

21. The Lure of the Unprofessional

The system-builders should be credited for much. Bridge-builders are they that allow a whole mass of humanity to cross from one way of thinking to another.

*The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

There is something about crudity that has always attracted me. That swam about as freely and uninhibitedly in my character as insincerity does in many an honest person's. How is it that this often ignoble habit and trait couldn't break the glass of my self-image? How is it that I could be so hyper-hygienic in one area while fouling myself in another? What would a good bourgeois say about a man who can't tell a white lie but can do a black deed? Is it likely that, if he heard me argue that there is an irreducible contradictoriness in all of us, he would look upon me with a more favourable eye? If I myself have used this argument for justifying low and unseemly behaviour, would I be in a position to deny that my reasoning on the matter is highly suspect? On the other hand, I feel quite right to argue that, inasmuch as these meanderings have been a part of my past no less than my present, I have always been partial to the self-justification of my immoral behaviour *and* to the suspicion against it. Which is as much to say that, although my behaviour may be immoral, it has never been so immoral as to make me unwilling to tell the truth about it.

My job as a cab driver (initially this was either seasonal or part-time work) allowed me to see how by slow degrees the libido can be given ever greater licence. Along with providing the field for a highly extended if casual study of diverse humanity, this job functioned as a sort of moving laboratory for self-experiment and self-observation. How inept I felt at times while doing something that is not supposed to require a great deal of intelligence. Keenly aware when I thrilled at some little adventure and violently self-critical when it went astray and sometimes even turned it into a hellish mess (no doubt because my reactions were often excessive), I egoistically ran through it all the thought that never would someone enter my cab with an intelligence equal to mine. Such egoism was in fact my psychological mainstay as I went from being a kind of stumblebum driver to a rather lecherous one.

– Is this his way of providing character references?

– It's better to ignore him.

In order to be on the track of something, I must check out the hypothesis that my life has been on the track of something. Truth-telling, cab driving, and a kind of tightrope walking are all things I have done that didn't fly off in all directions because the first was the strong pinions upon which, condor-like, I followed my course. What an arbitrary thing it is to think that this subject should only exist, if it should exist at all, in the university! To let it move out into the world and to see the world as its proper setting is what strikes me as the intellectually honest move. Let anyone who wishes to tell me differently also tell me they have answered all questions about the nature of truth and what it is to tell it.

– It's dreadful! This spitting on the hard work of so many people!

What a headless fool I could be at times when, not knowing the city well, I had difficulty finding some street, address, building, or pickup spot. Then, like a tormented, raging beast, I would drive around, cursing and swearing like a maniac, exhibiting the excessive speed and rude reckless behaviour for which taxi drivers are known. I would often fight my way through traffic, streetlights, stop signs, and all manner of human or inhuman obstacles as if I were fighting my way through enemy lines. Sheer aggression in the line of duty, in the thought that the customer was either getting terribly impatient or that, after all the struggle to get where he was, he would be long gone. In all honesty, I was sometimes on the verge of being as reckless as when, in my younger years, I drove while my faculties were impaired. From the point of view of pure civility and civilized behaviour, I was no more my regular self than a soldier who is trained to kill people. Insofar as I felt myself assigned to a task, mission, or duty, and insofar as the field proved to be obstacle, lure, resistance, deception, and sometimes danger, it took on the dimensions of a battlefield drained of all blood but what pulsed in my fevered brain.

– I'm going to lie down in my office.

It has been said that character is destiny. It could just as easily be said that character is circumstance. Had my life flowed out as one long European trip, had I always had enough resources simply to move about and meet people on a casual and friendly basis, I doubt there would have been many occasions when the less civil side of me would have risen up. But since I was forced to enter into a system of external demands and expectations that either I couldn't always live up to or else were always susceptible to taking arbitrary and abrupt turns, I was subject to all the attendant emotions and

impulses of a harassed and beleaguered human being.

– I've never felt such violence in myself and never felt the need to be uncivil towards others.

