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Resident Artist

Brazilian artist Thais Beltrame was born in 1976. When she was little, she despised coloured pencils and used to compulsively scribble on her mother's books with a ball pen, creating endless narratives with simple lines. Today the results of such acts are universal existential issues represented in black and white, which recreate the memories of our childhood in all its darkness, sadness, discovery and glow.

Thais makes subtle and meticulous use of brush and ink, creating a visual atmosphere both peculiar and melancholic. A Fine Arts graduate from Columbia College, Chicago, she lives and works in São Paulo. She has illustrated for several magazines and books, and her artwork has been exhibited in England, Brazil and the United States, as well as featured in *Juxtapoz Art & Culture Magazine* and a series of Brazilian magazines. Thais still creates lines compulsively, although no longer on her mother's books.

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The Common Bad, part 1

by Ben Irvine

In 1963 Davey Moore died in hospital from a punch that had been thrown by fellow boxer Sugar Ramos during a fight televised live in the United States. A year later, singer-songwriter Bob Dylan stood onstage at the New York Philharmonic Hall and announced his next song. "This is a song about a boxer", he said, plainly – as Dylan was wont to do. "It's got nothing to do with boxing", he continued, cryptically – as Dylan was also wont to do. "It's not even having to do with a boxer", he concluded, with a grin. Then, verse by verse, Dylan proceeded to interrogate the circumstances of a very public death: *Who killed Davey Moore? Why an' what's the reason for?*

Was it the referee, who could have stopped the fight sooner? The crowd, who were baying for blood? The boxing writer, whose publicity had enticed them all there? Moore's manager, who organised the fight? Or was it Ramos, who struck the deadly blow? *Not I*, they all insist, one by one, as Dylan's lyric propounds their excuses. They were all involved, but absolved. Each was playing out his allotted role in the name of entertainment – even Ramos, with his plea of innocence, *Don't say 'murder', Don't say 'kill'*. The song ends, as it began, with its unanswered refrain: *Who killed Davey Moore? Why an' what's the reason for?*

This essay isn't about a boxer, or boxing. But it *is* about what I think Dylan's allegory is about – a puzzling question concerning not just a single casualty of incivility but a pandemic of it: *How is it that modern societies are haunted by so much man-made suffering and injustice despite being economically, technologically and politically developed in so many ways?*

The juxtaposition is certainly counterintuitive. If enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could have seen into the future, they would have been delighted. Out of their core values of democracy, freedom and reason, many stunning moral achievements have flowed across vast areas of the globe: political accountability, universal suffrage, racial equality, legal impartiality, humane penal systems, religious tolerance, open markets,

freedom of speech, unprecedented material wealth, longer lives, lower infant mortality, spectacular scientific and technological advances, instant global communications, and Bob Dylan's ongoing career. There is plenty for the 'rational optimist' of Matt Ridley's title to crow about.

Yet many of today's commentators aren't entirely impressed, particularly by the frayed state of Britain and the US (influential nations which I, too, will focus my account on). The prevailing verdict on modern life is clear: "could be better". We could, it is said, be better to each other. At the end of the Second World War communal solidarity was widely entrenched, and gains in social justice followed during the 1960s, yet we've since been spending less and less time together – in groups, societies, charities, sports teams, social clubs, choirs, and civic life generally. We not only listen and talk to each other less; we are less trusting, helpful and kind. We enjoy less of what economists call 'social capital'. Then there's the flipside of this collective failure; we could be better in ourselves. Lacking the peace of mind that is derived from social belonging and common purpose, and bombarded by adverts and celebrities depicting phoney happiness, we've become stressed, neurotic and lonely. We've tried all the spurious 'remedies' we can buy (Prozac, alternative therapies, chocolate, package tourism and cosmetic surgery) and neglected all the genuinely effective ones we can't (family, friends, community, financial orderliness, job satisfaction, moral values and healthy living). We seem to have lost the knack of being happy.

'It is a remarkable paradox', write Wilkinson and Pickett in *The Spirit Level*, that 'at the pinnacle of human material and technical achievement, we find ourselves anxiety-ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume and with little or no community life'. And, as ever, the poorest are the most vulnerable. There's nothing inherently wrong with competition and the inequality which inevitably follows – on the contrary, both are motivators of progress – but much modern economic activity is simply not cricket. When capitalist societies underinvest in social capital, they fail to cultivate the moral norms and values that would otherwise dissuade opportunists from seeking advantages by exploiting the gullibility of the poor, who are doubly hampered by the lack of civilizing values and the corrupting products and deals on offer. Theodore Dalrymple has summarized:

> Having previously worked as a doctor in some of the poorest countries in Africa, as well as in very poor countries in the Pacific and Latin America, I have little hesitation in saying that the moral, cultural, emotional and spiritual

> impoverishment of the Western underclass is the greatest of any large group of people I have encountered anywhere.

Inequality has over-ripened. Among rich societies, the most unequal, such as ours, tend to have worse levels of alcoholism, drug use, obesity, teenage pregnancy, educational performance, health, mental illness, violence, social mobility, life expectancy and infant mortality, with these levels worse among the poorest members of those societies.

Another, graver reason to lament our modern malaise is that it yields a climate in which extremism can flourish. When a society loses interest and faith in its own public affairs – shattering into a glinting rubble of private dreamworlds – it tends to be the moderates who disengage first, relinquishing their influence over meetings and rallies to the most vehement and uncompromising citizens, who then, encouraged by fellow extremists, become even more extreme, and round up more vulnerable loners from the world outside. Soon the messages emanating from the front lines of public discourse grow antagonistic and intolerant, and the media, ever-hungry for a provocative angle, broadcasts these faithfully, zapping an already edgy population. In this way we've gradually become more callous, while in our cynicism we've increasingly abnegated any personal responsibility for mitigating the economy's social side-effects, and, instead, invested in proxy state intervention. The combined result is a powder-keg – a massive state apparatus, a hard-boiled populace, and a groundswell of extremism – out of which fascist dreams are made real. We risk witnessing that familiar looping of the political spectrum whereby individualism and socialism meet to form the manacle of totalitarianism.

And that's just the in-house threat; outside, worse is brewing. The scientific consensus is that the planet can hardly sustain our current patterns of economic activity, with valuable resources running short, biodiversity at risk, pollution rife and global warming continuing apace. The developed world is 'the cradle of the best and the worst', to use Leonard Cohen's apt phrase.

So who's responsible for the worst? Who should we blame? Bankers gambling? Corporations profiteering? Multinationals plundering? Politicians swindling? Tories cutting? Socialists meddling? Benefit claimants sponging? Journalists scaremongering? Marketers cajoling? Celebrities attention-seeking? Or – as Dylan's song hints – might the very fact that everyone is pointing the finger at everyone else reveal a deeper, more uncomfortable truth?

~

When I was a boy in the eighties, my Dad used to take me and my brother to watch our favourite football team, Tottenham Hotspur, at the White Hart Lane stadium. The stands were always filled with fans, thrilled to see great players like Ossie Ardiles, Glenn Hoddle and Paul Gascoigne showing off their skills. Keen not to miss any of the action, thousands of heads would be bobbing above flapping scarves, straining to get a decent view. Inevitably, someone would stand up to enjoy a momentary panorama, then others would immediately follow, until everyone was leaning and stretching and peering as before, only this time on their feet. Periodically, the burden would spread throughout the assembled masses like a great elephant struggling to its feet, with barely a groan. It was as if this was just an accepted part of the day, grimly tolerated like the wind whistling through the upper rafters of the stands then scampering down the backs of those craning necks.

What I had participated in, I now know, was a 'tragedy of the commons'. In a famous essay published in 1968, the biologist Garett Hardin described how shared pastures are prone to overgrazing. The problem, he explained, is that any farmer using common land perceives that he can gain an advantage by allowing his animals to eat as much of the vegetation as possible (and by grazing as many animals as possible). But soon the land's limited resources are at risk of depletion, leaving nothing for anyone. This is obviously a disastrous outcome for all the farmers, yet each can be led to contributing to its eventuality by a compelling chain of reasoning. Imagine you are a farmer with a decision to make. If you don't restrict your animals' grazing, you stand to gain, whatever everyone else does: if everybody else restricts their animals and you don't, you'll get a bigger share of the land's resources; and if nobody restricts their animals and you don't, you'll still get a bigger share of the land's resources than you would have done through exercising restraint. The 'tragedy' occurs when every farmer makes this calculation, so that the land, and each and every one of them, ends up worse off than if they had kept to an agreed, sustainable schedule of land usage.

Hardin's description isn't just applicable to farmers. All kinds of groups can get locked into a permanently suboptimal state of functioning whenever their members reckon that it's in their interests to succumb to the temptation of antisocial behaviour. It's not simply a case of people mimicking each other – as in yawning or adopting each other's mannerisms and judgments; in these cases mimicking takes place with no strategic intent on the part of the actors, and no strategic outcome for them, negative or positive. Nor is it a case of people mimicking each other in adopting some beneficial new method (a phenomenon

more commonly known as progress). In this case people may recognize that if they don't adopt the method they'll be worse off than the people who do, but it's not the case that if everyone adopts the method they'll all be worse off – quite the opposite. Tragedies of the commons consist in a regressive situation for the many that arises from a progressive impulse on the part of individuals: participants perceive an opportunity to gain an advantage over their peers, and act on it, but when the rest of the peers adopt the behavior so as to share in the advantage, all the peers end up worse off than if none of them had acted as such.

Consider again those football fans rising and reposing. What appeared to (at least some) individuals to be a gain (standing up) ultimately turned out to be worse for everyone (tired legs). You can imagine being a fan deciding whether or not to stay seated: if you stand up while nobody else does you'll get a much better view; and if you stand up when everybody else does you won't get as good a view but it'll still be better than if you'd stayed seated, looking at someone's backside. Up and down, up and down, up and down go the fans, as this reasoning periodically ignites then spreads.

Yo-yoing football fans are a fairly innocuous case of a tragedy of the commons. For a start, many supporters will say that getting to your feet is all part of the fun – they do it willingly, anyway, when chanting, celebrating a goal, or offering an ovation – so as inconveniences go it's hardly major. Also, there are no wider consequences of the 'tragedy': it bothers no-one outside the ground. A final mitigation is that no-one devilishly benefits from the fans' inconvenience: it's not as though the club directors are encouraging the rising and reposing so that they can power their helicopters with the kinetic energy created, or sell foot massages after the game.

But not all tragedies of the commons are as circumscribed. Consider another example from where I grew up. Every day millions of Londoners use their cars to get around – the capital is a big place, and there's no time to waste. But it's not *that* big, not big enough for all those cars. Rather than cruising round an airfield or a Swiss mountain bend – what people imagine they're signing up for when buying a car – driving in London is more like moving furniture in a bedsit. The traffic is jammed in a frenzy of beeping, road rage, revving and fumes, with hardly a parking space in sight, while commission-paid traffic wardens stalk the pavements slapping £120 fines on windscreens. Dystopia would be putting it mildly.

Excluding public transport from the equation (which many people, understandably, do: buses and trains in cities can be pretty grim), driving in London (and most other urban spaces) is 'tragic' insofar as road users calculate

that, whatever everyone else does, going by car is a better option than walking or cycling. If the minority drives then it's quicker and better to take the car; and if the majority drives then it's still better to take the car because congested streets are too intimidating and polluted for walking or cycling on. Through such reasoning, all the drivers end up worse off than if none of them had driven.

But it's not just the participants in this tragedy who end up suffering its consequences. Everyone is affected negatively. Because car-filled streets are unpleasant and dangerous, especially for vulnerable residents such as children and senior citizens, wider society ends up paying for the consumer habit of one section. Also, cars are less sociable – secluding their occupants behind a windscreen – and therefore they decrease 'social capital'. Furthermore, urban congestion embodies the dynamic hinted at above, wherein a section of society devilishly benefits from a tragedy of the commons – in this case, the producers of cars and fuel, who make money on the back of that compelling chain of reasoning which leads urbanites to buy and run a car despite the collective harms. As a society we are compromised doubly: our suffering is a cohort's gain.

There are other examples of tragedies which share this apportioning of loss and gain. Gun ownership in the US is one. With the highest murder rate in the developed world, Americans are constantly debating the merits of their constitutional 'right to bear arms'. On one side are those who point out that firearm availability correlates with higher murder rates. On the other side are those who defend their right to defend themselves. It is the latter group's reasoning which makes gun ownership a tragedy of the commons. The most ardent consumers – for example, members of the National Rifle Association – reckon as follows: if the minority of people own a gun then it's safer and better to own one; and if the majority of people own a gun then it's still safer and better to own one. Soon guns are prevalent, and wider society suffers. Citizens

live in a quasi-militarized state, with police officers, gang members, and even elected officials toting guns and talking up the threat, while squabbles turn into shoot-outs, grudges into massacres and depressions into suicides. And, with so much tension in the air, social capital declines. Meanwhile, arms manufacturers benefit from the tragic behaviour of the gun lobby, compounding society's losses by making monstrous financial and political gains.

The litigiousness of American society is another example of this pattern of tragedy, and one which has become increasingly common in Britain too, in all areas of life – whether in business, family/marital affairs, or cases of personal injury. Rather than solving disputes amicably and personably, more and more of us are turning to those zealous 'no-win-no-fee' lawyers who whisper promises of vengeance into the ears of the aggrieved. As usual, you can imagine the reasoning being suggested therein: if your opponent doesn't litigate and you do, you stand to gain; and if your opponent does litigate and you do, you stand to gain by not getting annihilated in court. The tragedy is that when so many of us claim and counterclaim, we pay through the nose for it – in stress, time, paperwork and uncertainty, not to mention money.

And, of course, this tragedy's effects are wider still. As a society we've become tetchier about liability, less willing to shoulder responsibility. Social capital is, again, the casualty. Fewer people are willing to engage in youth work, for fear of being branded a paedophile; fewer people are willing to help repair damage to public amenities, for fear of having their wrists slapped for interfering; and fewer people are willing to help an injured or distressed stranger, for fear of inflicting further harm. There's also a flipside to this wariness about taking the initiative: excessive, paranoid diligence when doing so. Managers and planners fixate on 'Health and Safety' guidance, thus throttling common sense and spontaneity in both work and play. Finally, the litigation tragedy involves beneficiaries – the lawyers themselves – who as a minority profit handsomely from the problems of the majority. No doubt, legal officials are a key resource in a democracy – the third-party settling of disputes is vital in avoiding the endless cycles of violent reprisals characteristic of primitive societies – but we mustn't forget which is the cart and which the horse. We employ lawyers to serve our civility, not be a substitute for it. When the latter occurs – when a woman delivering junk mail sues a homeowner after tripping on a paving stone, when a casual sexual partner sues her bedfellow after contracting herpes, when hospitals are swamped with requests from personal injury lawyers to supply test results for evidence in court, and when, 'like the provider of artificial hormones that supplement the diminished supply coursing through the body, the lawyer

contrives enforceability to supplement the failing supply of reciprocity, moral obligation and fellow-feeling', as law professor Marc Galanter puts it – it's the lawyers who benefit.

A similar dynamic characterizes the fashion industry. Fashions begin when arbitrary brands or items of apparel (clothing, jewellery, handbags or other bodily adornments) acquire desirable status after being showcased by someone the public has been told by the media to look up to (usually no-one genuinely deserving). Subsequently, an all-too-familiar choice offers itself to the acolytes: if you mimic this celebrated style and no-one else does you will gain more respect among your peers; and if you mimic this style and everyone else does you will still gain more respect among your peers than you would if (God forbid) you had worn last season's trends. Consequently, followers of fashion end up bedecked in the same handful of styles and brands, thus accruing no social advantage over each other, and – since they're now poorer, having purchased grossly overpriced items – they're actually worse off than they would have been otherwise. Each of them ends up 'a kicking screaming Gucci little piggy', as in Thom Yorke's savage lyric.

Fashion victims suffer most from this tragedy, but we're all affected to an extent. The fallout for wider society comes in the form of the accepted, casual belittling of 'unfashionable' people, an epitaph most of us will shoulder at some point. Traditionally the worst-affected are trainspotters, hippies, geography teachers, nerds, hikers, and frumpy women, all of whom suffer the ignobility of not being 'cool'. But even being 'normal' isn't good enough. We're all made to feel as inadequate as the fashion victims themselves when we see a celebrity wearing the 'right' clothes and us, by implication, the wrong ones. Maybe that's another reason why so many of us have been disengaging from social life. Indeed, the biggest insult comes from the fact that our tormentors are benefitting from these insecurities. Fashion is a global industry, and it feeds on, and perpetuates, tragedy. Once those aspirational images have generated as much revenue as they can, new endorsements and further profits follow, and so the cycle goes on, and on, and on – like a fashion victim's clothes rail.

It's a whole lifestyle we buy into when we buy a fashionable garment. A big part of this lifestyle is being seen out and about, on the scene, socializing – invariably with a drink in hand. In the UK we've experienced a long-term trend for increased alcohol consumption since the 1950s: today we drink double the amount we did then, with one of the highest levels of binge drinking in Europe, with a third of men and a fifth of women exceeding the recommended weekly limit, and with more than one in 25 adults dependent on alcohol. Most people

think this is all a bit of a laugh; yet the negative effects of alcohol are far from amusing.

For a start there are the psychological harms. Alcohol causes memory loss, impaired judgment, anxiety, depression, aggression, self-harm, suicide and even psychosis. Young people are particularly at risk in these respects, since the human brain is still in development until the late teens, and may be more susceptible to damage than the adult brain; in adolescents who regularly drink, areas of the brain important in planning and emotional control have been found to be smaller than otherwise expected.

Then there are the physical harms. Everyone knows that drinking causes short-term maladies, such as sickness, diarrhoea, dehydration, impotence, hangovers, and, in the worst cases, alcohol poisoning. But you seldom hear (perhaps because they don't make such good anecdotes) about the long-term health complications connected with alcohol, such as obesity, reduced fertility, hepatitis, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, dementia, cirrhosis, pancreatitis, diabetes and cancer. Finally, there are the extraneous risks associated with drinking, such as suffocation (through choking on vomit), road deaths, foetal harm, date rape, sexual abuse, accidents (e.g. fires or drowning), relationship and family problems, crime, job loss, financial difficulties, and sexually transmitted diseases. All in all, alcohol is estimated to be responsible for at least 33,000 deaths in the UK each year.

So why do we drink? The most obvious answer is because it's fun. The next most obvious is that alcohol makes us feel more able to cope with our lives (it is, as Homer Simpson quipped, the 'cause and the solution to all the world's problems'). But there is a tragedy of the commons involved too. People drink to 'lose their inhibitions'. This means, in part, being more assertive, confident and brave (having 'Dutch courage'). But it also means being less conscientious, thoughtful and sensitive: these, indeed, are the so-called 'inhibitions' lost. The motive, at least partly, is one-upmanship. In the kinds of social situations where people drink alcohol – e.g. when on the pull, out with the lads or lasses, mixing with high society – the most brazen individuals tend to get ahead. Alcohol makes men more 'alpha' and women more 'matriarchal' than usual; so our colleagues, associates and employees turn into those hoards of silverbacks we've all seen marauding along high streets on a Friday night, those scantily clad gaggles of screeching women staggering ahead, and those (supposed) artists getting sloshed and trying to get papped at sophisticated awards ceremonies.

We can all imagine only too well the reasoning that takes place prior to drinking in such situations: if you drink alcohol and no-one else does you'll be

much more fun, sexy and influential than them; and if you drink and everyone else does you'll still be more fun, sexy and influential than you would have been otherwise. The tragedy occurs when all the drinkers adopt this attitude, all end up cancelling out each other's social advantage, and all are ultimately worse off, due to the short- and long-term ill effects and associated risks of alcohol. Of course, drinkers cancelling out each other's social advantage is only true to the extent that everyone drinks the same amount; hence that inflationary effect wherein everyone tries to out-drink everyone else (otherwise known as binge-drinking). But since everyone involved is pushing themselves to fairly universal biological limits, the cancelling effect still generally occurs.

Anyone who has tried to have a 'dry night' in a pub or at a dinner party will appreciate the power of this dynamic. As soon as a few attendees begin to drink, the urge to follow is strong. If you don't drink you might end up being a boring (and bored), unsexy loner while everyone else exuberantly and lasciviously (and increasingly incoherently) asserts themselves. There's also a pull coming from the other drinkers. When their consumption is just beginning, they still have enough conscientiousness left to encourage you to have a drink, so that you won't get left behind in the social stakes, and to ensure that they don't end up embarrassing themselves later in front of a sober companion. All too frequently the cajoling (both inner and outer) works, and a dry night turns into a late one, with your plans for the morning after also a write-off.

This narrative hints at the wider effect alcohol has on society; yet drinking doesn't just draw others in, it impacts upon them even when they abstain. The effects can be obvious, such as the enormous tax burden for dealing with alcohol-related health and social problems, or the fact that you have to wait for hours in A&E with an accidental injury or illness while students get their stomachs pumped and brawling clubbers get their faces stitched. But the social consequences of our drinking culture can also be more subtle.

Consider the lack of decent places to congregate in which don't involve drinking: the late-night cafes, community centres, youth clubs, dance halls, sports clubs and public spaces (for hosting bonfires, barbecues and coffee mornings) people used to frequent; paradoxically, all that drunken camaraderie seems to be making us all less sociable. Consider also the gradual decline in the quality of our national discourse: millions of sozzled brains create a market for the inanity and superficiality that's increasingly evident throughout the media. It is troubling that each of us must live alongside and somehow co-operate with fellow human beings who sacrifice thoughtfulness, conscientiousness and sensitivity at the drop of a Jägerbomb. Alcohol's effect on society is worse

than heroin's, concludes psychiatrist David Nutt, the UK government's former advisor on drug usage.

