your property tax, you lose your property; if you don't pay your income tax, you don't lose your income. (Well, you might, if you're imprisoned, but that's an indirect result, whereas losing one's property for failure to pay one's property tax is a direct result.) What justifies this difference, this having to keep on paying property tax even though you *own* the property (that is, even though you're not renting, not paying to use someone else's property)?

One response may be that the revenue from property taxes goes to fund municipal services, and since property owners use these services on an ongoing basis, they should pay for them on an ongoing basis. But the revenue from sales tax goes to fund provincial services, which are also used on an ongoing basis, and the revenue from income tax goes to fund federal services, again, which are used on an ongoing basis.

Is there anything particularly unique about municipal services? I don't think so — my municipality provides/maintains roads (the local roads), education (elementary education), the dump, the firehall, public recreation centers, and libraries (and probably some other stuff). Provincial and federal governments also provide/maintain roads (the highways), education (universities — to some extent: we pay tuition, but it's subsidized by the government), provincial and national parks (akin to the

recreation centers), and so on. So if provincial and federal levels of government can fund their services with revenue from sales tax and income tax, collected from those who reside within their jurisdictions, why can't the municipal government do the same?

In addition to this inexplicable inconsistency of only at the municipal level linking property ownership to payment for public services, such a link is unfair. First, the assumption that property owners use (and therefore should pay for) municipal services is mistaken. People who own empty lots in one municipality but who live in another municipality do *not* use any of the first municipality's services.

Second, one can't even assume that length of residency indicates extent of use. For example, supposedly year-round residents use the municipality's services six times more than summer residents. But I swear some of the summer people take more garbage to the dump in one weekend than I do in a whole month; they also use the roads a lot more than I do, going here and there and here and there — I drive into town once every week or so. (They're also more aggressive, destructive, in their use, tearing around on ATVs — these are roads of dirt and gravel — necessitating more frequent grading of the road.)

And third, you certainly can't assume that someone who owns ten times as much land uses the municipality's services ten times as much. And yet, that person will be required to pay ten times as much in taxes.

It seems to me that municipal services should be paid for by, and only by, the people who use them. This may or may not be the people who own land in the municipality, and the amount of payment will be independent of both the length of residency in the municipality and the amount of land owned.

But why stop there? Why shouldn't provincial and federal services also be paid for only by the people who use them? Okay, maybe not *only* by people who use them, but *mostly* by people who use them. Perhaps many of the services, the ones

that simply make the municipality, province, or country a good one to live in (roads? education? dumps? certain health services?) should be paid for by everyone, to some basic extent. Beyond that, the services should be paid for by those who use them. So I would pay a basic amount for the dump, but I would also pay a per bag fee; I would pay a basic amount for the roads, but I would also pay a per kilometer fee; and so on.

Admittedly, this gets complicated. (But income taxes are pretty complicated too.) We'd have to figure out the basic fee for each of the many services and the individual user fees... And then there's the monitoring ... But it's certainly do-able.

'Course, there's an easier argument for abolishing land tax (tax on the buildings should be simple sales tax: you pay when you buy your house, or the materials to build it, just as you pay when you buy your car): abolishing land ownership. I still haven't figured out the basis for land ownership. You don't make land like you make a chair or even like you 'make' an apple orchard: it's not something you own because you've added your labor to the raw material to make it what it is (Locke) — it *is* the raw material. Furthermore, you can't own the air or water — why can you own land? Like air and water, it's required for the very essentials of life (which is, presumably, why we say you can't own the air or water). (Then again, if the U.S. can buy Canada's water, I guess we do own it. Well, the government owns it. Hm. How can the government own something I can't own?)

# Cellphone Syndrome

*Originally written when cellphones first appeared. Don't think I'd change a thing.*

Has there been a more transparent advertisement of insecurity?

Look at me, I'm so popular! Everyone's calling me! I have so many friends! *Answer that thing one more time when I'm with you, you'll have one less.*

Look at me, I'm so busy! I have so many calls to make, so many calls to take! *What you have is a total inability to actually enjoy life.*

Look at me, I'm so important! Excuse me, I have to take this call! *No. You don't. You are not a doctor on call. You are not a top-level executive. Neither your presence nor your opinion is urgently required. Anywhere. By anyone.*

Frankly, it's frightening. Suddenly all these men are making calls on their cellphones while they're driving. Just yesterday they couldn't even dial a phone while sitting at a desk, they had to get their secretaries to do it for them.

And of course it's annoying as hell. Just what makes people think the rest of the world wants to listen to every word of their unbearably inane conversations? "Hey, Jen. We're at the Van Houtte on St. Laurent. Yeah. Just ordered. No. Not yet. We're waiting. Coffee."

Of course people have been having conversations in cafes and stores, and on sidewalks and buses, for quite some time. It's not an invasion of public space. Unless the person TALKS SO LOUDLY THAT EVERYONE CAN'T HELP BUT HEAR

THEM. Then it's an advertisement of the immaturity of overriding self-importance.

But that doesn't explain why a person talking loudly on a cellphone in public is even *more* annoying than two people having a loud conversation in public. Why *is* that? I think it's because in the case of the cellphone conversation, we hear only half of the conversation. However annoying the whole conversation would be, half of it is even worse. It's like hearing only every second word in a sentence. (Speaking of which, remember the early " — ar ph — s"?) This occurred to me when I heard someone speaking on a cellphone in a language I didn't understand. It wasn't quite as bad. I wasn't engaged against my will in a frustrating half-comprehensible experience. (The whole thing was *incomprehensible*, and so more like background noise.)

But what's most worrisome about the widespread use of cellphones is that it indicates not progress, but regress. We are, in fact, devolving. Imagine, for a moment, what it would've been like to have been the first one in your cave to discover thought, the first one to hear words, inside your head. It's a neat and handy trick, not having to say out loud everything that occurs to you. And one of the more valuable side-effects of being able to think is being able to evaluate — to deliberate, to compare, to measure. (And to realize that not everything that occurs to you is *worth* saying out loud.) But we've gone backwards, from "I think, therefore I am" to "I talk, therefore I am." (I wonder if cellphone users can read without moving their lips.)

Given the recent increase in attention deficit (what we used to call 'a short attention span') (usually in reference to children and other less advanced creatures), the cellphone phenomenon is not surprising: it takes a certain amount of attention or concentration to think — to focus on and follow that little voice inside your head. It used to be that doing two things at once meant your ability to concentrate was so good, you could

divide your attention. Now it means that your ability to concentrate is so bad, you can't pay attention to any one thing for more than ten seconds. (Either that or you don't care enough to pay attention to anything or anyone for more than ten seconds.)

And maybe cellphones wouldn't have become the annoyance they are if everyone hadn't ditched their landline phones. Because now the ONLY place you can have a phone conversation is OUTSIDE. Wherever the signal is good. Whether that happens to be outside someone's bedroom window or one foot away from a stranger waiting for a bus, well, no matter. Your conversation takes priority. To everything and everyone. Apparently.

## Opinions, Judges, and Juries

Why is it that a prerequisite for being a jury member is that you have no opinion about the case — in particular *or in general*. If I have formed an opinion about, say, the issue of abortion, before considering the individual facts of the case (let's assume the case before the court involves 'unlawful termination'), why should that exclude me from jury duty? Isn't it a *good* thing that I have thought carefully about various issues? Apparently not. When it comes to juries, only airheads need apply.

There are no such prerequisites for judges. So either the system is just inconsistent (ho-hum) or judges are trained to set aside their biases in order to render a fair judgement. (Some judgements certainly constitute evidence to the contrary, i.e., that judges are *not* so trained.)

But let's distinguish between 'opinion' and 'bias'. An opinion is exactly what we want — from judges *and* juries. However, we want, preferably, a *good* opinion, one that is based on reasons — relevant and adequate reasons. A bias is also an opinion, but it's a bad opinion, one *not* based on relevant and adequate reasons. So in barring jury members with opinions, are we assuming they actually have biases rather than good opinions? And, or, are we assuming that the formation of good opinions requires training? That jury members aren't expected or required to have? And yet, they are, nevertheless, considered to be an acceptable equivalent to the judge ...

Which brings me to a jury of *my peers*. At the risk of inviting insult, airheads are not my peers. If clear thinking *does* require specific training, then *that* should be a prerequisite for jury membership. (Actually, that might not even be good

enough: when I taught a course called “Clear Thinking and Straight Argument” at the university level, I was dumb-founded at the difficulty most students had with the course. I recall one fourth year student in particular struggling with the difference between ‘A because B’ and ‘A therefore B’. Struggling. Fourth year.)

And if clear thinking doesn’t require specific training, then the *presence*, not the absence, of opinions — *good* opinions (recall my definition, a good opinion is not an opinion I agree with but an opinion which is based on relevant and adequate reasons) — should be prerequisite.

Pity, ‘opinionated’ has become such a dirty word.

## The Arithmetic of Morality

I limit my fuel consumption: I ration myself to one trip into town a week, and I haven't taken a 'joy ride' since the '70s. For what? My neighbour thinks nothing of going into town three times in one day. Half the men on the continent drive gas-guzzling pick-ups all day, without ever picking up anything, and the other half drive mini-vans, that are mostly empty most of the time. I keep myself colder than I'd like and I live in a dark house, while the lights and computers stay on 24/7 in some guy's place of business, and his advertisements light up the world.

Still, it's the principle that counts. Really? Unless there's a god, it's the consequence that counts. 'Using only what you need' is right *because* it's wrong to take more than you need *if that means others will have less than they need*. But if, say, you take more apples than you need because otherwise they'll just rot on the ground, what's wrong with that?

Of course, if *enough* people decrease their fuel consumption (and a corresponding number don't *increase* their consumption), there would be a consequence. Possibly even a moral consequence. (Though that's arguable: less fossil fuel use leads to less carbon emission, which leads to less global warming, which leads to less climate change ... tell me when I get to the *moral* good ...)

## The Freedom to Fail, the Right to Succeed

Call it what you will, 'bell curving' or 'marks inflation' or 'social passing', or even 'maintaining a certain flexibility with regard to evaluation', an A is not necessarily an A.

True, the more students fail, the more apt they are to drop out, and the fewer students a school has, the less money it gets. But to lie to students about the quality of their work in order to get more money is to use them. Furthermore, if the students who fail *did* quit (and perhaps they should — institutionalized education, academic education, is not the be-all and end-all for everyone, and those who say it is are probably just trying to save their jobs), well, the institution may not need the money. So what's the problem? A 'money for the sake of money' mentality is the problem. (Unless of course that money would benefit other students, those who don't quit. But then it's X's benefit gained at Y's expense.)

And true, the greater the number of failures, the worse the teacher or the school looks. But, well, looks can be deceiving. In an ideal world, student success *does* reflect teacher/school competence — but ours is not an ideal world. Students in increasing numbers don't bother to show up for class on a regular basis; nor do they bother to do the assigned homework. Oh, but if your class was *really* interesting, they *would* show up and if your assignments were *really* relevant, they *would* do them. Excuse me, but let's not delude ourselves: teachers are seldom that important in a student's life. I have, as a student, on occasion skipped class, and it was *never* the teacher's fault: I would've skipped whatever class I had at that time on that day. And I have, as a student, on occasion gone to class unprepared,

and again, it was *never* the teacher's fault: probably I hadn't done the work for any of my classes that day or that week.

And then there's this argument: a pass boosts the students' confidence, their self-esteem, their social development. Yes, it's good for students to have self-esteem, but at some point our schools must change from being wellness centres to being educational institutions: if I need surgery, I wouldn't want a surgeon whose professors considered self-esteem when grading. Further, students need a *healthy* self-esteem, not a fake one. And, unless they're very young, they usually know the difference; they can smell a gift, an inflated mark, from two desks away. And if they don't know at the time that it's a gift, a lie, they'll find out five years later — and then they'll *really* be pissed and may not survive the blow (for what inner resources will they have, once they know that any confidence they thought they had was fake?).

If we respect our students, we'll tell them when they've made a mistake, when they've done it wrong, when it's just not good enough. We don't have to be brutal about it. And we certainly don't have to be terminal about it: few failures are irrevocable; in fact, most mistakes are opportunities to learn — knowing how to do it wrong often sharpens knowing how to do it right. Notwithstanding that, no course should be un-passable *for the student with the necessary prerequisites, who attends every class, and who completes the assigned practice.*

Which leads to what makes bell curving, in particular, invalid: it's based on the faulty premise that effort and ability are distributed within a class according to a certain stable pattern. I don't know whether this was ever the case, but it sure doesn't seem to be the case now: it seems *half* of my students are academically unprepared for the course they signed up for and *half* are attitudinally unprepared for *any* course.

The other problem with bell curving is that it makes grades completely relative. If an A just means that you're better than

most of the others in the class, then why bother with grades at all — why not just use ranks? In fact, why bother with *standards* at all? When the grades are relative, a B *can't* mean 'a clear and competent grasp of the course material'; it can only mean 'a clearer and more competent than a C,' which is 'better than a D,' which is 'better than an F', which is, hm, 'worse than a D'.

Perhaps the biggest problem with 'marks fixing' is this: if students know they'll pass anyway, most will be less apt to bother going to class and doing the work. This feeds a vicious cycle: the marks are fixed, so they don't do the work, so the marks are fixed ...

No, the biggest problem is this: if students don't have the freedom to fail, they'll probably never experience success. And I mean true success — genuine understanding of the material or mastery of the skills, after genuine effort. Surely students have that right. But in a system in which it's impossible to fail, it's also impossible to succeed.

## Living in a Global Community: Needs and Wants

I don't like living in a global community. When everything is so interconnected, everything I do (or don't do) is bound to be at someone else's expense. Mere self-interest seems impossible; selfishness is inevitable.

For example, if it pleases me to live in a cabin on a lake in a forest quite a distance away from the nearest town or highway, and I buy such a place, that no one else even wanted, let alone needed, I'm acting out of self-interest. No one has been disadvantaged by what I've chosen to do. However, if I prefer to keep warm with easy electric baseboard heaters or an oil furnace rather than with the hassle of splitting and carrying firewood and building fires, that's another story. With the former, I'm supporting a heavily-subsidized industry: the subsidies that support it could have gone instead into education, but didn't — to the detriment of how many kids? I'm also supporting the nuclear industry; I'm thus responsible perhaps for one of those microscopic flakes of plutonium that will give somebody cancer. As for the oil furnace, well, the acid rain that's killing our lakes? Some of it was formed by the SO<sub>2</sub> and NO from *my* burning of fossil fuels. But even if I heat with wood, well I'm depleting our already endangered forests, the lungs of the planet. Okay, what if I heat with the sun? That wouldn't be at *anyone's* expense — taking heat from the sun for myself doesn't reduce the amount available for someone else. But I'd have to cut down a lot of trees to go solar, and well, the trees are the lungs of the planet.

But let's back up a bit. If I'd chosen instead to live in a rented apartment, that down payment of several thousand dollars could've provided housing for some "Third World"

family. So actually, that initial self-interested action *was* at the expense of another — it was also selfish. Okay, but maybe if that Third World family didn't have so many kids, they could provide their own house. Maybe if their country didn't spend half of its money on weapons, they would *have* a home. But, and, maybe if they didn't spend the other half paying off their debt to us 'First World' countries who, let's admit it, are as well off as we are because we've exploited them ... Okay, but why should *we* suffer for the past and/or present corrupt trade policies of our government? Well, why should *they*? I don't know the solution to this problem: I know we're connected, but the connections are neither clear nor simple: *how much self-interest should I sacrifice for the very low probability that my deficit will be their asset?*

Let's go on. What about intangibles? What about things like peace and quiet? I happen to be very happy when it's quiet. My neighbour, however, seems to be happy when he's making noise (he sings when he's outside, loudly enough for me to hear him; he cuts his grass with a power lawnmower; he trims the weeds with one of those obnoxiously noisy weed trimmers; etc.). I'm sure that if I told him he was being selfish whenever he cut his grass, because it was at my expense (it destroys the quiet upon which my happiness depends), he would disagree. (He'd probably do a few other things as well.) I'm sure he thinks he's being a morally responsible person by cutting the grass. He'd also claim, I'm sure, that he doesn't *want* to cut it — it *has to be* cut. And I, of course, would deny that — he doesn't *need* to cut his grass!

And here we get to the infamous 'needs/wants' distinction. Many people call something a 'need' when it is really just a 'want'. For example, contrary to popular opinion, one doesn't *need* sex. Of course, the crucial question is 'need for *what?*' My answer is pretty basic: for survival — if you can live without it, you really don't *need* it, you just *want* it.

This definition allows us to make the persuasive proposal that all things being equal, one shouldn't satisfy one's wants until everyone has had their needs satisfied; one shouldn't take dessert until everyone's had some bread and water. But what if someone didn't help with the harvest? Well, that's why I said 'all things being equal'. We're really back to the Third World family home problem.

Eventually we get to the equally infamous difficulty of ranking wants (or needs, if you like). Whose want is more important, more to be respected? I would argue that since my desire for quiet is truly autonomous and hence genuine, and my neighbour's desire to cut the grass is just socialized habit and hence artificial (we live in a fucking forest for god's sake, it's stupid even to *have* a lawn), mine is better and therefore to be more respected. Or I could argue that my desire does no harm, whereas his does (having a lawn that one maintains with fossil-fuelled machines adds to ecological degradation); but he'd probably say that his desire keeps people employed, it creates jobs (all those lawnmowers to manufacture and repair). How do we judge?

Well, we could rank wants according to their proximity to needs, according to their relation to survival, both individual and collective. And so, since quiet is totally *unrelated* to food, water, and shelter, whereas cutting the grass is *negatively* related (environmental degradation), my want should have priority. (So yes, this puts environmental health *before* economic health.) In the case of two equally unrelated-to-survival wants (do we hear Bach or Bon Jovi), I think equal time to each would be fairest (unless some creative solution can be found — like headphones).

So what's my guide here to living unselfishly in the global community? Well, using truly unlimited resources is okay: it would be impossible to even *have* the stuff *at another's expense*. Use of limited resources should be directed by the distinction

between needs and wants, with needs taking precedence; that is to say, one should not have what one wants if that causes another not to get what is needed. (But wait a minute — who is this ‘another’? Someone *you* made? Why should I do with less because you replicated yourself? Shouldn’t the people *you make* come out of *your* allotment?) However, if the stuff is so limited that it would not even meet everyone’s needs, surely it’s insane for everyone to not get enough — that would be species suicide. *Someone* should get enough. In that case, then, it seems permissible to take what one needs. *But no more*. Those who die from lack of it don’t die because you took more than you needed, they die because there wasn’t enough. And as for the non-stuff things, the more related something is to a need for survival, the greater priority it gets. Failing that distinction, the more genuine the want, the more respect it should get. And failing that, equal time or a creative solution should do the trick.

Not gonna happen though. All those connections were made in the first place by people hoping to satisfy their *wants*, not their *needs*. We don’t live in a global community: we live in a global marketplace.

## Inner Peace

The problem with inner peace is that it's really just resignation. It's giving up. It's refusing to accept responsibility for one's actions by refusing to accept that one *can* act. It's the epitome of passivity.

Consider the following "symptoms" of inner peace (it's on several internet sites).

*A tendency to think and act spontaneously.* That is, without careful deliberation, without thorough consideration. So when one thinks at all, one's thought will necessarily be superficial and shallow. Actually, perhaps one *won't* think at all; after all, to "act spontaneously" is to do so *without* thinking. So how, exactly, *does* one 'think spontaneously'? The rest of the item provides no help: ... *rather than on fears based on past experience.* Past experience is what guides us (at least those of us who are rational): the last time we put our hand on a hot stove, it hurt; so the bright ones among us stopped doing that. Granted, if we use only the *fears* of our past experience, we are being a bit lopsided, but that doesn't seem to be the point being made here.

*Loss of interest in judging other people.* So *that's* how an actor got to be president of the most powerful country on earth! This could also account for at least some of the women who stay with a violent man. I wonder if they're feeling innerly peaceful. (I'll bet they have *frequent attacks of smiling.*)

*Loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.* This pretty much goes hand in hand with the previous one: if you're not going to judge, there's no point in interpreting. Though for the life of me, I can't see how failing to interpret the actions of someone who is loading and aiming a gun at my friend will lead to my inner peace.