Of course had I been a different sort, I would have searched for work where incivility, my own or others, wouldn't have likely arisen as an issue. Incivility brought me close to something raw, something unpleasant, something demeaning and degrading and yet and yet – something entirely itself, non-veiled, non-duplicitous, non-alloyed to base metal because it *is* this metal. How often is the latter counterfeited in comparison with gold or silver, the valued ideal and its various forms and embodiments? If all human acts were divided between politeness and incivility, I would say that nowhere is there a more thoroughly consistent agreement between thought and word, between intention and act than where the first is absent. When a Shakespearean character vituperates another, it is as if a beautiful mask suddenly drops and reveals an ugly but all too human face. If one is more repelled by beautiful masks that feign to be non-masks than by the coarse features of a non-feigning face, then the best way to spend the better part of one's time, apart from being alone and in the company of the ideal that one either presumes to be or has the presumption to think unfeigned, is in the company of the latter.

– Am I dreaming? Is this the evil genius? Everything seems normal except this voice that comes from nowhere.

To think of all the people I met: the brief exchanges, the brief events, sometimes banal, sometimes dramatic that have their greatest reality now in a fading memory. In this rather limited and personal zone shared perhaps by a few limited, scattered, and fading others. How vulnerable then the so-called true report to the so-called false one! The what-took-place that is in principle verifiable to the account of it that can escape this principle either wholly or in part. All that guides me as I grope back over the past are various impressions about a particular city's day and nightlife. Things that span work and pleasure, health and sickness, riches and poverty, sobriety and drunkenness, wisdom and stupidity, happiness and sadness, seriousness and mischief, good will and ill will, order and disorder. Can the truth-status of any individual detail at this point in time be more important than simply the wealth and diversity of details? Can what I report as having happened during many private and obscure moments be determined on an ontological basis more firm than the report itself? Thus it must be that, speaking of such things, I tell the truth in the more general and objective sense (that is, not

just to myself) only insofar as my report manages to carry the same weight and conviction that others feel when they examine themselves with rigour. It is the character of this report then that ultimately proves or disproves it: the various signs it shows of not wishing to hide or hold back or, for that matter, to forge additional experiences about the past beyond what seems to be unavoidable.

– I feel now I'm supposed to say something. But all I can think of is you've got to have a minimum of belief.

Well, I have said that I was attracted to the wide world as a classroom and it now seems appropriate to bring in another image: the restricted or confined space of a taxicab as a private booth, closed office, or confessional. So many suffering heads trying to patch together a dignity of sorts. So many lives growing up as ragged weeds from earliest years. So many successful or moderately successful people living their compact and modular lives. So many earnest lives being lived all over. So many revealing snatches and brief conversations that made it seem as if intellectualism was very rare and common sense and pragmatism universal. So much in fact as to make me feel I was in a human machine as part of it and not only the driver of a merely manmade one.

– Silence. Whatever we can't speak of should be passed over in silence.

It was this sort of thing: the machine couldn't be dispensed with and yet everything that was low-grade, that seemed to be rough, coarse, and neglected because it wasn't part of the machine, struck me as being desirable and necessary (at least in the large), as being somehow more than it was by virtue of being *what it was*. In all this I couldn't think of giving credit to people for making conscious moves along ethical lines (though this could certainly work its way in somewhere down the line) but simply the indifferent, mysterious, beyond-good-and-evil constitution of the whole. A kind of order/disorder as much identifiable with the human machine and its dehumanizing effects as it was with the rough and barbarous elements that strangely humanized it.

– He thinks he finds bottom by seeing none.

In this outer zone where prejudices are amply viewed, where conventional coverups simply don't have much reason to thrive, I moved as one with an antenna-like grasp of the limited reflection that formed these prejudices. That was largely what it was as limited thought and thought-production

because of its inability to return to these prejudices in a doubling back movement. In fact nothing seemed more universal to me than this lack of reflective dexterity. From the highest to the lowest it was hard to find anyone who questioned and reflected with an effort to get behind himself. On the other hand, given that so much is universally hidden away, I should have been cognizant of a largely unreflected prejudice in myself. Which is to say that people are always more of a world in their cognizant being than they give themselves out to be. Limiting themselves to being relatively consistent in their utterances and outlooks, they seem stupider, simpler, and more fixed and one-dimensional than they actually are. Were this not the case, there would be more than a few people who wouldn't be able to spend barely a moment thinking about a point of view different from their own. Even the most thickheaded and unwavering dolt can be made to waver in his arguments – so long as he is willing to argue – by being reminded of other arguments and points of view. It is this repertoire of arguments and viewpoints that is always alive in some sense and to some degree in the most varied range of people. Like a great stack of cards in a tremendous game, it must always be drawn from in those countless situations where to communicate with someone quickly and effectively counts for far more than being innovative and original.