Then, of course, there are beneficiaries. We should certainly cherish our liberal values, but in the comedian Bill Hicks's parody the real message of alcohol companies is 'stay stupid, America!', and the real philosophy behind their actions is 'you are free to do as we tell you'. The vast remuneration the rest of us dole out for this hypocrisy makes alcohol's tragic effects all the more galling. In John Christopher's classic sci-fi trilogy *The Tripods*, the human race is enslaved by aliens who stalk the land in giant three-legged metal transports. These huge, terrifying contraptions wield long tentacles which are used for 'capping' people. Implanted in the brain at age 14, the caps suppress curiosity and creativity and leave the recipients placid and docile, incapable of dissent. Some minds are even crushed under the pressure of the cap's hypnotic power; an unlucky few become vagrants wandering the countryside shouting nonsense. It's an apt allegory for the tragedy of alcohol consumption.

It is also an apt allegory for another of modern society's favoured diversions: the screen. 'If a Victorian gentleman arrived in present-day London, he'd think we'd been invaded by glowing rectangles', writes British comedian Charlie Brooker. And the future? 'Imagine a screen pissing illuminated phosphor into a human face – forever.' How did it come to this? First there was TV. Hardly anyone had one in 1950, and now nearly everyone has – though it's still easy to forget how astonishing TV is. When we sit down to watch, we're enthralled by characters who are more bizarre, entertaining, loveable or compelling than anyone we'll ever meet in real life. Our screen-mates give us plenty to goggle at and, unlike real people, they don't require anything in return: we don't have to help Phil Mitchell on *EastEnders* give up drugs; we don't have to worry about the plight of the game show contestant who gambles his winnings away on the turn of a wheel; and we don't have to make comedians laugh back (just ask Kenneth Williams). All this, at the touch of a button: TV is 'the cheapest and least demanding way of averting boredom', as British researchers Sue Bowden and Avner Offer put it. We just sit back and enjoy.

Or so we think. TV has hidden costs. As sociologist Robert D. Putnam observes, 'dependence on television for entertainment is not merely a predictor of civic disengagement. It is the single most consistent predictor that I have discovered'. In other words, telly addicts become less interested in real people's lives, making less of a contribution to the stock of social capital in their locality. In this sense (disregarding some of the positive effects TV may have, such as promoting sympathy among disparate cultures) TV-watching contributes to

a tragedy of the commons. The watcher perceives a gain, but once everyone around them adopts the same habits, everyone ends up worse off, because there is no community left to speak of. Moreover, due to the collective inertia caused by TV, there is no option to revert to previous social activities (you can't attend a gathering, go to a dance, or enjoy a social dinner when everyone else is at home watching *Big Brother*, *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Come Dine With Me*). The problem stems from familiar reasoning: you'll be better off watching TV for entertainment if no-one else does, since you can enjoy all those fantastic characters while living in a pleasant community rich in social capital; and you'll still be better off watching TV for entertainment if everyone else does, since there'll be nothing better to do once that stock of social capital has been depleted.

The line between the participants in this tragedy and wider society is blurry, because so many of us watch TV. But the negative consequences are clearly manifest in the diminishing quality of our national discourse: with its parade of soap operas, chat shows, game shows, 'reality' shows, violent dramas, makeovers, singing contests, celebrities, and dumb advertisements,

TV's vulgarity and banality undermines, *or at least fails to promote*, virtues like intelligence and wisdom. We end up living in a stupider, crasser, more infantilized society. The rot begins in the earliest few years of life, when exposure to any form of video produces older children with shortened attention spans. The American Institute of Pediatrics has concluded that there is no safe level of viewing for children under two. Worst of all, our viewing habits have a negative effect on the political process. This occurs partly because TV undermines grassroots activism through undermining social capital; but, in addition, the preponderance of entertainment programmes tends to make us less informed as voters and therefore more likely to be swayed by populist (though not necessarily sensible) policies.

Not that the beneficiaries give a damn. For moguls, celebrities, vendors and cable men, TV is a lucrative industry. In the US, 99% of households own at least one set; in the UK, 88%. That's a big market to sell to – whether through advertising, merchandising or hardware. How strange to be making others rich by making our own lives poorer.

Video games, for parallel reasons, generally have the same tragic effects as TV. But perhaps that's not the limit of computer-based tragedies. The internet entered our lives in the late twentieth century and has since spread like wildfire, though many of us profess to dislike our new networked world and feel intense nostalgia for what life was like before. Of course, nostalgia can be grossly misleading. In science, medicine, industry, research, transport, and countless other areas, networked computers can be enormously useful, and no doubt there are many wonderful new applications to come. More nebulously, it has been claimed that the internet may have accelerated the gradual democratisation and pacification of the world's nations, a process that historically has been helped along by open economies and freer communication. Indeed, in itself the sheer pace of change brought about by the internet renders any definitive condemnation of the technology untenable. 'We are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire', as John Perry Barlow has remarked.

And yet any discussion of a technology's benefits legitimizes – indeed, makes imperative – an analysis of its attendant costs; of whether the latter outweigh the former (an evaluation which is especially apt when democracy is itself cited as a benefit). In other words, it is *right* to ask whether the internet's downsides are sufficient to render its spread, despite all appearances, a tragedy (one in which the boundary between users and wider society is almost totally blurred, because the technology's mass adoption has been so swift). Here are

a few quick reminders of those downsides, with which we're all familiar: the internet exposes children to obscene content, adds to the temptations of gambling, makes it harder for musicians and authors to profit from their work, enables people to print off guns, intensifies the tragedies of TV-watching and marketing, encourages us to click on links rather than immersing ourselves in content as we would when reading a book, makes it easier for governments to spy on their citizens, and consumes enormous amounts of energy and resources.

Above all, it is easy to forget that the internet requires a relentless and pervasive *human* effort to keep the whole system operational. In this respect, I am reminded of the 'Turk', a mechanical chess-playing machine which wowed audiences in the nineteenth century, until it was revealed that there was a dwarf hiding in the base of the machine, pulling levers. Is the internet in fact a Turk, which achieves its marvels only because we ourselves are confined within the mechanism as integral components?

In the midst of the worst global recession in almost a century, this question has particular pertinence. Given the supposedly superior efficiency of networked computers, how could such a recession even be *possible*, unless businesses were in some sense trapped in an internet tragedy? Today any viable business must design, build and maintain a website, which costs money and takes time (an unspeakable amount – grappling with images, text, code, software, uploading, browser-compatibility-checking and much, much more). This is akin to running two businesses: one in the real world and another in an irritating hinterland where the functionaries don't speak English (or any other recognized human language). There's no escaping from all this hassle because, as long as everyone else is putting up with it, the consequences of unplugging would be commercial suicide.

We were sold networked computers on the promise of individual gain – quicker this, smarter that – yet many of us feel hampered and bewildered daily. Whereas the first users of the internet were impressed by the convenience it afforded, now that a critical mass of users has been exceeded, instead of things being easier for everyone, things seem harder. Using the internet has become the predominant way to get any message across – because everyone else has drawn the same conclusion and is spending increasing amounts of time online. What started out as a shortcut has turned into a detour that we all must make by the day, the hour, the minute – even by the second, in the case of social media platforms such as Twitter. What was originally the means has become the end in itself; communicating in order to get things done has given way to communicating so as to be heard, irrespective of having anything purposeful to

say. More is not always more.

These dynamics can be seen most acutely in the social realm: the internet surely diminishes social capital. When everyone in a community needs to use a computer for a large amount of time every day to keep up with what everyone else is doing, that community is not functioning as effectively as it would be otherwise. You can argue, of course, that caring, sharing and wisdom are to be found in online networking; but, patently, these electronic incarnations are *not as good as the real thing*. Being essentially alone, surrounded by four walls, tapping on a keypad and shuffling a mouse around, or chatting to a grainy image on Skype, is not the same as conversing with flesh-and-blood human beings, complete with their real-time reactions, body language, physical contact and practical support. Most of us now spend more of our time interacting with computers than with people. One might even wonder about the vaunted democratising power of the internet. The reams of politicised comments to be found in forums or beneath news columns online might comprise the wrong sort of 'engagement'. For while those comment threads, shorn of the niceties of face-to-face interaction, make us more opinionated, our atomisation as users makes us lethargic as doers (and this is true despite those occasional calls to mass action delivered by the internet, whereby we are hoodwinked into assuming that the rest of our online behaviour is similarly efficacious). Democratic debate is arguably being subsumed and muted by the internet, as so many of our social interactions have been. On gloomy days, I wonder if we have built a perfect totalitarian sponge that mops up the populace's criticism and activism, with the dissenters' eager consent.

If these considerations have any validity, then the reckoning that lies behind the tragedy of the internet is as follows: if you go online and a majority of other people don't, you gain an advantage over them by communicating and retrieving information quickly; and if you go online and everyone else does, you're still better off because you won't get left behind (even though the latter 'advantage' is spurious – we're all going *weird* with frustration, chronically battling faulty connections, broken links, attachments that won't open, incomprehensible codes, viruses, pop-ups and innumerable windows, while watching that sinister little egg timer pouring our lives away).

It hardly needs saying that the beneficiaries of this arguable tragedy are the tycoons who've built our brave new world. They've grown mind-bogglingly rich by velcroing the cortices of almost an entire species to those bristling screens.

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We've covered seven examples of consumer behaviour taking the form of a tragedy of the commons wherein the producers are the beneficiaries and wider society is a casualty. There are, however, some tragedies which occur among producers. In these cases the consumer is best described as a 'patsy'; someone who believes he is gaining from a relationship but who is actually losing out. There are also implications for wider society in such cases, but, because of the prevalence of the tragedies in question, the line separating these tragedies from wider society is especially vague. To the extent that society is affected extraneously it is a casualty.

First among this group of tragedies is the media. What we now call 'media' used to be very different: dignified newsreaders would sit in front of a plain backdrop while recounting events dispassionately; newspaper columns would document the day's affairs with a level of decorum only found today in obituaries; interviewers would diligently coax out their subjects' deepest thoughts. These days, stories, reports and discussions are more emotive – as though only a 'human interest' angle can interest humans. Even science stories are jazzed up as 'controversies', typically with some crackpot view to counterbalance the facts. Eyewitness voxpops have replaced statistics, images have replaced descriptions, goading has replaced interviewing, and journalists and broadcasters adopt the personas of actors or trashy authors – frowning, smiling and intonating provocatively, or exaggerating, hyping and quoting gratuitously – to add the requisite dash of sentiment to their words. Content itself has changed too. Journalists now favour novelty and sensation over relevance and useful explanation.

Viewed in a certain way, this change is tragic. If we assume that there is a baseline cache of information which is relevant to any particular rational public on any day, then the activities of the media in either emotionalising the information or supplementing it with sensational content can be seen as extraneous tasks which journalists would be better off not performing, to save their own professional integrity as well as a lot of effort. The tragedy is predicated on the following reasoning: if – as an editor, producer or journalist – you add emotional dressing to your conventional output or seek out sensational content and none of your journalistic rivals do, you can win a bigger audience share; and if you offer emotional dressing or unusual content and all your rivals do, you'll still win a bigger audience share than you would have done otherwise. The upshot is a race among media outlets to produce feistier content, but none gain much of an advantage over each other in terms of audience share, and all are worse off than if they all reverted to a more sensible, less manic 'baseline' service.

Those are the contours of the tragedy as far as its participants are concerned, but by its nature it requires the confederacy of an attentive public. The fact that viewers and readers are turned on by tear-jerking, fear-peddling and provocation is what drives the media to redefine its journalistic standards and to up the emotional ante. You might argue that this redefinition helps the audience to empathise with what they are seeing, but on the whole they can hardly be said to be benefitting from the experience. Rubbernecking at disaster on a daily basis makes viewers scared and depressed, while gawping at soppiness and scandal makes them addled and angry. Reasonableness is what they sacrifice to be mesmerised: they are the media's patsies.

This is bad news for wider society. It's the same old problem: the deterioration of public discourse and the decline of civic life. When the task of rooting out the facts from the fantastical becomes too difficult, fewer people act in an informed and constructive manner. When emotions such as fear, anxiety, shock and distrust are primed to fever pitch, more people seek private respite in their homes rather than congregate. Often misinformation and apprehensiveness combine, as in the following example cited by Dan Gardner in *Risk*:

> When we succumb to wildly improbable fears, there are consequences. Lock all the doors and treat every visitor as a potential homicidal maniac and a school's connections to the community are cut, a tangible loss because, as research shows, schools function best when their community connections are strong.

Then there's the fact, as mentioned earlier, that the combination of ignorance and fear promoted by the media enables extreme ideologies to gain more traction both among members of the public and within the media itself. Promoting fear of extremism makes extremism more likely, and vice versa.

Sometimes the media audaciously sells solutions to spurious problems it has collaborated in creating – for instance, when pills for 'Female Sexual Dysfunction' are touted alongside empty 'medical' advice aimed at weary parents. It's more than just money that's in contention in this example. Having read one such solicitation, Ben Goldacre in *Bad Science* laments the important conversations we forgo as a society when the truth is veiled in melodrama:

> Rarely was there a mention of any other factors: that she was feeling tired from overwork, or he was exhausted from being a new father, and finding it hard to come to terms with the fact that his wife was now the mother of his children, and no longer the vixen he first snogged on the first floor of the student union

> building to the sound of 'Don't you want me baby?' by the Human League in 1983: no. Because we don't want to talk about these issues, any more than we want to talk about social inequality, the disintegration of local communities, the breakdown of the family... [or] changing expectations and notions of personhood.

Real causes and real solutions get lost in the fog of media sensationalism.

This example hints at another tragedy of the commons, closely related to that of the media: marketing. Imagine a world where products were marketed matter-of-factly; where their specifications were described plainly and simply, without hyperbole; where services and goods were, say, alphabetised, so that you could simply scan through a list, pick up the telephone and speak to a human being who could help you ascertain whether or not they could meet your needs (not unlike using the old *Yellow Pages*). Imagine a world where your purchases were based on quality and personal trust rather than the subversive influence of an endless loop of grinning, schmaltzy goons literally being paid to pretend that a certain company has made them happy. Keep dreaming, because that's not our world.

Ours is a world where companies use marketing to overlay the facts about their products and services with sexualisation, fearmongering and other kinds of emotional manipulation. In this way, we're encouraged to *feel* we need to part with our cash; and for many people that's a more powerful motive than reasoning. Worse, this is true whether we recognise it or not. In his book *How Customers Think*, marketing professor Gerald Zaltman offers this advice on the importance of the unconscious in business:

> Most influences on consumer behaviour reside at this frontier; consumers encounter these influences and process them unknowingly. Firms that most effectively leverage their explorations of this frontier will gain crucial competitive advantages.

If you think that's sinister, you probably won't be happy to hear what else he has to say:

> Some companies... are beginning to conduct "deep dives" on specific emotions in order to understand their subtle nuances and operation... For example, a study of the meaning of "joy" conducted for one of the world's leading brands identified more than 15 elements of this basic emotion. These insights are leading the firm to a major overhaul of the brand story.

Geoffrey Miller's eye-opening book *Spent* documents the extent to which companies are clamouring in this way for our attention and cash. The modern 'marketing orientation', as Miller calls it, 'constituted an invisible revolution in the 1960s'. He continues:

> though it did not get the same press as the sexual revolution, the hippies, or the New Left, unlike these counterculture trends, the marketing revolution radically changed the way business works… and remains one of the most important but least understood revolutions in human history...

One way to understand marketing is as a tragedy of the commons. (In what follows, I mean marketing in its ultra-manipulative modern form, rather than *per se* – as Steven Pinker points out in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, some marketing is better than none, because banning it raises the incentive of zero-sum forms of self-advancement.) The emotional packaging of products and services by businesses can be seen as analogous to the emotional massaging of information by the media. Accordingly, marketing can be seen as a wasteful deviation from a sensible baseline level of description, in the same way that media sensationalism is a deviation from reporting the basic facts. Neither calls a spade a spade.

The individual reckoning which leads to the tragedy is this: if you use marketing to manipulate your customers into making purchases, and your rivals do not, you will gain an advantage; and if you use marketing as such, but your rivals also do, you will still be better off than you would have been otherwise (because no-one will buy an ungarnished product or service). This reasoning is compelling despite the fact that in reality all such rivals end up gaining scant competitive advantage over each other while paying a grotesque financial cost.

Once again, this dynamic depends on consumers fulfilling their role as patsies. Wide-eyed viewers or readers are exposed to an advertisement and become convinced that their lives will be enhanced by parting with their cash. This is marketing's lifeline, yet consumers' lives are often undermined. The men don't end up like James Bond as they were promised, nor the women like Cheryl Cole: a maxed-out credit card is the reality. And for many that's just the start. The most gullible spenders will persevere, with a little help from a debt consolidation company (the actor seemed ever-so-friendly in the advert). Bankruptcy – and even crime – follows.

And, once again, wider society suffers. Since a desire for status is one of the most powerful social influences on us, advertisements plough this emotional

furrow relentlessly. What arises is a culture in which people are forever comparing themselves to each other in the wrong way, forever craving material or sexual supremacy rather than spiritual solidarity and genuine respect (which, of course, has to be earned through benevolent leadership, the lack of which impoverishes society further). In this way, the so-called solutions touted in the ads are, in fact, among the causes of many of our social problems. The higher the advertising spend of a country (proportionate to its GDP), the higher its levels of inequality.

Marketing's disunifying propaganda typically reaches us early in life, and quickly takes hold. (Though Sweden, to its credit, has banned advertisements aimed at children, thereby undoubtedly contributing to the relatively high levels of well-being enjoyed by its inhabitants.) Yet everywhere in the developed world, adults are exposed to marketing's stunting effect, many people remaining like teenagers at their worst – petty, bitchy, resentful, and dependent. It cannot be a coincidence that wider society is saddled with such a huge welfare burden when the poorest among us are constantly misled by marketers into thinking that buying status symbols – mobile phones, bling, designer clothes – is a route out of social exclusion.

One of the saddest effects of marketing's pre-eminence is the creative talent that is thereby lost to society. As Neal Lawson laments in *All Consuming*, 'at the moment some of the best minds in the world are used to make us want to buy things we don't need'. Couldn't these 'brilliantly persuasive' people be doing something better with their time than inventing slogans like '*Whassup?*'? More troubling still is the fact that the charitable enterprises which do exist in the modern world have to invest so much money and effort in marketing. One of the most effective such tools is direct mail; a fundraising method which is, ironically, advocated by almost all the major environmental groups. The tragic fact is that when everyone else is at it, marketing – despite the hugely expensive outlay involved and the minimal size of the returns – is the only effective way to get through to the public. Needless to say, the people in need of charitable support don't get any help from the envelope stuffing, spamming, TV advertising, website designing or brand management undertaken by the charities. Nor, for that matter, do the donors. Rather than performing real charitable acts – thereby enhancing their own skills while raising and benefitting from social capital – they typically sign on the dotted line then go back to the daily grind.

The early-20th-century American thinker Edward Bernays described marketing as 'the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses', adding that 'those who manipulate this unseen

mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country'. Bernays considered this influence to be an 'important element in democratic society', but it is hard to agree with him. The point of an elected government is to bring out the best in a populace by providing checks and balances (laws, prisons, fines) which disincentivise antisocial behaviour. In contrast, the runaway process of marketing has the opposite effect; and the extent to which this constitutes an 'invisible government' – which surely it does – is lamentable.

But what of actual governments? What of politicians, our elected representatives? What role do they play in mitigating the twin tragedies of the media and marketing? Unfortunately it is a case of the blind leading the blind, because politicians are rendered unsighted by their own tragic distractions. In order for any politician to challenge the status quo – the emotionalizing and sensationalizing of information in the public domain – he'd have to be operating in a cultural climate in which due consideration was given to his words. But that, of course, is precisely the problem: there is no such climate. Hence, his critique is rendered ineffectual by the very situation it critiques.

The only way to avoid this eventuality would be for politicians to get together and forge an agreement that in their public statements they would resolutely stick to analyzing genuine issues, the deeper causes of society's problems. Instead of the same old claptrap about tax (cuts), public services (improvements), crime (reduction), (the war against) terrorism and (curbing) immigration, the *ad hominem* attacks, and the tedious fudging of answers to probing questions, politicians could speak their minds, tell it like it is, point the finger at the public where necessary, and offer rigorous analysis and constructive solutions rather than sound bites.

Of course, any such pact would be extremely fragile. It would only take a few demagogic statements from defectors for the status quo to return – for politicians to go back to pandering to the media's favoured emotion-driven version of democratic debate. Therein lies the tragedy – and it is as old as they come, identified in 380 BC in Plato's *Republic*. As soon as a few politicians seek to gain an advantage by appealing to the masses through simplistic sensationalism, anyone who seeks political influence thereafter is compelled to follow suit, because measured words are not as impressive in the eyes of the electorate as provocative rhetoric. To an individual politician the tragic reckoning goes like this: if you rouse the rabble and your political opponents don't, you will gain an electoral advantage; and if you rouse the rabble and your political opponents do, you will still be better off than if you had campaigned in

a measured and honest manner.