*An increased tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.* This one says it all. A complete abdication of responsibility. *Que sera sera.* If someone blows up the world, well hey, stuff happens.

There you have it. Inner Peace. Aka Resignation. If you don't care about X or Y, losing X or seeing Y hurt won't bother you. And an unbothered person is a peaceful person. Don't worry, be happy.

But a peaceful person is an uncaring person: it's the *absence* of inner peace, the *presence* of frustration, anger, and disappointment that is a measure of one's caring. The more one cares about X or Y, the more one will be agitated, *not* at peace, if one loses X or sees Y hurt.

The only thing that makes sense of all this inner peace crap is the belief that someone else, perhaps someone more qualified, is being thoughtful, judgemental, and active. Hm. Could it be God? Well, yes it could! That's why we don't have to worry about anything: God will take care of it, what will be will be by God's will.

The problem with this is that there are no gods. They're a figment of our prehistoric ancestors' imaginations.

So the route to inner peace is the route to death. Not thinking, not judging, not interpreting, not acting — sounds a lot like the comatose, who, without someone *else* to be responsible for them, would die. (Because when's the last time you saw *God* change a catheter?)

# Who Wants to be a Millionaire?

I don't.

First, I'd have to do a lot of research to figure out which organizations are really what they say they are. Names like "Lands for Life" remind us that you can't judge a book by its cover (the organization is more accurately named "Lands for Private Profit"). So that would take a while. Sending \$10 or \$20 to the wrong group, well, that's not such a big deal, but I wouldn't want to be giving or lending several thousand to the bad guys by mistake.

And of course it's not all black and white. A solar energy company may keep its female engineers at the secretarial level. So are they the good guys or the bad guys?

And even good intentions are not good enough. I'd need to know which groups are really going to make a difference. There's no point in funding something that's just an ineffectual feel-good enterprise. Which organizations have what it takes to really do something? I have no idea. Because I don't know what it takes. So I guess I'd have to hire someone to advise me, perhaps an ex-loan officer, someone who can look at a business plan and tell me whether it'll succeed. I'd also have to hire someone to assess the research plan. I mean, consider that guy who claims he has the technology (and it's cheap and portable) to neutralize radioactive material<sup>1</sup> — is that for real?

Then I'd have to figure out how best to distribute all that money. \$100,000 to ten groups? \$50,000 to twenty? The whole million to one?

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<sup>1</sup> Sorry, I can't find the link!

And that sort of depends on what I decide about priorities, about problems and solutions. How best to change/save the planet? (With or without the human species?) Do I support those out to save our ecological environment because without that we're toast, or do I figure we have time to get to the root and focus on education programs, or do I decide we don't have time for anything but coercion and get behind political/legislative powers?

So, no thank you, I don't want to be a millionaire. Fulfilling the responsibility that comes with a million dollars would be a full-time job for at least a year. And frankly, I'd rather sit and watch the sun sparkle on the lake.

## Ten years later, she meets Dick, and he's so —

*You're so — different. Not such an —*

Yeah. It's like before I was so — driven. It's like I was in a car, no, I was the car. And it was always in high gear, in screaming high gear. I had to get somewhere, I always had to get somewhere. I couldn't sit still without revving my engine, roaring my engine. Every car was a car I had to pass, and every time another car passed me, it was such an affront, it was so — humiliating.

And then it stopped. And the silence — the not being driven, not being pushed — I could think. For the first time in my life, I could just ... think. And feel. All sorts of things. Subtle things. I don't know how to describe it.

For a while I was so — sad. I thought if I could've lived my whole life like that ... I wanted a 'do over' so bad. I wanted my life back. It's like it had been hijacked or something.

So what happened? I mean, what changed everything?

Oh. I got in a car accident. Lost the family jewels.

# The Freedom to Shop

In a not so recent, but largely unnoticed decision (*Daishowa Inc. v. Friends of Lubicon*), the Ontario Divisional Court said that boycotts are illegal when specifically intended to cause economic damage to the boycott target. Isn't that generally the point? Boycotts allow us to put our money where our mouths are; they allow us to hit a company where it hurts, so it smartens up and changes.

I often choose brands according to the sociopolitical record of the company. Doesn't everyone? Surely the days of shopping according to price and quality alone are gone. Didn't the 'Made in Canada' fad and the Nestlé fiasco kickstart this broadened awareness?

I routinely refuse to purchase GE products because the company is one of the largest military contractors in the U.S. McDonalds lost my business because of the CFCs; Burger King, because it used rainforest beef. Coors? Not as long as they're anti-gay and racist. Gillette? Proctor & Gamble? Not as long as bunnies do me no harm. And my next pair of shoes will not be Nike. (See *Rating America's Corporate Conscience*, Steven D. Lydenberg et al. and *The Boycott Quarterly* [boycottguy@aol.com](mailto:boycottguy@aol.com).)

Granted, it's getting harder to keep track of who owns who (for example, GE owns RCA now), and often my choices are less-than pure (when I was making a car purchase decision, the most fuel-efficient therefore environmentally-friendly car on the market, the Chevrolet Sprint, was made by GM, a company heavily involved with nuclear weapons). When in doubt, I choose the unknown and too-small-to-be-dangerous brands.

But now the Ontario government has taken away my freedom to choose, to shop according to my ethics. Because

doing so causes economic damage to certain companies. Of course, seeing our government give priority to economics over ethics and to corporations over individuals shouldn't surprise me.

I do wonder, though, how they'll enforce this decision. I mean, how will the shopping police know *why* I buy Primo instead of Ragu, MacIntosh instead of IBM?

(They won't. See that's the problem with freedom. Better they just don't give me the chance. To buy Primo, or MacIntosh, or lesbian love poems, or a solar heating system ...)

I also wonder if they're going to be consistent. Will trade embargoes be illegal now too, economic sanctions no longer an alternative to bloodshed? Pity.

## Fiscal Conscription

It's income tax time. Do you know where 9.2% of your taxes will go?

Well, let's just say that you bought the bullets. (Out out damned spot, you say?)

Then again, \$2500 (if your taxable income is about \$25,000) might buy more than a few bullets. Maybe you can pay for a whole box of screws for one of our nuclear submarines. Or maybe you even can buy a bit of gas for one of those fancy helicopters.

Sure, better your money than your life, but wouldn't neither be better still? Wouldn't it be good if at least you had a choice about serving the military?

I mean, it wouldn't be so bad if it really *were* the Department of *Defence*. There are many arguments in favour of waging a war and, in truth, I find a few convincing; sometimes killing *is* the best of a bunch of really bad options.

But we live in a world in which countries routinely sell weapons to their enemies. Doesn't that make the whole thing just a little bit of a farce? (Hey you. Yeah you. I'm gonna blow your face off. Yeah. What? You ain't got nothin to fight with? Hey Vinny, sell the man one of your bazookas. No not that one, the other one. Yeah. Well he can pay us later. Put him on our don't-pay-till-May plan. Okay? You all set now? Okay then. *Now* I'm gonna blow your face off.)

Oh but we can't just start letting everyone choose what portion of their taxes they'll pay and what they won't! Agreed. So everyone will still pay that 9%. They'll just get to say whether or not it supports military endeavours.

But if we let people choose not to direct that 9% to the military, we'd have to allow choice for the other 91%! Well, would this be such a bad idea? Maybe it would be a good thing to be able to put our money where our minds are. I, for example, would choose not to put any of my tax money into subsidizing big corporations; let them take a cut in profits first; better yet, let them pay taxes first. I especially wouldn't subsidize Ontario Hydro; I'd rather fund jobs in solar industries than support the nuclear industry. And I'd rather pay for ViaRail than for the four-laning of every highway in the country. And so on. Oh, and how about mandatory sensitivity training and a conflict resolution course for every male between eighteen and twenty-four.

You think we don't have the draft in Canada? Check your wallet next time you see a convoy of khaki jeeps en route to somewhere. (Other than to Toronto in winter.)

# The International Court of Justice

Did you know there's something called the International Court of Justice? Did you know that back in 1996, this Court considered whether or not the threat or use of nuclear weapons should be legal?

Forty-five countries made submissions to the Court. Two-thirds argued for illegality; the U.S. and the U.K. were part of the other one-third. (Canada didn't bother to take a stand one way or the other.) (Is that our secret to being a peaceful people?)

According to Josef Rotblat (ever hear of him? he won the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize), the arguments presented by the U.S. and the U.K. assumed that nuclear weapons do not cause unnecessary suffering. I guess that means they just cause *necessary* suffering. Nor are they indiscriminate: civilians and territories of third-party states would not be affected. And pigs can fly.

The U.K. added that calling into question the policy of nuclear deterrence would be profoundly destabilizing. Hm. The 'Don't rock the boat' argument. It always seems to come from those already *in* the boat, doesn't it?

Russia simply dismissed arguments against nuclear weapons as political and emotional. This, from the country that had Chernobyl. (Can you spell d-e-n-i-a-l?)

Germany and Italy presented an interesting opinion: a ruling from the World Court about the legality of nuclear weapons "might jeopardize the complex and sensitive process of negotiating nuclear disarmament." Well yeah. That's rather the point. If the stuff is deemed illegal, negotiations *will* be jeopardized: they'll be over.

France questioned whether the *World Health Organization* had exceeded its scope by requesting a ruling from the Court — about weapons that could detrimentally affect the *health* of everyone in the *world*. Exceeding its scope? Could you run that one by me again? Granted, dead people have no health. But surely the WHO could argue that nuclear weapons therefore decrease its client base. Oh, and it could also mention that nuclear weapons sometimes just injure people or make them very sick *before* they die.

And the winner was? Well, we're not quite sure. The Court decided that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be contrary to the rules of international law except "in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake." On that point, they tied seven to seven. Maybe. The way that part was put together — "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law ... however ... the Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence ..." — was such that the yeas and the nays were a mess: yes, I agree that we cannot conclude, we can't make up our mind about the self-defence circumstance; yes, I agree that we cannot conclude, because to conclude about the illegality of nuclear weapons is not within our authority; no, I do not agree, we *can* conclude, and we can conclude that there is no 'generally' about it, nuclear weapons are illegal even in self-defence; no, I do not agree, we *can* conclude, and we can conclude that generally nuclear weapons are illegal but not in self-defence. Next to this, 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' is easy.

And of course the definition of 'self-defence' has me worried. Any law student can argue that one's self includes one's interests, and *voilà!* Desert Storm is a war of self-defence, bring out the nuclear arsenal, boys! (So when the aliens see

earth's tombstone floating through space, they'll read the epitaph, "We thought they were going to kill us.") (Instead of *my* choice, "I *told* you we were sick!")

Now, why didn't we hear about any of this? Perhaps because at the opening press conference, there were no (no) media representatives from the English-speaking world. What, were they all still covering O. J. Simpson? (Ever hear of him?)

Was this really because they didn't care? Or was it because they know that any advisory opinion made by the International Court of Justice has about as much power as, well, as a Canadian referendum. (Sing along, "[They] are the world...")

## Generation X: Lineage

Insofar as Generation X is that generation of people who obtained university degrees sometime after 1990 and who, alas, cannot now find a job in their chosen field, Generation X is a fiction. It's not that they don't exist. It's that they existed prior to 1990 as well. Perhaps the only-now identification has occurred for two reasons.

As of 1980something, young people started considering a university degree to be job training. Don't know where they got that idea. A college diploma is a lot more job-oriented, always was, probably always will be. But going to college was, well, for those who couldn't get into university. Maybe something clicked and people started realizing they'd been suckered — those who had bought into the elitism of higher learning wanted their job training too. Or maybe it started to be the case that anyone who could get into college could also get into university; with elitism out of the picture, perhaps it was thought that job training could or should enter the scene.

But our society has not created entire industries around sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literature, history, mathematics, physics, astronomy, etc. It could have. But it didn't. When was the last time you saw an ad in the classifieds for a sociologist? Not since 1990. Not before 1990 either. Our jobs are clustered, inasmuch as there's *any* job clusters left, in business, computers, and perhaps engineering. And this gets us to the second reason.

Which is quite simple: maybe the growth in the number of business and engineering graduates exceeded the growth of the business and engineering job markets (and perhaps this may soon be the case with the computer industry). Maybe it's just

that you can't keep expanding forever: the needs of a society are not endless — they get met, and then you don't need any more. Maybe World War III didn't come on schedule and create a lot of job vacancies. Maybe the postwar boom has set off a cycle of generational boom and bust: there will be jobs when the now 50-65 year olds retire en masse, but they'll go to the at-the-time 20-35 year olds — who will experience the same boom those 50-65 year olds experienced 30 years ago in the '60s; but the generation of at-the-time 35-50 year olds, the now 20-35 year olds, will just get left out — after being the right age at the wrong time, they'll be the wrong age at the right time. (Unless, of course, our attitude toward hiring middle-aged people changes.)

I graduated in 1979, double major in Philosophy and Literature, minor in Psychology. I knew it wasn't going to get me a job; I wasn't at university for a job. I was there to open my mind, to satisfy my intellectual hunger; I signed up (and paid) for four years of reading, writing, and thinking about stuff — what an indulgence, what an opportunity! I did *other* things for employment — learned how to type, got my Conservatory grade eight to teach piano, planned to get a B.Ed.

Which I did in '81. And they were telling us *back then* there weren't any teaching jobs. I got lucky and landed a part-time one. Yes, in 1981, I considered myself lucky to get even a part-time job in my chosen field. And no, it didn't grow into a full-time job, I didn't put in ten years and then become a Department Head, I am not now raking in \$50,000/year, and I will not have a nice pension when I retire. Where do Generation Xers get those ideas about their predecessors? I was declared redundant, available for transfer to a job elsewhere in the Board, but I decided to quit before finding out whether or not this other job would materialize — in order to finish my first novel.

And no, the book didn't get published and I'm not now one of Canada's new young (read under 45) writers living off

royalties. This was the early 80s, not the 60s. So none of my next four books got published either. Grant-supported from time to time, shortlisted from time to time, but never published. So, in the meantime, I typed and filed, taught piano, got lucky with some summer school and night school courses for a while, filled in at detention centres and women's shelters, worked for minimum wage on a maintenance crew. And didn't even get an interview for advertised positions as part-time librarian, literacy assistant, magazine editor, or greeting card company poet. That's life.

And what a wonderful life it's been. For 20 hours/week I do whatever to make money so for the rest of the week I can read, write, and think about stuff — and otherwise satisfy my passions for and in life. (And I don't miss the \$50,000/year Department Headship one bit.)

So Generation X is either just the business and engineering students for whom, yes, the landscape has changed or it's just the Arts and Science students who never should have expected a job anyway.

Or, third possibility, maybe Generation X is just *men* experiencing what women have been experiencing since forever: being all dressed up with nowhere to go, being gifted, talented, educated, and seeing the high school dropout make more money.

Speaking of money, nor should they have expected to leave home and step into the same economic class they left, the one it took their parents twenty years to climb into. I grew up middle class, but I've been in the lower class ever since I left my parents' home.

So excuse me, but you guys are not the first to face an uncertain future, to not get a job in your chosen field, to not even get a job. You say you're over-educated, but it sounds like you've never even heard of the Depression.

## Public Universities: for members only?

*This was written a mere twenty or so years ago. How revolutionary have been affordable computers and access to the internet! (But not completely revolutionary ...)*

A university education is intended to awaken one's intellectual curiosity, one's thirst for knowledge and understanding; it is intended to instil habits of life-long learning. Suppose it does. What do you do with that curiosity, that thirst, those habits — when you walk out through the university's doors, hearing them slam behind you?

Many bright baccalaureates decide not to go on to grad school — for some, it's a matter of money, for others, a matter of time. Of those who do, many — some by choice, some by chance — do not go on to an academic post. I wonder how many of us there are then, shivering in the intellectual wasteland outside the ivory tower, our passion for the life of the mind the only thing keeping us warm.

Life is hard for the independent scholar. Without the benefits of university membership (that is, of being either a student or being on the staff or faculty of a university), success is minimal. Let me enumerate these benefits; it may be enlightening for those who've always lived on the inside.

*Access to a huge, well-stocked library.* Think for a minute about having to do your research and write your papers using only the city's public library. Think of the CD-ROMS you use — no more Philosopher's Index or PsycLit. Think of the government documents — any guess about how long it takes to get them directly from the government? Think of the journals — know how

much it costs to subscribe to just your top five? Even the books you'll want will now almost always be inter-library loan requests.

Sure, you could become a member of the university library — if you're an alumnus. But you've probably moved away from wherever you got your degree(s). Even so, you *may* be able to join, if you can afford it — and if you can demonstrate “serious intent”.

*Access to a photocopier.* Sounds like a trivial thing. There are print shops, after all; one can get anything photocopied anywhere. Yes, but if you're on the inside, you have free, or at least half-price, access to a photocopier. Out on the street, you'll pay five bucks for every twenty-page paper you want to copy.

*Access to a computer.* Yes, Virginia, there are still some people who haven't afforded a computer. Scholarly life is so much easier with word processing, not to mention things like database and statistics programs. And some journals now require submissions to be on disk. In larger cities, there are computers-for-rent-by-the-hour places, but many of us don't live in larger cities. And again, it costs us; for you, it's free.

*Access to a laser printer.* Now at this point, you'll surely object and say with some impatience, yes, yes, but these are cosmetic things, papers don't *need* to be word processed, they surely don't *need* to be printed on a laser printer. Then why are resume services which promise laser printing doing so well? Be honest. Unless you're a rare treasure, if you're looking at one cv that's laser-printed and another that's typed with, alas, a few white-out corrections, chances are you're already responding more favourably to the lasered one. Especially if it has some cool fonts and a bit of colour.

Ditto for papers and articles; sure they may receive anonymous review, but someone first decides whether to forward them for such review. (Have you really not noticed how hard it is to give an A+ to the exam with the loopy handwriting?) As with photocopying, the independent scholar can get material laser-printed — but at a greater cost than the university-affiliated scholar.

*Access to specialized equipment.* If you work in audiotape or videotape, it's worse. Many calls for works, be it for performance or competition, specify certain formats, such as half-track, 15 ips, reel to reel. Oh for the days when you had access to the university studio! Or lab, if you work in the sciences instead of the arts. At least there *are* private studios for rent. I don't think there any private *labs* for rent. Even rats, I suspect, are hard to come by if you're just some no-name from R.R.#1 Woodsville.

And, unlike the word processor/typewriter difference, these are not *merely* matters of form. Process (form) in many cases affects product (content) — immensely. For example, having access to a Fairlight and a 24-track studio might allow the composer to hear orchestration problems that might otherwise go unnoticed — so there's a direct bearing on the quality of the product. I expect the same is true for specialized equipment in other fields as well. (In fact, while it's at least possible to be an independent *scholar*, I suspect it's near impossible to be an independent *scientist*.)

*Access to university letterhead and envelopes.* The benefit of this cannot be overstated. Again, be honest. A paper on Kant from R.R.#1 Woodsville and one from the University of Toronto: which is more likely to be forwarded for review? (Especially if the former is printed by dot matrix and the latter by laser?) University affiliation carries weight. What is done there is automatically presumed to be of high quality. That may be a justifiable assumption. After all, there were hoops to jump through to get in. But its converse, that what's done outside the tower walls is *not* of high quality, is *not* justifiable. One shouldn't assume the hoops were botched.

*Access to bulletin boards.* Those treasure troves of 'what's on' — symposia, conferences, seminars, calls for papers, competitions — opportunities, opportunities, opportunities — that, if you're outside, you know nothing about.

Sure, you could keep informed with the trade journals. But they're in the library, the one with the lock on the door or the

tollbooth, remember? And not only do subscriptions cost money, often the journals don't get to you before the deadlines advertised within their pages. (Remember they must arrive in plenty of time — emailing or faxing an almost late submission costs us, it doesn't cost you).

*Access to the internet.* Of course, you don't need to be in the ivory tower for this, but like almost all of the above, it's free or cheaper if you are. And internet access gives you email (quick access to the collegial network of listserves as well as instant mail service for those deadlines mentioned above). It also gives you all those websites, for possible research use. And, increasingly, access to bulletin boards.