– Let him go on. He's not the only one who can see through a glass darkly.

Prejudice is a sensitive issue. Few people go out of their way to make their own a topic of discussion. It is usually a case of expressing a prejudice or else denouncing others for expressing theirs. Sometimes the most intelligent, well-meaning, and cultivated people seem little different from others in this respect. Reaching back into my memory, I can see once again that young couple I picked up very early in the morning. The more assertive and talkative of the two was a black woman. Although showing signs of a limited education, she spoke to her companion as one who was well versed on the subject of racism and not simply well-schooled by the experience of it. But little did I dwell upon this minor incongruity. It was rather the later event that struck me. Continuing her discourse right up to the time I reached her door, she then told me she had to run into the house to get some money. Being the rather naive driver I was at the time (meaning in effect I still hadn't developed a systematic or working prejudice against poor people, natives, and inhabitants of the demimonde), I waited for about ten minutes before I finally abandoned all hope that she would return. Later I told this incident to a woman I had recently become friendly with. We were seated on a park bench on a beautiful day. The woman I was with was not only black but a journalist from South Africa seeking work in Canada. She

was not only a fellow tenant in a modest downtown apartment block but one who had been gracious enough to look over and comment on one of those terrible attempts at a play I was forever working on. A second surprise came out of this whole affair when, in telling my story about the black woman who, along with her white companion, had cheated me, I spoke about the incongruity of the woman's complaining about racism and then promptly committing an act that could hardly be construed as working in favour of its elimination. No sooner had I delivered this critique when my well-spoken neighbour, looking stricken, jumped to her feet and walked away.

– It was rather tactless.

With people I have no reason to think unintelligent and close-minded, I have always preferred to speak my mind and risk giving offence than to hold like glue to the seemingly correct, proper, prejudice-free, and I might as well add, superficial. My thought was always that, if someone judged me to be in the wrong, he or she should stand their ground and make their case against me. Arguably my greatest prejudice has always been against those who lack courage.

– His sister said — yes, I remember: "It's so easy for the strong to be strong and assign it all to themselves and not to luck."

A large percentage of my customers were native people. For a number of years, I was very much on edge with them. Several reasons could be cited for this. However, if I were to sum up the matter most perspicuously, I would have to go beyond my relations simply with them. I would have to say that being on edge with natives and other disadvantaged people (perhaps ninety-five percent of the natives I encountered were disadvantaged) was tied up with the fact that it took me several years of driving around the city before I got to know it well. Before I got to know it like the back of my hand so I could be confident in dealing with the most troublesome situations.

Not knowing the city well as a system of roads, routes, residential, industrial, commercial, educational, governmental, cultural, recreational, transport, and health facilities was definitely a drawback and an inhibiting and even intimidating factor. Getting lost, making mistakes, wasting time, upsetting people, etc. were elements so common in the first few years that I can only compare it to struggling to learn a new language. Stepping back from it all, I can't help but reflect on the large number of taxidrivers who were immigrants and who were not only confronted with learning the language of the city but English itself. It is difficult for me now not to

appreciate what they had to contend with. In any event, the business of learning a new language was complicated by the fact that not all segments of the city used the same one. The poor areas where unemployment, alcohol, drugs, prostitution, crime, violence, and the like prevailed produced a dialect of behaviour that was class isolation and ghettoisation personified.