The upshot of the tragedy is that all the politicians involved are compromised. Their careers must always end in failure, it is often said; but in reducing democratic debate to a rhetorical trench fight, the sword of Damocles hangs more precariously over them all. They are forced constantly to guard against being true to themselves and their learning, to dig deep and muster a salvo of sensationalism any time they are questioned on an issue. They must fund a swathe of spin doctors, PR advisors and focus groups to ensure that their every policy, word and, indeed, thought is branded and shrink-wrapped for public consumption. Their past misdemeanours, however tiny, become boulders on the road ahead, and their friends, even spouses, become liabilities. Machiavelli couldn't have envisaged how dark the art of politics would become with so much bright light shone on its participants.

The whole charade is acted out for the benefit of those voters – the majority – who are impressionable enough to be convinced by its validity. Politicians can be thought of as the producers who satisfy these consumers among the electorate. But the consumers in question are patsies, however omnipotent their aggregative effect in the reckoning of the politicians. No-one who is entranced by the politicians' constant provocation, obfuscation and mutual accusation is edified by the spectacle; rather, it causes a sense of confusion and disillusion. Meanwhile, the wider public suffers from futile policy gestures, and the real causes of social problems remain untouched beneath the surface melee.

There is one more tragedy which occurs among a group of producers. Fittingly, it is an example which figures as latterly in the public imagination as it does in this analysis: the tragedy of banking. This particular pattern of behaviour differs slightly from the examples already mentioned, insofar as it is not an ongoing problem, but rather an ongoing threat. It is, however, a threat that became a reality a few years ago, with severe consequences for the world economy.

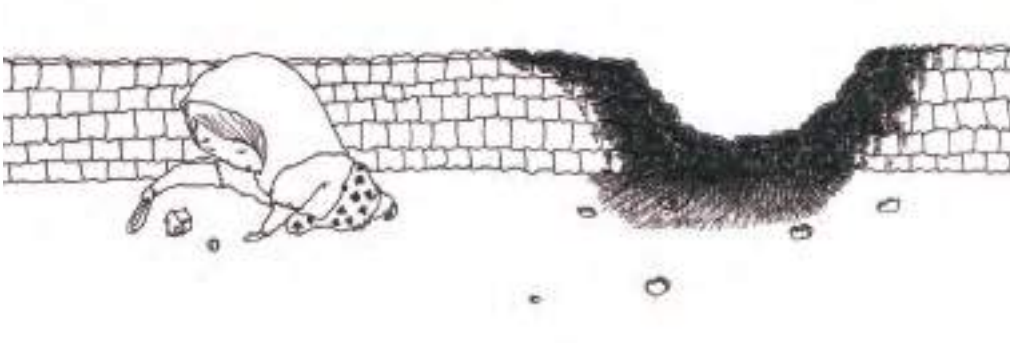
There is nothing wrong with banking (or capitalism) *per se*. Lending and interest are crucial components of the network of reciprocally altruistic relationships that our economy, at least to a large extent, comprises. The source of the tragedy of banking is a particular kind of malpractice relating to 'fractional reserve banking'. In this, the most common kind of banking, not all customers' deposits are retained. Some of the total funds (the 'bank reserves') are instead reinvested so as to produce profitable income. This arrangement creates the risk of a crisis known as a 'bank run'. A bank run begins when a large number of customers come to believe that the bank is at risk of insolvency,

i.e. of not having enough money to cover withdrawal requests. The belief has a self-fulfilling character, as the more people attempt to withdraw money, the less the bank is likely to possess the financial resources to cope with the demand, so the more people attempt to withdraw money, and so on.

In late 2007 the British bank Northern Rock experienced the first bank run in the UK in 150 years. Queues of panicking customers formed outside high-street branches. In order to avoid the bank's total collapse – with hundreds of thousands of investors losing out and countless more of the bank's financial relationships in chaos – the UK government purchased Northern Rock, thus guaranteeing its funds. Soon afterwards when another large British bank, Halifax Bank of Scotland, asked the Bank of England for emergency funding, another bank run appeared imminent, but was averted when Lloyds Bank purchased its struggling competitor in a takeover hastily arranged by the UK government.

These events were precipitated by a corruption scandal in the US involving the management of the Lehmann Brothers Bank, which ultimately collapsed in 2008. Other US banks came close to the edge: AIG, which was saved from bankruptcy when the US Federal Bank bought most of its assets, and Merrill Lynch, which was taken over by Bank of America.

The result of this series of crises was a global recession in which banks became reluctant to lend, and the vitality of economies across the world consequently suffered. At the time of writing, most countries involved are still recovering painfully from those initial banking crises. Naturally, what caused these is of great importance. One of the most prominent theories is that the crises were brought about by 'sub-prime lending' – the lending of money to customers who are at the greatest risk of reneging on their loan repayments. Another contributing factor is thought to have been the complexity of some of the financial instruments banks were trading amongst themselves: bundling



up lots of different kinds of investment into complicated packages hid the risks associated with each of the individual components in the deal. These two factors conspired to cause a tragedy of the commons among the employees of those banks at the epicentre of the financial crisis.

The 'commons' in question equates to a particular bank's total reserves, a resource which is vulnerable to exploitation by the bank's employees. Usually banks have procedures in place (otherwise known as 'management') to ensure that the funds are not depleted in this way; but on the brink of the global recession these fail-safes evidently did not save the banks which failed. The tragic overextension of the banks' reserves arose when too many employees overzealously sought to gain personal advantages (in the form of bonuses or commissions) through irresponsible lending or purchasing. The individual reckoning which led to the crises was: if you overinvest the bank's reserves and your colleagues don't, you stand to gain a financial advantage over them; and if you overinvest the bank's reserves and your colleagues do, you still stand to be better off than you would have been if you had shown restraint. The tragic upshot is that by reasoning in this way all the employees ended up worse off, as their actions jeopardized their livelihoods by crippling some of the largest banks in the world.

Some would argue that too many bankers came out of the crises relatively unscathed – either getting new jobs or being protected in their old ones through the government's intervention. Few would argue that the consumers in the tragedy came out unscathed. Millions of people worldwide were issued loans they couldn't repay and hence ended up bankrupt or evicted from the homes whose mortgage repayments they couldn't meet. These were the patsies who were impaled on the promises made to them by the bankers.

But by far the biggest fallout was experienced by wider society. In this tragedy, half the world suffered (and continues to suffer) the consequences. Many people are still struggling to deal with the aftermath of those banking crises, and with talk in the air of more to come, not to mention fears of a repeat of the global conflict that followed the last downturn of comparable size in the 1930s, many are facing the future uncertainly and anxiously. Now it is time to take stock.

Another Set of Notes from Underground

by Anonymous

The author of the diary and the diary itself are, of course, fictitious. Nevertheless, it is clear that such persons as the writer of these notes not only may, but positively must, exist in academia, when we consider the circumstances prevailing over the past half-century or so. I have tried to expose to public view, more distinctly than is commonly done, one of the characters of the recent past. She is one of the representatives of a generation still living. In this fragment of the diary, this person introduces herself and her views, and, as it were, tries to explain the causes owing to which she has made her appearance, and was bound to make her appearance, in our midst. This wider information may be gleaned, between the lines so to speak, of the actual notes of this person concerning certain events in her life.

I am an odd woman… I am a clueless woman. I don't fit in. I believe my uterus has finally ceased to function. However, I know very little about the state of my uterus, or whether it has anything to do with what ails me.

I work at a University. I am a faculty member. I occupy a tenured position in a Department of Philosophy. Various things have happened to me recently about which I wish to complain. Not that I think it will do any good to complain. I just want to complain, because telling the truth (the exact truth, with no cover-up and no apologies) would feel good.

I wrote a book, an introduction to the thought of a philosopher I admire – let us call him Herr Gloopenstein, since he was German. Gloopenstein, in my opinion, was the clearest, most original, and most interesting of the German idealists. He was also very funny and he despised Hegel – both points in his favour, in my opinion. A reputable press accepted my book for publication – let us call it Oxbridge University Press. I was pleased. I put together a modest

dossier of my academic accomplishments since tenure, and applied to my university for promotion to Full Professor.

This was when all hell broke loose, Ladies and Gentlemen. The Chair of my department, as was his duty, sent my dossier and my book manuscript out for review, not only to the friends and supporters whom I suggested, but to three Gloopenstein experts. Woe unto me, I had not cited the work of these Gloopenstein experts in my poor little book. Silly me, I had thought that if one wanted to write a nice, clear introduction to Gloopenstein, the thing to do was to read, well, Gloopenstein. It appears I was mistaken.

The department Chair advised me that he had received "two negative recommendations out of five", and advised me to withdraw my application for promotion. Why, I queried? What bad things had these two people said? Why did only their negative opinions, and not the other three people's positive opinions, count?

I was told that the Gloopenstein experts had faulted me for not citing all the "secondary literature" on Gloopenstein, and for not reading Gloopenstein in the original German. (I do not read German. I had relied on what is reputed to be the definitive translation of the Gloopenstein corpus. So?) According to the Chair, only the negative opinions counted, and not the positive opinions expressed by the other three reviewers, because the ones who hated my book "are the only ones who know anything about Gloopenstein". The Chair further informed me that "Oxbridge made a mistake" in publishing my book.

I asked to see these negative letters about my work. The letters, and who wrote them, were supposed to be "confidential", but I was stubborn about having the right to confront my accusers, so this request was, at length, granted. Eventually, I received "redacted" copies of the letters (covered with black marks crossing out identifying information). I read these letters, as best I could, given all the black marks. Indeed, the two gentlemen (and I am sure they were gentlemen – it was really not difficult to figure out who they were) faulted me for not citing all the secondary literature on Gloopenstein, and for not reading Gloopenstein in the original German. "She is not Full Professor material", opined one of them, going on to say, "If Oxbridge University Press had asked me to review this manuscript, I would have strongly recommended that it not be published". The other one said, "I was looking forward to some new Gloopenstein scholarship by someone I had not heard of. I was sadly disappointed".

Well. I never set out to do "Gloopenstein scholarship". I'm not sure I even know what that is, other than reading, discussing, and citing everything that

every bozo has ever said about Gloopenstein, and, frankly, this strikes me as dreary and boring to the point of bringing on suicidal ideation. What would be the point? Gloopenstein was the genius, the one whose work has endured. All of these other guys are second-rate, and I don't care what they think. (All right; I'm second-rate, too; but at least I am trying to educate myself by reading as many great books as possible, instead of reading every trivial little thing ever written about a *single* book.) What would citing all the "secondary literature" have added to my book, other than making it fatter, larded with footnotes, less readable, and less my own? I am not interested in "scholarship". I am interested in *philosophy* – metaphysics, epistemology, ethics (things like that). The only reason I take an interest in history of philosophy is because some of those old dead guys might have been *right* about a thing or two.

Please note, Ladies and Gentlemen: neither of the negative reviewers attacked me for saying anything mistaken about Gloopenstein, either his philosophy or his biography, because I *didn't* say anything mistaken. My book is accurate. I might point out that it also takes an unusual line regarding the value and direction of Gloopenstein's thought, and attempts to introduce Gloopenstein to an audience that does not normally read him (namely, so-called "analytic" philosophers). One of the points of my book is that Gloopenstein has been co-opted by the wrong people (namely, so-called "Continental" philosophers, the only ones who read the German idealists anymore). Well, of course, my book was sent for review to the people who "do" Gloopenstein, and they didn't get it. My book is about Gloopenstein's actual philosophy, you see. Dreadful. It is also written in a personal style, with some examples drawn from my own experience; and I often express my own views when they differ from Gloopenstein's. Even more dreadful.

It was even worse after my book was published. More Gloopenstein experts, "Continental" philosophers all, were asked to review my book for journals. They all castigated me for my "poor scholarship", again because of the lack of references to "secondary literature". They also ridiculed me for writing in a personal way, expressing my own opinions about the philosophical problems discussed by Gloopenstein. Apparently, it is irrelevant that I understood Gloopenstein, appreciated him, was even *moved* by him, and tried to make his work known to a wider and different audience; it is also irrelevant that I developed my own thought on the philosophical questions with which Gloopenstein grappled. Evidently, none of that counts as a worthy thing for a philosopher to do. No; only "scholarly" work counts. And of what does "scholarly" work consist? KISSING THE BACKSIDES of all the people who

have ever written about the subject of one's work, that's what!

When I applied for promotion to Full Professor, there were four gentlemen in my department who were already Full Professors, and who therefore had the right to vote on my application. Three out of four voted against me. Please note, Ladies and Gentlemen, none of these three had ever read a word of Gloopenstein, nor had any of them bothered to read my book. They simply relied on the judgment of the "Gloopenstein experts", to the effect that I was "not Full Professor material" and that my book should never have been published.

Well, all of you who work in universities know that when a faculty member goes up for promotion with three out of four Full Professors against her, including her department Chair, she's in trouble. The department Chair wrote the cover letter for my promotion dossier, in which he "regretfully" informed the Dean that he was "unable" to support my application for promotion. He actually said that my book was "an embarrassment", *without ever having read it*. He also said, "She does not argue rigorously for her conclusions". *How would he know?* Besides being unfounded, because the author of this remark never read my book, this remark is false. I argued as rigorously for my conclusions as anybody ever does, at least if one refrains from translating everything into predicate calculus. (Maybe that's the problem! Because I wrote in plain English, everybody could understand what I was saying! A book that is *clear* and *accessible* can't possibly be any *good*!)

They all expected me to withdraw my application for promotion. One of these esteemed colleagues of mine sent me an email, in which he said, "The problem, of course, is the outside letters. It is certainly not the practice to ignore the secondary literature". That's it! That's what I did wrong – I disregarded *the practice*. THE PRACTICE, that which is accepted as constituting "good scholarship", is TO KISS EVERYBODY ELSE'S BACKSIDE! Even if you think that what other people have said is wrong or irrelevant or tedious, and even if you are writing an introductory book, you are expected to acknowledge and defer to everyone else who has ever written on the subject. This, it seems to me, is a *very bad* practice. It discourages original thought, and encourages the production of lengthy, unreadable books that tell you nothing except what other people have already said. THE PRACTICE was stupid, so I ignored it. I broke the unwritten rules! (Why am I suddenly reminded of how dogs act in a pack – all the lesser dogs rolling over and baring their throats, showing their submissiveness to the dogs higher up in the dominance hierarchy? I am the clueless dog who somehow didn't get this dominant/submissive behaviour in her genes! I must be punished! The other dogs must chew me up!)

How, you may wonder, did I get to see the Chair's cover letter for my dossier, containing his negative recommendation and his untruths about me and about my work? Well, I insisted on my right to see that "confidential" letter too, and won the argument. Having seen all the relevant insulting material, I wrote a detailed reply and placed it in my dossier before the dossier went to the College of Arts and Sciences Promotion Committee, and the Dean.

Of course, nobody read my reply. That's not how these things work. The Committee read only the department Chair's negative recommendation letter, and decided to recommend against me on that basis. The Dean read only the Committee's negative recommendation letter, and decided to recommend against me on that basis. The result was that I got a letter from the Dean in my mailbox one fine morning informing me that my "scholarship" was "weak". Not only was it of poor quality, there was not enough of it. In *x* years I had published only *y* academic papers, and this was not sufficient "scholarly productivity". (As if philosophers were cows, expected to "output" so much milk per year!) Besides, according to the Gloopenstein experts, my book was no good. Case closed. I would not be promoted to Full Professor unless I succeeded in appealing to the Provost and the President.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have spent most of my life keeping a low profile, cringing at the hint of criticism, hiding under my desk, watching the behaviour of others from under the floorboards, as it were, and not being able to figure out what they were doing, or why. I am clueless about politics, about the games people play; mostly I just want to be left alone. I will do almost anything to avoid conflict, and I have a long history of apologizing for myself at every opportunity. "I'm sorry; I'm sorry; I'm sorry." I am not the sort of person who raises a stink. Everybody expected me to say, "Oh, I'm sorry; my book must really not be any good; Oxbridge indeed made an error in publishing my terrible book; I am ashamed; I withdraw my application for promotion". That would have been entirely in character. However, I couldn't do it. An apology for my own heartfelt work stuck in my throat and would not come out. I did not withdraw my application for promotion. I appealed to the Provost and the President.

What, you ask, were the grounds for my appeal, when I had VIOLATED THE RULES OF GOOD SCHOLARSHIP by FAILING TO CITE ALL THE SECONDARY LITERATURE and by NOT READING GLOOPENSTEIN'S WORKS IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE? How could I possibly make a case for myself?

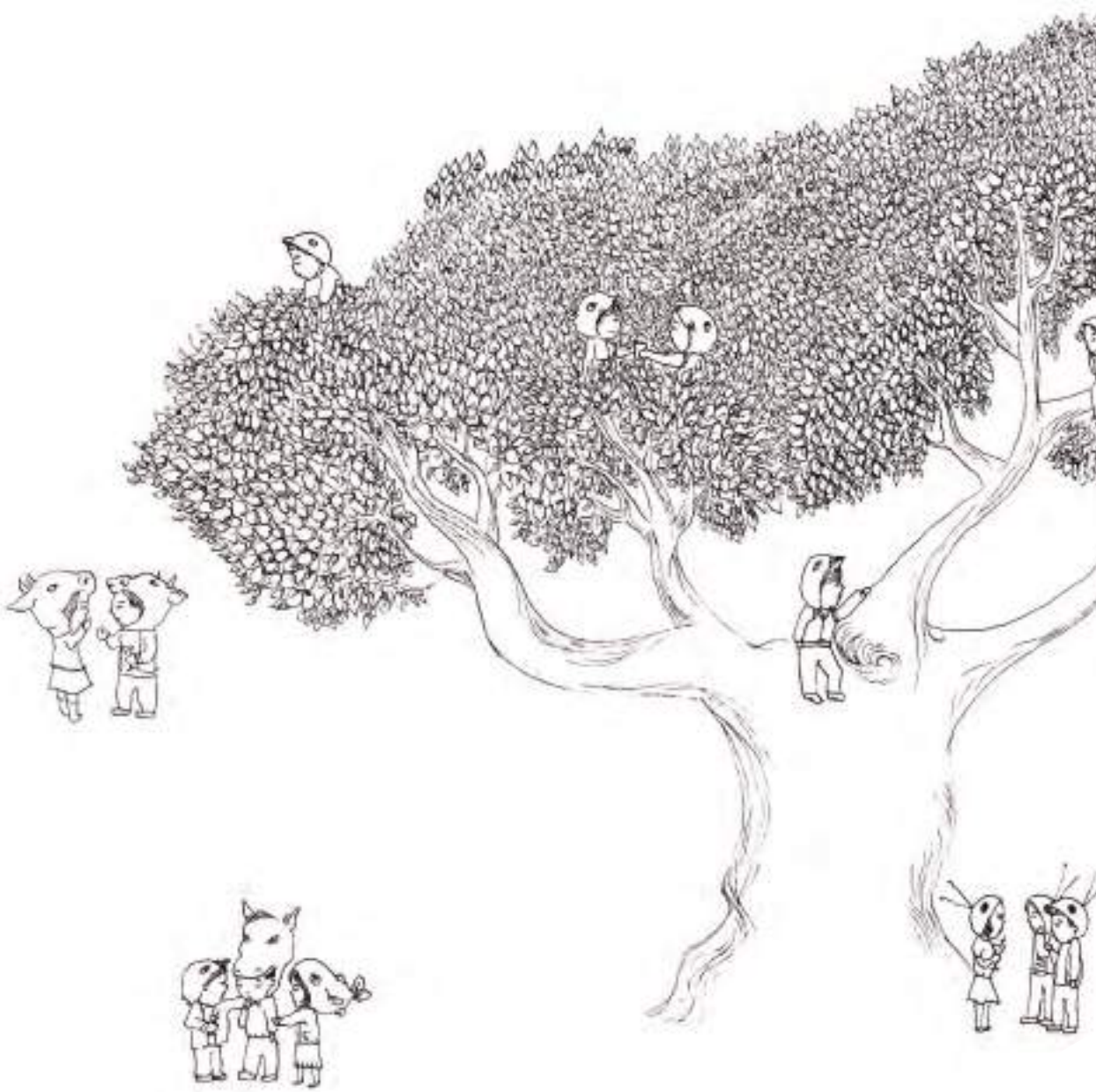
This is what I did, Ladies and Gentlemen: I obtained the curricula vitae

of the three senior colleagues who opposed my promotion, and I found out exactly how much they had published at the time they were promoted. None of them, it turned out, had published any more, quantity-wise, than I had. Such publications as they had produced were in less prestigious venues than my own. I took this data to the Provost, pointed it out to him, and argued that I was being held to standards of "scholarly productivity" that no other Full Professor in my department had been required to meet. I also dug out my department's Statement of Criteria for Promotion. The criteria stated that a book published with a reputable press, subsequent to tenure, would generally be sufficient for promotion, provided the book made "a substantial contribution to philosophical scholarship". My senior colleagues, of course, were arguing that my book made *no* such contribution. Only a book that cited all the "secondary literature" could possibly make a contribution to *scholarship*! A *scholarly* book could not possibly be clear, accessible, and (ugh) personal! I opposed these arguments, Ladies and Gentlemen, on the grounds that "scholarship" can mean many things. It can mean, among other things, understanding and evaluating the work of a great philosopher, and explaining his thought in clear terms to an audience that has unfairly neglected him.

I did not expect to win, Ladies and Gentlemen. At this point I had given up on ever actually getting promoted. I had lost about twenty pounds; I was drinking vodka every night when I got home from work; I was taking tranquilizers and anti-depressants; I was shaking with rage every time I passed one of my senior colleagues in the hallway. I spent a good portion of each day crying. I was worn to a mere shadow of my former self. But I could not give up. The words, "My own work is no good. I apologize for it", would not come out of my mouth. I even decided that if promotion were to be denied me I would sue the University for gender discrimination, and I told the Provost this. (I really surprised myself! For the first time in my life, I stood up and fought!)