*Access to other people.* In a word, networking. Most opportunities — jobs, publications, performances — don't come through the formal channels of public advertisement. Rather, they come through informal connections: the person editing the book or organizing the concert will probably ask friends/colleagues for submissions; likewise for the person who needs a stats expert for a research project or a violinist for a performance. While it's possible to develop a network in virtual space, chance chats in real space, in hallways and lunchrooms, continue to be very fruitful.

And if you're the one with the opportunity to offer, well, if you're a university-affiliated scholar, the research assistants and experimental subjects come free of charge or at subsidized rates — you don't have to pay for their services out of your own pocket like we do.

*Access to conference money.* Not only does conference attendance sharpen the quality of your work (discussion with one's peers, etc.), it provides more networking (see above, access to other people). For those on the outside, having a paper accepted at a conference is lamentably just another cv entry; we usually can't afford the travel and accommodation expenses to actually go and present the paper.

So. What's the solution? Well, I think we may have a very fortuitous matching of supply and demand here. The high numbers of unemployed PhDs suggests that there are a lot of scholars out there *unaffiliated* with any university; and for every PhD, my guess is that there must be a least one still-intellectually-interested MA or BA. There's the demand. And I understand that budget cuts have made more than one university consider closure. There's the supply.

I suggest we turn such universities into truly public institutions, places for independent scholars to continue their work. Sort of like an intellectual Nautilus. Membership fees could be set according to the number of visits or hours per week or month or whatever. The premium package could include access to all facilities; a less deluxe package could limit the user to, for example, the library and the computer lab.

Would membership fees cover the continued operation of the university? I doubt it. But it might come closer than you think: take away faculty salaries, the Dean's office, the Registrar's office, and Student Services, and well, the cost of keeping the university open is decreased by what, about 80%? We would keep the library staff, the computer staff, the maintenance department, some clerical staff, and some lab staff...

And many of these are barterable tasks. For example, perhaps if you work at the circulation desk for five hours per week, you could get a discount on your membership fee. Gee. Could the whole set-up be a cash-less co-op? Maybe. (Wow.) (Any unemployed MBAs out there to work up a proposal?)

I've heard that in Europe even the garbage collector knows Puccini. And in the cafes, philosophy happens. But here in Canada, there are 'No Trespassing or Loitering' signs outside the ivory tower; such limited access seems to have given the university a monopoly on the life of the mind. Which explains a lot.

## Advertising Jobs

I read the other day that 80% of all jobs are not advertised. Why the hell not?

What good does it do to force the unemployed into what is, therefore, largely a wild goose chase? Sending out resumes, making calls, making visits — to a long list of prospective employers shortlisted from the yellow pages.

It's a waste of the employer's time and money: even if they don't respond, they still have to open the envelope and read a bit before they throw it away.

And of course it's a waste of the unemployed's time and money: resume plus cover letter plus manilla envelope plus postage equals about two dollars. Times fifty and you're up to \$100 — which is no small amount for someone who doesn't have a job.

Worse, what do you think happens to one's self-esteem in the face of what's bound to be constant rejection? It *has* to affect our presentation (should we be so lucky as to send an application to someone who actually has an opening, for which we are actually qualified, and who actually shortlists us out of several hundred for an interview).

And this of course creates a vicious circle, because the more hopeless and unenthused we are, the more likely we are *not* to get the job, so the more hopeless and unenthused we become. Enthusiasm becomes very difficult very quickly: each time you have to climb over one more failure in order to feel hopeful, to think for a moment that you might actually get this one — when you don't, you fall that much further, and then have to climb that much higher the next time. Only the insane maintain hope.

The rest of us, in touch with reality, give up. It's called maintaining that last shred of dignity.

'Course maybe that's the point of such 'recruitment strategies': you weed out those with a bit of dignity, 'cause we all know where dignity can lead — to autonomy. Desperation is a much better indicator of workplace success. (And let's not forget, of course, that the rest of those unadvertised positions can just go to who you know, the old 'IOU' game.)

# My Job, My Self

I'm intrigued by the psychological devastation that seems to accompany layoffs, not to mention ordinary unemployment, as well as underemployment. It doesn't seem to be just a matter of money; it seems to be a matter of self-worth, self-esteem; personal identity seems to be at stake.

It's an intriguing claim: one is what one does for money. And I suppose that insofar as one chooses what one does, it's valid. But one *doesn't* necessarily get to choose one's work. That's the false premise. Perhaps there was time one could so choose, perhaps, between 1945 and 1970, if you lived in the U.S. or Canada, and if you were white, and if you were male, and at least lower middle class.

Certainly in many European and Asian countries, the state has told people what jobs they would have. Even in the U.S. and Canada, in war time, the state made that decision: a lot of men would *not* otherwise have chosen to be soldiers, a lot of women would *not* have chosen to work in munitions factories.

But political power is not the only factor that coerces one's career choice: economic pressures, as in the Depression, have not only determined *what* job one had, but *whether* one had a job.

And let's not forget social pressures: the 'career' choices for people not privileged by sex, race, or class have always been less broad. Do you really think that every secretary *chose*, out of all the careers there are, to be a secretary? (Do you really think 'secretary' is a career?) Social conditioning, whether it be by society-at-large, the school system, or the family, has always led us, pushed us, in a certain direction.

Even when the options are many, they are few: what are the odds that, of all the jobs available, both my father and my

brother would choose one in the insurance business? Pretty good, considering that it's human nature to choose what's familiar. My guess is that my brother didn't even really consider being an electrician, let alone a secretary.

So there have always been constraints; what job we have (or don't have) has never been totally up to us. Perhaps only now, as a result of downsizing and closures, with the consequent layoffs of middle management and senior workers, are the middle class older white males finding out about it. And, as usual, something doesn't exist until the middle class older white male experiences it.

As an artist, perhaps I've had an advantage. Artists can rarely earn a living from their chosen work; they've always had to do something else for money. So we know that you don't have to be paid for what you do in order for it to have value. We know that that attitude, though common (surely it's responsible for the demeaning label of 'hobby' — not until I *sold* a poem was I considered a *real* poet), is mistaken. Look carefully and you'll see that it's also inconsistent: in some very important cases (oddly enough, cases in which women dominate), getting paid *decreases* rather than increases the value of the endeavour consider mothering, consider sex. So ask any artist 'What do you do?' and the answer will be 'I write', 'I paint' or whatever — not 'I'm a waiter.' Our identities have *never* been confused with our jobs.

And unless non-artists learn, and learn quickly, to make the same separation, we'll be one sorry-looking society pretty soon. It's a sad thing: lose your job, lose your self. But it's really nothing new — it's no different from the empty nest syndrome and the retirement phenomenon. I have met people who want a job 'just so as to have something to do, somewhere to go every day.' Geez, what bankrupt pathetic souls they are. Get a life! A job is secondary.

# The Problem with Business Ethics Courses

The problem with business ethics courses is that all too often they're taught by business faculty. And ethics is, after all, a field of philosophy. And with all due respect to my business colleagues, philosophy faculty are far better qualified to teach ethics than business faculty.

As far as I can see, business ethics when taught by business faculty is superficial at best. The so-called 'media test' and 'gut test' are in essence nothing but appeals to intuition and childhood conditioning. I think it far better to teach the many rational approaches to ethical decision-making which consider consequences, rights, values, and so on.

A further weakness of business ethics when taught by business faculty (and medical ethics when taught by medical faculty, and so on) is that what takes place is preaching, not teaching. The course is essentially "This is the right thing to do" or "Do this in this situation" — what is taught is simply the current conventions, standard practices, and/or legal obligations. Far better, I think, that a critical thinking approach be used: provide students with a toolbox of approaches so they can figure out what to do for themselves (after all, *they* are responsible for the decisions they make).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These weaknesses, by the way, are horribly magnified in business ethics practitioners (consultants, officers, and the like). To my knowledge, most have *no* training in philosophy/ethics at all! And that's considered okay! Would you accept an accounting consultant who had no training in accounting? After all, *anyone* can add and subtract (just as everyone knows right from wrong). Ethics practitioners are either legal people or management/human resources people and so their approach to an ethical issue is either 'Comply with the legislation' or 'Comply with

Unfortunately, philosophy's disdain for business is matched only by business' disdain for philosophy. So even when a philosopher *does* teach a business ethics course, it is unnecessarily difficult and sadly unsuccessful. Students can be quite hostile when things they have been taught as fact (such as 'The purpose of business is to maximize profit' or 'As long as it's legal, it's okay') are challenged. They take it personally and spend a lot of time trying to win — and so miss much of the course. But that's what philosophers do: we challenge the assumptions that arguments are based on.

And we insist opinions be *based* on arguments! Clear and logically sound arguments no less! That's a lot of work! Students are especially hostile when a lot of work is required for what is, after all, 'a bird course'! If the student is used to knowledge and comprehension courses, then teaching ethics, requiring arguments to support opinions, is doubly difficult. And business students have led me to believe that the kind of critical and abstract thinking required in these ethics courses is significantly different from anything they've had to do before.<sup>2</sup>

And in ethics in particular, we navigate through grey: there is no right answer; there are only degrees of right. Students resist this, they stand on the sidelines, never really getting the value of the course. They are far more comfortable with the black and white they seem to be taught in their other courses.

And sad to say, though I was a philosopher teaching business ethics, one day I was informed that I would not be asked to teach ethics again. (Well actually I wasn't really

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the company' (and in both cases, remember that bottom line). Articles on ethical issues that get published in business magazines (as opposed to those that get published in ethics journals) are, frankly, embarrassing in their lack of depth; business codes of ethics are laughable for their simplicity, their naiveté ....)

<sup>2</sup> Which should be worrisome even to them, as this kind of thinking, at a much more advanced level, is required for the Reading Comprehension and Logical Reasoning sections of the GMAT.)

informed — talk about the need for ethics: if it weren't for the phone call of an administrative assistant acting on her own initiative, I probably would've found out I was 'fired' by seeing an ad for an ethics instructor in the paper.) Why? I asked the Dean for confirmation and an explanation. Student evaluations have been "mixed", he said. True enough. In any ethics class, there is a handful, usually the less mature and less academically apt, who react with the hostility and resistance described above. And there are others who nominate me for an Excellence in Teaching Award.

It's quite possible, though, the ad won't appear. It's quite possible the course will simply not be offered anymore. Such was the fate of the IT Ethics course I also taught for a while. As it is, the business ethics course was offered only every second year, as an elective, sending a message of unimportance that also makes the course so difficult to teach successfully (after all, since business is profit-driven, ethics is irrelevant, and anyway, everyone already knows right from wrong).

# The Radioactive Killing Fields

*This was written back in the early 90s, when DU was first (?) used in bullets in the Gulf War. Apparently, this has not changed.*

Of course, they're doing it again. Using radioactive waste (specifically, depleted uranium — DU) in the bullets.<sup>1</sup>

While this is marginally better than dumping the stuff into the ocean, launching it into outer space, burying it in containers built to last not nearly as long as the stuff itself, or using it to build schools (oh, you didn't know about that one?), there are, of course, ethical concerns. ('Ethical' — Commander, can you say 'ethical?') And this may be just one more reason (who needs *another* reason?) not to support the military (we're talking about 9% of your income taxes; that's almost \$2500 if your income is \$25,000).

Yes, yes, I know that DU bullets can penetrate a steel tank better than anything else we've used. They're smaller and they're faster. And they're pyrophoric, to boot. ('Pyrophoric' — they burn intensely on impact.) (Our Commander can even spell that one.)

But there are drawbacks. (Yes, those other things were the *good* points.)

One of the usual problems after a war is that whole areas still have active mines in them. But at least there is a simple solution: send a bunch of kids out into the field to play and, well, pretty soon you'll know where the mines are. True, you lose a bunch of kids, but hey, thanks to the Pope's ban on contraception and cultural norms that allow husbands to treat

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, for real. [scientificamerican.com/article/the-science-of-the-silver](http://scientificamerican.com/article/the-science-of-the-silver)

wives like breeders, the current population growth rate is such that these kids are easily replaced. When they turn seventeen, we'll nail their feet to boards in the trenches anyway (at least if we're in Argentina, we will), so let's not be hypocrites about this: kids are expendable.

But now, if the fields are also radioactive, well we have to wait 4.5 billion years just for the uranium's *half-life* to expire. So there's no point in getting rid of the mines. (That's one PR show that was put on for nothing.) Oh, and we wouldn't have to use all those kids.

Come to think of it, there's also no point in clearing away the rubble so the land can be re-cultivated — the food would be radioactive anyway.

And certainly why rebuild if no one can live there? Hey, we don't even have to bother repairing the energy and sanitation infrastructures.

In fact, we can just write off the whole area. Actually, from now on, if this radioactive-waste-into-military-weaponry thing catches on, *any* area in which there's fighting may as well be considered a write-off. Gee, when was the last time the best solution was also the cheapest solution? And so elegant too — solving two problems at once, waste disposal and weapon production.

Wait a minute. What about the people that used to live there? Where are they going to go? More importantly, if they don't have to rebuild, they won't have to borrow from the IMF — so they won't become indebted to the U.S. well into the 24th century. Somebody didn't think this through ...

Well, we won't have to worry about refugees. Especially if the new toss-'em-overboard immigration policy keeps working. And anyway, they're not our concern. It's not like we Canadians shot over 14,000 rounds of radioactive ammunition — wait a minute, we did. Well, maybe not 14,000 rounds, but, well, there were 4,500 of us in the Gulf War, plus how many in

Yugoslavia ... I assume they weren't taking night courses. Oh, and (oops, I almost forgot this) *we're the ones supplying the uranium.*

Come to think of it, hundreds of those soldiers are sick all the time now. Some of them, no doubt, are acting like they've received fifty chest x-rays (gee that'd be about right for carrying the bullets around for an hour). I wonder if their newborns will have fused fingers and no eyes like the others.

## What if the right to life ... ?

What if the right to life was a natural, inalienable human right to the age of eighteen, but after that it was an acquired, alienable right? So you had to deserve it somehow, you had to *deserve* to be alive. And you could lose it, by doing any of a number of things ...

## **Entertain me. Hurt him.**

Given the violent content of many prime time dramas and sports, both of which are considered entertainment, it is apparent that many of us consider it entertaining when people hurt other people. What does that say about us?

That so many people find violence entertaining should be deeply disturbing. Instead, it's so normal, it's unremarkable. (And what does that say about us?)

## Great Minds

From time to time, I amuse myself, I reassure myself, by contemplating truly great minds. I'm not talking about the mind that makes your typical accidental or derivative kind of discovery: lots of people would have seen a rock roll down a hill, and several probably thought of the wheel; likewise, I'm sure the thought of velcro occurred to many a person while picking burrs off pants (though probably only a few bothered to fabricate a prototype, and then only one of those was first at the patent office).

No, I'm talking about the kind of mind from which has come a discovery or invention so remarkable, so astounding, so, in a word, *surprising*, that it gives one pause, that one *has* to ask: *what kind of mind would you have to have to have come up with that?*

For a while, I considered the flush toilet to have been the product of such a mind. But eventually I realized that more likely it was the pedestrian idea of some pre-toilet-century Mom who was, yet again, rinsing her baby's bottom in a basin.

And for a while I thought the fly strip was testimony to such a mind. But more likely it was just the result of sadistic tendencies intersecting with a jam-sticky kitchen counter.

However, the discovery of fire surely remains such an example: who would have possibly thought that rubbing two sticks together would cause fire? There isn't even a remotely obvious connection between the two: stick — flame. One might as easily have thought that running in a circle around the would've caused it to burst into flame. One doesn't accidentally, one doesn't just *happen*, to rub two sticks together and then notice a flame. Even if one did, some evening, perhaps a little

bored with *Star Trek* reruns, pick up a couple nearby sticks and casually rub them together, well, you see, that just wouldn't do: in order to be successful, the action has to have been quite intentional, quite purposeful — and quite persistent.

So the question remains: to whom would it have occurred that rubbing something, like a stick, with just the right amount of pressure, and the right amount of speed, would produce heat and — Oh.

Okay, maybe the balloon ...

## Casual Work?

Casual work — a few hours here and there, often doing one-time jobs. I've had casual work: I was a relief worker at several different agencies (detention centre, women's shelter, mental health home); I was a temp — an employee of one of the temporary work agencies that so often supply office workers for vacationing or ill regulars. Let me tell you, 'casual work' is a big misnomer. 'Desperate work' is more like it.

To describe the desperation you feel, not knowing from one month, from one week, hell, from one *day* to the next, if you'll get enough work that month to pay the rent, to buy milk for your oatmeal. (Brown sugar is too much to hope for.)

To describe the desperation you feel when you don't.

To describe the desperation you feel when you start hoping people will get sick, so you will get enough shifts. (My suggestion for a more equitable job-sharing program was always met with stone-eyed stares. Whether of incomprehension or hatred, I could never tell.)

Your dreams get small. You dream of a part-time job. (Full-time is too much to hope for.) For a regular income, for that little security. Still no dental plan, still no pension plan, still no paid holidays, still no sick leave, and quite probably still no eligibility for UI when you lose the job, but hey: a paycheque, however small, for sure, every two weeks.

I have heard unemployed people say they want a job just to have something to do, somewhere to go in the morning. It makes me so angry. Because if that's all the job means to you, please, don't take it. Leave it for those of us who really need the money. (Or really want it — because they're trying to put a year's tuition together from a few days of cutting grass here, a

windfall week of painting there.) Instead, volunteer. You'll still have something to do, somewhere to go.

Oh but receiving money legitimizes. I know that feeling. You're worth only how much you make. Well, that feeling is a crock of shit. There are lots of things we do for free that are extremely valuable. Parenting, for one. And there are lots of things we do for money that are completely useless. Manufacturing products that no one really needs or wants, for one.

I've got a job now. My dream came true: I'm working part-time, seasonal, 25 hours/week for nine months of the year. And the next time my cabin needs painting (I have no grass to cut), I could, as before, do it myself. But if I can find someone desperate for 'casual work', you can bet I'll hire her/him.

And until we recognize and accept that the current 'distribution' of work (let alone the current 'creation' of jobs) is unfair (and unwise), you can bet I'll find that someone.

## Networking and Mentoring: Legitimizing ‘Connections’

Both networking and mentoring, while two distinct activities, seem to endorse using people; this is bad enough, but they also, partly therefore, support the ‘It’s who you know, not what you know’ mentality. In the interest of justice based on merit, both should be discouraged.

Consider networking. On a superficial level, networking refers, harmlessly enough, to ‘making contacts’. But networking is not so incidental, not so accidental. Networking is ‘*developing* and *maintaining* contacts’. For what, you may ask. Good question. An article in *Incentive* by Steven M. and Harvey J. Krause provides the answer: “The goal of networking is to create a pool of people and information that you can use for a variety of goals: increasing the quality of your product or service, decreasing customer attrition, gaining customers or getting a job that your competition never even heard was available” (July 1995, p.71). The key word, of course, is *use*. Many people think it’s wrong to use people, especially to use them as a means to your own ends. And I’m one of them.

The Krauses’ article is titled, aptly enough, “Circle of Friends: Don’t overlook the value of networking as a sales tool” — suggesting that people who network are the kind of people who call you up to tell you they’ve got a job at ABC car dealership now so hey, you need a car, dontcha? (Well, no I don’t. And if I did, I’d check the Consumer Reports.) That kind of people, I would think, quickly become *ex*-friends, and for good reason: no one likes to be used.

Another article, this one by Robin White Goode, focuses on networking as the way to get a job: “If you’ve developed and

maintained contacts in your industry [“your own personal network of corporate insiders”], partnered with recruiters, worked with your career placement office, subscribed to professional magazines and joined key organizations, your job search is sure to be successful” (*Black Enterprise*, January 1995, p.76). Can you say ‘all of that costs money?’ And if you’re unemployed, you don’t have money for lunches (‘partnering with recruiters’) and subscriptions and memberships.

This strategy, obviously then, is meant for those who already *have* jobs, who are already on the ladder and want up (or over) a rung. That desire is not necessarily a bad thing, but networking for jobs, then, fosters a vicious cycle of ‘those who already have are apt to get more’. This is, of course, not fair; nor is it necessary. Given our computer technology, and given the decreasing number of jobs, *every* job could be posted to the *same one* directory, and *anyone* looking for a job would simply need to visit the local job office to log on.