When I first started driving, I felt much less the master of my situation than I did later. Much less in control of my cab once I had a fare and was somewhere between A and B. Besides the problem I was having with the language of the city, there was also this problem with the dialect: this often quick to anger or show your fangs way of speaking that was not habitual with me. Given that I was quite conscious of being in a service industry, I acted with customary deference to people irrespective of where I picked them up. I accorded all the same level of civility in such a way that I often felt myself at a disadvantage with those whom I have been calling the disadvantaged. For it was with them and not with better-off types that occasions would arise wherein I would be abused, threatened, cheated, intimidated, and so on. No lack of aggression and violence was there amongst some of them and, given that they had been disadvantaged all their lives, I suppose it was natural for them to take advantage of some situations.

At this point I could deliver numerous anecdotes to justify my slow but steady drift towards a working prejudice and on-the-job racial policy. It would have its sensational and self-indulgent side and, like the *fait divers* of a newspaper, exhibit or engender feelings of moral superiority. But because my task is to tell the truth about myself, I must forego this route and focus on the twinned curiosity and moral superiority that kept me alive and enthusiastic as I toured the human zoo and studied up close some of its specimens. Not leaving aside the matter of prejudice, I would say that learning to operate with the presumption that a certain segment of society had it in its power to make my life miserable ultimately saved me from a great deal of misery.

I'm tempted to state my working prejudice and on-the-job racial policy formulaically to avoid soft-peddalling them (or maybe *to* soft-pedal them). Although I have never considered these practises to be unjustified, I have always been sensitive to the fact that, under different circumstances, they either would have been or could have become so. For inasmuch as they contained the seeds of cruelty and calculated indifference, they were in effect what exists everywhere. Practises then that often seem justified or justifiable but have the potential to nourish these seeds either without

reference to an altered situation or else in accordance with external conditions radically favourable to their monstrous growth and proliferation.

So this was my working prejudice and on-the-job racial policy: 1) white person + suburban residence = 1% probability of my being verbally harassed, cheated out of my fare, having the taxicab damaged or dirtied, etc.; 2) native person + inner city residence = 10% probability of the same occurring. Accordingly, I systematically discriminated against the second group by not granting it the automatic right to be trusted in the general middle-class way and to be treated with what might be called middle-class courtesy and respect. Although nine out of ten customers from the second group were not much different from those of the first (apart from minor considerations such as non-tipping, coarse language, poor dress, and the like), the one out of ten who made all the difference and who sometimes caused me serious trouble was sufficient to put me on the defensive. Or, more accurately, on the track of becoming *less* defensive insofar as I could find ways to avoid being victimized by, when necessary, going on the offensive.

– I get into a taxi. Go some place. Sometimes they're dirty. What more do I think about?

– Chalmers? Oh, good Lord! What're you doing?

– Did you hear the latest, Theo? A course on prejudice. Mainly how to justify it.

– It woke me up like a bad dream. I'm afraid we're never going to get rid of him.

– There's a glass. Help yourself, Theo. I'm taking the day off.

– You know I don't drink, Chalmers. What's got into you?

– Isn't the question rather what's got into us?

– No, it isn't because we're only in this situation on account of him.

– But are we still ourselves, Theo, you and me?

– I'm not going to answer that question. I'm just going to say that we're struggling to be ourselves – maintain our sanity – in a hellish situation.

– As philosophers, shouldn't we examine it?

– No, I'm not about to play Descartes and I suggest you curb this tendency of yours to play Thoreau. You know what I mean. Bringing up big philosophical questions at the most inopportune times. Luncheons, committee meetings, and once, you remember, when I invited you to the house and my wife had over the Greek ambassador. Really, Chalmers, I — I'm sorry, old man, but it's something I've been meaning to bring up for a long time.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words and, though a verbal picture can easily take up as many, it may still capture dozens of interfused elements that would require a matching exposition ten times as long. With this in mind, I'm prompted to bring up one incident that, with no less reference to the kind of animal I could become than to the human zoo just mentioned, captures the good, the bad, and the ugly of my life as a cab driver.