So, now you probably think that I am going to tell you how it all came out. Did I get promoted, or not? Well, I'm not going to tell you, because *it doesn't matter*. The only important thing is that I did not back down. It is better to be an Associate Professor with self-respect than a Full Professor without it.

OK, so I have my self-respect. The fact remains that the people who think they own Gloopenstein all trashed my book. (Nobody owns Gloopenstein. He didn't write for "scholars". He wrote for the human race!) Many reviews of my book were published, all scathingly negative, all by Gloopenstein "scholars" who were pissed off that I didn't cite their work, and even more pissed off that Oxbridge didn't publish *their* books on Gloopenstein. We live in the age of the



Internet, Ladies and Gentlemen, and, as a result, those bad reviews will never die. From now until Kingdom Come, if you Google me, up will pop all these foaming-mouthed reviews, saying what a poor scholar I am, how silly I am, how Oxbridge made a mistake in publishing my book, and so on, and so forth. As a result, almost nobody will read my actual book; they will conclude that my book is not worth reading, on the word of the so-called "experts".

Well, I have learned something about the sociology of academic philosophy. Poor, naïve me: I thought philosophy was about trying to find out the truth. In middle age, it finally becomes clear to me that philosophy, as academics practice it, is not at all about trying to find out the truth. It is about KISSING BACKSIDES.

As long as we are discussing truth, I should mention that my own department has "gone Continental" in recent years. This means, among other things, that most of my colleagues don't even believe in the truth. There is no truth, according to these people; there is only what everybody says. No wonder my senior colleagues didn't bother to read my book, and judged me instead on the basis of what other people said about it. They probably believe there is no fact of the matter about either (a) what my book says, or (b) whether what it says is correct. This is known as "postmodernism". Since I am a so-called "analytic" philosopher, I must admit that some "analytic" philosophers have been guilty of similar nonsense. Quine, for example. Quine called it "pragmatism" rather than "postmodernism". However, a dead rat by any other name would smell as bad.

My problem with the "Continental" folks is not just that they self-defeatingly deny the existence of truth while propounding their own wacky ideas as true. I wouldn't mind that so much if they would just say what they mean clearly. But no; they babble in this weird jargon that doesn't make any sense to me. It is like listening to a foreign language. Where are the issues? Where are the arguments? What, exactly, is everybody babbling about? I never get a straight answer to those questions.

As nearly as I can figure it out, in addition to denying the existence of truth, postmodernists apparently think that if you make an argument in support of a conclusion, you are doing something Western, something Male, something that involves illegitimately imposing power on the oppressed. I don't get it. I belong to at least one traditionally-oppressed group (the females). I don't see how we females are supposed to establish our intellectual credentials and our moral rights if we are not allowed to make arguments. Of course, intellectual credentials and moral rights are oppressive, Western, Male ideas, and I am a victim of false consciousness! Sorry, but I don't buy it; I don't see any

alternative, if one seeks liberation, to arguing for the truth.

I am not much happier with the current state of "analytic" philosophy than I am with "Continental" philosophy. When I turn to articles in my own field, "analytic" metaphysics, I find passages such as the following:

> Recall Quine's own conclusion that ontology is doubly relative, both to a manual of translation and to a background theory. The manual of translation tells us whether, for instance, 'gavagai' is to be rendered as 'rabbit,' or as 'undetached rabbit part,' or as 'rabbit stage'. The background theory tells us whether one of these options, say 'rabbit', is to be interpreted as designating Peter Cottontail, the whole cosmos minus Peter, or Peter's singleton, since "Reinterpreting the rest of our terms for bodies in the corresponding fashion, we come out with an ontology interchangeable with our familiar one". The different background theories are isomorphic and thus contribute the same "neutral nodes to the structure of the theory".

Please do not miss my point. The preceding is from an article by an analytic philosopher I admire, an article with which I substantially agree. I am just trying to point out that, to an outsider, it probably looks every bit as arcane and impenetrable as "Continental" philosophy looks to me.

I am trying hard to find something worth doing in philosophy, something that is not a game, something aimed at finding out the truth about what kind of world we live in, where we fit into it, and how we ought to live. I am finding it difficult. Everywhere around me, I see the signs of a degenerating research programme. One of the main such signs is that people in the field speak only to each other, and only in special languages that take years to master. Worse, they speak mostly *about* each other, instead of speaking about recognizable issues. Philosophy is no longer for thoughtful human beings; it is for Specialists who can play a peculiar, rarefied game. I am depressed about the current state of philosophy, and most days I wish I had gone into molecular biology instead.

A Silk Purse out of a Sow's Ear

by Amitai Etzioni

By the first part of 2013, the economic growth rates of China and India were falling sharply; the growth of the United States and Japan were anaemic; the EU was on the edge of a recession. While the Arab Awakening is often considered a call for democratization, most citizens of the nations involved are keen to command a significantly higher standard of living, which may well not be forthcoming. As Dominic Rushe and Phillip Inman report in *The Guardian*, the IMF is warning that the global economy is headed toward its lowest growth rates since 2009. Governments seem unable to find the economic tools that would restore the economy of their nations, and indirectly that of the world, to the levels enjoyed in previous decades. Historically, domestic upheavals and conflicts among nations occur not when they are most poor and oppressed but when growth is lost and expectations are dashed. Indeed, one sees in many nations an increase in nationalism, xenophobia, racism, religious fanaticism, and extreme politics. The fact that inequality is rising very sharply in all the nations involved adds further fuel to the sociologically combustible condition.

If the people of the world cannot return to what is being called the 'old normal' (paid for by strongly growing economies), what will the new normal look like? Will it simply be a frustrating and alienating, scaled-back version of the old normal? Or will people develop different concepts of what constitutes a good life, as they did in earlier historical periods? If successful, a recharacterization of the good life will allow people to make – to use a rather archaic turn of phrase – a silk purse out of a sow's ear; in plain English, to turn their misery into an opportunity.

The Good Life in Historical and Transnational Perspective

People immersed in the consumerist culture that now prevails in large parts of the world find it difficult to imagine a good life that is based on profoundly different values. However, throughout history different conceptions of what makes a good life have dominated. For instance, for centuries the literati of imperial China came to prominence not through acquisition of wealth, but through the pursuit of knowledge and cultivation of the arts. This group of scholar-bureaucrats dedicated their early lives to rigorous study in preparation for the exams required for government service, spending years memorizing the Confucian classics. Having passed the imperial exams, the literati carried out their government duties in tandem with various artistic pursuits, or even retired early in order to dedicate themselves to those pursuits. They played music and composed poetry, learned calligraphy, and gathered with like-minded friends to share ideas and discuss great works of the past.

Sociologist Reinhard Bendix writes that in keeping with Confucian teachings 'the educated man must stay away from the pursuit of wealth… because acquisitiveness is a source of social and personal unrest… The cultured man strives for the perfection of the self, whereas all occupations that involve the pursuit of riches require a one-sided specialization that acts against the universality of the gentleman'.

Another alternative conception of the good life can be found among knights during the Middle Ages, who were expected to adhere to an exacting code of chivalry that is well captured in *The Song of Roland*, an 11th-century poem. Throughout the poem, the worthy knight is shown to serve his liege lord gladly and faithfully, to protect the weak and the defenceless, to display proper reverence for God, to respect and honour women, to be truthful and steadfast, and to view financial reward with revulsion and disdain.

Even in recent Western history, there have been significant changes in what was viewed as the good life. One such major change occurred after the end of World War II. At that time, economists held that human beings had fixed needs, and that once these were satisfied people would consume no more. Noting that during the war the American productive capacity had greatly expanded, economists feared that at the end of the war the idling of the assembly lines that had produced thousands of tanks, planes, and other war-related materials would lead to massive unemployment, because there was nothing the assembly lines could produce that people needed, given that their fixed needs were sated.

In this context, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith came up with

a solution. In his book *The Affluent Society* he conceded that private needs were satisfied, but pointed out that the public sector could absorb the 'excess' capacity by investing it in public schools, parks, museums, and such. Similarly, David Riesman published an influential essay, 'Abundance For What?', in which he suggested that the 'surplus' be used for projects such as paying the people of New Orleans to continue to maintain their 1955 lifestyle so that future generations of children could visit this sociological Disneyland to see what life was like in earlier ages, as they do in Williamsburg.

Instead, in the years that followed WWII, industrial corporations discovered that they could produce needs for the products they were marketing. For instance, first women and then men were taught that they smelled offensive and needed to purchase deodorants. Men, who used to wear white shirts and grey flannel suits like a uniform, learned that they 'had to' purchase a variety of shirts and suits, and that last year's wear was not proper in the year that followed. The same was done for cars, ties, handbags, towels and sheets, sunglasses, watches, and numerous other products – as Vance Packard laid out in his bestselling book, *The Hidden Persuaders*. More generally, the good life was newly defined as enjoying a high and rising level of consumption, in the sense that a person could never consume enough. There was always a new product, or a fashionable new version of an existing product, that the person 'needed'.

Less often noted, probably because it is so self-evident, is that paying for this high level of consumption required hard work. It was initially mainly

the husband who worked to provide for the family, leaving – as depicted in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* – little time and energy for other pursuits, including being with the family. In later decades, as more and more women joined the labour force, the combined incomes of husband and wife went to paying for the high-consumption lifestyle. More and more people began to take their work home with them, even on holidays, courtesy of Blackberries and their equivalents, and more seniors and teenagers took jobs.

In short, there is nothing natural or unavoidable about what is today considered the good life, the affluent life. Indeed, it is a lifestyle that was rejected in earlier historical periods in the East and West.

Replacing Versus Capping Consumerism

Criticisms of consumerism, materialism and hedonism are at least as old as capitalism and are found the world over. Numerous social movements and communities originating from within capitalist societies have pursued other forms of the good life. The Shakers, who left Manchester for America in the 1770s, founded religious communities characterized by a simple ascetic lifestyle. Other ascetic communities (some secular, some religious) have included the Brook Farm Institute, the Harmony Society, the Amana Colonies, and the Amish. In Britain, John Ruskin founded the Guild of St George in the 1870s, which he intended to guide the formation of agrarian communities that would lead a simple and modest life. Jewish refugees who emigrated to Palestine early in the twentieth century established kibbutzim, in which the austere life was considered virtuous, consumption was held down, communal life was promoted, and advancing a socialist and Zionist agenda was a primary goal of life.

In the 1960s, a counterculture ('hippie') movement rose on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Its core values were anti-consumerism, communal living, equality, environmentalism, free love, and pacifism. Timothy Leary encapsulated the hippie ethos when he advised a crowd to 'turn on, tune in, drop out'. The British iteration of the hippie movement manifested itself in London's underground culture, which Barry Miles, writing in *The Guardian*, has aptly described as a 'community of like-minded anti-establishment, anti-war, pro-rock'n'roll individuals, most of whom had a common interest in recreational drugs'.

Many of the movements and communities that wished to opt out of both the consumption and work systems of capitalism sought to form an alternative

universe wherein people could dedicate themselves to transcendental activities, including spiritual, religious, political, or social pursuits. The aim was to replace capitalism, rather than to cap it and graft onto it a different kind of society.

The historical record reveals that practically all these movements and communities failed to lay a foundation for a new contemporary society, let alone a new civilization, and practically all of them either disintegrated, shrivelled, or lost their main alternative features. It seems that there is something in ascetic life that most people cannot abide for the longer run.

Hence it seems that if the current austere environment calls for a different attempt to form a society less centred on consumption, this endeavour will have to graft the new conception of a good life onto the old one. That is, not seek to *replace* consumption but to *cap* it and channel the resources and energy thus freed into other pursuits.

Once one approaches the subject at hand through these lenses, one finds millions of people who already have moved in this direction, although they are not necessarily aware that they are following a new vision of a 'good society' or coming together to promote it. These millions include a large number of senior citizens who retired before they had to, to allow more time for alternative pursuits. These seniors typically lead what might be called a comfortable life from a materialistic viewpoint, but spend more of their time socializing and engaged in spiritual, cultural and politically active pursuits, rather than continuing to be employed and to consume full-throttle. (Note that by definition those who retire early earn less than those who continue to work, and hence either consume less or leave less of a bequest, which limits the consumption of their families.) The same holds for the millions of women or men who decide not to return to work after having children (at least until the children reach school age, and, for many women/men, long after that) although doing so means that they will have to consume less.

As these two large groups illustrate, as well as those who drop out of high-earning pursuits to follow a more 'meaningful' life (say, as teachers for those less privileged), to consume less one need not lead a life of sackcloth and ashes, of deprivation and sacrifice. One can work enough to ensure one's basic creature comforts but dedicate the rest of one's resources, energy, and aspirations to goods other than the consumed variety. One can, indeed, find *more* satisfaction in pursuits which offer an alternative to working long and hard to pay for consumption above and beyond what is needed for a comfortable life. The fact that millions have long persisted in capping their consumption and finding other, more authentic sources of contentment suggests that such

capping is much more sustainable than the ascetic life advocated by the social movements and communities that sought to replace capitalism altogether.

Consumerism Versus Happiness

Overviews of social science data have repeatedly concluded that after income rises above a given level, additional income buys little happiness. Japan is an often-cited example. Between 1962 and 1987, Japan's economy more than tripled its GNP per capita. Yet according to Richard Easterlin, Japan's overall happiness remained constant over that period. Providing further support for this point, Easterlin also shows that although in America the average income could buy over 60% more in 1970 than it could in the 1940s, the average happiness of Americans did not increase during that time. True, as is often the case in social science, not all the data point in the same direction. However, if all studies are taken together they leave little doubt that at high income and consumption levels, additional consumption (and the work required to afford it) leads people to deny themselves the joys of alternative pursuits.

The import of these data ought now to be revisited, as many middle- and working-class people face not so much the option of giving up additional income (and obsessive consumption) in order to free time and resources for alternative pursuits, but are forced to give up on the dream of an affluent life built upon high and rising levels of consumption. Can people come to see such capping not as a source of frustration but as an opportunity to re-examine their priorities? The analogue is not someone who has lost his job or is paid only a minimum wage, but a worker with a decent job who finds that he is furloughed one day each week and hence works only four days, and finds that the extra day offers a welcome opportunity to spend more time with the kids or go fishing.

The thesis that people will be better off if they cap their consumption and dedicate the freed energy and resources to alternative pursuits should not be interpreted as a suggestion that people should buy into what sociologists call 'status acceptance', the ideology that whatever your position in society, you should accept it as your place in life and not seek upward mobility. Status acceptance finds its roots in Aristotle, the philosopher who dealt most explicitly with the subject at hand – what makes a good life – and gave us the felicitous term 'flourishing'. He did not mean by it (as modern commentators often do) those people who live up to their fullest human potential – but that people will find basic contentment if they labour to carry out best whatever social role they find has been cast their way. The servant serves well, the lord leads well, and

so on. (Aristotelian philosophy is much more nuanced and complex than the preceding lines suggest, but this need not detain us here.) The Catholic Church made this precept one of its central tenets during the Middle Ages, and status acceptance is built into the Indian caste system.

In contrast, my claim is not that a low wage, a low status, or even unemployment should be tolerated, but that – whatever a person's earnings, above a certain basic level – working fewer hours and hence consuming less can be viewed as an opening for re-examining one's lifestyle and as the beginning of a quest for alternative sources of contentment. So what is the 'basic level'? To answer this question, it is useful to draw on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. At the bottom of this hierarchy are basic creature comforts; once these are sated, more satisfaction is drawn from affection and self-esteem, and, beyond there, from self-actualization. When the acquisition of goods and services is used to satisfy the higher needs – as in when we use our purchases to signal success, show off, or impress a date – consumption turns into consumerism, an obsession. The transition is empirically indicated by the level at which additional income and the associated consumption generates little or no additional contentment.

The Alternatives

The main alternative to consumerism is what I call 'transcendental pursuits' – those activities whose focus is neither materialistic nor commodity-based, and which yield much more contentment than does the obsessive pursuit of consumer goods. Many transcendental pursuits are very familiar, but deserve restatement as they seem to have fallen into neglect, eclipsed by the rise of consumerism.

Social activities: Individuals who spend more time with their families and friends are more content than those less socially active. As Robert E. Lane writes, 'Most studies agree that a satisfying family life is the most important contributor to well-being… The joys of friendship often rank second'. Robert Putnam presents a mountain of data to the same effect in his classic book *Bowling Alone*.

Spiritual and religious activities: Individuals who spend more time living up to the commands of their religion (attending church, praying, fasting, making pilgrimages, and doing charity work) are more content than those less so engaged. In his book *The Politics of Happiness,* Derek Bok points to studies that demonstrate that people with a deep religious faith are healthier, live longer,

and have lower rates of divorce, crime, and suicide. Robert Putnam and David Campbell found that the difference in happiness between an American who goes to church once a week and one who never attends church was 'slightly larger than the difference between someone who earns $10,000 a year and his demographic twin who earns $100,000 a year'.

Non-instrumental activities: Much of consumerism's failure to bring satisfaction can be attributed to the fact that the focus of consumerism is the *pursuit* of enjoyment rather than the enjoyment itself. People labour long hours for the sake of getting money which, in turn, is only a means to purchasing things that they will hardly have time to enjoy after all the time spent working and shopping. By contrast, there is great joy to be found in those activities that we consider to actually *comprise* the good life as opposed to those that are merely the means to attaining that good life. These non-instrumental activities include studying for studying's sake – rather than doing it for vocational purposes – or engaging in cultural activities such as painting or making music, again not to serve a market but for the intrinsic enjoyment that they bring. Such activities are characterized by what Kant called 'purposiveness without purpose': intentional, motivated action that is engaged in for its own sake.

Community involvement: Researchers who examined the effect of community involvement found a strong correlation with happiness. One study by John F. Helliwell, which evaluated survey data from 49 countries, found that membership in (non-church) organizations has a significant positive correlation with happiness. Derek Bok reports that 'Some researchers have found that merely attending monthly club meetings or volunteering once a month is associated with a change in well-being equivalent to a doubling of income'. Other studies have found that individuals who devote substantial amounts of time to volunteer work have greater life satisfaction.

There is no need for more documentation here as these studies are familiar and readily accessible. They suggest that capped consumption combined with greater involvement in one alternative pursuit or another (or a combination of several) leads to more contentment than consumerism does. The challenge we face is to share these findings, along with their implications for populations dragged into an age of austerity.

Two Bonuses

A society in which capping consumption is the norm and in which the majority of people find much of their contentment in transcendental pursuits will receive two

bonuses of great import. One is obvious, the other much less so.

Obviously, a good life that combines a cap on consumption and work with dedication to transcendental pursuits is much less taxing on the environment than consumerism and the level of work that paying for it requires. Transcendental activities require relatively few scarce resources, fossil fuels, or other sources of physical energy. For instance, social activities (such as spending more time with one's children) require time and personal energy but not large material or financial outlays. (Often parents who spend large amounts of money on toys or commercial entertainment for their kids bond with them less than parents whose relationships with their kids are much less mediated by objects.) The same holds for cultural and spiritual activities such as prayer, meditation, enjoying and making music, art, sports, and adult education. True, consumerism has turned many of these pursuits into expensive endeavours. However, one can break out of this mentality and find that it is possible to engage in most transcendental activities quite profoundly through only moderate consumption of goods and services. One does not need designer clothes to enjoy the sunset, or shoes with fancy labels to benefit from a hike. And the Lord does not listen better to prayers read from a leather-bound Bible than those read from a plain one, printed on recycled paper. In short, the transcendental society is much more sustainable than the consumerist one.

Much less obvious are the ways in which the transcendental society serves social justice. Social justice entails transferring wealth from those disproportionally endowed to those who are underprivileged. A major reason such reallocation of wealth has been surprisingly limited in free societies is that those who command the 'extra' assets tend also to be those who are politically powerful. Promoting social justice by organizing and galvanizing those with less and forcing those in power to yield has had limited success in democratic countries and led to massive bloodshed in others. Hence the question: Are there ways to reduce the resistance of the elites to the reallocation of wealth?

Recharacterization of the good life along the lines here indicated can help, because it encourages high earners to derive a major source of contentment not from acquiring additional goods and services but from transcendental activities that are neither labour- nor capital-intensive. There are numerous accounts of rich people who have given substantial parts of their wealth to good causes. It is much better for all when such people gain prestige, self-esteem, or affection by *doing* good rather than by *buying* goods.

Among the well known examples of those who have embraced charity over additional consumption are George Soros, Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren

Buffett and the children of the Rockefellers. And there are many more like them, such as the rich who give to charity for religious reasons, but are less visible because their contributions are smaller (though not smaller proportional to their assets). The more transcendental ideals are accepted, the greater the number of affluent and powerful people who will have less reason to oppose reallocation of wealth, and the more who may even find some source of contentment in supporting it. Granted, we have seen that embracing transcendental ideals and social-minded values can take on a more extreme and excessive character, as was the case with the spread of the counterculture. There is no guarantee that we shall get it right this time, but surely it is worth a try in the face of the mounting anti-social reactions to forced austerity.

One can envision other characterizations of a good life. However, we should not delay the dialogue about what such a society would look like and what its norms and projects can be. The world would greatly benefit from a reorientation of the goals of the economic system, in particular if we face prolonged sluggish economic growth. By reframing our conception of the good life, slow growth might be viewed not as frustrating and alienating but as an opportunity to re-examine and reset life's priorities, and to determine if we can break away from consumerism without denying that we all seek and are entitled to secure, basic creature comforts. Recharacterization of the good life may not only spare the world major social and political upheavals and international conflicts but also create a world in which more people can flourish.