Mentoring is not as easily dismissed, if only because it’s not as easily defined. A mentor may simply be a role model: someone whose footsteps are good to follow. And/or a mentor may be a personal trainer: someone who acts as a source of information on the policies and procedures of the organization, who helps you with specific skills, who gives you feedback, etc. And/or a mentor may be a sponsor: someone who introduces you to influential people in the organization, who facilitates your entry to meetings and activities usually attended by high-level people, who publicly praises your accomplishments and abilities, who recommends you for promotion, etc.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the case, mentors are well-connected; they have power and prestige.

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<sup>1</sup> These descriptions are taken, roughly, from Margo Murray’s *Beyond the Myths and Magic of Mentoring: How to Facilitate an Effective Mentoring Program* (San Francisco: Jossey-Boss Publishers, 1991, p.12-13).

So, the bottom line is that those who have a mentor have an advantage over those who don't. And that's the problem. Whether trainer or sponsor, everyone could benefit from a mentor's services. But most mentoring programs assign mentors only to a select few. Thus, mentoring legitimizes favouritism. But, you may say, the selection is based on merit — only the capable and the eager get doors opened for them, as should be the case. My response is that if merit truly mattered, people wouldn't need others, mentors, to open those doors for them. That they do reveals that it *isn't what* you know, but *who* you know. (And let's not forget that mentors can close doors too; what do you do when your mentor starts 'forgetting' to 'mention' you?)

Some mentoring programs don't function as much to fast-track the chosen ones as to affirmatively activate the heretofore unchosen ones. For example, several mentoring programs are designed for women and minorities *because* they are unconnected, because they are "not as well integrated into departmental or institutional networks" (Linda K. Johnsrud, "Enabling the Success of Junior Faculty Women through Mentoring" in *Mentoring Revisited: Making an Impact on Individuals and Institutions*, p.53). But this just compensates for an unfair system; it doesn't make it less unfair.

Both kinds of mentoring are, however, exclusionary, and, as I've said, that's the problem. As for a mentor providing inside information, well, there shouldn't be any inside information: an organization's policies and procedures should be written out for all to read, perhaps even presented at a new employee training session (and there should be no unwritten policies, no under-the-table procedures); any preferences for application materials, be it for a job, a promotion, or a grant, should be stated on the application form itself, or perhaps explained in a separate "Tips for Applicants" sheet; and, as suggested earlier, knowledge of any available job, promotion, or grant, should be freely accessible to all.

As for a mentor opening doors, well, merit should be the only key. Am I suggesting that people can't even 'put in a good word' — am I suggesting the demise of recommendations? Part of me wants to say, yes: my abilities and credentials should speak for themselves, what someone else says about me shouldn't matter. But we live in a world where people can hire someone to prepare their resume, where businesses exist solely for the purpose of writing grant applications. In light of such rampant spin doctoring, perhaps employers and adjudicators need to be able to speak directly to someone who has actually known and worked with the applicant. So, let's keep recommendations, but as only one of several criteria for judgement, and let's use them most judiciously: people (especially people with power) should not give recommendations unsolicited; employees should solicit recommendations only from those people named by the applicant; and the prestige of the recommender should not matter — there are a lot of good people out there who simply aren't 'well connected.'

In many ways, both networking and mentoring are nothing new: they're the 'old boys' club' all over again. Sure the club may include non-male and non-white people now; it may even be a club you've made yourself. But the question at the starting line is still the same: 'What can you do for me?' (because I can't do it for myself) (because I'm deficient and/or the system is defective).

# Countdown to Looking Glass

I highly recommend the movie *Countdown to Looking Glass*. Through a series of newscasts by a fictional television network (CVN), we see a chain reaction that takes a mere eight days to go from the default by three South American countries on loans from the United States to the detonation of a nuclear weapon in the Persian Gulf.

Eerily, I realized I watched people watch the media watch the world end. Complete with commercial breaks.

The credible ease with which one thing led to another was frightening. It was like dominoes: once the chips are in place, a single trigger and the end is inevitable. Just like the nuclear fission process itself.

But perhaps what was more frightening was that only one television network aired the movie. And it did so at 2:15 a.m. on Christmas Eve. Apparently our real networks are not nearly as committed as the fictional CVN to keeping their viewers aware and informed. Because those domino chips are in place.

## Political Science: A Costly Misnomer

Science is the pursuit of knowledge according to the scientific method: hypotheses must be testable, and results must be verifiable by replication. Obviously, the more quantifiable something is, the more accurate and precise its measurement can be, and the more accurate and precise something is, the more testable and verifiable it is — it's hard to test and then verify an uncertain or vague something-or-other. So the definition of science really comes down to quantification. Well, that and matter — only material things *can* be quantified.

Political science is the study of government organization and political systems. These things are not quantifiable. It would seem, then, that political science should have been named political art.

So? Well, one, we're left with an interesting question: why was political science mis-named in the first place? My guess is that it was because men did the naming. For whatever reason (and several come to mind), men dominated government and politics, so, of course, they would initiate, dominate, *name* the field of political science.

And why would they choose to call it a science rather than an art? Well, simply because the arts are considered feminine. And this was a bad thing.

And why was science, on the other hand, considered masculine? Perhaps because male supremacy depends on size. So size is seen as a good thing. So quantifiability, the measurability of size, is seen as a good thing. Science, by quantifiability, is thus linked to masculinity.

And two, we're surely left wondering what the consequences have been of this error in nomenclature. Perhaps

if political science had been named correctly at the start, if the creation and maintenance of a just society was recognized as an art, not a science, we might *have* just societies.

We might be focusing on quality, not quantity. Consider the impact of this on the current economics-by-GNP system (a system in which oil spills and car accidents are good things because they increase the GNP — read Marilyn Waring), the system which directs our Finance Departments. If we focused on quality, one's standard of living might not be determined by how much one has, but by how happy one is, how free and autonomous one is.

Systems of organization might be lateral, not hierarchical (hierarchical systems are implicitly incremental, that is, dependent on quantity differences). Consider the impact of this on the workplace.

Attention might be paid to process, rather than to structure (structure is matter, static quantity). Consider the impact of this on hospitals and schools.

It might have been understood that societies are dynamic, fluid, and characterized by relationships which must be kept in balance. Consider the impact of this on trade and foreign relations.

And it might have been understood that each organism has an optimal size, that unlimited growth is not in its best interests, that more is not better. Consider the impact of this on consumer societies and 'Defence' Departments.

Just consider the impact of the inconsequence, the insignificance, of quantity.

## What's Wrong with Power

The thing about power (power over others, that is, not power over oneself) is that it can interfere with the other's freedom of choice. But it does so only if they *use* that power, you may wish to clarify; so people should simply not *use* their power over others; they should not even show they have it.

Well no, the thief doesn't have to *use* the gun in order to interfere with my choice of giving or not giving her my money. Simply *having* the power to shoot me affects my decision. But, you'll counter, other people always have some sort of power over you; the thief may not even have the gun with him. (Yeah, it's usually a him.)

Correct. In fact, he may not even *own* a gun. He need only have the power to buy (and then use) the gun. In fact, a gun need not even be involved. He could run into me with his car. The bottom line is that everyone has the power to do something harmful, something hurtful, to everyone else. Therefore, everyone's freedom of choice is limited in some way. And that's all there is to this point: there is no such thing as complete freedom of choice: all of our decisions are made in a context of possible, or probable, consequences.

But there's something here of importance: the difference between possible and probable. Surely we give more weight to the latter. Harm is more probable if the thief has a gun pointed to my head than if he has yet to even buy one.

And there's another point of importance: there is a difference between constraint and coercion. Constraint becomes coercion only when the person would've chosen otherwise had the constraints not been there. That is to say, if I

would've given my money to you anyway, your power over me is not coercion, it is not controlling me.

And interestingly enough, control is not dependent on the intentional use of power by the other. Just as often it is one's own judgement, which may well be incorrect, of the probability of harm that controls one's behaviour.

Having power over others, others having power over us — these are facts of life. The easy part is distinguishing constraint from coercion; the tricky part distinguishing possible from probable. But our freedom of choice depends on these distinctions.

## A Millennial New Year's Resolution (Who's Making Policy?)

I don't do New Years'. I especially didn't do *this* New Years. Though the chance to join in worldwide celebration of an error in addition (our calendar is such that there wasn't a year zero — 1 A.D. came right after 1 B.C., so actually we've just *begun*, not *finished*, the 2000th year A.D.) (and A.D., well that's a whole mess of mistakes, not the least of which is marking time across the entire planet according to a religious myth) — What was I saying? Oh yeah. While joining with humanity worldwide to celebrate, indeed to proclaim in song and dance, our F in arithmetic had its attraction, I declined. Because even if they'd gotten it right, the arbitrariness of it all is pretty insulting. I mean, I'll celebrate and reflect when I have good reason to, but our fascination with base ten is a mere evolutionary happenstance, and to rejoice at the occurrence of multiples of ten serves merely to reassure us that we do indeed have ten fingers and toes.

Nevertheless, I ended up watching several hours of the "2000" telecast. Not the midnight champagne and crowds part, but the performance parts throughout the day: I realized early on that it would probably be another thousand years before so much art was given so much air time. Certainly I'd never see Jean-Michel Jarre on tv again.

But pretty soon the irony (and the heritage schlock stuff) spoiled it, and I stopped watching. I'm referring, of course, to the fact that on every other day of the year, the decade, the century, the arts are marginalized. In every way. But now, now that it's the millennial new year's eve, now you want us. *Now* you want the choirs, the symphony orchestras, and the

composers; *now* you want the dance troupes and the choreographers; *now* you want the costume designers, the stage designers. *Now* you let us out of our attics and closets — and expect what?

Entertainment? If you truly think us entertaining, then you'd televise our performances throughout the year, right alongside sports and sitcoms.

Glorification? If we weren't living in the attic, we'd turn down your commission for a Coronation March — and try again to make you understand that we seek to edify more than we seek to glorify.

Certainly we are an inappropriate choice to re/present the achievements of the past thousand years. Better to put Conrad Black on the stage.

Perhaps it's not the chronicler you want, but the visionary. Well, if you think the arts so adept at articulating, nay, formulating a vision, why don't you ever invite and/or value our input?

It would be no lie to say that, especially in the last century, business has been calling the shots. And while many calls have been good ones (I'm so very grateful for the production and sale of CD players), we are, overall, in pretty bad shape. We've done serious damage to our ecosystem; too many people don't have access to good food, good water, and good healthcare; and too many people do have access to horrendously lethal weapons.

So when I, as an ethics prof, was invited by a business prof to come talk to his policy class, I jumped at the chance. Up and down. But then it suddenly occurred to me: why is it only business and economics programs that have courses in policy-making? No wonder they're calling the shots; no one else is being trained to do so.

So there's a resolution for the new millennium. Humanities programs should have courses in policy-making. Historians would be great policy consultants. And philosophers, there are

our policy analysts, with their concept clarification skills, their sharp ability to identify assumptions and implications, and their obsession with consistency and clarity. Social science should do the same. I note that at our university, social welfare has a course titled 'Social Policy', but what about sociology and psychology? The economics policy course lists, as topics to be considered, poverty, inequality, healthcare, education, and pensions. Surely sociology and psychology have much to say about these things! Also listed are regional development and agriculture. So what about the input of the natural sciences? I see that environmental studies has a policy course, but that's it. Every discipline should have a policy course. Every discipline should have a course that teaches its students how to be of value to business, how to make their discipline's value and importance understood by business, how to make their discipline's interests heard by business.

Failing that, and we can call this the back-up resolution, business students should be taught to actively solicit the input of non-business interests. Call it the burden of being in control. Any decision-making team should be as diverse as possible. That's just good management, isn't it?

But — and this is important — all votes must count equally. For example, one could argue that science already sits at the boardroom table, but let's face it: only the blueprints that are profitable make it into production. And psychology has a chair, but they're just being used by marketing. Clearly, the monetary vote is trumping everything else.

Maybe if we had artists in there, our cities wouldn't be so ugly (all that stone and concrete, all those walls, so many lost opportunities for sculptors and painters). And maybe if we had nurses and teachers and poets there, our policies would pay attention not only to economic value, but also to the value of health, freedom, and joy.

(And oh for crying out loud, I've gone and written a Millennial New Year's column.)

## Why don't we have professional jurors?

A couple weeks ago I received a summons to appear for jury selection. So I dutifully drove to the courthouse on the day in question ready to establish my fitness to serve. No, that's not true. I drove to the courthouse on the day in question ready to answer their questions and curious as to whether one or both of the lawyers would decide they'd rather not have me on the jury.

The judge welcomed us — all hundred of us, it was standing room only — and briefly described the upcoming trial and the jury selection process. He then said, "If there is anyone with hearing problems who has trouble hearing what's being said in the court room, please raise your hand." Off to an impressive start, I thought.

We were a motley crew of housewives, electricians, social workers, administrative assistants, metal fabricators, and restaurant owners. I know, because as we were called one by one to stand before the lawyers, that information was provided to them. We weren't asked if we had any prejudices, if we had any issues with the law that had been broken, or if we would be able to render a fair decision. (To which my answers would have been yes, but the relevant issue is whether my prejudices would get in the way; yes, I don't think possessing marijuana should be illegal, nor do I think selling it should be illegal, especially as long as selling alcohol is legal; and that depends on what evidence is presented and how it's presented — and your definition of 'fair'.) Which means that the lawyers' decisions to accept or reject potential jurors were based solely on what we looked like and what we did for a living. So much for prejudices and rendering a fair decision.

Oh, and we were asked to look the accused in the eye.  
("AAGH!")

And then, if we were accepted, we were asked this question: "Do you swear that you shall well and truly try and true Deliverance make between our sovereign the Queen and the accused at the bar, whom I have in charge, and a true verdict give, according to the evidence, so help you God." Well, ya should've asked that before. Because first, I don't know what the hell "true Deliverance make" means. Second, as for being able to give a true verdict, if we knew what the truth of the matter was, we wouldn't have to have a trial now, would we? And third, I'm atheist, so I'm not putting my hand on that! 'Reject!' both attorneys say at once.

Well, no they didn't, actually, because I never got a chance to say any of that. The required thirteen jurors were selected before my name was called. And I have no idea why the chosen thirteen were chosen. Why was the college instructor rejected? Because she might ask too many questions and get too few answers and, therefore, hang the jury? Because it would be too inconvenient for her to be away from her job for two weeks? And why was the steelworker accepted? Because he smiled at the judge and seemed like an awshucks kinda guy? Or because his employer would reimburse him so the five dollars an hour we'd be getting paid wouldn't be quite so appalling. (Mind you, that's just if the trial goes on for more than ten days; for the first ten days, we aren't paid at all, which means it may well cost us, a not insignificant amount, to *be* a juror, given the ten days' lost income.)

What's even more appalling, of course, is that someone's future is at stake. Whether or not the accused spends time, possibly years, in prison is up to people who aren't even getting paid.

'Course why should they be? It's not like they're qualified. Their names were drawn out of a hat and they were chosen largely on the basis of their appearance.

All of which *begs* the question: why don't we have professional jurors? People who are trained not only to recognize and resist personal prejudice, but to recognize and resist loaded language. People who understand the difference between fact and opinion, and who know what an argument is, and the difference between an inductive argument and a deductive one. People who can identify and evaluate unstated assumptions, and who understand relevance, the difference between correlation and causation, and the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions. People who understand the many ways to reason incorrectly and who know how to evaluate personal testimony, sources, and studies. People who are paid according to their qualifications and contribution.

Seriously, why don't we have professional jurors? Is it because we want a jury of our peers to decide our fate? Why in the world would most people want that? Most people's peers couldn't tell the difference between good evidence and bad evidence if their — your — life depended on it! Is it because we think that in a democracy such decisions are best made by the common people? Right, well, maybe that's the problem with democracy. We have professional judges; our judges are trained to be clear and critical thinkers (notwithstanding the one mentioned above). And since jurors often bear more responsibility for the judgements to be made in our courts, they too should be trained, qualified to do the job.

## The Atheistic Samaritan

I'm interested in the question 'On what basis is an atheist bound to help another?' As an atheist, recourse to 'duty to God' is not an option. What about a 'duty to others'?

Yes, but on what is that duty grounded? That is the question. Certainly atheism does not preclude a value system: one could simply hold it valuable to help others, just as one might value generosity and courteousness.

But why? Why would one choose those values? I think here we get quickly to two possibilities, both of which are acceptable. One is that such values, or more precisely, acting upon such values, makes one happy (psychological egoism). The other is that such values make for a good or pleasurable society — which, in turn, makes one happy. And so the second possibility is actually reducible to the first, to psychological egoism.

There is a third possibility, however, that is not so transparently egoistic. I would guess that most atheists value justice, such that they would be upset, for example, if they were imprisoned without a trial for a crime they did not commit — that is, if they got less than they deserved. The flip side of this injustice, equally unjust, is getting *more* than one deserves.

The trick is to realize that a Samaritan situation automatically entails injustice: if another needs help, needs something, and I, in fact, can help, can provide that something (without similarly depriving myself), then obviously that other has less than s/he deserves and I have more. (Hence the qualifier, 'without similarly depriving myself'. To similarly deprive oneself would effect another injustice).

However, the 'obviously' holds *if and only if* that other did not deserve to be in such a state of need. (And this is not at all an easy condition to determine, I grant this.)

*And* if and only if one concedes that we are all equally deserving to begin with. (This one should be no problem.)

Therefore, one is *logically obligated* to help — to restore the balance, the justice.

Given the value of justice, then, helping another becomes a matter of consistency, a logical obligation rather than a moral obligation.

## LD — just a matter of access?

*This was written way back when LDs and accommodations first became an issue, and so I thought about not including it, but with the increase of LDs, the questions I raise may become again important.*

Suppose you're working with a bunch of computers and you discover that one of them has a very slow modem, or perhaps a malfunctioning modem. First question: how would you know it was the modem and not the computer? Without the specs and without trial and error with a fast or functional modem? Second question: would you just get a faster or functional modem for that computer? Yes, if your only purpose was to bring out the best possible performance of the computer. But what if your purpose was also to test the computer? Are you testing the computer alone or the computer-plus-modem?

I first heard the computer-modem analogy at a Learning Disabilities Transitions Conference held at Nipissing University. So we're not talking about computers and modems, but brains and sensory systems: people — specifically students.

My guess is that most of us don't know whether we're testing the computer or the computer-plus-modem. We're testing intelligence/ability. But is intelligence/ability just the computer or is it the computer-plus-modem? And unfortunately, though many of us just want to bring out the best in our students (so yes get the faster modem!), we are also evaluators — informally, for feedback for course modifications, and formally, for final grades. What to do?

I confess that I have tended to regard learning disabilities with suspicion; I'm one of those who suspected 'LD' was just

the politically correct term for 'stupid'. And sometimes I still think that. (Not that there's anything wrong with being stupid. Some wonderful people are apparently stupid.) (And some of our smartest people have been ones our species could've done without.)

Then I read about Einstein, whose brain was as comfortable in spatial-visual mode as mine is in verbal-visual mode. Until he found a university structured around that mode, he failed. Just as surely as I would've failed if my university education had consisted of nothing but diagrams, maps, and 3-D models. (I can't rotate a square to save my life. Well, okay, I can do a square, but make it L-shaped and you lose me.) Or if I hadn't had access to pen and paper, to printed textbooks: if I'd had nothing but talking books, lectures, and oral exams, I would've come across an idiot. (Well, okay, *more of an idiot.*) There's no point sending in green to a brain that receives in red. Little would've gotten in, and even less would've been retained; with such meagre ingredients, the cake's going to be pretty basic.

As I understand it, a bona fide learning disability is a neurological deficit. (Though I prefer to call them brain quirks. Whether it's a deficit is a question of context: recall Einstein.) But is the distinction between learning disability and learning style that clear? Is there really an identifiable short circuit or is there just a weak circuit?