It started off as a busy Saturday night in the middle of summer. I was thirty-five at the time and, although I had been driving on and off for several years, I still wasn't as adept as I would be when, three or four years later, I was forced to work full-time. Around midnight I got a call that sent me out to the very limits of the city. There I found a young native boy, about nine years old, patiently waiting at a phone booth. In his possession was a small rundown bicycle. After I had put it in the trunk, got behind the wheel, and had him seated in the back, he explained to me that he had left the inner city with an older friend and, both on bicycles, they had cycled around for several hours, always moving away from the downtown until, for some reason, they had become separated. Finding himself so far out, worn-out by his adventure, and not sure of his way home, he had called his family to arrange to have him picked up. The first unsettling moment of this soon-to-be very rough night was when, upon finding out that he had been away from home for six or seven hours and then remarking that his parents must have been worried about him, I heard him answer: "No, they're drinking." It was with some trepidation that I finally arrived in the darkened centre of the low-rental housing complex. Presumably the planners of it thought it was necessary to grant the tenants a good deal of unlighted parking space. After I had unloaded the bicycle and had my young customer lead me towards his unit, I noticed some adolescents loitering about. Then my attention was drawn to the brightly-lit windows and open door where a lively party was underway. I entered the unit, the usual dingy living quarters that one finds in this part of the city, with the boy who promptly disappeared while I,

waiting uneasily by the door, listened to blaring country music and loud voices that issued from the back. After a time the boy returned with an old woman, probably his grandmother, who was clutching a twenty-dollar bill. It seemed that all was going to end well when, all of a sudden, another woman entered the scene. By the way she shook and scolded the boy, I could only suspect that she was his mother (although the degree of violence she used might have suggested otherwise). Turning upon me then, she fiercely told me that I hadn't picked up the boy where I said I did and therefore wasn't going to get paid. Instead of walking out of a bad situation, I began to argue with her. In the meantime the poor grandmother, still clutching the twenty-dollar bill, stood in the background. Beside her the boy with tears in his eyes. Then it came. The younger woman pushed me towards the door and, before I knew it, I had hit her.

And before I got back to the taxi, I realized I had made a mistake. A veritable lynch mob came after me and hauled me out of it. Screaming their lust for revenge, they scratched and tore and punched away at me with a certain degree of ineffectuality that I can only put down to their years. Nevertheless I did receive a few solid punches. But all in all I managed to stay on my feet and find the opening to take to my heels. Running to a nearby busy street, I flagged down a cab and was promptly taken to the police station. There I waited for a couple of hours before being taken back to the scene of the crime. My crime, their crime: the police officers weren't sure. For it never entered my head to give them an account any different from the one I'm giving now.

- What do you make of that, Chalmers?

- Thoreau?

- Chalmers, I know your hero is Wittgenstein. Let's not pursue the matter. You've always been a credit to the Department.

- I've been teaching Gadamer for the past twenty years.

- I know, I know. I only meant you have a soft spot for those philosophers who think it should be lived and breathed. Tell me - just to divert matters - have you noticed how filthy the cabs are in this city? I took one from the airport last Sunday and it was full of rubbish. All over the floor. When I tried to say something about it to the driver, he could barely understand me. Really, I think it's high time they imposed an English course on people who take up that line of work.

What does it matter to me that other people are better behaved when I know that, chances are, they're less honest? That they cover up so much and feign a control of their inner and outer lives that every good writer knows is the crooked backbone of a frail humanity? Which is as much as to say that what is called order and control is inextricably bound up with what is the *image* of it. And that honesty and openness about this are only valued in minor doses and in relatively isolated areas. Such an area is where I am now and where the strict philosopher never is. He who tells the truth while exhibiting great control over his subject, who exhibits no doubts about this control, and who doubts, dismisses, or in some way neutralizes anyone who has such doubts.

– What impudence! Jumping from cab driving to philosophical turf! Are we to recommend him for a special chair in our Department? Letting savagery and buffoonery take over? Hitting women?

– I don't think he's arguing he should take control, Theo. Just that there isn't the control in a philosophy department or book or whatever that you and I give out.

– You and I?

– Well, our crowd. People who often have to give the appearance of being on top of things when they're not and — well, I'm sure you've felt that.

– I've never played the guru.

– I'll be retiring in six months, Theo. So I'm taking the opportunity to speak my mind.

– Chalmers, I didn't suspect you had this problem.

– Yes, it's been gnawing at me for a good long time. I once had a teacher, believe it or not, who actually thought his thoughts in class. How I wish I could've followed his example.

– Chalmers, I wasn't referring to that.