Here

by Rebecca Watts

Birds daren't go to
the sky: it's already full,
impenetrable as ice.

Down here, dark trees
beside the river
grow into their reflections silently.

England breathes
regardless, and my thoughts
spin away like sycamore seeds.

I can't go back
without disturbing the wood
where I've found my feet.

Rationalism

by Theodore Dalrymple

The man without principles is a scoundrel; but the man who lives *only* by principles is a fool. Surely there can be very few of us who have never experienced a tension or opposition between, on the one hand, a firmly held principle and, on the other, what it is right in the circumstances to do. Only a man such as Kant, whose daily walks were so punctual that you could set your watch by them, would suggest that you should tell a man whom you knew to be intent on murder the truth (if he asked you) about the whereabouts of his intended victim, on the grounds that one should always speak the truth. We believe, on the whole, in telling the truth, but not at the cost of avoidable murder. No doubt the elaboration of general principles is natural to mankind, at least above a certain stage of development, but trying to decide how to conduct life by the elaboration of principles is like trying to capture a cloud with a butterfly net. This is not to decry butterfly nets: they are splendid for catching butterflies. But trying to capture clouds with them is likely, if persisted in, to lead to futile exhaustion.

Man is a problem-solving creature, but he is also a problem-creating one; and among the factors that create problems is the heedless application of general principles to real life. Indeed, the application of such principles can conjure problems, potentially serious and very divisive ones, from the air. There was a recent example in Germany.

Most people would agree that children ought not to be mutilated. Taking this rather unexceptionable principle, an action was brought in a court in Cologne, in the wake of a bungled operation, to outlaw the practice of male infant circumcision, and the court ruled that it should indeed be outlawed except for strictly medical reasons, as circumcision before the legal age of discretion was an assault on the physical integrity of the child. The right to such integrity is a fundamental principle of the German constitution.

It will hardly come as a surprise that the legal ruling was greeted with outrage

in some quarters as an assault on the religious freedom that the constitution also guarantees, and that the subsequent discussion quickly descended into a morass of social, historical, medical, legal, political and philosophical arguments and considerations, many or all of which were of questionable relevance to the matter at issue. As anyone who has ever participated in a public discussion or debate knows (and radio and television are yet worse), it is almost impossible to keep strictly to the point of the discussion or debate, in part because the question of what is relevant to it becomes a matter of subsidiary discussion or debate. A downward spiral is soon reached; tempers fray while nothing at all is illuminated, and all feel frustrated.

Does the child's right to its physical integrity (except for strictly medical interventions) trump that of religious freedom? And does the right to religious freedom inhere in individuals or in groups? Religion is not merely a matter of doctrine and belief, but of practice. We should hardly call a country religiously free if people could believe Catholic doctrine if they wanted, but not attend a Catholic service.

Of course, all who are secularists, or at any rate not theocrats, believe that religious practices must conform to the secular law; we should not accept human sacrifice merely because people claimed to believe in the Aztec religion of old. Religious freedom also raises the question of the boundaries of religion itself. At what point does a cult of doubtful practices become a religion? The question has been of some practical importance because certain groups claim that the consumption of an illegal drug of one kind or another is essential to their religious rituals, and to prohibit the drug would therefore be an infringement of their religious liberty. If it were officially claimed that, as many privately suspect, the desire to consume the drug precedes the religious requirement, which is but an *ex post facto* justification for the consumption, the members of the drug-taking cult or religion could claim religious discrimination. After all, wine has been used a long time in communion as well as in, for example, Jewish Passover services, and alcohol is undoubtedly a drug or psychoactive substance. Moreover, anthropologists will tell us of a hundred religious ceremonies involving the consumption of drugs. The supposedly immemorial nature of the religious ceremonies involving drugs and alcohol has nothing to do with it, according to those who want the matter decided by appeal to the principle of religious freedom, because, after all, any religious ceremony was once new, even if its origins are lost in the mists of time; we cannot close down *ijtihad* – the Muslim concept of personal interpretation of the scriptures – in religion, as if nothing further remained to be developed or discovered. At least

we can't if our society claims to be a religiously free one. There can be no law against the possibility of new revelation.

For those who believe that the right of the child to its physical integrity trumps all other considerations, the fact that circumcision is a practice of deep religious significance to at least two groups will be of no account: for the right enshrined in the constitution speaks of universal human rights, at least of such rights within the German jurisdiction, not of the rights of groups. If people in Germany, then, want to live differently, for example wanting their boys to be circumcised, they should leave the country: not an alternative with happy historical echoes, given Germany's past.

What could those opposed to the prohibition return to this? They might argue that freedom of religious practice is more important, a right more fundamental or 'deeper', than the right to the physical integrity of the child; but there is no way of proving it to be so, and this argument is unlikely to find a lot of sympathy in an irreligious age such as ours. However, dialecticians could find an answer to turn the argument from physical integrity on its head.

Is male circumcision, as a matter of empirical fact, life-threatening or life-preserving, health-giving or health-taking? A certain number of children will die from the operation itself: the number being smaller the better the surgical conditions in which it is performed. (This in itself might be used as an argument for permitting male infant circumcision: for if people felt sufficiently strongly about it to disobey the law prohibiting it, they might resort to clandestine means, which would almost certainly raise the death rate. This, after all, is compatible with the modern ethic of harm reduction: if some members of society engage in a hazardous activity or habit, provisions must be made for these people so as to reduce, as much as possible, the amount of harm they inflict upon themselves.)

Proponents of circumcision will argue that, notwithstanding the occasional deaths from the operation itself, it protects the circumcised, and those who have sex with them, from contracting certain diseases. No circumcised person suffers from cancer of the penis, for example (admittedly a rare type of cancer); transmission to and by the circumcised of diseases such as AIDS and the papilloma virus are much reduced. If these facts are accepted – and they are not universally accepted, at least not in so unequivocal a statement of them – then it follows that *not* to circumcise a boy would constitute an avoidable threat to his health and to that of others. Far from being permissible, male infant circumcision should be compulsory.

We have entered a labyrinth of argumentation. Not only are the facts of the supposed health benefits of male circumcision likely to be disputed because

they rest on epidemiological surveys that are seldom as clear-cut in their results as, say, those which connect smoking with a variety of diseases, but surveys record situations that are limited in time and place rather than providing us with the kind of eternal verities that those who argue from first principles so desperately want.

The supposed deleterious effects of *not* being circumcised themselves derive from a lack of personal hygiene, at least if current medical thinking is to be believed. In other words, the uncircumcised who are scrupulously clean would be at very little extra risk of various diseases than the circumcised. To circumcise all because some people might be unhygienic is like taking out everyone's teeth because some people might neglect them and get dental decay as a result. One of the arguments in favour of euthanasia is that it prevents people from suffering uselessly at the end of their lives; but an argument against euthanasia is that the short way with the terminally (or not so terminally) sick is likely to discourage efforts to relieve that suffering. Why bother if you can just cut it off at its root, which is life itself?

It is obvious that the legal case against male infant circumcision, which was argued on abstract grounds, created a potentially serious controversy that, if not defused, might have ended in real social conflict. The decision was reversed, but probably more out of fear of the consequences of not reversing it than from a rejection of the original principle. However, the genie of fundamental principle is now out of the bottle, and in a society in which religion no longer provides much transcendent meaning or purpose, the struggle for the implementation of supposedly fundamental and unquestionable principles fills the vacuum, 'the God-shaped hole'. In other words, the question of circumcision will probably not go away just because the court has reversed the ruling; the partisans of the inalienable right of the child to physical integrity will continue the fight, elsewhere if not in Germany.

The unexamined life, Socrates famously said, is not worth living; but also

not worth living, or at least very unpleasant, is the life in which everything is examined and judged in the light of a supposedly first principle. When this happens, the failure of an institution to comply or be consistent with a first principle – even though in practice the institution works perfectly adequately, causes no harm and might even do good or give pleasure – becomes itself a problem that can be solved only by the destruction of the institution.

Let me give a more or less concrete example: the judiciary of the High Court of England and Wales. This has been criticised because its members have been chosen in an opaque manner that is undemocratic and appears to result in a small and closed coterie that is not at all representative of the population, in sex, race, social origins and so forth. That the 95% of the population with an IQ less than 130 are also not fairly represented is not usually complained of, as indeed it should be if unrepresentativeness were in itself a fault.

As it happens, I have appeared as a witness before High Court judges many times; and almost without exception I have been struck by their scrupulous attempts at fairness, their patience, their courtesy and the power of their intellect. (The sentences they hand out in criminal cases are another matter, but their hands are to a very large extent tied.) These judges seem to me about as good at their job as anyone could wish. When, for example, they give their rulings on the admissibility of evidence, or on some such technical legal matter, I have been much impressed by the clarity of their arguments and usually (and not coincidentally) by the clarity of the language in which they express them.

The attack on High Court judges, then, seems to me completely beside the point, at least if the purpose of a judiciary is to conduct trials as honestly and fairly as is possible. Whether they are or are not representative of the population in some way favoured by a monomaniacal band of detractors is utterly unimportant. Why tamper with a system that actually works, when there are so many things in the world that do not work?

From the point of view of someone who deduces what society ought to be like from first principles, however, this is deeply unsatisfactory. He is more interested in the conformity of institutions to his principles than in whether institutions work, and is therefore not interested in whether what they are replaced by will work any better (or worse). Goethe said that theory is grey, but green is the tree of life. For the political rationalist, it is precisely the other way round.

The quality of knowing when to apply principles and when to override them is that of judgment. To demand the principles that supposedly must lie behind judgment is to enter an infinite regress.

Self-help is No Dirty Word

by Jules Evans

I was at a drinks party of a history conference a few weeks ago, talking to a young academic who was writing a PhD. "And what are you working on?" she asked me. I said I was researching philosophy groups, and was interested in the role of support groups and self-help networks in education and health. "Oh", she said, "well, I'm a socialist, so I don't believe in self-help".

The incident came back to me when I recently gave a talk at a university college. Before the talk, I had a drink with some of the college dons in the senior common room. The college principal had left some copies of my book *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations* lying around, and I looked on as one of the dons picked up the book, flicked through it, then tossed it aside with distaste. "It's just philosophy as self-help", he muttered to a colleague.

There is a widespread feeling among academics that self-help is an ugly manifestation of neo-liberalism (see, for example, *The Age of Oprah: A Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era*). Self-help, for many on the Left, means Zig Ziglar telling you how to be a winner, or Anthony Robbins getting you to walk on coals, or Rhonda Byrne telling us we can all be rich if we just think rich thoughts. It brings to mind corporate seminars with Steve Ballmer jumping up and down like a bald gorilla, or Annette Bening's character in *American Beauty* desperately repeating positive affirmations: "I *will* sell this house. I *will* sell this house!"

Not only is self-help wickedly neo-liberal and individualistic, according to the intellectual consensus, it's also stupid. The best way a book reviewer can diss a book, these days, is by calling it 'self-help'. Naomi Wolf's latest book, *Vagina*, for example, has attracted incredibly vitriolic reviews, but surely the lowest blow was calling it 'self-help marketed as feminism'. Ouch.

Academics would admit to reading anything, even *Fifty Shades of Grey*, before they admitted to reading a self-help book. When the great novelist David Foster Wallace killed himself in 2008, and around 40 self-help books were

discovered in his library, everyone was a bit, well… *embarrassed*. And when the University of Texas created an official archive of Wallace's books, the self-help titles were surreptitiously removed, like a pile of porn mags under the bed of a dead relative.

Well, it's true, a lot of self-help is pretty awful. You can drown in all that Chicken Soup. Much of it is badly written, full of dodgy statistics and falsely attributed quotes. (My favourite is the idea that Plato said 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle'. Plato would never say that.) Some of it is a weird religion for capitalists, what Charles Wright Mills called the 'theology of pep'. But that's not the whole story with self-help. It's just the direction self-help took in the 1980s, and unfortunately most people strongly associate the word with the Reagan era.

There is an older history of self-help – a history of mutual improvement clubs, corresponding societies, lending libraries and friendly societies. It runs through the 17th century, via Protestant groups like the Quakers and Methodists, into 18th-century mutual improvement clubs in London, Edinburgh, Philadelphia and beyond. It runs into the working class education movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, and through Chartism, the Co-operative movement, and the battle for universal suffrage (Samuel Smiles, the author of the 1859 book *Self-Help*, was a supporter of universal suffrage and the Co-operative movement, and his books were widely read by Labour activists at the turn of the century).

It runs through Kropotkin and Tolstoy's Russian anarchism, through Gandhi's theory of *swaraj* and the Indian self-governance movement of the 1940s, and through Malcolm X and the Black Nationalism movement of the 1960s (X declared, in his most famous speech, "We need a self-help program, a do-it-yourself philosophy, a do it right now philosophy"). It is still alive, and vibrant, in the Indian women's self-help movement and the UK Refugee Community Organisation (RCO). It is also a huge movement within the mental health sector, leading to life-saving organisations like Alcoholics Anonymous and the Hearing Voices network.

I feel a strong affinity to that history, partly because I come from a Quaker family, and partly because self-help helped me when I was suffering from depression and anxiety in my early twenties. I went to two psychotherapists, both of whom cost a lot, neither of whom helped me. I then found a support group for social anxiety through the internet, and together we practiced a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) audio-course, every Thursday evening.

That helped me a lot. So did reading ancient Greek philosophy, which I discovered had been the inspiration for CBT. Over the next decade, I tracked

down and interviewed many other people who had helped themselves through reading ancient philosophy. None of them were 'intellectuals' – they were ordinary people who'd self-medicated with philosophy. I called my book self-help, and I wore that badge with pride.

What appeals to me about self-help is the autonomy it involves. I like the fact that people help themselves rather than being subjected to the theories and power structures of their 'betters' – whether that be psychiatrists, academics, or Party officials. I like the fact that the advice people share comes from their first-hand personal experience, rather than someone else's abstract suppositions. I like the democracy of it, the lack of hierarchy, the egalitarianism. I think this, secretly, is why some academics look down their nose at self-help: because it challenges their intellectual authority, their expertise, their mandarin status.

At this point I can hear left-wing sociologists (and Adam Curtis) saying: "That's the whole problem with self-help – this naïve belief you can somehow liberate the self from power structures. Haven't you read Foucault?" Yes, I've read Foucault. In particular, I've read the last writings of Foucault in which he expresses regret for focusing too much on the individual as passive victim of social domination, and he begins to explore how individuals can actively take care of themselves and learn to govern themselves 'with a minimum of domination'. Foucault, by the end of his life, was celebrating self-help.

Look, for example, at the Hearing Voices network, which helps people who hear voices to escape the definitions and power structures of conventional psychiatry and to help each other come to a more practical working relationship to their voices. That is self-help or group-help at its best, and it's a life-saver. Without Hearing Voices, people who hear voices would have no voice in the power structures of state psychiatry, and would be forced to swallow psychiatry's flawed model of schizophrenia.

I'm aware that one can take this sort of self-reliant philosophy too far. It can be too individualistic. It can put too much emphasis on the superhuman individual conquering all circumstances. I think this critique can be directed at both Pierre Hadot and the later Foucault – they both concentrated too much on individual spiritual exercises in Greek philosophy, and missed the communal aspect. As I put it in my book, 'the Greeks knew that the best way to change yourself is together with other people'.

That's why I'm increasingly interested in self-help *communities*, in mutual improvement. I've moved, personally, from quite a Stoic-libertarian philosophy to a more communal philosophy – I suppose it's more Christian, in the sense that it's grounded in a recognition that life is difficult for everybody and we all

need to help each other. I'm interested in experiments in communal self-help, like the School of Life, which the intellectual Left loves to sneer at. Verso Books, for example, which is the publishing arm of the *New Left Review*, loves to mock Alain de Botton. Of course, Alain de Botton's ideas are not that deep, and, of course, he is a multimillionaire. But at least he writes books that ordinary people can read, and that actually help ordinary people. What outreach has the *New Left Review* or Verso Books done recently? When did Verso last publish a book that was genuinely popular, and that genuinely helped ordinary people?

When did the British Left stop caring about adult education? One possible answer is: when Perry Anderson ousted E.P. Thompson as editor of the *New Left Review* in 1962, and the intellectual Left became entranced by obscure and pretentious continental philosophy and contemptuous of the British mutual improvement clubs that Thompson so admired. Thompson wrote about the history of adult education and was prepared to put in hours and days of work at the Workers' Educational Association, teaching small groups of ordinary working people around the country. After he was ousted, the New Left became preoccupied with voguish continental philosophers like Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek, whose appeal was strictly limited to college graduates. It lost touch with the British tradition of mutual improvement. Now, anything that doesn't reference Badiou or Lacan or some other continental charlatan is dismissed as 'self-help'.

Yes, the mutual improvement ethos can also be taken too far. It can be used as an excuse by libertarians for cutting public services, for closing libraries and hospitals, for dismantling comprehensive schools, for rolling back all the gains that the Labour movement achieved since it first came to power in the UK in 1924.

But self-help groups aren't inherently libertarian, or laissez-faire capitalist. Support groups can really help people to get better. Self-help books can really help people (the best ones can, anyway). They can empower the vulnerable and relieve human suffering. And they can also work very well *in partnership* with public services, rather than as a rival. So the next time someone dismisses a book as "just self-help", ask them, "what do you mean… *just*?".

Control Your Thoughts and Emotions

by William Irwin

Like cold-blooded animals whose body temperatures rise and fall with the surrounding temperature, "emotionally cold-blooded" people allow their emotional temperature to be dictated by the people and situations around them. Emotionally cold-blooded people may hit greater emotional highs, but they also hit much lower lows. It is better to maintain a constant base temperature, to become "emotionally warm-blooded". Thankfully this is possible; the internal thermostat is yours to control. This is not to say it's easy. You can control your emotions in the way that you can bench press your body weight. You have the potential, but it takes practice and exercise to achieve the goal. Still, just realizing that you can potentially control your emotions – and your mind and thoughts, too – is an important first step, an encouraging one: from there you can take further steps to turn potential control into actual control.

Thought and Emotion

Wisdom has it that I must watch my thoughts because thoughts become words; watch my words because words become actions; watch my actions because actions shape character; and my character is my destiny.

We need to learn to think the right thoughts about the right things at the right time. What people say and do is important, but what they think is more important because it is more fundamental: my words and actions echo in my thoughts, but my thoughts dictate what I will say and do. Getting right with myself means taking charge of my thoughts, and thus taking charge of my words and actions. External circumstances present obstacles and circumscribe arenas, but my mind and its thoughts choose the game and make the rules. My problems are my thoughts.

The most important, obvious, and yet unpracticed philosophical insight is that thoughts produce (most) feelings, and thoughts can be controlled. When I have a negative or non-constructive thought or feeling, I don't have to take it all the way to the end. It's like getting on the wrong bus or train – I'm not obliged to ride it to the end of the line. When I realize it's not what I want, I can get off. So I need to let negative thoughts and feelings pass, simply observing them as a scientist, not criticizing them as a judge. Thoughts and feelings aren't facts, and they carry no external moral authority. We can and should override them when they are not good for us.

Thoughts often arrive without invitation. This would seem to suggest that we cannot control them and are not free to think what we want. But that is not so. We can dismiss a thought if we choose, though at first this is not as easy as shooing a fly. One way of disposing of negative thoughts is to find the errors in them and disprove them. This can be particularly helpful with stubborn and persistently recurring thoughts. With other thoughts such debunking may not be necessary or warranted. We can simply notice the thought, acknowledge it as a thought we do not wish to entertain, and let it pass. Most thoughts that are not nourished by our attention will eventually cease their recurrence.

Many people mistakenly believe that if they feel angry then they *should* be angry… or sad… or fearful… and so on. They see changing and controlling emotions as unnatural, as potentially making them into something machine-like, less than human. The goal, however, is not to get rid of emotions, but rather to take charge of them. Feeling angry, for example, does not mean I have a right or an obligation to be angry. It is simply a biological response, partly learned. Our emotional responses and what we do with them are, in part, habits. Habits can be good or bad, and they can be changed. For example, I can learn to not act on my anger by practicing not acting on my anger, repeatedly, as occasions arise. By not feeding the anger, I can, in time, even learn to change my initial reaction, such that I look at the situation with the perspective of a detached spectator.

Emotions sometimes arise prior to thought, but they can still be changed by thought. The sight of a bear in the woods will start my heart racing and adrenaline pumping with fear before I can even articulate the thought, "There is a bear". The same might be true of the rage produced by finding my spouse in bed with someone else. I may "see red" and be flooded with emotion even before my thoughts are clear about what I see (granted, to some extent I must "know" what I see in order to have the reaction, even before I have clear thoughts or words for it). This was evolutionarily adaptive; in the wild we often don't have

time for thought and reflection. It's "fight or flight".

When we watch movies, which we know aren't real, we can similarly have a response to what we see on the screen, prior to any clarified, cognitive response. This can be explained by the evolutionary instinct to mimic the emotional response we witness; this mimicking is to our advantage, as it helps us to identify with and communicate with others, as well as to use other people's insights to heighten our own preparedness. In watching a movie we may become sad or frightened as one of the characters does, but then reflecting on the fact that this is just a movie, we can change our thoughts to override our emotions. This, of course, may take some practice and effort.