The distinction is important because access to accommodations is justified for the first, but not for the second. And yet consider another analogy mentioned at the conference: how fair would it be for professors to insist that you write with your non-dominant hand? Your notes would be partly illegible and surely incomplete; so, therefore, would be your knowledge of the lecture material; so too then would be the exam you write (you might even forget the little you had to say because of how hard it was to write it). But if you got more time for writing the

exam, or if you were allowed to use your other hand, *your preferred mode*, well, your chance of success would increase (if only because your professor could read more of what you'd written). Unfair accommodation?

When people talk about access to accommodations to compensate for learning disabilities, rather than preferences, technology can certainly compensate for input/output deficits. If you've got an aural processor, you need aural inputs and outputs.

But *is* there a clear distinction between the modem and the computer? Doesn't the brain control the sensory processing? Isn't processing part of what we call an A+? And that processing isn't *only* sensory, is it?

Consider an 'organizational deficit'. What does that mean? That the student can't see a problem with 'urban', 'rural' and 'busy' as the main headings for an essay on lifestyles? But isn't categorizing is a hallmark of intelligence? How can that student still be said to have the IQ required for university studies? And what technological aid (short of an interface jack in the skull) can level the playing field for that student?

Or is this the malfunctioning modem, the one that causes your screen to go blank every now and then, so the computer can't stay on task or doesn't know what it's doing from time to time. But isn't attention and memory part of intelligence? It's certainly part of learning.

Okay, so is intelligence just learning ability? But then learning *disability* would be *disintelligence* (stupidity). So maybe 'LD' is just another word for 'stupid'. And maybe the problem isn't with what 'LD' is, but with what 'stupid' is. Maybe *all* stupid people are just red-receivers living in a green-sending world. Maybe they just need a transformer, a translator, added to their modem.

Okay, but what about a deficit with 'processing *speed*', not with 'processing mode' — the slow modem. With practice, you

can speed up your processing. You may not *need* a new modem. And practice can affect not just processing *speed*, but *processing quality*. And isn't that just 'thinking'? *Intelligence can be taught and learned*. (See Wahlsten,<sup>1</sup> Whimbey,<sup>2</sup> and others). If I'd written the GRE in my early 20s, I never would've scored over 2,000. But at 35, after 15 years of wrestling with words and concepts, toward clarity and coherence, I had become smarter (in *that* way; in a bunch of other ways I was just as stupid). I'm proud of my brain now. I've worked hard with it, like one does with a body. Is getting it in and getting it out just a matter of access or is it part of intelligence? Some of us encode and decode not only more quickly, but more efficiently and more fruitfully. Is that (why we're) more intelligent?

But no, there are limits. No matter how much I train, I will never have the gymnast's flexibility. And I suspect that no matter how much I practice, I will never be able to rotate an irregular 3-D shape. (Or maybe, given the goods, the little gain won't justify the amount of practice required.) Does that mean I should be given access to a rotation software program? (Is rotation ability the end or the means to another end?)

So am I saying that accommodations are justified if they compensate for the absence of an ability that the majority have (interesting), the absence of which that no, or only an excessive, amount of effort will remedy (surely difficult to determine), and the presence of which is required for the demonstration of, but is not part of, a certain other ability (which is not at all clear)?

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Wahlsten, "The Malleability of Intelligence Is Not Constrained by Heritability" in *Intelligence, Genes, and Success: Scientists Respond to The Bell Curve*, Bernie Devlin, Stephen E. Fienberg, Daniel P. Resnick, and Kathryn Roeder (Eds.), NY: Springer-Verlag, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur and Linda Shaw Whimbey. *Intelligence Can Be Taught*. NY: E.P. Dutton, 1975.

What I love about university is that it's home for the intellectual elite; the bar is set high; this is where those who love our minds go to play. (And if not, as I fear, then where — where then do the best minds go to develop?) Unlike at the secondary school level, we are not compelled to teach to the lowest common denominator and watch potential go unchallenged, undeveloped. But will my concern for the standards that keep the university *post-secondary*, and my concern for fairness, leave other potentials undeveloped?

## English Language or Literature: Foreign Students and Standards

*This was also written a while ago, when ESL courses started to appear in schools, and I thought about not including it as well, but with the increase of environmental refugees sure to be seen in our near future, it's become relevant again (or still).*

As a high school English teacher, I've had to grade foreign students. Not surprisingly, most such students would fail OAC English<sup>1</sup> — if I used the same standard I use for my Canadian-born-and-raised (or at least for my non-ESL) students.

To use a different standard would be unfair, right? I mean, a pass is a pass; you're either good enough or you're not. So okay, it's not fair to use a double standard, to be 'easier' on my ESL students. But nor is it fair for a kid to have to leave her country to get a chance at university. To leave her home. And her family. A family who got together and voted her most likely to succeed and therefore to be the one to go (for of course, they can afford, and that barely, to send only one). A family who, because of politics, she'll never ever be able to see again. Nor is it fair for a kid to have to escape his country, dodging bullets, begging for food and water from soldiers, and seeing his friend 'not make it' (I didn't ask exactly what that meant).

Is it fair for me to make all of that 'for nothing' — by giving a poor or failing grade in OAC English, a grade that will, because it either brings down an otherwise high enough average (is it fair that the university requires a higher average of foreign students in

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<sup>1</sup> What used to be grade 13 English in Ontario.

the first place? does one double standard compensate for the other?) or leaves the kid with too few credits, prevent him/her from going to university? To get a degree in Math or Engineering? Do you really need to understand Atwood for that?

No, but don't you need to be fluent in the language of the university in order to succeed? Isn't that the point of needing OAC English? Well, no and no. Apparently you *don't* need to be fluent in English to succeed in some subjects: these students often get very high marks in OAC Maths, Physics, and Chemistry. Couldn't they continue to succeed in university-level Maths, Physics, and Chemistry? Why make them wait? Why not let them start their degree in Engineering or whatever and let them get their English at the same time?<sup>2</sup> They can't afford, literally, to stay in one spot for two or three years. And in fact, most Canadian universities have ESL classes/courses available now.

What, you may ask, is the university doing teaching English? It's an institute of *higher* learning! Well, probably, it's trying to hang on to those foreign students. In an ideal world, perhaps such students should be admitted to university at their own risk, and encouraged to become fluent at their own additional expense.<sup>3</sup> But then we'd need the public school system or private literacy agencies to provide ESL courses, so the university *could* focus on the higher stuff.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> But then program requirements would have to change, to include *only* the concentration courses, and not electives which would require English; and there goes the liberal arts view of a university education as a broadening well-rounding sort of experience. But that needn't be a bad thing: why couldn't we have specialist degrees made up of nothing but Maths or whatever and generalist degrees which retain that broader knowledge base?

<sup>3</sup> While university ESL courses usually cost, just like any other course, they are also usually credit courses; so the financial and academic expense is *part* of their degree program, *not* additional to it.

<sup>4</sup> And actually, ESL courses *are* part of the provincial Ministry of Education

And no, fluency in English is apparently *not* the point of needing OAC English for university entrance. Most of the students who write a university's Writing Competence Test fail it<sup>5</sup> — and most of *those* students *have* OAC English. How can that be, you gasp. Apart from theorizing that perhaps standards are being lowered and marks inflated not just for the foreign high school students, it may be that two OAC English courses focus on Literature, not Language, and the third focuses on Creative Writing, not write-in-complete-sentences academic writing.

So who teaches that? Who makes sure their sentences *are* complete? Good question. I suspect the Chemistry teacher figures the English teacher is doing it, and the English teacher is saying 'Look, I've got a full course of Literature, why should I do Language on the side any more than the Chemistry teacher?' One might think it wouldn't be 'on the side'; one might think that Language is *included* in Literature, literature depends on language. One would be wrong. Surely fluency with language will probably mean greater success in Literature, but this is also the case in History and quite a few other subjects as well. (Including Chemistry, where, for example, using 'and' and 'or' interchangeably could be costly.) Granted, some subjects depend more on the English language than others, but that's not to say the study of one is entailed in the study of the other.

Why do I go on at length about this? For the same reason that the eventual creation of an 'OAC English for ESL Students' course bothered me. On the one hand, it was a perfect solution: it provided what the students needed. On the other hand, it messed things up even more. Either the regular OAC English is necessary for university entrance or it's not. If it is, then ESL students shouldn't be able to take this other course instead. If it's not, then

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curricula — but not every public school offers such courses.

<sup>5</sup> Consult Nipissing University, Brock University, and others.

why require it even for the non-ESL students? If what's really necessary is English *language* fluency, why not let the non-ESL, as well as the ESL, students take this new course? Well, because this new course wasn't a language course either; we were still teaching literature, but we were supposed to grade students' work for language (and mark with a standard that would enable most to pass). It was ridiculous.

And it was, perhaps, as much a double standard as the ESL credit courses currently offered at universities: foreign students can get six credits for mastering a grade 8 level of language (the ESL course) but non-ESL students must master a university level of language for their six credits (the first year Communications course).<sup>6</sup>

Given all these wrongs, it rapidly becomes right to pass Min and Tran. *And Mary and Bill?*

Black and white is easy: it's easy to establish rules and follow them. It's hard to navigate through grey: it's hard to consider each case on its own; it requires you to know and evaluate each and every person at unique intersections of contexts. Why should I or anyone have to do that? If the universities are willing to accept students before they're fluent with the language, let them. If they're willing to provide language training, let them. Because if a pass in OAC English doesn't mean fluency for *non*-ESL students (recall the Writing Competency Test failure rate mentioned earlier), it wouldn't be understood to mean fluency for ESL students either. So what's the big deal? Until OAC English is recognized as a literature course and then perhaps not required for entrance into certain programs, why *not* inflate the marks?

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<sup>6</sup> And even though finally at university, literature courses are called literature courses and language courses are called language courses, both are usually taught by the English (!) department — and so the confusion remains. And, if the Maths and Sciences professors don't mark language, it does become possible to get a degree without much English language competence.

If and when the universities change their minds and eliminate their ESL courses, well, maybe then privately-run ESL classes will spring up near the campuses. And perhaps *that's* the perfect solution. (Now if they also offered language classes for the *non*-ESL students...)

## What Went Wrong with Political Correctness?

My guess is that it started well enough, as sensitivity: people realized that terms such as ‘crippled’ and ‘retarded’ had gathered too many negative connotations, had become insults; so they replaced them with new words such as ‘physically challenged’ and ‘mentally challenged’ — words that, *because new*, would be *free* of such slant.

This linguistic reform was called, I suggest, ‘political correctness’ by people (men?) who couldn’t say (let alone be considered) ‘sensitive’.

From there, ‘politically correct’ became ‘expedient’, and the terms were used not out of sensitivity to those being identified but out of sensitivity to those doing the identifying: ‘Which term will make me seem most like what people want, so that I’ll get what I’m after?’ People unaccustomed to treating others as ends in themselves (as people with interests that could be violated by an insensitive insult), but familiar with treating them as means to an end (as people who could serve one’s own interests if one simply pushed the right buttons, used the right words), turned linguistic reform into linguistic expedience.

If we’d just stayed with ‘sensitive’, perhaps we could’ve kept the sensitivity. Then again, if enough people pretended to be sensitive just because it was expedient, the term ‘sensitive’ would’ve become stained — better that ‘politically correct’ got stained.

But hey, what’s in a word? Well, a lot. Our language determines, indeed limits, our thought as much as it reflects it. There are a lot of things we don’t have words for. Read Douglas Adams’ and John Lloyd’s *The Meaning of Liff* and *The Deeper*

*Meaning of Liff* for examples. One of my favourites is 'abilene', an adjective to describe 'the pleasing coolness on the reverse side of the pillow'. And the thing is, if we don't have a word for it, we can't easily talk about it. We don't have a word for the woman's active role in sexual intercourse; no surprise then that we usually talk about her role as passive. And if we can't easily talk about it, we don't often think about it — which could be why so many women *are* passive in sex: we still think, most often think, that women are fucked, penetrated, taken (not that men are engulfed, enclosed, taken in).

Sometimes linguistic reform alone can bring about an attitudinal change: changing our habits sometimes changes our selves. Calling myself non-Black rather than Caucasian has made me think less of white as the norm.

But sometimes changing a word is just superficial and not the result, or even accompaniment, of attitudinal change. Nothing *really* changes. And we've seen that with the politically correct replacement terms: 'physically challenged' and 'mentally challenged' have themselves now picked up negative connotations, have become insults; so yet another new pair of terms must be found. But unless the attitude changes too, unless there are truly no negative connotations to *be* picked up, what's in a new word? (Nigger, Negro, Black, person of colour ...)

But 'politically correct' doesn't refer only to words; it also refers to attitudes and actions. It's politically correct to have a person of colour on your Board of Directors, for example. What does that mean? That it's expedient to do so, because then you'll look like a non-racist organization. Who really buys that? Soon after 'politically correct' entered common discourse, the term 'token' also showed up. And no wonder. The hypocrisy was pretty obvious. Repackaging something that's sour doesn't make it sweet. Which is why 'politically correct' now means not 'sensitive', nor even 'expedient', but 'hypocrite'.

Ironic, isn't it? The very thing that's happened to politically correct terms has happened to the term 'politically correct' itself: it's become tarnished, with negative connotations. But unlike terms like 'physically challenged' and 'mentally challenged', *rightly* so.

## Developing Authority and Being a Parent

I'm wondering whether it's just me or ... whether most women who never become mothers simply never develop an authoritative manner. Men have it from the get go: they are automatically thought, by themselves as well as by others, to be authorities, and early on, they develop both the habit of telling others what to do and the expectation that they'll be listened to.

Women don't. (Unless they're deluded.) At least, not until they become a parent. Only then do they gain some authority. Only then do they start telling someone what to do and expecting to be listened to.

Sure, the authority they now have extends only to their kid, but it leaks out. As it does with men. When you talk with authority in your house, to your wife or kids, you don't suddenly 'turn it off' when you leave the house. It's an acquired manner, a way of carrying yourself, a way of presenting yourself that becomes part of yourself.

I've never acquired that manner. I'm not in the habit of telling anyone what to do. I don't expect to be listened to. So, despite my breadth and depth of knowledge and skill, I don't have any authority.

## Paying People to Pretend to be Doctors

So I caught a glimpse, by accident, of one of those entertainment shows the other day and it hit me: we pay people who *pretend* to be doctors more than we pay people who actually *are* doctors.

## Dyer on Mass Media: Cause for Pessimism or Optimism?

Ironically, the very thing Dyer claims<sup>1</sup> to have been responsible for his pessimism is responsible for his optimism: the mass media. And, as he claims his pessimism was thus mistaken, so, I claim, is his optimism.

‘The News’ is chosen, he’s quite right about that. And since the choosers believe, probably correctly, that we have “a strong predilection to be interested in the dramatic, in the extreme, and even in the violent” (2-3), the top stories were *not* “In 99% of Vietnam today, nothing happened” (2). Thus, the false pessimism. So far, so good.

However, the choosers also believe, probably also correctly, that news gets stale. People get desensitized and then disinterested. A *new* dramatic and extreme violence has to be in the headlines if they are to be read. And *that* is why Dyer “[has] not heard anybody worried about [the threat of nuclear war] out loud for years now” (3-4): it’s simply old news. But that does *not* mean, as he concluded, that “There is no threat of nuclear war anymore” (3, my emphasis). As long as countries have angry men and nuclear weapons, there is a threat of nuclear war. It doesn’t have to be a World War. Actually it doesn’t even have to be a war. Chernobyl managed to kill about as many people as the Gulf War, and it destroyed a chunk of land the size of the Netherlands. Similar media manipulation

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<sup>1</sup> Can’t for the life of me figure out which book I’m referring to here. I’m pretty sure it’s Gwynne Dyer (and not Wayne Dyer), but I’ve looked at both *War* and *Climate Wars* and don’t see the references ... May have been a library book I’ve long since returned, but a quick web search doesn’t provide any further clues.

may have been involved in the second problem-no-more as well: while I agree that the threat of totalitarian expansion has indeed diminished, largely due to the USSR's demise, I wonder if it really ever was the huge threat we thought it was.

Of course Dyer's argument, and the role of the mass media in it, goes much deeper than this: all three of the problems-no-more (the two already mentioned along with chronic regional crises or regional moral scandals),<sup>2</sup> Dyer argues, are/were the result of hierarchical, militarized, tyrannical societies; but, he continues, democracy is on the rise, thanks to the mass media, and hierarchism, militarism, and tyranny are on the wane.

First, I don't believe hierarchism is on the wane: tribalism and patriarchy, to name two of its forms, are alive and well. In fact, tribalism, under the guise of multiculturalism, seems to be on the rise. Whether it's insisting on a certain language or preventing interbreeding, any form of 'ethnic cleansing' shouts the tribalistic motto, 'we want to preserve our group, our differences!' Even within the *same* culture, the development of gangs, and gang wars, suggests that tribalism is persisting. As for patriarchy, if it were really receding, men wouldn't still own most of the land, make most of the money, and hold most of the positions of power.

Nor do I think militarism is on the wane: if it were, it wouldn't be so difficult to get war toys off the shelves, Americans wouldn't be spending 45% of their taxes on their military, and Canadians wouldn't be making 50 low-level military aircraft flights a day over Innu territory (that's a lot of

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<sup>2</sup> Even if the environmental nightmare *were* the only problem left, this would be no cause for optimism. As I mentioned, Chernobyl caused as much devastation as a war. And even if every nuclear reactor were shut down today and not one more was built, what about the radioactive waste we've already accumulated (a six-foot high pile stretching along the entire TransCanada Highway, if that's where we put it)? And what about the CFCs already released into the atmosphere (we've yet to feel the effects of post1970 CFCs — pre1970s CFCs alone have been responsible for a 200% increase in skin cancer)? And on. And on.

practice for such a peace-loving country).

That leaves us with tyranny. Now it may be, as Dyer says, that democracy is on the rise (9).<sup>3</sup> But democracy and tyranny are not mutually exclusive. In a democracy, there can be a tyranny of the rich — Dyer does not argue that profit-motivated capitalism is on the wane (it's not, which is why there will always be nuclear weapons). I live in a democratic country, but I don't feel equal to everyone else (Dyer's 'sort of definition of democracy [12]). I especially don't feel equal to those with money: the voices of lobby groups and big business are heard; my voice is not (my MP made it quite clear to me that he represents his party, not me, his constituent).

In fact, democracy and tyranny are definitionally inclusive: democracy is merely the tyranny of the majority. Dyer *assumes* that democracy is good, that it is better than totalitarianism, but this is not necessarily so: a benevolent dictatorship is better than a democracy of amoral idiots.<sup>4</sup> And that is what our society consists of — without education.

Without education, democracy will not only not free us from tyranny, it will *be* that tyranny. And I mean *real* education, not just literacy. I mean a non-specialized education, an education through which one gets 'the big picture' — gee, do I mean a liberal arts education?

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<sup>3</sup> An aside — Dyer claims that as soon as we were presented with the potential to be democratic, we were ("Present us with that potential, we will seize it" [8]). But Marilyn Waring presented us with a new economic system that would lead to an incredible increase in equality. Did we seize it immediately? No. The current system suits the currently empowered just fine, thank you. And solar and wind energy technology would lead to an incredible increase in equality. Did we seize it immediately? No. Oil continues to be the energy source of choice precisely because it supports the current power imbalances.

<sup>4</sup> Another aside — Dyer claims that democratic countries don't fight with each other (9-10). But the British and French and Native nations were all democracies when they fought each other in what is now Canada, weren't they?

Further, I mean an education that includes critical thinking skills, most especially *media literacy skills*. Without this kind of education, the mass media doesn't become the path to the (dubious) solution of democracy, it remains an obstacle to both the justice and happiness Dyer admits democracy alone won't necessarily provide (9). How so? Dyer explains it himself when he says that "Satellite dishes equal terrorism" (14) but he doesn't seem to recognize the irony, the tyranny of the mass media: the mass media<sup>5</sup> tyrannizes the minds of the hopeful to want, to need, what they can't hope to have and thus it feeds, it fosters, hierarchism and militarism, the dramatic, the extreme, and the violent.

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<sup>5</sup> The mass media is, of course, actually the U.S. Oh yes, you get BBC and Brazilian telenovellas as well as MTV, but what were the people in Maharashtra talking about? Michael Jackson, Madonna, and *Santa Barbara*: "When you are connected to cable you get the world" (13) — but the U.S. *is* the world ("We are the wor-rr-rld..."), remember?