My honesty had its limits. I lied and cheated on occasion. Although I can't remember telling any serious lies, I certainly told small ones. And as for cheating, well, it usually happened over change and when I didn't like the customer.

– Do you hear this, Chalmers? Do you hear this? There’s the proof! A working dishonesty harnessed to a working prejudice! A taxi-driving Thoreau who hasn’t even got the decency to go out into nature and be pure.

I also picked up prostitutes and got into the habit of using them. Some were even minors.

– Chalmers, if there were a way to turn off this pornographic site, this strip show, this indecent way of exposing an allegedly philosophic mind, I’d do it. As it stands, we must simply bear it with as much dignity as we can.

The whirligig of time is the whirligig of every day and every week. Week after week. Some things step into view for the first time. Others disappear. It was only after I had lost my youth that the very young took on an allure they never had before.

– Chalmers, I’m going to do something I’ve never done before. Hand me that glass.

– Theo!

– Fill it up. I’m going to try to get it down.

A long way away from a Marquis de Sade but not so far away from a faltering and transgressing priest. That about sums it up. Sexuality is that turbulent subject so out in the open as a vast public property and so secret and furtive as innumerable private transactions.

– I rather wish he’d move on to something else. What’s that line in Hamlet? Treat every man after his dessert and who should ‘scape whipping?

Well, there’s definitely a satirical element that comes from having to make them talkative. Many an academic, were he confronted with a similar situation, would simply clam up. I have never yet encountered one who impressed me as being more than intelligent, competent, civil, hard-working, fair-minded, and sometimes witty and humorous. It was only in books I met those others who could be all this and something else that I’m tempted to call errant. The capacity to depart from the tried and true that, good or bad, is the way of genius.

– Very charitable, isn’t he, Chalmers? Crooked paths. The way of genius, Blake, isn’t it? And we’re just simple underlabourers.

I have been masturbating all my life and what I'm doing now is only the most elegant, protracted, and heroic form of it. The genealogy of myself as a truth-teller requires stating what is unpleasant and impure in order to be pure. Pure in one way and in one movement that can only distinguish itself by drawing itself towards and squaring itself off with the mixed company it habitually keeps. That I got into fights, cheated, lied, whored and did so always with some measure of restraint or reason were the weeds that never overran the spiritual garden I may claim to have cultivated.

- *We're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz!*
- *Chalmers, what's got into you?*
- *Shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings.*
- *You're drunk.*
- *I'm just testing the limits of language. Everything from an early Wittgensteinian point of view should draw us a picture of the world. Otherwise it's nonsense.*
- *An independent part of the world, you mean. A set of objects and the relations between them that correspond to the logic of propositional language.*
- *The glass is on the table or the glass is not on the table. But not there is a pink elephant under my desk.*
- *I suppose we must pass the time somehow.*
- *There is more between heaven and earth than in your philosophy, Horatio.*
- *You should've stayed with your dream of the theatre, Andrew.*
- *All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances. It's a damn frightful thing.*

War! War against professionals and professionalism. A private war conducted from the back of a classroom. Certainly not merciless, rowdy, vainglorious or cruel. At least not the vast bulk of the time. War against what I didn't hate but couldn't always like. War against what I didn't disrespect but couldn't always respect. What was less a bonafide threat from without than from

within. As if it were a vast doctrine preached largely in the practise or in countless indirect ways to discourage wide-openness, radical self-critique, and the shaking of the foundations. As if the search for truth so earnestly pursued should have its scheduled flight paths from which nothing should divert save all in the past that had already done so. The continual demand not so much articulated as institutionalized that stressed a recognizable and agreed-upon starting point. That was not lacking in sense from the perspective of what is social and needs to be learned as such but rather all too full of this sense and no other. The feeling then almost of an adolescent perpetually rebelling against a necessary but constraining parent. What others shook off for the sake of becoming responsible and successful adults struck me as treason, a betrayal of their youth, its knightly quality that was as hard to find in the professional world as a fair maid to rescue from a dragon. Yes, no doubt I had already personified truth as a woman without knowing it and before I had ever read Nietzsche's account of her as a coy, veiled, secretive, and discountenancing beauty.

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