The lesson is transferable to emotional responses outside the movies: thoughts can override emotions. We can monitor our emotional response, identify it, decide that it does not benefit us, and counteract it with other thoughts. Certainly, this is all easier said than done. The environmental stimuli and internal biochemistry that bring on an emotion can be powerful and unrelenting. And so we may need to change the environment to remove the stimuli, or take medication to set the biochemistry right.

To make a change in mindset, a helpful first step is to become convinced of the value of the change. Patterns of thought are established habits. We cannot become grateful, for example, with a snap of the fingers. But, believing it important or valuable to become grateful, we can take the steps necessary to achieve a grateful mindset. To do so, we must repeatedly make notes of things for which we are grateful, and focus on those things rather than on negatives; for example, I begin each day by writing a list of ten things for which I am grateful. Likewise, taking the action an optimist would can, with repetition, lead to thinking as an optimist would, and so eventually can lead to being an optimist. The same is true with regard to patience, kindness, resistance to anger, and pretty much anything else. Acting your way into thinking differently and being a different kind of person starts a transformation that is completed with repeated practice.

Taking Action to Change Thought

Action is empowering. Rather than worrying about what's beyond my control, I need to take charge of my life by doing what I can. The feeling of confidence and empowerment that comes along with action and accomplishment feeds on itself, leading to more action and accomplishment. Sometimes there is not much more I can do than put away the dishes or do the laundry. So that's what

I do. It's far better to feel good about a minor accomplishment than to wallow in worry about something beyond my control.

If I don't like the way I feel, I need to change the channel. If I didn't want to feel sad, I wouldn't listen to a radio station that plays nothing but sad songs. Just as music affects our moods, so do the various stimuli the world throws at us. So if I don't want to feel sad I don't hang around sad people. Instead, I can do something I enjoy to change my mood. For example, I like to watch old music videos on YouTube. A friend of mine likes to get his shoes shined. What would work for you?

We're probably all aware that small investments in personal hygiene pay great dividends. For example, the few minutes a day I spend brushing and flossing my teeth not only make me feel better about myself, while making me more attractive to others, they actually save me a great deal of time, pain, and money in the long run – far fewer trips to the dentist! While dental associations have done a lot to promote dental hygiene, no group is doing enough to promote mental hygiene. Habits of hygiene may differ more readily and widely in the mental realm, but for me they involve keeping a journal and meditating. In my daily journal, along with my gratitude list, I note one thing I did well and one thing I did badly the previous day, thereby conditioning myself with approval and disapproval. Not wanting to write in my journal that I lost my temper, for example, is actually a pretty good motivator for not losing my temper. Daily

meditation has taught me how to quiet my mind and let unwanted thoughts pass. I also cleanse my mind by reciting and reflecting upon some helpful things that focus my thinking on what is good, right, and positive. In my case I recite the Buddha's eightfold path; someone else might quite as effectively recite a prayer, a poem, or some other inspiring words.

Good mental hygiene helps to prevent negative thoughts from arising, and, as the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. It's easier to let emotional and mental hygiene slide, though, since its effects are not readily noticed by others in the way bad breath is. Then again, the bad attitude that can emerge from neglecting mental hygiene will be readily recognized, and can be pointed out to us, by those who know us well and feel comfortable asking whether we've skipped some part of our routine.

Control

Nothing outside my mind is under my complete control; the world outside my mind is, at most, subject to my influence. And exerting my influence always comes at a price; it's a trade-off.

The nature of the universe is that things fall apart. To accept this is wise and mature; to be always surprised by it is foolish and childish. The car will not start some days; the milk will spill. We can exert influence in holding things together or putting them back together, but the exertion is its own price. Some things need to be let go – the cost of repair is not worth it.

We do not and cannot control other people; it is foolish and counter-productive to try. What I can control is my own mind. As the saying goes, it makes more sense to put on a pair of slippers than to try to carpet the whole world. Ordinarily, it doesn't even reward effort to try to influence people in any direct or coercive way. The best way to influence people is indirectly, through good example. People would rather see good behaviour than hear a sermon on it. For example, I teach my son to be patient not by lecturing him about patience, but rather by being patient with him; I teach him not to hit his sister by not hitting him.

We need to avoid resentment. It does me no good to hold a grudge against you. In fact, it harms you little, if at all, while it harms me seriously. Its effect is contrary to its intent. I need to eliminate negative thoughts about other people as I would eliminate negative thoughts about myself: correct and dismiss them. No good comes from thinking negatively about others, and putting labels on people puts me in error. I am not a "vindictive jerk" and neither is my boss.

No one is so easily captured by a label; individuals are complex. I need to have compassion for the shortcomings of others, because those shortcomings cause the other person far more pain than they cause me. Certain environments can keep resentments burning, as the actual sight or presence of an irritating person, place, or thing enlivens the passions that one seeks to dull. If it is possible to extricate myself from the person, place, or thing I resent, then I do it. When escaping the irritant isn't an option, I have other means at my disposal. When a negative thought about someone pops in, I try to replace it with a positive thought about that person. Developing the talent and the habit of finding what is good and what I like in each person I encounter is not easy, but it works. For example, I have gone out of my way to catch one of my difficult co-workers when he does something right. I thank him and praise him, and that has diminished my resentment.

I have resolved not to host conversations, arguments, and fights in my head. That space is too precious to give away rent-free. An old story has it that a patient said to a doctor, "Doc, it hurts when I move like this". The doctor responded, "So don't move like that". If it causes me emotional pain to entertain a memory and there is no clear, constructive purpose for entertaining it, then I don't entertain it. The same may be said of having conversations and arguments in my head with people I resent. No good comes from these, no catharsis, no relief, no great insight or positive solution – just upset and stress. So I don't do it. Again, it's not easy to break the bad habits of resentment and negative self-talk, but it can be done with practice.

People say some pretty offensive things, but I can only be offended when I choose to be. No matter how nasty, inappropriate, or vitriolic someone's words or actions are, it is my choice whether or not to internalize them. Indeed, there is rarely any point or advantage to internalizing and being offended. For the sake of the company I keep, it's certainly worth noting when someone's words or actions are offensive, but that's all.

To be disturbed by difficult people is my own choice, surpassed in foolishness only by my choice to be disturbed by difficult things. Difficult people are suffering people, worthy of compassion. Generally, they do not do things *to* me; they just *do* things. My reaction is my choice. Difficult things – dripping taps, dead batteries, scratched DVDs – all the more clearly do nothing *to* me. In the extreme, consider the person who gets mad at the scales because they don't tell him that he weighs what he wants to weigh. It's not the scales' fault. It's his fault that he weighs so much, and it's ultimately his choice how to feel about his weight and what to do about his weight.

Anger

When I was growing up, no one ever told me that it was bad to be angry. The lesson I learned from the adults around me was that it made sense to be angry at what I found unfair. And so I was angry a lot. Thankfully, I'm not like that any more. My thoughts have mastered my anger.

Anger tempts with its intoxicating adrenaline rush; it impairs judgment, lowers inhibition, and heightens self-righteousness. Feeding anger can turn it into rage, as feeding a fire turns it into an inferno. To exist in a constant state of low-grade anger with spikes into rage is no way to live. The proverbial angry young man is not happy. He may have been dealt some bad breaks in life, but he worsens things by punishing himself, jailing himself within his own anger, making excuses for and justifying his poorly chosen, angry actions. This kind of anger begs for an outlet, a creative expression, whether that be exercise, painting, music, or any number of other things. The angry but no-longer-young man sets himself up for an abbreviated life of misery, as anger takes its toll not just on his life's circumstances but on his life itself – a heart attack awaits.

We too often condone and even glorify anger, especially for men. Our

culture needs role models who don't get angry, even though they easily could in their circumstances. We need examples of people who when they start to become angry catch themselves, acknowledging the feeling but then letting it go, defeating it. We need examples of people victorious *over* anger rather than victorious *because of* anger. Of course, first and foremost we need to be those examples ourselves, for the sake of our children and others who look to us. We cannot and should not expect the culture to change; we need to change ourselves and the culture will come along… eventually.

Anger may visit, but I need to leave it unfed. As I don't need to speak or act in anger, so too I don't need to feel anger. Having learned to control my actions, I am in a position to control my words. Having learned to control my words, I am in a position to control my thoughts and feelings. But what should I do in response to someone else's mistake or wrongdoing? First of all, I note that the anger doesn't result from the other's words or actions. No one can cause me to be angry. Other people inevitably do things that will upset me, sometimes that are designed to upset me – but most times not. It is unfortunate that they do, but the problem is ultimately their own; I only have a problem if I choose to. The response of anger may come over me so quickly that I believe I have no choice in it, that it is justified, and that it was caused by someone or something outside of me. But that is nonsense.

I need to ask myself: Is there any chance that I myself have done the other person even some slight wrong for which I owe an apology? If "yes", then I give the apology. The person with whom I feel angry is likely to feel angry too, so rather than clash, I offer the olive branch. The most important thing is to keep my own house in order, my own side of the street clean. I don't worry about the apology someone else owes. That's for them to worry about.

Anger is felt within. So I don't dwell on the internal anger, which would only feed it. Instead, I direct myself out towards another person. If I cannot help the person to whom I am reacting in anger, I help someone else. If there is no obvious person around who is in particular need of kindness I commit a "random act of kindness".

I do not feed my anger, and I do not allow anyone else to goad me and feed it. The cure for anger is delay. So I take ten deep breaths; this increases the oxygen in my system and calms me down. And I resolve to take no action until later, when I am no longer feeling angry. Anger makes a person feel justified in taking extreme actions. Sometimes those actions actually are justified, though it is not anger, but reason, that justifies them. If a response is justified and appropriate now, it will still be justified and appropriate in an hour, probably

still in a day. And it will be better planned and executed that way. Learning to stop for anger, rather than going with it, is essential to healthy, happy living. It helps to have this modelled for us and it takes practice, particularly if unchecked anger has become a bad habit that needs to be unlearned.

"Shut up, shut up. Please God help *me* to shut up." My friend, Mark W. Chamberlain, taught me this prayer, and it has saved me from saying many things in anger I would have regretted. The fun part of the prayer is its reversal. I start in my mind saying shut up to the other person, but it gets turned around such that I'm telling myself to shut up. For example, my toddler once fell over while my wife was watching her and I wanted to say to my wife, "You really need to watch her more carefully; she only gets hurt when *you're* watching her". But I said the Shut Up Prayer and I was glad I did. Had I spoken in anger to my wife, she would have been upset and defensive and I would have felt bad about it. The situation was much better handled by calmly discussing my daughter's fall the next day.

We don't have to choose between expressing and denying anger. The third and best alternative is diffusing it. One good way to do this is to get out of our heads and into our bodies. Anger manifests itself mentally and bodily, but it can only be fed mentally. Exercising vigorously releases bodily tension and produces endorphins, the body's natural pain killer – a good flood of endorphins is a fantastic natural high and a great cure for anger.

Anxiety and Desire

Anxiety, the worry that things will not be alright, is cruel and needless, and it can be crippling. Considered in the light of needs rather than wants, things will almost always be alright. My current worry about the future is nearly always one I would advise another person to let go of. We often think and react as though we have no choice but to worry in response to some occurrence. But that's just not so; worrying is optional. We may have a natural, or socially programmed, automatic worry response, but we can learn to override and disable this response. And it's generally in our interest to do just that. It may have been worth worrying when we were living in the state of nature and sabre-toothed tigers were on the prowl – that kind of worry may have helped us survive. But for the non-life-threatening problems of modern society, worry is not helpful and is often counterproductive. For example, worrying about meeting my in-laws for the first time won't help me to make a better impression and may actually contribute to me making a worse impression.

Worries about what happened in the past or what will happen in the future rob us of the present. They also keep us from doing the best we can to rectify past wrongs and bring about a good and happy future. Anti-anxiety medications may make sense for some individuals, helping them get unstuck from negative thoughts, but rationally talking back to anxiety-ridden thoughts makes sense for all of us, and may be enough for most of us. Part of the difficulty is that the thoughts run ahead of the "censors". As a TV broadcast of a live event often has a seven-second delay to allow censors to bleep out foul language, so we need a delay to analyze our thoughts. One anxious thought feeds the next. And rather than let the beast feed, we need to recognize that it's awake and feeding. Stop the feeding and it will sleep. As with other emotions, just because I feel anxious doesn't mean I should.

Conclusion

The relationship between thought and emotion is complex, but, as we have seen, it is possible for us to control our thoughts and thereby control our emotions. This is not to say it is easy or that it is simply a matter of will. Rather, it is difficult and takes practice. Good mental hygiene is important for maintenance, but it can also be part of a programme of continuous improvement in which good habits are strengthened and expanded. This essay focused largely on negative emotions and their attendant thoughts, but it would be a mistake to neglect positive thoughts and emotions. As I suggested in discussing gratitude and optimism, positive thoughts and emotions can be cultivated and developed, just as negative thoughts and emotions can be prevented and extirpated, through deliberate effort and practice.

In Praise of Lent

by Tom Barker

Springtime brings its familiar raft of feasts, festivals and general distractions – some welcome, others less so. Readers of a nervous disposition will be happy to have made it through another February 14th. For a few weeks each year, shop windows blossom with gaudy red hearts, and restaurant chains compete in a less-than-romantic tug-of-war for the patronage of put-upon Valentines, who wish it didn't quite have to be this way. Less overbearing perhaps are the simple pleasures of 'Pancake Day', celebrated in thousands of homes every year, with comparatively little attendant fuss and fanfare. In just a matter of weeks, however, not long after Mother's Day has been remembered just-in-time, Easter arrives, with its predictable flurry of chocolate eggs and cartoon bunnies.

Some of these ancient celebrations have proved more amenable to commercialisation than others. One season that is particularly difficult to market is Lent, the Christian period of abstinence that marks the forty days Jesus spent in the Judean desert, during which time, as the story goes, he was subjected to temptation by the Devil. Lent has traditionally been observed as a time of solemnity and penitence, throughout which believers undertake some form of fasting to honour Christ's ordeal. Contrasted with the enjoyment and consumption inherent in the two celebrations that bookend the period – Shrove Tuesday and Easter Sunday – it's not difficult to see why Lent has failed to be swept along by the tide of modernity. Where's the fun in moderation? Where's the profit in pious self-abnegation?

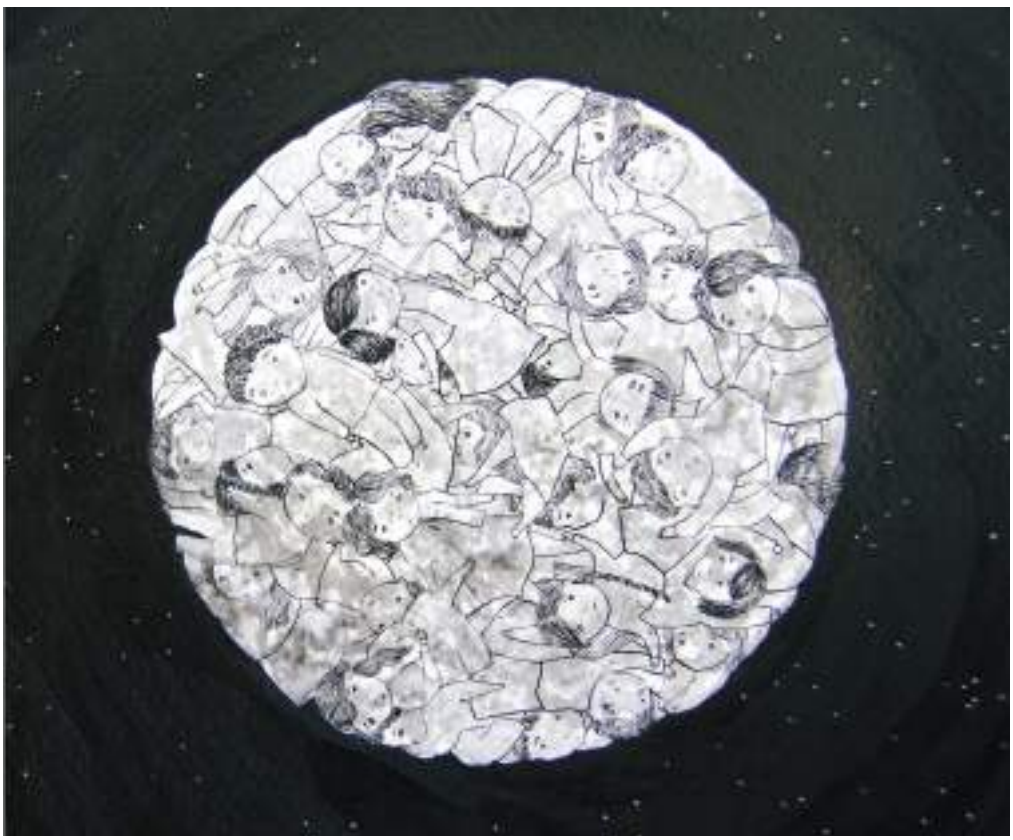
Yet in spite of its obvious lack of glamour, Lent holds an enduring appeal, which calls not just the faithful to its observance, but many thousands of non-believers too. There is much about Lent that appeals to a modern secular audience. There is a palpable desire among some sections of society for simpler, more frugal ways of living; a recognition of the limits – personal, social, and environmental – of contemporary consumer culture. Lent also allows for a

considerable degree of personal choice, leaving individuals relatively free to choose the terms of their fast. Familiar foes such as cigarettes, alcohol and chocolate are always popular, but there is nothing to prevent people from taking on a more generalised 'menu' of fasting if they so wish; in the past, the forgoing of animal products was particularly common. In an interesting interpretation of the tradition, some argue today that the taking on of new responsibilities or challenges represents a more positive way of marking the season. This is in many ways an appealing idea; deciding to go to the gym regularly, or making a volunteering commitment to a local charity, seem like much bolder gestures than knocking the fags on the head for a few weeks. Equally, the taking up of new activities could be interpreted as a relinquishing of personal flaws – laziness or selfishness, say – just as abstaining from certain products or behaviours can itself be cast in more positive terms, for example the giving up of meat as a positive commitment to animal welfare.

It has been difficult to avoid the rise in recent years of what might be termed (with something of a groan) the 'health and well-being agenda'. Some might castigate the entire movement as just another example of 'nanny-statism' – big government telling people how to live their lives – and undoubtedly the government's enthusiasm for many of the ideas associated with this agenda is motivated by a desire to save money. As health costs spiral due to the effects of long-term smoking, obesity and untreated mental health conditions, the idea of preventative health interventions – i.e. those which seek to deal with potential problems by changing behaviour early on – has obvious appeal. But the fact that there are strong pecuniary motives behind this latest shift in public health policy does not make it a bad idea. The physical and mental health benefits of regular exercise, a healthy balanced diet, and sensible alcohol consumption are pretty well established, and many of us could do with taking some steps to bring our consumption and behaviour into line with medical advice. This has nothing to do with a 'nanny state', and everything to do with individuals having access to sound scientific advice from reputable sources and being able to make educated choices about their own lives. Indeed, by no means does the government or the health service have a monopoly on sound advice. Witness the success of this year's 'Dry January' campaign, organised by Alcohol Concern. This web-based initiative asked participants to pledge to give up alcohol for a month, with some also choosing to raise money for the charity. The idea seemed to chime with a growing desire among many people to lead healthier and happier lives, less dependent on familiar but damaging crutches.

In this context, we begin to see the potential for Lent to take on renewed significance and popularity as a period of self-motivated abstinence or fasting, geared towards the achievement of personal goals. Lent remains a widely recognised tradition, with pre-existing legitimacy and credibility that requires little explanation. Telling a friend "I'm giving up alcohol for Lent" is less likely to be followed by a string of awkward questions than the stand-alone "I'm giving up alcohol for a while" – the former being self-explanatory, the latter (unfortunately) requiring greater justification. Indeed, telling friends and family about our Lenten fasts can be crucial to the entire project. We know from modern cognitive psychology that public declarations of goals and intentions act as incentives to keep us on the straight and narrow; the fear of falling off the wagon and losing face in the eyes of our peers is a powerful motivator. Not that we should simply come to see others as unsympathetic judges in the whole endeavour; the communal nature of Lent lends itself to mutual support and understanding amongst individuals striving to fulfil their ambitions.

It would be wrong to conclude that Lent is about – or needs to be about – po-faced self-abnegation or, even worse, hair-shirted self-flagellation. In fact, Lent can teach us some very important things about enjoyment and pleasure. For life's pleasures are often all the sweeter when they are infrequent, or, rather, when we have control over their timing and a sense of balance. Too much of a good thing, as we all know, is usually a bad thing; there is a dreary monotony to excess, which can make the mind as flabby and lethargic as the body. Then there is the powerful link a great many of us feel between work and reward. Holidays and periods of rest are welcome and vital, but prolonged periods of unemployment – even when there are no associated financial concerns – can have a devastating effect on our sense of self-worth and well-being. This familiar logic is present in the story of Lent and Easter: a time to work and a time to play, a time to test ourselves and a time to let go and relax; two parts to a simple story about how to live well and enjoy life.



The Common Bad, part 2

by Ben Irvine

How is it that modern societies are haunted by so much man-made suffering and injustice despite being economically, technologically and politically developed in so many ways? A natural response to this question is to blame the consumers and producers described in part 1, whose behaviour afflicts wider society. We could blame the consumers who behave tragically – the gun owners, urban drivers, litigators, fashion victims, boozers, TV watchers and internet users. We could blame the producers who benefit from these tragedies – the car manufacturers, arms dealers, lawyers, fashion houses, drinks makers, TV networks and computer programmers. We could blame the producers acting tragically themselves – the media, marketers, politicians and bankers. Or we could blame the consumer patsies who respond with their wallets to the cajoling of these producers – the viewers, readers, shoppers, voters and borrowers.