## **I can do whatever I want on my own property!**

I am so very sick and tired of hearing 'I can do whatever I want on my own property!' The latest instance concerns a neighbour who has stuck some of those new solar lights in front of her cottage, lakeside of course. Thing is, they don't have an on/off switch. So what she's done on her own property means the rest of us will have to see her lights every night, all night, for the rest of our lives. If we lived in the city, maybe it wouldn't be so bad; they'd get 'lost' in their surroundings. But we live on a lake in the forest. Where the stars are amazing and the moon glimmers across the water. And now there are a dozen lights at eye level a little to my left whenever I look out at night. They stand out like a middle finger. I can understand the desire for outdoor lights in order to see where you're going, but then turn them off when you go to bed. Or in this case, cover them. And I can understand the possibility of all-night lights deterring wildlife, but motion-sensor lights would be a better choice, if only for the startle effect.

Please, people, are you really that stupid? Do you really not see that what you do, even on your own property, affects others? On that basis, those others most certainly *do* have a right to ask you not to do something.

In the same way, your pre-1980 use of spray cans was justifiably subject to my complaint. It's why I'm at risk for skin cancer now. Your excessive use of fossil fuels will be partly responsible for the flood or wildfire that destroys my house. Your actions often have consequences for me. Not immediately and not directly and maybe you're too stupid to see any other kind

of consequence, but nevertheless, most certainly, what you do affects me.

The really sad thing is that my neighbour doesn't even notice the lights. She doesn't believe me when I say I do. She's that desensitized to her environment. Or that inattentive. She thinks I'm exaggerating the intrusion. I received the same response when I complained about the bright red Home Hardware sign that suddenly appeared nailed to a tree at the beginning of the lane. And when I've complained about any one of a hundred noises — dirt bikes, ATVs, leaf blowers, weed trimmers, generators, chain saws. Those of us who see things, who hear things, those of us who pay attention to what's around us, we're the ones to suffer. The dullards who go through life with a 'What?' expression permanently on their face, who wouldn't notice, well, anything, they're the ones living happily. So in order not to go crazy, I wear earplugs most of the time now. And my reading glasses (so everything more than six feet past the tip of my nose is out of focus). The alternative is to become as oblivious as the rest of 'em.

## Rethinking Nero and the Gas Chamber Accompanists

One of the most memorable scenes for me from all the movies I've seen is that scene in *The Titanic* when it's clear the ship is sinking, they're all going to die, and the first violinist of the chamber group looks to each member of the group and receives confirmation that 'Yes, of course, we're going to do this' — not because it's their job (like that sad character in McKeller's *Last Night*) or because they want to soothe or distract the hysterical (who surely won't be paying any attention), but because they're musicians. And, despite their gig on the Titanic, music is everything. So what a way to die! To have as the last thing on one's mind that score, to have that beautiful music be the last thing one hears, to draw the bow with one's last breath —

So Nero fiddling while Rome burned and the people who played as the others walked to the gas chambers — not cowardice, not callousness, not endorsement, not mockery, not even comfort. But respect. If I can do nothing, at least I will give (you) beauty, I will honor (your) life with all of my skill and all of my art —

## Assholes or Idiots (take your pick)

Every now and then I hear something really insightful on tv. What recently caught my mind was an explanation of the behavior of one of the alphas on, of course, *Alphas*. Rosen says that Marcus can see twenty moves ahead and doesn't understand why others can't; so when what they do harms him, he believes it's intentional.

Yes! I too — and many, many others, it's not an alpha trait — can think ahead. I can imagine the likely effect on others of my actions. And I work through the ethics of my behavior. So when what someone else does affects me, I can only assume that they don't care about others (and so haven't bothered to think ahead about the effects of their actions, or work through the ethics of their behavior) or they do, and have, and consider what they've done to be morally acceptable. *Or* I must assume that, unlike me, they *cannot* imagine the effects of their actions; they do *not* comprehend the ethics of their behavior. Which means, in short, either they're inconsiderate, egoistic, irresponsible, lazy assholes or they're idiots.

And so when I point out that what they're doing does affect me, invariably they respond with aggressive defensiveness. Because, of course, I'm implying they're either assholes or idiots.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pity they don't apologize for their thoughtlessness and ask me to help them work through the ethics of their behavior. After all, I'm an authority on applied ethics. Don't people seek expert opinion on important matters? Yes, but not from a woman. Especially one who's either a bitch or just crazy.

## Is it true that some people can't think?

I watched *The Shawshank Redemption* recently and was struck by the scene where the guy says that in solitary confinement he had Mozart to keep him company, and they all express surprise that he was allowed to have a record player, and he says 'No, in here' and points to his head — and they all look at him dumbly. With no understanding whatsoever. Shortly before that, I was reading a novel in which someone confesses to making people up and having entire conversations between them in her head, and someone else says something like 'Really? Being able to make up characters and tell yourself stories is a sign of high intelligence.' What? *What?*

Is that true? Is it the case that some (many?) (most?) people can't imagine? Or even remember? They can't close their eyes and picture (remember or imagine) a scene, they can't hear (remember or imagine) music in their heads, they can't hold (remember or imagine) conversations in their head? Meaning, if they can't do the last mentioned, they can't think? Has there ever been a study about this? Has anyone actually conducted a survey and asked people whether they can do the forementioned?

## Why the fuck are ATVs, PWCs, and snowmobiles still legal?

“By 2050 at the latest, and ideally before 2040, we must have stopped emitting more greenhouse gases [typically caused by the burning of fossil fuels] into the atmosphere than Earth can naturally absorb through its ecosystems (a balance known as net-zero emissions or carbon neutrality). In order to get to this scientifically established goal, our global greenhouse gas emissions must be clearly on the decline by the early 2020s and reduced by at least 50 percent by 2030.”<sup>1</sup>

- Snowmobiles and ATVs “emit 25 percent as many hydrocarbons as all the nation’s cars and trucks put together, according to an EPA study.”<sup>2</sup>
- “In one hour, a typical snowmobile emits as much hydrocarbon as a 2001 model auto emits in about two years (24,300 miles) of driving.”<sup>3</sup>
- “Two-stroke PWC engines dump 25 – 40% of uncombusted fuel in the lake, the air, or on the land.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis*, Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac (architects of the Paris Agreement), pxxii

<sup>2</sup> [products.kitsapsun.com/archive/1999/02-19/0062\\_environment\\_\\_snowmobiles\\_\\_atvs\\_du.html](http://products.kitsapsun.com/archive/1999/02-19/0062_environment__snowmobiles__atvs_du.html)

<sup>3</sup> [mymuskoka.blogspot.com/2010/01/snowmobile-pollution.html](http://mymuskoka.blogspot.com/2010/01/snowmobile-pollution.html)

<sup>4</sup> [mymuskoka.blogspot.com/2010/01/snowmobile-pollution.html](http://mymuskoka.blogspot.com/2010/01/snowmobile-pollution.html)

- “In a single hour of run time, a 2000-model PWC will dump about 4 gallons (15 liters) of unburned oil and gas into the water [source: CO Parks].”<sup>5</sup>

And yet ATVs, PWCs and snowmobiles are still legally allowed. That is, Canada is allowing *a lot* of fossil fuel emissions *just for fun*. Through our precious climate-controlling forests and on our struggling fresh water lakes, no less.

What the hell is Canada thinking?

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<sup>5</sup> [science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/green-science/watercraft-destroy-planet.htm](http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/green-science/watercraft-destroy-planet.htm)

## Blind to Natural Beauty

Living in a world in which most people are blind to natural beauty is so painful. What little beauty there is left so often gets destroyed, irrevocably, without a thought. After polite requests and rational explanations, I simply beg, *Please don't*, but they just smile at me, with incomprehension, perhaps amused by my apparently baseless hysteria — and carry on, tearing me apart as they cut down all the trees in one of the few remaining untouched coves and park a dirty aluminum boat right in the middle of the now decimated, and ugly, shoreline, as they put up gaudy halogen lights lakeside ensuring I will never again be able to gaze at the glimmering moonlight on the dark water, as they park a bright yellow floating raft ruining yet another view of nothing but trees and water.

I want to write a victim impact statement, I want to make them see what they've done, I want them to appreciate the full extent of their obliviousness, their negligence, at the very least their lack of respect for something they cannot see that is, so clearly, of such great value to another. I don't 'get' men's love of cars, but I get that they do love them, deeply, and on that basis alone wouldn't spray paint someone's truck with pink polka dots. (Though I confess, I'm sorely tempted.) I don't get women's love of shoes, but I get that they do love them, and, so again, would not drag them through the dirt. (Though again ...)

(Even though that wouldn't make my point because they could simply repair the truck and replace the shoes. Options not available to me.)

## Blood & Oil

About a year ago, the weather reports became dramatic. Forecasters started talking about “extreme weather events” with voices and gestures that rivalled sports game commentary, making droughts, wildfires, floods, tornados, and high temperatures all so — *exciting*. My god, I realized one day with horror, they’re making the evidence of our imminent death into entertainment.

There was no mention of short-term, let alone long-term, implications for things like, oh, food and water ... There was no mention of why our weather is changing. No mention of who’s to blame. (The oil industry for providing the supply, and not telling people about the consequences of use. The media for agreeing to censorship on that point [whenever any public interest group tries to put out an advertisement informing us, the media refuses to sell them airtime]. And most Americans and Canadians for allowing their worldview to be formed by forementioned censored media.)

I imagined the world actually ending as people continued mainlining television, utterly oblivious. And that was bad enough. Then I saw the trailers for the new<sup>1</sup> tv series, *Blood & Oil*. Oh my god.

They’re making oil *sexy*. They’ve got Don Johnson, they’ve got two bare-backed supermodel female bodies, they’ve got a phallic fire-gushing oil rig. They’re making it *exciting* (at least to the male brain), what with the sex, the fire, and the blood.

Why? Why have the oil companies commissioned a tv series that makes oil sexy and exciting? Do they think too many

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<sup>1</sup> New, in 2015.

of us are limiting our fossil fuel use? Carpooling? Reducing air travel? Turning down the heat during these colder winters? Not turning on the air conditioning during these hotter summers? (As if residential resource use comes anywhere *close* to the unbridled industrial use ...) (For example, it takes 4.3 barrels of water to produce one barrel of oil from tar sands mining, and once the water's used, it's radioactive, toxic, pretty much useless.)

This is decade zero. We're halfway through. Decade zero. And we've already pretty much eliminated the possibility of staying under two degrees. Given what we've already done, we're certain to reach 1.5 degrees. *Certain*. Cause and effect. It's a done deal. (To stay under two degrees, we need to limit our carbon dioxide concentration to 450ppm. We hit 400 ppm in 2013. And we're adding 2-3 ppm every year. Do the math.)

So why the fuck are they encouraging us to *increase* our use of fossil fuels? Are they trying to distract us, play a little pretty music on our way to the gas chambers? (No, that's the least plausible explanation. They clearly don't care about us. And there is no need for oil in that pretty little music.)

Do they really not *know* they've already guaranteed the end of the world as we know it? (According to Naomi Klein's research, if we don't get our emissions under control by 2017, "our fossil fuel economy will 'lock-in' extremely dangerous warming" [*This Changes Everything*, p.23].) (And "under control" means leaving 80% of the claimed oil where it is. Underground.)

Are they trying to *hasten* our death? Move the predicted date of extinction from 2100 (we'll be at five degrees by then) to 2050? (Watch the insurance companies. Watch the riders and exclusions they start attaching to our policies. Refusing to insure for damages and injuries resulting from nuclear accidents will be the least of it.)

Are they trying to rush the return on their investment so they can buy one more company before we all die? Guarantee their ticket to ride on the shuttle to the new world — on Mars?

Have they forgotten that the free trade agreements they paid our governments to sign *guarantee* that their profits trump the planet? (Never mind that the \$775 billion in subsidies that they've received from taxpayers make their profits *ours*.)

Or are they trying to minimize the likelihood that someone, *someone*, will eventually go all vigilante for justice and target them with a semi-automatic.

Or did Hollywood come up with the idea all on its own? Could they really not *know* what they're doing? (Just like they don't know they have single-handedly desensitized millions of people to violence, to harm, injury, pain, death.) (Ah.)

Given the facts, *Blood & Oil*, and so much like it, is the equivalent of making the plague exciting. And vomit sexy.

## Climate Change and Disaster Movies

Have you noticed the increase in climate change disaster movies? Right, yeah, let's get everyone comfortable with the idea. The idea that survival — after, if only, heroism — is possible.



# A post script

## Business and the Environment: An Introduction

*The following is the introduction (well, except for the end) to Chapter 10, Business and the Environment, of my business ethics text, Ethical Issues in Business 2e, Peg Tittle (Broadview Press, 2016). Although it doesn't quite fit here (in terms of style, tone, length) (well, except for the end), I feel obliged to include it because of the recent astounding meltdown of the Greenland ice sheet and the reports that the Alaska glaciers are melting 100 times faster than projected.*

*I'd hoped, five years ago, already too late, that it would have some impact among business students who might become ... influential, but too few professors are choosing the text for their business ethics course. And/or too few business departments have a business ethics course.*

*In any case, much of it speaks not only to business students, so ... (And, given "Business Rules the World. Do we want it to?" in the first edition part of this collection ...)*

Why should you be concerned about our environment? Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to this question, depending on whether you think our environment has intrinsic or instrumental value. (Of course, it could have both. Did you catch that almost false dichotomy mistake?) If our environment has intrinsic value, then even if we didn't need to breathe and drink, even if we didn't find starry night skies stunningly beautiful, we should refrain from damaging it. See Rolston for

this view; see Stone too, who argues not only for value, but also for rights. In a sense, our environment can be considered a stakeholder (see Starik, as well as Hoch and Giacalone): it can be affected by business decisions.

More common, however, is to consider our environment's instrumental value: what's in it for us? (See Baxter for a good articulation of this view.) As long as the "us" is human beings, it's a rather speciesist view: after all, we're as much a part of the beaver's or tree's environment as the beaver or tree is part of ours.

So on what ethical basis can one justify concern for our environment, given this instrumental view? Egoism probably comes to mind first. As a person, you need the environment to live (food, water) and you need it pretty much the way it is to live the way you do (reliable, nutritious, relatively inexpensive food, ditto water, plus all the other stuff that makes life worth living). But as a *business* person, you'll need the environment to maintain your supply: if your source material runs out, you're out of business. Same goes if you run out of dumping grounds or they become scarce and disposal costs increase — there goes your profit. (Can you develop a fully recyclable product, eliminating the disposal problem? Consider the ice cream cone.) Quite simply, our environment has economic value to business.

That is, if *you're* the one who has to pay for disposal. Recall the discussion in the chapter on Profit and Capitalism about externalities. Traditionally, the impact of business operations on the environment has been considered an externality. (Which may account for the shape it's in.) But is that morally right? Why should others bear the consequences (environmental damage) of your profit-making? Justice theories come in handy here.

You may say 'Well, it's not my fault, or not only my fault, after all, you *bought* X, *you* wanted it!' See Bowie, who argues that if consumers aren't willing to pay more for environmentally

friendly products, it's not the responsibility of business to "correct" that "market failure." But that argument depends on consumers *knowing* the environmental cost of the products they buy. And if you've externalized it, if you haven't included it in your price, how *could* they know? If the cost to the environment *were* included, people may well decide *not* to buy it, they may not want it *that* badly. And what about the people who *don't* buy it, at *any* cost? Why should *I* have to pay to clean up the mess you made, or, if you're a consumer, the mess you paid to have made, because you had to make/have your wedding rings and steak? (Gold mining means deforestation and mercury poisoning; beef production releases 5 times the greenhouse gas emissions as other meat production, and requires 28 times more land and 11 times more water [Boehrer] — one study goes so far as to say that eating meat is worse for our environment than driving a car.)

If you're running your business according to the stakeholder model, however, egoism won't cut it. You'll be concerned about the effects of your business on your customers, your employees, the community, perhaps even society-at-large if you have that much influence/power, all of whom/which depend on the environment as much as you do. In that case, utilitarianism would be more appropriate.

However, assessing the consequences, as utilitarianism requires, is particularly complicated when it comes to the environment, for a number of reasons. First, everything is connected. For that reason, it's difficult to *identify* the consequences. Furthermore — and this goes to determining moral responsibility rather than determining consequences — it's impossible to keep the consequences of what you do on (or with) your own property *on* your own property. If I burn tires or even leaves on my so-called private property, chances are good the smoke will drift over onto your so-called private property and give you a headache or, if you have your windows

open, require you to (pay hundreds of dollars to) clean your drapes and carpets. Less easy to see, but hopefully just as easy to understand, if I send carbon molecules (or CFCs or PCBs) into my air, or if I dump toxins (including fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, BGH — what goes in, comes out) onto my ground (or even straight into my stream, bypassing the groundwater system), they will, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually, show up somewhere else. Earth is a closed system. What goes around comes around.

Which is why, as far as the environment is concerned, every business issue will be a global business issue; environmental issues are international issues. (So if you're doing business in other countries *because* they have lower environmental standards — should you do that? just because you can? (and why does a dog — never mind) — it'll come back to bite you. Or your grandkids. Read on.)

This interconnectedness, by the way, may be a good reason *against* private ownership of natural resources. (See the “Property and Ownership” entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for a good introduction to this topic, and Lefevre and many others have written entire books on the matter.) *Can* water, earth, and air *be* owned? Because if not, that would radically change the way we do business.

The question applies, of course, not only to water, earth, and air *per se*. “One drug company extracted the multimillion-dollar cancer drug, vincristine, from Madagascar rosy periwinkle, paying just a few dollars for the plant. The company made millions, and Madagascar received nothing” (De George 573). Was that morally right? Why/not? Did they pay too little? Or did they pay too much? That is, should the periwinkle have even *been* for sale? Should *vincristine* be for sale? Can the company claim ownership of — can it patent — vincristine? Can it patent the periwinkle?

So, similarly, what about the fish that swim in the ocean — who owns them? Everyone? No one? Whoever catches them? Without regulation or joint consent, overfishing can (will?) occur. This is the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (so named and perhaps best articulated by Garrett Hardin). But see the piece by Angus, the accompanying comments, and his reply. Private ownership is suggested as the solution to this overuse (and contamination): if someone owned the lake, the argument goes, it would be in their best interest to look after it (would it?) (in the long-term?), so they wouldn’t allow overfishing (or pollution). Of course, if privatization of our water, for example, would mean cleaner water, then we should go for it. (See Carty, Clarke and Barlow, and Brubaker on this issue.) Though it must be said that there’s a difference between owing the water and owing the treatment plants that deliver and keep the water clean. (Is there?) (So the rich can afford *clean* water, but the poor can’t...)

But *would* private ownership mean cleaner water? Yes, in theory, it would, or should: Roark argues that Locke’s Proviso concerning the duty of appropriators of natural resources to leave enough and as good for others should apply to appropriation *and* use; he considers the destructive use, degrading use, overuse and restricting access use of unappropriated natural resources.) But in practice? People, private owners, can be short-sighted or reckless or ignorant. So just because it’s privately owned, that doesn’t mean it’ll be taken care of.

But the same is true when it’s *not* privately owned. Many people consider crown land and water not as something that is *jointly* owned and so requiring the consent of others before doing something, but as land and water that is *unowned* which they understand to mean they can do whatever they want on it. For example, ATVs and snowmobiles have the (legal) right to go wherever they want on crown land. But that means that

others' enjoyment of said crown land is lost. I haven't been able to go for a walk in the forest for over five years — unless I want to hear constant engine noise (a two-stroke engine can be heard for about five miles in every direction) and breathe neurotoxic fumes (whether I turn around or keep going, I'll have to walk in the fume trail). Compared to drinkable water and breathable air, that's a relatively trivial example, but hopefully it makes the point: as a result of others' freedom and/or rights to basically do whatever they want — which is how they understand 'crown land' *and/or which is how the government is regulating, or failing to regulate* — my freedom and/or rights have been severely constrained.