The problem is, each potential culprit is embedded in such an extensive network of relationships it is hard to pin the blame on anyone. Just as in Dylan's song – in which the referee, the crowd, the promoter, Ramos's manager, and even Ramos himself all forswear any personal responsibility for the incivility of Davey Moore's death – each of the defendants against the charge of causing wider society's incivility can protest their innocence. *Not I*, every one of them will say.

Every gun owner will say he is protecting himself against others like him; every urban driver will say that because so many people drive it's too dangerous to walk or cycle; every litigator will say it's a jungle out there; every fashion victim will say he's just dressing how everyone else is; every drinker will say he's keeping up with the rest; every TV watcher will say he's doing it because there's no-one to socialize with; and every internet user will say going online has become a necessity now it's so popular. *Not I.*

On the other hand, car companies will say they're providing for their

clients; gun dealers will say they're giving people security; lawyers will say they're protecting people's rights against others' wrongs; fashion houses will say everyone wants to look glamorous; alcohol manufacturers will say their customers love a drink; TV producers will say people can't get enough of watching the box; and computer programmers will say the internet has been overwhelmingly endorsed through its mass adoption. *Not I.*

Meanwhile, every hard-bitten journalist will say only the most sensational stories win an audience share in a competitive industry; every advertiser will say that selling is a matter of swimming not sinking and that the public is highly sensitive to branding; every politician will say his shenanigans are just realpolitik; and every banker will say his job's *raison d'être* is to make money from money by investing in society's ventures and anyway it's not his fault if people don't repay their debts. *Not I.*

Finally, every viewer or reader will say he didn't make the news; every shopper will say he didn't create the advertisements; every voter will say he's holding our duplicitous politicians to account; and every borrower will say the bank agreed to lend the money and anyway he just wants a place to call home and a decent car like everyone else. *Not I.*

This last example suggests another reason why it's hard to pin the blame on individuals. Each individual's responsibility dissipates into a network of relationships that spans multiple tragedies. The banker, for instance, lends money to a borrower who needs a car because the city streets are too dangerous to walk or cycle on because everyone else drives. The borrower, in other words, could defend himself by saying that it was other drivers who caused him to overstretch financially, and hence, in turn, the banker could say that those drivers contributed indirectly to the bank's reserves being depleted.

Lawyers cashing in as a result of the higher prevalence of gun ownership in the US is another example. More gun crime, more court cases. A similar relationship unites litigation and alcohol consumption. More drinking means more accidents, criminals and family breakdowns, all of which require lawyers to clear up the mess. Litigation and politicians form another such connection. A litigator could plausibly insist that his action is necessary because politicians are more interested in clambering over one another for votes than fostering a sense of conscientiousness among the electorate.

The more you look, connections among the tragedies multiply. Sometimes the relationships are subtle. For instance, the tragedy of TV-watching blends into that of fashion, because people who spend more time 'with' glamorous onscreen celebrities than with regular people are more likely to wear trendy

clothes in public. Partly this is because the celebrities have upped the sartorial ante, but also it's due to the fact that the viewers' interpersonal relationships have become attenuated (superficial status displays are more important to social interactions the less the participants are interested in each other's internal traits). Another tragedy connected to TV-watching is drinking: people who spend too much time watching TV lose the art of conversation, so when they find themselves in a social setting they use alcohol as a substitute.

With a little imagination, links can be identified between all 11 tragedies. Thus, when confronted by any one of those tragedies, and that compelling chain reasoning which is characteristic of them all, not only does the weight of one particular tragedy bear down on a person: the synergistic effect of a total of 55 interrelationships weighs on him.

From this bird's-eye view, the individual tragedies combine to form a patchwork, and further examples of tragic behaviour can be seen in the pattern. Consider food producers who add sugar and fat to their products. On a small scale these inclusions look like a canny way of making money by pandering to consumers' guilty desires; so canny, in fact, that if, as a food producer, you didn't add fat or sugar, you wouldn't make as much money as your competitors. But the wider social effect of our fatty and sugary diets is an increase in heart disease and obesity, problems which all of us – not just those immediately affected – pay for. In seeking a competitive advantage over each other, the producers make all of society worse off. Their behaviour is part of one big tragedy (and has a synergistic effect, moreover, when you consider that fat people are more likely to drive a car, stay indoors to watch TV, and so on).

Consider also the conduct of government bureaucrats. All bureaucrats have a well-known tendency to value the opinions of their superiors above efficacy and efficiency. They also have a tendency to overstate the extent of the problem their work is addressed to (in order to get a bigger budget) and underinvest in actually solving the problem (because they have a financial interest in perpetuating it). Of course, in a competitive market where jobs ultimately depend on paying customers, businesses keep such tendencies in check. But in government, where external pressures are lower, employees face the constant temptation of prioritising their careers over their duties. And when every other bureaucrat is facing the same temptation, the demobilizing effect on individual employees is amplified – what sort of mug would take the public's needs seriously when all his colleagues are busy writing lengthy reports to impress the boss? These dynamics conspire to produce bigger, more insular, more useless government bureaucracies, making everyone, including

the culpable officials, worse off. Moreover, shoddy governance not only forms part of the one big tragedy but feeds into other specific tragedies within the patchwork; for instance, through the implementation of road layouts which promote driving in urban spaces.

When viewed at the macro level, any kind of profitable yet antisocial corporate behaviour counts as a contribution to the one big tragedy: whether it's supermarkets bullying the authorities into granting planning permission for huge new branches that local people don't want; porn barons dangling images of vulnerable young women under the noses of lonely men; restaurants playing unpleasantly loud music so that customers eat and drink more and faster; rappers glorifying violence in the eyes of impressionable adolescents; security firms scaring us into thinking we need to install more cameras and locks rather than start a neighbourhood watch scheme; teen publications triggering insecurities in young girls; online gambling sites luring in losers in the early hours of the morning (not to mention the high-street bookies doing the same in broad daylight); or banks making money out of all such irresponsible activities. Profit-making is a good thing, but profiteering is not, and wherever, whenever and however organisations do it (or we, as consumers, allow them to get away with it by giving them our money), such behaviour aggregates to form one big tragedy of the commons.

The most salient example of the one big tragedy is the damage humanity has inflicted upon the environment. The entire planet can be construed as a commons that has been exploited. Every time human beings chop down forests unsustainably, kill endangered animals, pollute the seas, or otherwise act in a way which harms the environment, they are contributing to the most widespread tragedy of all.

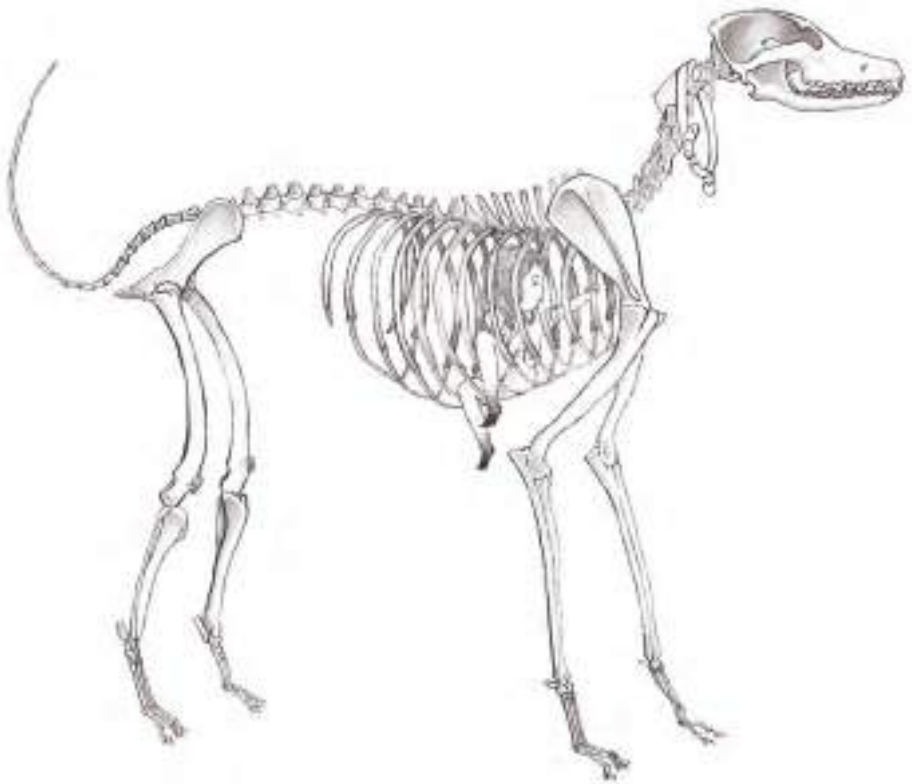
This holistic way of looking at the situation is the final nail in the coffin of any suggestion that wider society might legitimately blame certain individuals or groups for the problem of modern incivility. Wider society cannot point the finger without hypocrisy, because there can be very, very few among us who have not contributed to the one big tragedy. Let he who casts the first stone be someone who has never driven in town, owned a gun, worn a fashionable garment, got drunk, watched TV for entertainment, used the internet, gawped at the news, been influenced by an advertisement, formed a political opinion on the basis of a sound bite, struggled with debt, exercised dubious morality in a corporate context (business or governmental), or purchased a product from an environmentally unfriendly company.

But hang on. If wider society has no right to blame individuals for the

one big tragedy, insofar as every individual can legitimately point the finger at every other, then there *is* a sense in which all individuals are to blame. From the fact that everyone (the collective) is to blame, it follows that everyone (every individual) is to blame. *Every*one means every*one*. As the American politician Charles W. Tobey put it, 'the things that are wrong with the country today are the sum total of all the things that are wrong with us as individuals'. Even if we interpret *Not I* as meaning *Not only I*, this hardly gets each of us off the hook: the pandemic nature of the problem accentuates the need for individuals to take ameliorative action.

So what can a person do against a black hole of tragedy? In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre points out that even a person being tortured remains free. Though much ridiculed, Sartre's claim has empirical validity: some people refuse to divulge information despite dreadful suffering at the hands of interrogators. In comparison, declining to participate in a tragedy of the commons looks less daunting. If, say, a French resistance fighter can rise above the horror of torture, then modern individuals can surely resist the temptation of tragic behaviour. In both cases, leverage comes from various related motivating factors, such as self-control, a reasoned understanding of the status quo and its inadequacies, and a commitment to civilisation at large. Individuals typically cultivate this cluster of traits in the context of a whole style of life – a *responsible* life lived with attention directed both inwards and outwards, towards one's own mind, others' minds and the real world in between. The searchlight of attention empowers people to choose wisely: to choose actions based on the knowledge that there is a large (albeit not absolute) degree of overlap when it comes to individuals' well-being.

So how well developed is our resistance to our modern tragedies? A natural place to look in order to gauge such activity is among intellectuals, in particular salaried ones, who, after all, are granted autonomy in respect of the daily grind so as to acquire a vantage point from which understanding, judging and influencing society is easier. Alas, many in the humanities seem to have risen so high that they have lost sight of humanity (their own included) and vice versa. This betrayal can be witnessed in the dismissive attitude prevalent among contemporary intellectuals to anything that smacks of a realistic portrayal of the human situation. For instance, the notion of a biological human nature is frowned upon in most humanities departments, on the dubious basis that knowing ourselves, warts and all, is tantamount to endorsing any features we find which we don't like. Ultimately born of a juvenile kind of insecurity, such opposition towards soul-searching and Darwinian original sin points towards



a deeper intellectual discomfort with the notion of responsibility. Whereas a responsible person acts with self-awareness combined with awareness of the realities of the world and of human psychology, many intellectuals refuse to situate their own minds within the real world. In particular, philosophers, sociologists and religionists are adept at building elaborate theories that promise exemption from the inconvenience of the mind–world combination. Sceptics and idealists deny the world; materialists deny the mind; postmodernists deny both in favour of an all-pervasive social ether; religionists and mystics collapse both into a transcendent being. Even many economists, presumed to be more level-headed, operate with a sort of idealism when it comes to their assumptions about people's reasoning abilities, an idealism that overlooks the blindspots, perversities, limitations and desires of embodied human beings. Amid all this evasiveness is a conspicuous lack of honest reflection on how to live – how best to cultivate responsibility in oneself and others.

The failure of the intelligentsia to consciously and conscientiously reflect

on such obviously important matters as reality, human nature and human well-being goes hand in hand with the popularity of various unbalanced ideologies within the academy. There are intellectuals, for instance, who wish to tear down the whole apparatus of modern economic life and live instead in allegedly more pleasant autarkic communities. At first sight there is a compelling logic to this aspiration. As Elinor Ostrom has documented, tragedies of the commons are much easier to solve on a small scale because neighbours more readily trust, and therefore co-operate with, each other. Conversely, the larger the number of people we are required to factor into our judgments, the more callous we seem to become. No less of a philanthropist than Mother Theresa confessed as much, declaring that 'if I look at the mass, I will never act; if I look at the one, I will', while no less of a tyrant than Stalin allegedly pronounced, similarly, that 'one death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic'. Somewhere between these extremes, the several hundred richest people in the world today hoard a collective wealth several per cent of which would suffice to give all the world's poorest people adequate nutrition as well as access to elementary medical and educational resources.

Most people are completely unaware of their indifference to the well-being, even the existence, of the human race as a whole. When it comes to recognising our shared humanity in relation to the multitudes, there is, shall we say, a 'sociotoma' in human cognition (an admittedly impressionistic coinage inspired by the word 'scotoma', the medical term for a blind spot in the visual field). This sociotoma manifests subtly, in various economic phenomena. Supermarkets offer two-for-one bottles of vodka which are eagerly snapped up by down-at-heel customers – yet few of us would inflict such an inducement upon a vulnerable neighbour. Advertisers spout phoney promises of happiness – yet few of us would seriously suggest to an insecure friend that an expensive skin cream is the answer to their problems. And management consultants shut down factories at the click of a 'send' button on an email, leaving employees to rot – yet few of us would be so callous as to cut adrift a member of a close-knit workforce in so ruthless a fashion. Joel Bakan goes as far as calling the typical corporation a 'psychopath'.

It's bad enough that big businesses go bulldozing in where local people fear to tread, and worse still that such insensitivity is now undermining local communities themselves. Worst of all, these days we can't even yearn for communal solidarity without leaving ourselves prone to marketing's siren song. 'If "local" has a feelgood factor', observes Neal Lawson, 'big business wants a piece of the action, at least rhetorically, to aid in emotional bonding with their

customers' ('the world's local bank' being about as perfectly hypocritical an example of this as you'll find); indeed, Lawson continues, 'anything that is remotely threatening to the perpetuation of the consumer society is co-opted by the market and turned into a money making machine'. Comedian Bill Hicks called this the 'righteous indignation dollar'. His friendly advice to marketers? 'Kill yourselves.'

Yet such howls of derision, however amusing, also show that it is easy to get carried away. When we peer through a wider lens, we find that trust and co-operation have actually blossomed via the markets. Money is an IOU note which can create a relationship of mutual obligation between any two people anywhere, thus enabling non-zero-sum gains to accrue way beyond local circles of friends and acquaintances: money is 'trust inscribed', as Niall Ferguson puts it. Through the vast trade networks which capitalism makes possible (and vice versa) we can turn the products of our own individual labours into virtually anything we want; even water into wine. Undermining the economy would confiscate the benefits of this trade-based form of trust; any gains from autarky would pale in comparison to what had been lost. Stripping away the cumulative gains of modernity would make life more penurious, precarious, and violent. In failing to accurately assess the realities of the modern economy – its benefits as well as its costs (utilitarian calculations that Darwinian thinking, not uncoincidentally, is steeped in) – champions of autarky end up committing the oldest philosophical error in the book: throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Above all, the idea of wiping out the whole economy merely serves to obscure the most important question: *How is it that modern societies are haunted by so much man-made suffering and injustice despite being economically, technologically and politically developed in so many ways?* You can't answer a question by not asking it.

Admittedly, there is one very popular answer to this question among intellectuals, but it is an answer that typically amounts to yet another ideology. Too many intellectuals' only response to social problems is a monomaniacal insistence that the state plays an insufficient role in human affairs, whether in terms of intervention or welfare provision – both of which, it is claimed, can mitigate the economy's side effects or even replace the economy altogether.

Socialism, however, is a futile prescription with respect to solving the tragedies of the commons I have described. Firstly, it is far from clear that government intervention in those tragedies would be desirable (with an exception, in my opinion, in the case of guns). Suitable 'externalities taxes'

might be potentially useful (perhaps, looking ahead, ones which cleverly draw on open-source technologies) but allowing the government to micromanage or even ban lifestyle choices that lead to tragedies of the commons would cause an even bigger tragedy, a potentially totalitarian one. In any case, total prohibition of those lifestyle choices would be counterproductive because many of the tragedies result from immoderation in domains where moderation would be preferable to complete abstinence. Just as grazing some farm animals on shared land is better than grazing none, being able occasionally to choose to have a drink, wear a fashionable garment, drive a car through town, and so on, is better than never being able to.

Secondly, welfare provision is precisely the wrong response to the bad choices that people (particularly patsies) make in contributing to tragedies of the commons. When the economy cajoles people into buying products that, despite appearances, cause those people more harm than good, subsidizing such choices through welfare only perpetuates and exacerbates the problem. To put it starkly, the state and the market end up in a sinister collaboration, in effect farming patsies, with the state keeping them alive while the market milks them for every pound they recklessly spend. You could call it a 'narcocracy' – after all, what drug dealer wants his customers dead? The whole sorry arrangement is funded by the exasperated taxpayer while intellectuals offer willing support – not only through statist propaganda, but by obscuring the distinction, fundamental to good judgment, between appearance and reality, and correspondingly failing to provide people with any specific guidance on how to make better choices in life. (Some intellectuals, to their credit, have wised up to the importance of well-being, but still insist that creating more of it in society requires not influencing people's behaviour directly but influencing government policy in order to change people's behaviour indirectly; this strategy cannot be wholly effective, because democratically electable governments must to a large extent pander to the public's preferences.)

The statist mindset so popular among intellectuals boils down to a distaste for the arena of business, trade and finance (or, more fundamentally, for the idea of rolling up your sleeves and personally doing something to make the world a better place). The specific excesses which undeniably exist in the commercial world cannot be redressed solely through pointing the finger at businesses, precisely because doing so serves to deflect attention away from the consumers whose choices fuel the excesses. For example, in a society lacking wisdom and social capital, in which people seek happiness through relentless purchasing, it's no wonder that bankers – the orchestrators of the whole system

– get fantastically rich; perhaps if we all stopped for a moment to instead *thank* bankers for their efforts, it might dawn on us how unhealthy is our near-total reliance on them for our enjoyment of life.

Just because the economy is threatened by the ideologies of autarky and socialism (or a Maoist hybrid of both), it doesn't follow that we should abandon our communities and give up on social responsibility, letting individuals and the markets do whatever they damn-well like – a libertarian ideology that can also be found in the academy (allied especially to the idealism of the economists). A balanced view – the opposite of an ideology – makes room for a range of key components. Thus, Matt Ridley, as well as being a cheerleader for economic prosperity, can be seen championing species conservation and noting that community activism makes it difficult for corporations or governments to inflict environmental abuses on a particular area. 'Ecological virtue must be created from the bottom up, not the top down', he concludes in *The Origins of Virtue*. Similarly, another economically liberal political commentator, James Bartholomew, can be found arguing, in *The Welfare State We're In*, that welfare – from healthcare and housing to education and unemployment support – is best administered and delivered locally, more intimately, more charitably. Indeed, in the UK there has been a growing consensus to this effect on both sides of the political spectrum: in 2003 leading figures in the Labour government were espousing a 'New Localism', while today's Conservative-led coalition is devolving power through its 'Big Society' initiative. Note that economic liberals who invoke the importance of localism are not simply passing off problems, with their tails between their legs, as it were. Their view is balanced in the sense that it recognises explicitly that a happy society is multifaceted, multilevelled. There is, for example, a symbiosis between localism and the vitality of the

wider economy; as Robert Putnam points out, areas richer in social capital tend to be richer economically. A similar dynamic unifies governance and the economy: strong economies require and promote good governance.

Rather tortuously, having sidestepped some of the bad ideas that today's intellectuals have thrown down, we have reached a commonsense position (a moderate position that is considered to be extreme, while the extreme positions are considered moderate, to borrow a phrase of Steven Pinker's): a flourishing society is characterised by good governance, a strong economy, thriving communities, and educated citizens capable of making wise choices, with all these forces being mutually reinforcing. Such a society is minimally afflicted by tragedies of the commons, insofar as individuals – consumers and producers – populate the sociotoma in their minds, come to understand the tragic pitfalls of certain behaviours, and consequently make suitably conscientious choices by way of resistance. In resisting, individuals support and are supported by nurturing communities, which themselves aggregate to form the strong economy and dutiful governance enjoyed by wider society. The upshot is an ecosystem – moral, social, economic, political – in which tragic behaviour proliferates much less readily.

Because resistance, just like obfuscation, begins in the realm of ideas, it is intellectuals who possess the greatest capacity to bring about change – both in themselves and, through their influence, in the rest of society. Therefore, the task of creating a less tragic society involves somehow making the realities of life beneath the ivory tower seem real and important to those inside it. This might be easier than it sounds, for the one big tragedy has begun to extend its tentacles inside those very walls.

Depending on which aspects of the tragedy are emphasised, intellectuals are more or less likely to be swayed. Doubtless they will be unmoved by the blunt observation that there is a tragedy involved whenever they espouse theories which promise exemption from the inconvenience of the mind–world combination. In a society where tragedies of the commons are rampant, any theory that promotes the tragic status quo, however subtly and indirectly, affords its proponents competitive advantages when attracting sponsorship, whether from governmental or commercial sources. In seeking such advantages, by espousing theories that resonate with the zeitgeist of irresponsibility, intellectuals contribute to the one big tragedy. For similar reasons, the ideologies typically preferred by intellectuals also proliferate. Responsible people, those who possess self-awareness and realism combined with a commitment to the well-being of communities and wider society, perceive clearly that the doctrines of

autarky, socialism and libertarianism are extreme, and eschew them. In a tragic society, one that is devoid of responsibility, these doctrines can be passed off as moderate, and people embrace them.

As we have seen, the proliferation of immoderate theories and ideologies has proceeded hand in hand with the hostility intellectuals express towards human nature. After all, understanding the evolved, universal character of the human mind requires a multilevelled analysis; one that populates the sociotoma (makes us empathize with all human beings) and consolidates focus on the community (evolutionary psychology reminds us that our minds are adapted to living in small groups as our ancestors did), achieving both by virtue of an attitude of realism and an ability to extrapolate from one's self-awareness. We might even speculate that the sociotoma itself is an adaptation – that our ancestors would have benefitted from *not* empathizing too readily with all of humankind, from not being aware of large-scale tragedies. If this is true, then the failure of intellectuals to accept the notion of human nature is explicable in Darwinian terms, at least in part: the evolved sociotoma is a cognitive blind spot in relation to the notion of human nature. Of course, that doesn't mean we can't overcome this deficit. But it does mean we should be wary of intellectuals in the humanities when they say they care about humanity. People are expert (self-)deceivers, particularly when their reputations are on the line. Claims to humanitarianism often hide premises which betray more parochial concerns. Philosophers study ethics but professionally doubt whether other people possess minds; postmodernists profess to defend the rights of foreign peoples but deny sharing any commonality of worldview with them; religionists preach love and peace but cheerfully condemn non-believers to eternal pain.

The tragedy, of course, is that wider society suffers when the guardians of humanity espouse, for their own career advancement, irresponsible theories and ideologies. However, there is a shaft of hope. Most intellectuals are far from happy about the funding and assessment arrangements which prevail in modern universities. Academics today are subjected to numerous morale-, time- and creativity-sapping evaluation processes, involving students, colleagues, administrators and the government. The latter's contribution comes in the form of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), whereby each intellectual's output is evaluated and their institution given a score that influences (or rather dictates) its chances of acquiring funding. This dynamic, in turn, determines individuals' chances of attaining an academic position. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the REF is widely hated. The description given on the homepage of the official website www.ref.ac.uk gives some insight into why:

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It will replace the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and will be completed in 2014.

The REF will be undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies. The exercise will be managed by the REF team based at HEFCE and overseen by the REF Steering Group, consisting of representatives of the four funding bodies.

The primary purpose of the REF is to produce assessment outcomes for each submission made by institutions:

- The funding bodies intend to use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their research funding to HEIs, with effect from 2015-16.
- The assessment provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment.
- The assessment outcomes provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks.

The REF is a process of expert review. HEIs will be invited to make submissions in 36 units of assessment. Submissions will be assessed by an expert sub-panel for each unit of assessment, working under the guidance of four main panels. Sub-panels will apply a set of generic assessment criteria and level definitions, to produce an overall quality profile for each submission.

This paragon of managerialism, vague yet straight-jacketing, is, of course, just the tip of the bureaucratic iceberg (one that is at least '36 units of assessment' deep). One particularly exacting aspect of the REF appraisal focuses on academics' publication histories. Academics must now not only publish research with sufficient frequency to meet the demands of the REF ('publish or perish', as the saying goes), they must also publish in reputable peer-reviewed journals, as adjudicated by a numerical rating scale.

You don't have to be Chicken Licken – the fabled doom-monger who warned that the sky was falling in after an acorn fell on his head – to realize that the labyrinthine funding and assessment procedures presently instituted by academia in cahoots with the government are a recipe for career dissatisfaction among intellectuals and, ironically, for poor quality output. Both of these outcomes were highlighted in a remark made to me recently by a senior

academic. Publishing pressure, she said, along with the other administrative burdens of the job, has become so severe that she *barely has time to read anymore*. Please pause to take in the full ludicrousness of that statement. Apparently even within in academia everyone's talking and nobody's listening; the learned classes have stopped learning. Of course, in the current climate, if intellectuals in the humanities did have time to read they wouldn't learn much from each other anyway; they're all parroting the same old claptrap. The editorial cliques patrolling admission to the most prestigious, that is, highly-rated journals slavishly insist on the customary dogmas of the intellectual establishment – precisely those responsibility-wrecking theories and ideologies discussed above. Regardless of the inevitable contribution of this arrangement to the irresponsibility pandemic within wider society (and perhaps there is a symbiosis involved too – the tragedies of marketing and the internet, for instance, presumably intensify academia's obsession with evaluation), the overall set-up is about as conducive to originality, creativity, depth and rigour as the surface of the moon is to a horticultural display.

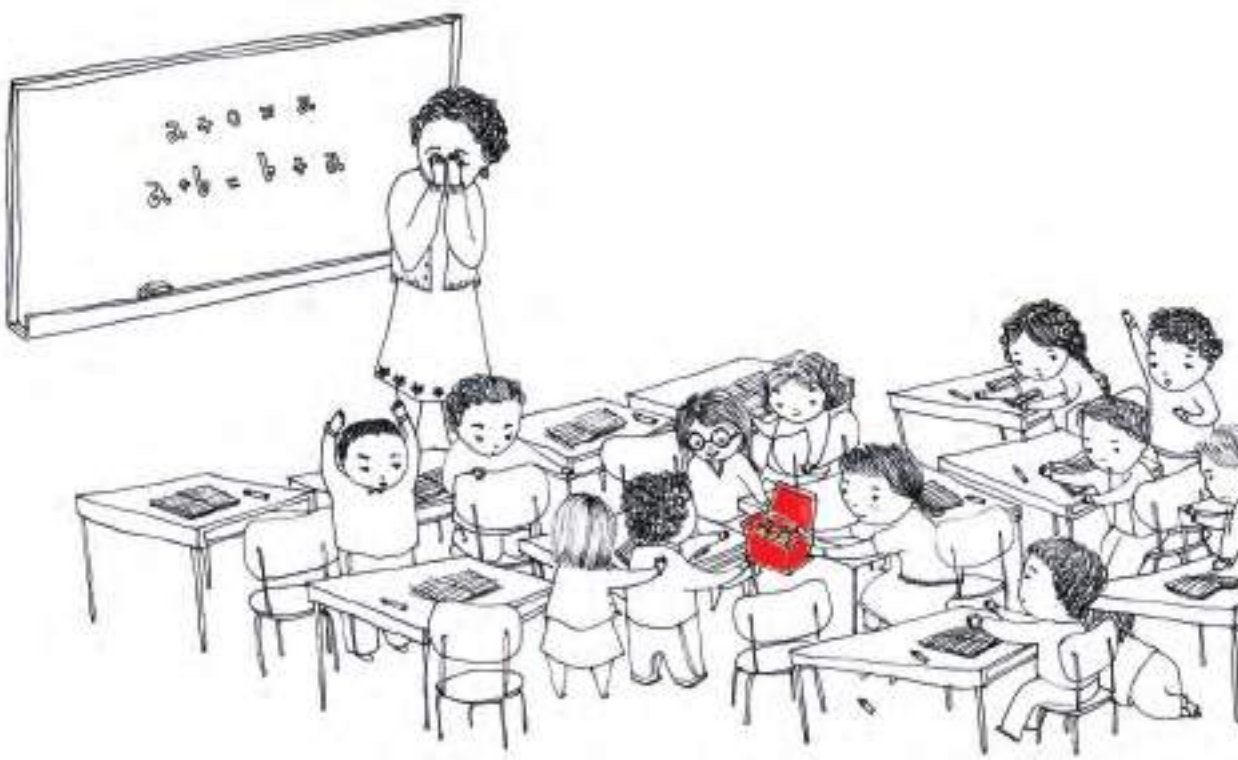
The tragedy of intellectuals consists in their disgruntled but ultimately willing participation in this barmy edifice of mutual control. As long as the majority are hamstrung by their own weddedness to theories and ideologies that preclude insight into, and the motivation to confront, tragedies of the commons; as long as the majority continue to defend a statist ideology that offers spurious legitimization for Big Brother-like meddling; as long as the majority continue frivolously to quaff wine every time they gather in numbers of greater than two or three, the situation will presumably intensify, academia hoist by its own petard, while the rest of society looks on, or looks away indifferently, without edification either way.

One can only imagine how unenlightening the spectacle is up close. A recent report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists entitled *Mental Health of Students in Higher Education* revealed the prevalence of mental illness on UK campuses. In the last decade, studies have shown as many as 65% of female and 54% of male undergraduates scoring positively on the General Health Questionnaire, which screens for minor psychiatric disorders. One study found 29% of students describing clinical levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression and social alienation. In a more recent survey, 80% of the higher education institutions that responded recorded an increased demand for mental health provision over the previous five years. In terms of possible explanations, the report notes that many students today are dealing with financial difficulties, pressure to perform in anticipation of a competitive job

market, drug misuse (particularly alcohol), or family problems.

Whatever the causes, familiar solutions are falling short: 'it is unrealistic now (and probably for the foreseeable future) to expect health or counselling services to be able to offer direct face-to-face therapy for all those who may wish to avail themselves of it.' Given this, it is especially unfortunate that there is another group that students generally don't have enough face-to-face interaction with: academics. Here the cause given in the report is more obvious: 'Academic staff are under constant pressure to maintain and improve research output.' In other words, the incessant evaluation academics are subjecting themselves to is limiting the time they spend mentoring their students – an undeniably important, if not paramount, aspect of the teaching role – resulting in an abundance of miserable, suffering young people (who, because they haven't been taught any life skills, and have had all the entrepreneurial spirit knocked out of them, inevitably swell the ranks of the unemployed).

The Royal College's report, in effect, advocates using one stone to kill



two birds – addressing the problems of demoralized staff on one hand and distressed students on the other. The authors call it a 'settings-based' approach, one in which 'the university or college is seen not only as a place of education but also a resource for promoting health and well-being in students, staff and the wider community'.

I think I can discern in such a 'setting' a template for a more humane, pleasant and, above all, wise academy. One in which intellectuals recognize and dismantle their own specific tragedy of the commons, thereby earning the right to balance and police their own publishing and pastoral obligations, and creating conditions under which other tragedies can be tackled. One in which academics reject responsibility-wrecking theories and ideologies, encourage and practice the intellectual virtues of originality, creativity, depth and rigour, populate their sociotomas with the facts of human nature, and strive to cultivate self-awareness, an attitude of realism, and the well-being of individuals, communities and wider society. One in which students – the future citizens, businesspersons and bureaucrats who will ultimately shape the destiny of society – are not only treated like human beings but educated about the human situation, along with the tragic pitfalls that detract from its brighter prospects.

But that's a cheerier inquiry, for another day – and, *ex hypothesis*, for other thinkers to undertake.

Misconceptions Concerning Wisdom

by Nicholas Maxwell

If our concern is to help wisdom to flourish in the world, then the central task before us is to transform academia so that it takes up its proper task of seeking and promoting wisdom instead of just acquiring knowledge. Improving knowledge about wisdom is no substitute; nor is the endeavour of searching for the correct definition of wisdom.

Do We Need More Knowledge About Wisdom?

Many hold that the world is heading towards disaster. And when one considers the grave global problems that we face, and our appalling incapacity to respond to them, it is difficult not to conclude that this is indeed the case. The explosive growth of the world's population, the development and spread of modern armaments and the lethal character of modern warfare, the destruction of natural habitats and rapid extinction of species, immense inequalities in wealth and power around the globe, depletion of finite natural resources, pollution of earth, sea and air, and above all global warming and all the disasters for humanity that that threatens to unleash: none of this promises well for the future. We know we are threatened by these grave global problems, but we seem to lack the capacity, the wisdom, to resolve them.

As Robert Sternberg has remarked recently, 'If there is anything the world needs, it is wisdom. Without it, I exaggerate not at all in saying that very soon, there may be no world'. This consideration may have led Sternberg and others, in recent years, to initiate and develop the scientific study of wisdom. If the world is to acquire vitally needed wisdom – so it is implicitly assumed – we

first need to know what wisdom is, and how it is to be acquired. We need more *knowledge* about wisdom.

I first became aware of this new field of the scientific study of wisdom as a result of the publication of Sternberg's book *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development* in 1990, to which 19 researchers contributed, including Sternberg himself. Since then, there has been an upsurge in scientific research into wisdom. Allied to this, no doubt, is the University of Chicago's Arete Initiative, a $2m research programme on 'the nature and benefits of wisdom' which seeks in part to arrive at a definition of wisdom.

Does this upsurge in scientific research into wisdom constitute an adequate response to the global crises we face? The rationale behind the research is clear. If we are to manage our planetary affairs in wiser ways than we have done in the recent past, we urgently need more wisdom in the world. In order to discover how we might achieve this, what we need, it would seem, is more knowledge and understanding about the nature of wisdom, what it is, what its origins are, how it is to be acquired and developed. Hence the growth in research that seeks to define wisdom and improve our scientific knowledge and understanding of it.

All this seems reasonable enough, and yet in my view it represents a seriously inadequate response to the crises we face. Something far more radical is required than an increase in knowledge about wisdom. What we need is a radical transformation in the aims and methods, the whole character, of science, and of academic inquiry more generally, so that the basic aim of academia becomes to seek and promote wisdom. We urgently need a new kind of academic inquiry that puts problems of living at the heart of the enterprise, problems of knowledge emerging out of, and feeding back into the central, fundamental intellectual activity of proposing imaginatively, and assessing critically, possible actions, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life designed to help solve our global problems. This new kind of inquiry would devote reason to the task of helping us make progress towards as good a world as possible. In short, instead of seeking more *knowledge* about wisdom, all of rational inquiry needs to become devoted to acquiring and promoting wisdom – wisdom being understood to be the capacity and active desire to realize – to apprehend and create – what is of value in life, for oneself and others. Wisdom in this sense includes knowledge, technological know-how and understanding, but much else besides.

As I have argued at some length elsewhere, all our current global problems are the result of successfully pursuing scientific knowledge and technological

know-how in a way which is dissociated from a more fundamental quest to discover how to tackle our problems of living intelligently, effectively and humanely. The successful pursuit of scientific knowledge and technological know-how makes modern industry, agriculture, medicine and hygiene possible, which in turn lead to great benefits for humanity, but lead also to all our global problems: population growth, modern armaments, destruction of natural habitats, global warming and the rest. What we need to do is embed scientific and technological research in the more fundamental quest to discover how to resolve our global problems in increasingly cooperatively rational ways – especially those problems *created* or made possible by modern science.

The enterprise of acquiring more *knowledge* about wisdom within the status quo is, in short, no substitute for the revolution in our institutions of learning and research that we urgently require so that the basic task becomes to help us create a wiser world.

Those who seek knowledge about wisdom in an academic context need to take note. The greatest obstacle to the growth of wisdom – *personal* wisdom, *institutional* wisdom, *social* wisdom, even *global* wisdom – is, quite simply, the long-standing, gross, structural irrationality of academia, devoted as it is to the pursuit of knowledge. Develop a more rigorous kind of academic inquiry devoted to the pursuit of wisdom, as defined above, and wisdom would flourish in our world.

Wisdom-inquiry – as I call inquiry rationally devoted to the pursuit of wisdom – requires that values, feelings and desires are expressed and critically scrutinized within the intellectual domain of inquiry, since realizing what is of value rationally requires that this is done. For wisdom we need, as I said in my first book, to put 'the mind in touch with the heart, and the heart in touch with the mind, so that we may develop heartfelt minds and mindful hearts'. But knowledge-inquiry (by and large what we have at present) demands that values, feelings and desires be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry so that objective factual knowledge may be acquired. As a result, knowledge-inquiry splits off the mind from the heart, thought from feeling, with the result that thought comes to be driven by unacknowledged, unexamined values, feelings and desires, rarely of the best, and wisdom founders. Knowledge-inquiry also fails to promote wisdom in failing to give priority to (i) the task of proposing and critically examining possible solutions to problems of living – possible actions, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life – and (ii) the task of articulating and critically examining problematic aims – personal, institutional, social, global. Both are central and fundamental within wisdom-inquiry.

Does Defining Wisdom Correctly Pose a Problem?

Those who seek to improve knowledge about wisdom tend to hold that an important first step is to define wisdom correctly. As Richard Trowbridge has remarked, 'Defining wisdom remains a major concern for scholars in all fields with an interest in the concept'. The Arete Initiative, already mentioned, actually has as its title 'Defining Wisdom'. The first question to answer correctly, it seems, is 'What is wisdom?'.

All this assumes, however, that wisdom has some kind of essential nature that is capable of being captured in the correct definition of 'wisdom'. But this Aristotelian idea has been devastatingly criticized and demolished by Karl Popper. In seeking the correct answer to 'What is wisdom?', the correct definition of wisdom, we are chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. What 'wisdom' means may, quite legitimately, depend on context and purpose. It is up to us to decide what, precisely, we choose to mean by 'wisdom', depending on what our purpose is. And indeed, those who take the task of defining wisdom seriously have come up with a great variety of definitions. What needs to be appreciated is that there can be no such thing as *the correct* definition of wisdom: the search for it is the search for something that does not exist.

What implications does this have for the endeavour of improving knowledge – even *scientific* knowledge – about wisdom? Just this. Do not engage in the hollow task of trying to arrive at the *correct* definition of wisdom. Avoid defining wisdom in a detailed, precise, narrow way because, if this definition is taken seriously in subsequent work, it will mean results will be restricted to this narrow definition. Those who do research in the field of acquiring knowledge about wisdom would perhaps do well to agree on a broad, loose, inclusive definition, if a definition has to be formulated at all. But the chief point to take into account is, of course, the one emphasized above. Granted our concern is to help wisdom to flourish in the world, then the really important task before us is not to improve *knowledge* about wisdom but rather to reorganize the academic enterprise so that it becomes devoted, as a whole, to seeking and promoting wisdom.

At this point it may be objected that I criticize the whole idea of defining 'wisdom', and yet put forward just such a definition myself. Should I not practice what I preach?

Let me explain. The argument I have spent the last 40 years developing and trying to get into the public arena (about the urgent need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods of academia) I first developed entirely

independently of the notion of wisdom. The first exposition is to be found in my 1976 book *What's Wrong With Science*, where I wrote of a 'people's rational science of delight and compassion' – a part of the subtitle of the book – and did not employ the word 'wisdom' in the argument at all. Subsequently, having come to appreciate that the basic intellectual and humanitarian aim of the academic enterprise ought to be not just knowledge but rather to help people realize what is of value to them in life, I cast around for a word to stand in for this aim. It struck me that 'wisdom' might not be too inappropriate (although I was aware that the word has connotations at odds with the use I intended to make of it). So, for me, 'wisdom' is merely a technical term. It is just shorthand for 'the capacity and the active desire to realize – apprehend and make real – what is of value in life, for oneself and others'. What really matters, in my view, is that academia should be rationally organized and devoted to pursuing that aim. That it is called 'wisdom' is no more than an afterthought, a secondary matter of no real significance.

Thus I am not engaged in 'defining wisdom' in any serious way, at all. I am merely using the word as shorthand for something that I do hold to be of great importance, just indicated.

Having removed myself from the enterprise of 'defining wisdom', I would, however, like to make the following remark in favour of my definition. There is a sense in which it successfully encompasses all other serious definitions. There would seem to be one point that all those concerned with wisdom, in one way or another, agree on: wisdom is something that it is of great value to possess. If this is so then, granted one possesses wisdom in my sense, it is reasonable to conclude one will come to possess wisdom in these other senses as well. A person who has 'the capacity and active desire to realize what is of value' will, presumably, acquire personal characteristics of value associated with other definitions of wisdom, whatever they may be – self-knowledge, compassion, empathy, the ability to make good judgments about what really matters, and so on. Of course, if one of those other notions of 'wisdom' is such that it is not of value to have 'wisdom' in that sense, then being wise in my sense will probably not lead to 'wisdom' in the other sense. But then, if 'wisdom' in that other sense is not something that it is of value to possess, can this be an acceptable definition? The great virtue of my definition of wisdom is that, because it ties wisdom to the capacity to realize what is of value but leaves what is of value entirely open, there is a sense in which this definition encompasses all other definitions which are such that being wise in any of these other senses is of value, or is the means to the realization of what is of value.

About the Authors

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Nicholas Maxwell has devoted much of his working life to arguing that we need to bring about a revolution in academia so that it seeks and promotes wisdom and does not just acquire knowledge. He has published many papers and six books on this theme: *What's Wrong With Science?*, *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, *The Comprehensibility of the Universe*, *The Human World in the Physical Universe*, *Is Science Neurotic?*, and *Cutting God in Half – And Putting the Pieces Together Again*: see www.ucl.ac.uk/from-knowledge-to-wisdom. For 30 years he taught philosophy of science at University College London, where he is now Emeritus Reader.

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... if the image of the wise man is a little old-fashioned nowadays
– at least in the West – whose fault is that?
We are responsible for a scarcity that afflicts us all.
One is not born wise; one becomes it.

MATTHIEU RICARD