Another reason against private ownership is that water is a basic need, like, presumably, healthcare and education, neither of which (for the most part) is privatized in Canada for that reason. (But then, isn't warmth also a basic need? And yet we pay private companies for oil, propane, electricity, and wood to heat our homes. Maybe we shouldn't. Somehow.) But if we treat water like a commodity... Consider the comments by Barlow and Clarke (especially relevant given the fact that our water consumption doubles every twenty years):

Water is listed as a “good” in the WTO and NAFTA, and as an “investment” in NAFTA. It is to be included as a “service” in the upcoming WTO services negotiations (the General Agreement on Trade in Services) and in the FTAA.

...

NAFTA contains a provision that requires “proportional sharing” of energy resources now being traded between the signatory countries. This means that the oil and gas resources no longer belong to the

country of extraction, but are a shared resource of the continent. For example, under NAFTA, Canada now exports 57 percent of its natural gas to the United States and is not allowed to cut back on these supplies... Under this same provision, if Canada started selling its water to the United States ... the State Department would consider it to be a trade violation if Canada tried to turn off the tap.

...

The commodification of water is wrong — ethically, environmentally and socially. It ensures that decisions regarding the allocation of water would center on commercial, not environmental or social justice considerations. Privatization means that the management of water resources is based on principles of scarcity and profit maximization rather than long-term sustainability. Corporations are dependent on increased consumption to generate profits and are much more likely to invest in the use of chemical technology, desalination, marketing and water trading than in conservation. (Barlow and Clarke, *The Nation*)

They also note that “In England and France, where water has already been privatized, rates have soared, and water shortages have been severe. The major bottled-water producers — Perrier, Evian, Naya, and now Coca-Cola and PepsiCo — are part of one of the fastest-growing and least regulated industries, buying up freshwater rights and drying up crucial supplies” (The New Press about Barlow and Clarke’s book, *Blue Gold*).

The second factor that complicates assessing the consequences of our actions on our environment is that the

consequences are far-reaching, space-wise. PCBs emitted in the U.S., Russia, and/or Asia (and quite possibly other countries) are now in breast milk in the Arctic. For another example, consider the 2011 legal case about whether Monsanto has the right to sue farmers for patent infringement if their seed should end up on their property. Did they really not consider this possibility beforehand? Did they not know that creatures fly and walk from one field to another? That pollen drifts with the wind? And do they really think they can hold the *farmers* responsible?) (And, by the way, tumours develop on rats that eat genetically modified corn. You *have* to be suspicious of a company that inserts into a contract a clause that absolves them of all responsibility [see Organic Alberta]. No wonder people are protesting, trying to keep Monsanto out of Canada...)

The third factor is that the consequences are far-reaching, time-wise. The use of CFCs in the 70s led to a 70+% increase in skin cancer in the 90s. Consider Chernobyl. Consider the following, which illustrates both previous points:

Since its massive use in the 1940s, the footsteps of DDT [hey! made by Monsanto!] can be followed from wheat, to insects, to rodents, to larger animals and birds, and to man [sic]. In its wake it left whole species of animals more or less extinct or with serious reproductive problems. To illustrate the degree of interaction involved and the insignificance of time and distance, traces of DDT can now be found in the flesh of polar bears. (Law Reform Commission of Canada, 22)

Relevant to the 'far-reaching time-wise' factor is the practice of discounting: "Economists generally value future goods less than present ones: they discount future goods. Furthermore, the more distant the future in which goods become available, the more the goods are discounted" (Broome). Is that morally

acceptable? The rationale is that a dollar to a poor person means more than a dollar to a rich person, and future people will be richer than current people. How do they figure that, exactly? Won't a litre of drinkable water be *more* precious in 2030 than now? See Broome (a moral philosopher trained in economics) for further discussion about the discount rate used by economists when they consider whether and what to do about climate change.

Yet another factor, but one that should make assessment simple, rather than complicated, is that environmental consequences are now pretty much life-threatening.

So, the question that applies to business is the same one that applies to the drunk driver: What right do you have to put me, my life, at risk? Ever.

*And*, the effects are persistent; they won't, they don't, they can't, just 'go away'. (For example, carbon stays in the atmosphere for over a hundred years. It just does. And CFCs, PCBs, DDT...?)

Now surely the developers among you are sputtering, our environment doesn't sustain us *just as is*. Mining? Agriculture? Paper doesn't grow on trees, you know! If we didn't develop the environment, we'd still be hunters and gatherers. And every development, even agriculture, causes some environmental destruction. It's a trade-off.

And therein lies an important ethical question: Is X worth Y? For example, are cars worth smog? Is a cheap burger worth the loss of rainforests? (See Baxter's *People or Penguins* on this.)

Before you answer, consider your alternatives: crop rotation "costs" less than other agricultural methods that wreak havoc on the topsoil; solar and wind power costs less than nuclear or hydroelectric power (*and* provides six to eight times as many jobs), etc. So maybe you *can* have your cake and clean air too. But it's not easy to figure this out: producing plastic bags requires 20-40% less energy than producing paper bags

(Fredericksen and Jones), but paper bags decompose in the dump while plastic bags don't — so which should you go with? Hopefully, environmental scientists, *independent* environmental scientists, can tell us.

But let's back up a step: Who decides? Who decides whether the trade-off is a good one? Utilitarianism and justice theories probably lead you to 'whoever would be affected' — which is, given the inter-connectedness, pretty much everyone, right? So am I saying you have to get everyone's permission before you open your business? Well, if your business creates by-product A which does B which affects C which makes a hundred lakes toxic for half a century, yes. Even if it makes one lake toxic for ten years, yes. No?

This may be where government plays a part: by setting regulations (e.g., don't change the climate) (this much? this way?), isn't it granting or withholding permission on behalf of "everyone"? So, as long as you conform to the regulations, you're okay? (How is the government doing on this regulation thing? Those of you with Minamata disease from mercury, or skin cancer from the ultraviolet, is it doing all right?)

But what if your by-product A isn't the only cause (of B which does C)? One smokestack may be okay; it may be within the coping threshold of the natural environment. But two may not be. So are you in the wrong only if your smokestack is the second one? That doesn't seem quite right. Or, if another factory wants to set up, and you're the first one, should you cut your exhaust in half, should you share responsibility? Think of China as the second smokestack. Can we defensibly deny them the benefits of the industrialization we've had — just because, due to that industrialization, the planet is now maxed out in terms of emissions? Does it matter what the alternatives are? (Can the second factory set up somewhere else? [Mars, maybe?]) Is there a way to manufacture your product with less exhaust? Does it matter what you're making? (Do we need it? badly?)

And, of course, after from ‘Who’, the big question is ‘How’ — How do we decide if X is worth Y? Unless we can use some common measure (like money?), we’re measuring apples against oranges. We can put a monetary price on paper, cars, and burgers. But should we, could we, put a dollar value on the starry sky, the quiet, the loon’s call, drinkable water, breathable air — life itself? If we say we can’t, because we say they’re “priceless,” then they’re certainly worth more than what’s on the other side of the equation. In addition to Barlow and Clarke mentioned above, and Kelman (and a great many more), Sagoff questions whether we should put a price on our environment, whether we should figure in how much people would be willing to pay for environmental qualities: “What is wrong with that?” he asks, and answers, “Not all of us think of ourselves simply as *consumers*.” See Shrader-Frechette for a response to his critique.

But of course it’s not so black and white. Surely a few cars — police cars and ambulances, at least — are worth a little air pollution and noise. And, well, the freight trucks that get food to my local stores (even bananas that come all the way from the tropics?) are worth a little pollution. And where do we draw the line? Two-car households? Single-occupant trips? Bananas from the tropics?

The utilitarian approach, weighing the consequences on both sides, is not the only way to approach this decision. Perhaps a principle-based approach can be enlightening. Do no harm. Period. So find yourself a nontoxic way to make money. Is that really too much to ask? (Is it really that simple?)

We could also, or instead, as suggested above, look at the issue as a conflict of rights: my right to a certain quality of life against your right to profit (i.e., a certain quality of life?) — my clean air or your idling BMW? See Blackstone for an analysis of this right to a livable environment. Right to private property is also invoked in this context. But see above. Also, are rights ever absolute? Does the right to private property include the right to

do anything you want to your property, on your property, regardless of harm to others? See Harbrecht for an interesting angle on this issue. Is the right to a livable environment a *human* right? If so, then any company that contaminates the air, water, or earth is guilty of human rights violations. Why isn't it that simple? And if that right extends to future generations ...

Speaking of rights, I keep coming back to 'Why does business have the right of way?' \* Even for something as simple as turning out the lights. People were asked to do that in their homes long ago: turn down your thermostat at night, turn out the light when you leave a room. But most businesses keep at least some of their lights on all night. Especially their advertising sign lights. (Why are you even still advertising with electricity? What is so god-damned important about your business that you get to let the world know you exist 24/7 while the rest of us put on a sweater in the evening?)

One might object to all these complicating factors, and the difficulty of weighing X against Y, with 'I can only mind my *own* business, here and now, the rest is really none of my business.' Really? On what basis, on what *moral* basis, do you make *that* claim?

Besides which, that's what your predecessors thought. And now look. Bluntly put, business as usual is killing us. The way we've been doing business is leading us to an almost-certain death. Planet-wide. And I'm not exaggerating or speaking metaphorically.

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## Climate Change 101

An increase of one degree, two, three, four... Ambient air temperature doesn't have much of a direct effect on humans — the difference between 15 degrees and 18

degrees on any given day isn't that big of a deal. But when we talk about climate change and global warming, we're talking about *average global* temperature.

Many species thrive in a much narrower temperature range than we do; they will not survive. Other species could adapt if they had enough time, but the warming is happening too fast for that to happen. This will have a number of food chain reactions that will eventually affect us; the lower on the chain, the more effect their extinction will have. Also, if species we depend on to pollinate food crops become extinct (bees, for example) (though they're dying off because of pesticides and fungicides, not warming), that too will have an effect. An increase in global temperature will also affect disease vectors; tropical diseases will increase their range.

However, more to the point is how such an increase affects our climate.

CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) released into the air (prior to their replacement with HCFCs in the late 70s), mostly through the use of spray cans and refrigeration, drifted up into the ozone layer, where the solar radiation breaks down the CFC, freeing the chlorine molecules, which then eat away at the ozone layer. This means that more of the sun's heat is getting through, which means that the earth's surface is getting warmer.

Carbon dioxide, water vapour, and methane that is released into the air form a blanket that keeps the heat in (normally the earth reflects much of it back out into the atmosphere). The thicker the blanket, the warmer

we get. Since the industrialization era, primarily due to the production and consumption of fossil fuels, carbon dioxide emissions into the air have increased significantly, thickening the blanket.

This means that both the permafrost and the polar ice has started melting. As the permafrost melts, the methane currently underground will be released; the more methane, the more melting, the more melting, the more methane... Since ice reflects the sun's radiation, loss of ice also means more warming, and more warming means more loss of ice...

Trees and other vegetation 'breathe in' carbon dioxide (and 'breathe out' oxygen), so cutting down the forests means even more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which means more of a blanket...

When the surface of the earth gets warmer, the air patterns change. This means that storms become more severe. Warming also puts more water vapour in the air which also contributes to more severe storms.

Heat waves will increase and become more severe as well. As will wildfires.

Rainfall patterns will also change, which means availability of drinking water will change.

A warmer surface also means more deserts. This further decreases (compounding the effects of urbanization and industry) the amount of arable soil.

Dry earth absorbs water less well, so flooding will increase.

As the polar ice melts and the sun's heat coming through increases, the oceans will get warmer. Warm water is less dense than cold water, so it takes up more space. This means that the ocean levels will rise, flooding islands and coastal areas.

These are facts. Cause and effect. Not a matter of opinion.) (How can the polar ice melt and the ocean level *not* rise? How can the ocean level rise and the coastal areas *not* flood?

There is a relationship, then, between the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and warming. There is a broad consensus that anything higher than a 2 degree increase would be disastrous. (Some say 1.5 is dangerous enough.)

And there is a broad consensus that more than 450ppm (parts per million) will put us over 2 degrees. (Some say 430, some say 480.) In January 2013, we were at 396ppm and adding 2ppm/year. In January 2015, we were at 400ppm and adding 3ppm/year. Which is why many scientists think we're past trying to stay under a two degree increase. (And look, even the economists agree! "The door to reach two degrees is about to close. In 2017 it will be closed forever" Faith Birol, Chief Economist, International Energy Agency [Klein 23].)

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Harris notes that "Only in the United States is there still considerable discussion about whether global warming is happening and whether humans are causing climate change, and only there is uncertainty about the precise consequences

used to stifle debate and prevent any real action” I’d add “and in Canada”. (You don’t think global warming is happening? See if your reasons are among the 117 dealt with on the Skeptical Science website.)

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## **Some Alarming Facts about the Fossil Fuel Business**

“[M]ethane emissions linked to fracked natural gas are at least 30% higher than the emissions linked to conventional gas. ... And methane is ... thirty-four times more effective at trapping heat than carbon dioxide, based on the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates. ... Cornell biogeochemist Robert Howarth says that in the first ten to fifteen years after it is released, methane ‘carries a warming potential that is eighty-six times greater than that of carbon dioxide’” (Klein 143).

\*

“Every industry in the country [the U.S.] has to follow the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Act, and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (which deals with hazardous waste) except one: the oil and gas industry” (*The Ethics of Fracking*).

\*

“As a joint 2011 report published by the Natural Resources Defence council, the Sierra Club, and others

notes, “There are many indications that dilbit is significantly more corrosive to pipeline systems than conventional crude. For example, the Alberta pipeline system has had approximately sixteen times as many spills due to internal corrosion as the U.S. system” (Klein 325).

The Keystone XL pipeline goes through the Ogallala Aquifer — “a vast underground source of freshwater ... that ... supplies roughly 30% of the country’s irrigation groundwater” (Klein 346, referencing the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture).

\*

“[I]t takes 2.3 barrels of water to produce a single barrel of oil from tar sands mining — much more than the 0.1 to 0.3 barrels of water needed for each barrel of conventional crude” (Klein 346, referencing the Government of Alberta).

“According to a 2012 study, modern fracking ‘events’ (as they are called) use an average of five million gallons of water — ’70 to 300 times the amount of fluid used in traditional fracking’. Once used, much of this water is radioactive and toxic” (Klein 346, referencing Seth B. Shonkoff, “Public Health Dimensions ...” psr.org).

“In other words, extreme energy demands that we destroy a whole lot of the essential substance we need to survive — water — just to keep extracting more of the very substances threatening our survival and that we can power our lives without ... at a time when

freshwater sources are imperilled around the world” (Klein 346-7).

\*

“[Investments in the fossil fuel industry] won’t be recouped unless the companies that made them are able to keep extracting for decades, since the up-front costs are amortized over the life of the projects. ... Exxon’s Alberta mine is projected to operate for forty years ... The long time frames attached to all these projects tell us something critical about the assumptions under which the fossil fuel industry is working: it is betting that governments are not going to get serious about emissions cuts for the next twenty-five to forty years. And yet climate experts tell us that if we want to have a shot at keeping warming below 2 degrees Celsius, then developed country economies need to have begun their energy turnaround *by the end of this decade* and to be almost completely weaned from fossil fuels before 2050” (my emphasis, Klein 146, referencing Shell Global, Imperial Oil, Husky Energy, and Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows, “Beyond ‘Dangerous’...”).

“From the perspective of a fossil fuel company, going after these high-risk carbon deposits is not a matter of choice — it is its fiduciary responsibility to shareholders, who insist on earning the same kinds of mega-profits next year as they did this year and last year. And yet fulfilling that fiduciary responsibility virtually guarantees that the planet will cook.

This is not hyperbole. In 2011, a think tank in London called the Carbon Tracker Initiative conducted a breakthrough

study that added together the reserves claimed by all the fossil fuel companies, private and state-owned. It found that the oil, gas, and coal to which these players had already laid claim — deposits they have on their books and which were already making money for shareholders — represented 2,795 gigatons of carbon. ... That's a very big problem because we know roughly how much carbon can be burned between now and 2050 and still leave us a solid chance (roughly 80%) of keeping warming below 2 degrees Celsius. According to one highly credible study, that amount of carbon is 565 gigatons between 2011 and 2049. And as Bill McKibben [author of *Oil and Honey*] points out, "The thing to notice is, 2,795 is five times 565. It's not even close." He adds: "What those numbers mean is quite simple. This industry has announced, in filings to the SEC and in promises to shareholders, that they're determined to burn five times more fossil fuel than the planet's atmosphere can begin to absorb" (Klein 148, referencing the Carbon Tracker reports based on papers published in *Nature* and *Climate Change*).

[In other words, "the fossil fuel companies have every intention of pushing the planet beyond the boiling point" (Klein 353-4).]

"McKibben leads us inexorably to the staggering conclusion that the work of the climate movement is to find a way to force the powers that be, from the government of Saudi Arabia to the board and shareholders of ExxonMobil, to leave 80 percent of the carbon they have claims on in the ground. That stuff you own, that property you're counting on and pricing into your stocks? You can't have it.

Given the fluctuations of fuel prices, it's a bit tricky to put an exact price tag on how much money all that unexcavated carbon would be worth, but one financial analyst puts the price at somewhere in the ballpark of \$20 trillion. So in order to preserve a roughly habitable planet, we somehow need to convince or coerce the world's most profitable corporations and the nations that partner with them to walk away from \$20 trillion of wealth" (Hayes).

\*

"Given these stakes, it is no mystery why the fossil fuel companies fight furiously to block every piece of legislation that would point us in the right emissions direction, and why some directly fund the climate change denier movement" (Klein 149, referencing John Fullerton, "The Big Choice" and James Leaton, "Unburnable Carbon").

"In 2013 in the United States alone, the oil and gas industry spent just under \$400,000 *a day* lobbying Congress and government officials, and the industry doled out a record \$73 million in federal campaign and political donations during the 2012 election cycle, an 87 percent jump from the 2008 elections" (Klein 149, referencing the Center for Responsive Politics).

"A 2012 report found that a single industry organization — the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers — spoke with federal government officials 536 times between 2008 and 2012, while TransCanada, the company behind the Keystone XL pipeline, had 279 communications. The Climate Action Network,

on the other hand, the country's broadest coalition devoted to emission reductions, only logged six communications in the same period" (Klein 149, referencing the Polaris Institute). [And probably not for lack of trying.]

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"So much oil is now being extracted in the U.S. (or 'Saudi America' as some market watchers call it) that the number of rail cars carrying oil has increased by 4111 percent in just five years, from 9,500 cars in 2008 to an estimated 4,000,000 in 2013" (Klein 311, referencing the *Globe and Mail*).

\*

And the last word?

"[Y]our fundamental business model of extracting and burning carbon is going to create an uninhabitable planet. So you need to stop. You need a new business model." Chloe Maxmin, Coordinator of Divest Harvard (Klein 354)

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We made the wrong decisions. We used the wrong formulae to calculate the trade-offs. Or something. Because half of the world's wetlands are gone (The EcoAmbassador). Half the world's major rivers are seriously polluted or depleted (The Nature Conservancy). Half of the world's topsoil is gone (World Wildlife Foundation). Half of our forests are gone (World Revolution). We're losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times the normal rate (Center for Biological Diversity). And there are an estimated 200 million tonnes of uranium tailings in Canada. (Tailings are nuclear waste: when ingested through the air, water, or food, they cause cancer and genetic mutations. See more about our toxic environment at "Our home and toxic land.")

So now what? How do we fix things?

Well, first, and the more ethically-relevant question, is 'Who should fix things?' How do we apportion responsibility? Consider Leahy's description of our current state of affairs:

"The family has just finished up an expensive seven-course restaurant meal, and the late-arriving cousins can only snack on bread sticks. When the bill arrives, the truculent, rich uncles — Canada, Japan and the United States — insist that the cousins, although poor and still very hungry, ought to pay a full share.

"And then Uncle Canada suggests that he pay less because he has a big appetite and can't help himself.

"With the fate of the planet in the balance, many critics say that is the current state of the negotiations ongoing in Bali at the international climate change talks."

Consider also the comments (made at the UN climate negotiation in Bonn, Germany in 2009) of Navarro Llanos, chief climate negotiator for Bolivia:

“Millions of people — in small islands, least-developed countries, landlocked countries as well as vulnerable communities in Brazil, India, and China, and all around the world — are suffering from the effects of a problem to which they did not contribute...” In addition to facing an increasingly hostile climate, she added, countries like Bolivia cannot fuel economic growth with cheap and dirty energy, as the rich countries did, since that would only add to the climate crisis — yet they cannot afford the heavy upfront costs of switching to renewable energies like wind and solar.” (as reported by Klein, *Rolling Stone*)

Klein goes on to say this:

“The developing world has always had plenty of reasons to be pissed off with their northern neighbors, with our tendency to overthrow their governments, invade their countries, and pillage their natural resources. But never before has there been an issue so politically inflammatory as the refusal of people living in the rich world to make even small sacrifices to avert a potential climate catastrophe. In Bangladesh, the Maldives, Bolivia, the Arctic, our climate pollution is directly responsible for destroying entire ways of life — yet we keep doing it.”

There are a few principles one could use to determine who should pay. (See Gardiner, Rosa and Munasinghe, and Wesley and Peterson for further discussion of this matter.) The preceding comments implicitly endorse the ‘polluter pays’ principle: the ones who made the mess should be the ones to pay to clean it up. (A quick comparison: in 2010, Americans emitted about 17.6 tons of carbon dioxide per person; India, by

contrast, emitted about 1.7 tons of carbon dioxide per person. [Ezra Klein]) This principle is the one endorsed by Brown and Garver, among many others, who say “The rules for the developed countries that are responsible for the current financial and ecological crisis should be different from those for developing ones.” A standard objection is ‘But we didn’t know!’ And a standard reply is ‘You should’ve found out!’ (Well, that and ‘Liar!’) Another reply is ‘Even so, you’ve benefitted.’

Harris adds two other dimensions, with his comment about the nature of the emission-generating activities and the effect of refusal to take responsibility:

“No country, however, bears more responsibility than the United States. With about one-twentieth of the world’s population, the United States produces about one-quarter of the world’s greenhouse gases. Much of that comes from arguably frivolous and certainly nonessential activities, whereas most of the emissions of the world’s poor are due to activities necessary for survival or achieving a basic living standard. The United States therefore has a heavy responsibility to act on this problem, and insofar as it fails to do so other industrialized countries — least of all developing countries — are much less likely to take necessary actions.”

One could use instead an egalitarian principle: everyone should pay equally. There’s not much to support this view, however, since both the causes and the effects are not distributed equally.

Yet another principle is ‘ability to pay’: the ones most able to pay should be the ones to pay the most. Peter Singer’s analogy of the relative moral obligation to save a drowning child is illustrative: is the child in a wading pool or the ocean? if the

latter, can you swim? Singer thus considers whether what you sacrifice by helping is greater than what is gained by doing so. In a sense, the 'ability to pay' principle bypasses responsibility and focuses on power. (Or does it just say that with power comes responsibility?) And although in theory, it thus differs from the first principle, in practice, the results are much the same.

One might point out that all three principles identify *countries*, not businesses. Very true. One can only hope that the country collects from the responsible businesses rather than the taxpayers. (Right?)

Which brings us to the question how do we make the responsible people pay? (I was going to say responsible 'parties' but that seems to deny or gloss over the fact that there are *people* who are responsible; *someone* had to make the decisions and carry them out...)

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## Why climate litigation could soon go global

Climate change is already causing about \$600-billion in damages annually. Here in Canada, the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy estimated that climate change will cost Canadians \$5-billion annually by 2020.

Canadian oil and gas companies could soon find themselves on the hook for at least part of the damage. For as climate change costs increase, a global debate has begun about who should pay.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu recently called on global leaders to hold those responsible for climate damages accountable. “Just 90 corporations — the so-called carbon majors — are responsible for 63 per cent of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions since the industrial revolution,” Tutu said. “It is time to change the profit incentive by demanding legal liability for unsustainable environmental practices.”

So far, the fossil fuel industry has successfully opposed litigation for climate damages, brought in the United States by victims of hurricanes and sea level rise. But new areas of litigation often fail at first; in the 1980s, tobacco companies were still boasting that they “have never lost a case to a consumer, have never settled, and do not expect that picture to change.” As the tobacco industry learned, changes to the interpretation and application of laws sometimes occur quite rapidly.

Nor is litigation in the U.S. or Canada the only thing the fossil fuel industry should worry about. It is becoming increasingly likely that companies could be sued by victims of climate change overseas, in countries with quite different legal systems. There, they might face lawsuits based on constitutional rights to a healthy environment, strict liability for environmental harm, or any number of other legal principles that don't currently exist in Canadian law.

Once a foreign court has ordered a Canadian company to pay for climate damages, that order is a debt — which Canadian courts can be asked to enforce. Chevron is currently fighting court actions in Canada, the United States and Brazil that seek to enforce a

\$9.5-billion award handed down by the supreme court of Ecuador — for pollution caused by oil spills.

Moreover, new laws could be introduced to facilitate climate litigation. When Canadian provinces encountered impediments to their ability to sue tobacco companies for public health costs, they eliminated those impediments by passing new laws. It's not hard to imagine countries impacted by climate change enacting new laws to clarify the liability of greenhouse gas producers.

Five companies traded on the Toronto Stock Exchange are among the “carbon majors” — Encana, Suncor, Canadian Natural Resources, Talisman, and Husky currently are collectively responsible for about \$2.4-billion a year of global climate damages.

Canadians are broadly supportive of the “polluter pays” principle — the idea that those who cause pollution should pay for the harm. But because climate change has seemed far off, there has been relatively little discussion about who should pay. It has been assumed — by industry, politicians, even some environmental activists — that oil and gas companies can continue producing with impunity, at least until a global climate agreement is reached.

But rising climate costs cannot be born only by taxpayers and by those who suffer the impacts of climate change. We believe that a new global awareness of the moral and legal responsibilities of the carbon majors will lead to a wave of climate litigation. Foreign lawsuits — with damage awards that are potentially enforceable in Canada — will be difficult and expensive to defend.

Source

Gage, Andrew and Michael Byers. "Why climate litigation could soon go global." *The Globe and Mail*. Oct 9/14

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Perhaps we need to answer first 'What exactly would the people responsible pay for?' That is, how do we fix it? What do we do? Some will argue for not doing anything. At least, not anything different. After all, we don't know for sure... But when the consequences are dire, should you really wait for certainty before taking action? (See Gardiner for more on this.)

One idea is to institute pollution taxes. Presumably that would deter pollution. (If we could *see* carbon dioxide. If the guy idling his pick-up could see clouds of dark purple stuff coming out his exhaust pipe... If you could see it poof into the air whenever you cut down a tree (?) or drill into the rock... And it just hung there... Similarly, if we could *see* the ozone hole above us, a rip in the sky, getting larger every day... If there were no 'dumps' and we had to keep all our garbage on our own property...) But unless the taxes were retroactive, this wouldn't really right past wrongs.

Another idea is to require licenses to pollute. The price of such licenses would presumably deter pollution. If these licenses could be traded internationally, underdeveloped countries could get rich, or at least debt-free, by selling their hardly necessary pollution licences to the industrialized world. But is that morally right? To *sell* pollution rights? Well, why not — why should this right be *inalienable*? But is it morally right to even *have* pollution rights? Or even pollution taxes — both imply the right to pollute, if you can pay enough to do so. Well, we could set limits — recall the trade-off idea.

Yet another idea is to pay countries to keep their carbon sequestered. That is, to *not* develop resources. That would also shift money from the industrialized countries to the underdeveloped countries. Norway, for instance, pledged \$1 billion each to Brazil and Indonesia for forest preservation efforts, partly to compensate for failing to meet its own greenhouse gas emissions targets. But consider Monbiot's concern that "If a quarry company wants to destroy a rare meadow, for example, it can buy absolution by paying someone to create another somewhere else." My neighbour does the same thing when she votes green to compensate for her RVing.

Similarly, in that it also involves paying someone to do the environmentally responsible thing, but without the absolution for an environmentally irresponsible thing, Vittel-Nestlé Waters recognized a few years ago that its aquifer in northern France was being polluted by nitrate fertilizers and pesticides from nearby farms. It devised a scheme to pay farmers to change their methods and deliver the ecosystem service of unpolluted water.

This solution addresses Conniff's comments: "Old-style protection of nature for its own sake has badly failed to stop the destruction of habitats and the dwindling of species. It has failed largely because philosophical and scientific arguments rarely trump profits and the promise of jobs. And *conservationists can't usually put enough money on the table to meet commercial interests on their own terms*" (my emphasis). And that's because the 'commercial interests' can get a return on their expense when they harvest the wood, for example, but when conservationists buy it, it just sits, untouched. But if, as suggested above, someone (who?) were to pay for just letting it stay untouched, if a tree, for example, was worth \$2,000 (per year) as a living carbon dioxide processor and only \$1,000 (one time) as lumber, then conservation groups *could* afford to buy and 'just let it sit'. That's the argument, the theory, behind

developing worlds asking to be paid for their carbon sinks, their untouched stuff — asking the rest of the world, us, to pay them to keep their forests uncut, and to keep their fossil fuels in the ground (the latter not as carbon dioxide processors but at least not as carbon emitters).

Conniff's comment may imply that the problem is with the economic model we've been using. Certainly MacDonald's comments do this, targeting supply and demand economics: "[I]f the corporate boycott [of Alberta's oil sands] has any impact at all, it will be roughly as follows. The reduction in demand for oil-sands oil will reduce the price it can command. And when you lower the price of something? Yup, you make it easier for other people to buy it. So, more — not less — will end up being used" (MacDonald).

Others argue that the current economic model isn't the problem and can actually provide us with solutions:

"Free market environmentalism can correct these problems. Short of privatizing the national forests, timber leases could be put up for competitive bid with no requirement that timber be harvested; environmentalists could then bid with timber companies. Environmental groups could lease the most critical owl habitat and allow no logging there. On other tracts, they might allow some logging, thus partially offsetting lease costs, but require that logging be done with minimal impact on the owls. Because it owns its timberlands, International Paper has successfully minimized impacts on endangered species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, and the Audubon Society has demonstrated that oil development can occur on its private preserves without significant damage to bird habitat." (Anderson and Leal)

See also Taylor for a defence of free-market environmentalism. Then see Tokar for a criticism of such a view, one that turns environmental protection into a profit-making commodity, and Smith for succinct replies to four arguments supporting free-market environmentalism. See also Simon and Partridge for another version of the Palmer and Peacock debate in this chapter. Lastly, see Bromley for an analysis of the ethical problems with basing environmental policy on economic analysis (and, bonus, ways to overcome these problems).

Many advocate, instead, increased government regulations. For a comparison of the market-based approach and the “command-and-control” (government regulation) approach, see Stavins and Whitehead. See also Freeman, who explains that of the two remedies for market failure, the government regulation approach suits environmental concerns better than the property rights approach because the environment is not easily divisible.

That last point underlines the necessity for coordinated effort. Levant went on to say, about the boycott MacDonald spoke of, “Where are they going to buy their gas from, if not Canada? ...Saudi Arabia? Could there be a more unethical barrel of oil than one from that racist, misogynistic, terror-sponsoring dictatorship? Venezuela, to enrich strongman Hugo Chavez? Iran, with its nuclear plans?” Poff makes the argument that the global economy with its increasing weakening of national boundaries (through privatization, deregulation, and liberalization of national economies) makes environmental sustainability impossible: any country strengthening its environmental protection laws unilaterally will be at a competitive disadvantage. Hence the need for nations to negotiate internationally.

Unfortunately, the past implies that such planet-wide coordination is unlikely. Governments have been trying to reach agreements for decades. And failing. So even if we recognized that a *radical* solution is required — such as earth, water, and air can’t be privately owned anymore, anywhere, and

there can be no non-sustainable development anymore, anywhere — it's unlikely it would be implemented.

So in the meantime? What 'new business model' (Maxmin, above) should we adopt? What should business look like *from this point on*? Well, we know what doesn't work. And only an insane person does the same thing over and over, expecting a different outcome.

To the extent that environmental destruction has resulted from the "bigger/more is better" view of development, a view that might (*might*) just have been excusable back when natural resources seemed infinite and causal connections were not understood, one would argue (as many have, for decades) that sustainable growth (rather than unlimited growth) should be our standard. See Hawken, for example, and Brown. Such a model, according to DesJardins, proposes three things:

1. Businesses should not use renewable resources at rates that exceed their ability to replenish themselves. ...
2. Businesses should use nonrenewable resources only at the rate at which alternatives are developed or loss of opportunities compensated. ...
3. Businesses cannot produce wastes and emissions that exceed the capacity of the ecosystem to assimilate them. (455)

See Beckerman for a counter to DesJardins.

Some argue for zero-growth. Which doesn't necessarily mean no development. What would that look like? (And would full-cycle costing help?)

Rocha et al believe that sustainable development can be integrated into business as is. But others disagree. Korhonen asks this very question: "Is there something that is fundamentally

wrong in the dominant business paradigm in the light of sustainability?” As a result of his search for “upstream principle mechanisms of current known and future unknown negative environmental impacts downstream”, he identifies growth without limits (suggesting instead creativity within limits), competition (suggesting instead symbiosis), specialization (suggesting instead diversity), and globalization (suggesting instead locality), concluding with “a new, alternative theory of corporate environmental management”.

What would this new, alternative business paradigm look like? Considering the question from the Canadian perspective, what makes Canada unique (?) is our plentiful natural resources which give rise to many very, *very* serious ethical questions. First is whether or not to develop them. According to a very recent paper published in *Nature* (one of the preeminent scientific journals), Canada’s tar sands and the 100 billion barrels of oil estimated to exist in the Arctic have to stay in the ground, undeveloped (McGlade and Elkins) if we are to keep under a two degree temperature increase. Though I haven’t found a similar fact for the fresh water that’s locked in our ice, I suspect it’s the same, since the melting of the polar ice is a significant factor in the warming chain.

Then, if you *do* decide to develop them, you’ll have to decide what to do with them. Sell them to rich countries like the U.S.? Sell them to poor countries like parts of Africa? Sell them to countries hell-bent on following our lead over the cliff, like China?

And, of course, in the process, you have to consider the process. Do you access the oil through deep sea oil drilling? Do you get to the natural gas by fracking?

And then, once you’ve got it, you have to consider your delivery method. Do you run a pipeline through thousands of miles of sensitive habitat? (XL Keystone.) (And keep in mind that by the time you’re in business, *all* habitat is going to be sensitive.) Running roughshod over private land? (Texas.) Do

you send it halfway around the world in tankers that may hit an iceberg? (Exxon.) Or trains that have a tendency to derail? (Lac Megantic, Quebec.) Seriously, is it worth all that risk?

Take a minute to define exactly that 'it'. *What are you doing it for?* Wouldn't most people would prefer renewable energy if it were cheaper? (And if you included the damage you cause it *would* be cheaper. Considerably cheaper. Put a price on the planet. Go ahead. I want to see your number.)

So are you doing it just because you have to finish what you started? Because you've got all that money committed, you can't stop now? Why not? Because you yourself need more money? That badly? Because your shareholders need more money? That badly? Will the world fall apart if we have to shift to solar, wind, and tidal power? (It will if we don't.)

And if you do take responsibility for disposal, should you go ahead and, for example, ship 1600 tonnes of nuclear waste through the Great Lakes and on to Sweden without conducting an environmental assessment? Even if your government allows you to? (Bruce Power Inc.)

We *have* solutions. Technological solutions. Windmills. Solar panels. Tidal power. Electric cars, with battery-swapping stations (see Better Place) instead of gas stations. Fuel cells (see Ballard). We just need business to make them work. (See Quartz for an analysis of why Better Place failed.) We just need to figure out a way to make them work, to make business and technology work together. Denmark switched more than 40% of their electricity consumption to renewables; Germany has achieved a 25% switch. How did *they* do it? (Canada's at 17%.) Being in business is not incompatible with being environmentally responsible. (Despite beliefs to the contrary: very few Canadian corporate codes even discuss environmental affairs: a mere 6.7% of 75 respondents, from 461 queried, of the top 500 corporations in Canada do so [Lefebvre and Singh]. Shame on us.)

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## Feel like Watching a Movie?

I highly recommend *H2O* (“a cautionary thriller about Canada’s destiny” featuring Paul Gross as Prime Minister)

And several documentaries: *The Ethics of Fracking*, *Waste Land*, *Gasland*, *Chasing Ice*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Waterlife*, *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour*

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Note, though, that all of the forementioned solutions, from pollution taxes on, do nothing to fix the current problems. They all address (simply) not adding to the problems. And maybe that’s because so many of the current problems are unfixable. We can’t retrieve the CFCs. We can’t retrieve all the carbon we’ve set into the atmosphere. We can’t retrieve the PCBs, the DDT, and all the other toxins that caused genetic mutations. Can we do something with all the garbage floating in the oceans? Can we neutralize nuclear waste? Can we purify our polluted water? Can we make soil out of thin air? I don’t know.

But the bottom line is the decisions being made by business are critical. And become more critical with every passing day. (Even if you’re not in fossil fuel business, your business decisions have more consequence than the decisions of any individual person.) (Your business likely uses more natural resources than any individual person.) “This is where multinational corporations come in,” Patchell and Hayter say. “Their global reach and tremendous capacity for the research, development, demonstration, and diffusion of new technologies offer the best chance of addressing climate change.” They also

claim that “Focusing on multinational corporations is also a more equitable approach to dealing with climate change.”

Governments have failed; look at all the climate negotiations, the summits, the conferences. Maybe it’s time for business to try. To *really* try. Why don’t those 85 richest people in the world (see the chapter on Profit and Capitalism) or the Global 500 get together and work out a *global business accord* that *takes the planet — the very possibility of future business — into consideration*. I say we need a revolution. Who better to lead it than business? You’re already in the driver’s seat.

Please. I’m begging you. Have the audacity. Be imaginative about the companies you start. Be vocal with the companies you join. Change the way we do business. (But do it quickly.)

(And save the world.)

*That’s how the chapter ended as it appeared in the published textbook.*

*This is what I’d also included in the manuscript I’d submitted to the publisher. I agreed to its deletion as a sort of compromise; they already thought the introduction to the chapter far too long and far too ... discouraging.*

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## **“I think we’re fucked.”**

*7 Reasons America will fail on climate change, Ezra Klein*

- 1) We’ve waited so long that what America needs to do is really, really hard — and maybe impossible.

In the early 1990s, scientists converged on 2°C as the level of warming the world could (probably) safely

endure. “We said that, at the very least, it would be better not to depart from the conditions under which our species developed,” Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, one of the scientists who helped devise the 2°C limit, told my colleague Brad Plumer. “Otherwise we’d be pushing the whole climate system outside the range we’ve adapted to.”

There’s disagreement as to whether that actually is a safe level of warming. “Two degrees is actually too much for ecosystems,” wrote George Mason University’s Thomas Lovejoy in the *New York Times*. “A 2-degree world will be one without coral reefs (on which millions of human beings depend for their well-being).” [Ed. note: They’re not just pretty ocean gardens for touristy divers; nearly 25% of all marine life depend on coral reefs for their survival; see the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration website for details.]

Either way, we’ve waited so long to begin cutting emissions that two degrees looks flatly impossible. We’re on track for 4°C of warming — which is nearly the temperature difference between the world now and the Ice Age. That’s a nightmare for the planet. The World Bank tried to model it and realized that they had no idea what would happen — or whether humans could manage. There’s “no certainty that adaptation to a 4°C world is possible,” they concluded.

See [vox.com/2014/6/5/5779040/7-reasons-America-fail-global-warming](http://vox.com/2014/6/5/5779040/7-reasons-America-fail-global-warming) for the other six reasons.

And if it's too late to fix it? After all, the dominos have been set in motion. There's really nothing we can do now. That train has already gone over the edge of the cliff. (So by the time this text gets into your hands, it'll *certainly* be too late. Even *more* too late because you're just students; it'll be a few years before you have any real power.) (See Hamilton, who argues that it's already too late to stop many of the dire consequences of global warming and that we're almost sure to make it far, far worse.)

In that case, what do we do now? Prepare for the crash landing.

Then, how will we start over? Which businesses will we need first? And how shall we run those businesses?

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## FINAL EXAM

Prepare an ethically-informed business plan for decimated planet.

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