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SAUL

## A Wondrous Uncertainty

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*John Ralston Saul's most recent book represents his latest step in developing an argument he has now refined for more than a decade. He describes it as his biggest leap in a new approach to ideas since Voltaire's Bastards. He notes that the uncertainty of such intellectual projects is where the real excitement of discovery lies. In this essay, he argues that as humans we are at our best, and most human, when we "embrace the complexity that comes from uncertainty." He describes this uncertainty as the pursuit of an impossible equilibrium among our six qualities.*

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WE live in a society that is among the best educated to have ever existed in human history. Of course, we still have many problems with literacy and other matters, but compared to our ancestors we have a very well educated population, and also a rich one, even though there remain enormous problems in terms of distribution of income. And this very rich, very educated society benefits enormously from technologies and methodologies that are far in advance of anything ever seen before in human history.

What is so strange is how in a such a sophisticated, complex society, every time we are faced with a real societal decision, we are told that we really do not have much of a choice – that it is an "either/or" decision. And when we are faced with a crisis situation, this phenomenon gets worse. In almost all of these important societal decisions, we are

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essentially told that we have a stark decision of black and white, rational versus irrational, head versus heart, hard-nosed versus romantic.

Take an example from recent history. Suppose you are working as a scientist for a corporation that produces a postmodern cattle feed made up of a revolutionary cocktail of ingredients which is fattening up the nation's cattle. One morning you walk into the conference room, and your colleagues close the door, saying, *We have a problem. There's a rumour circulating about the feed. It's about the protein we put in via the ground-up sheep carcasses. Some people are starting to believe a disease present in the dead sheep has somehow leapt to the cows. It gets worse – people are starting to think that meat from the cows has in turn infected human beings, and that a number of people now dying in agony are victims of this same disease. No one can prove it. We are facing something entirely new, so of course there isn't much proof either way. It's just a rumour. But we have to deal with this situation.*

At this point, you and your colleagues fall inexplicably and unnecessarily into the either/or situation that has created so many human disasters.

You are told that you can take the rational, hard-nosed, managerial, professional position – or, on the other hand, you can be soppy, soft, romantic, truthful, open ... *ethical*. From this perspective, the soppy position is to say, *We must be honest and tell the public that we don't know what is happening, and that therefore we must stop selling the feed until we can study the problem and find out what is going on. Once we learn more about this, we'll make a decision about this product.* The hard-nosed, rational, sophisticated, intellectual, managerial position is to say, *If we take this sentimental position, we'll lose our jobs. If we take this position, our colleagues and superiors will think we're weak. Besides, we have a professional obligation to protect our corporation (or perhaps our government department, or our profession, or our industry). And anyway, if we admit that we have fears about this product's safety, the public will panic.*

Consider for a moment this last rationalization. If we are so afraid of the public's theoretical inclination to panic, to become irrational when presented with important information, then why bother to preserve a democracy at all? I've never understood this reasoning.

Of course the above scenario actually took place in Britain with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. In the case of this particular epic decision, those in charge feared that public panic would destroy the British beef industry, ruin thousands of farmers, harm the economy. So they chose to do what they considered hard-nosed, rational, professional managers must. They decided they would *manage* their way through this crisis. And the end result of this, only a few years later, has been the

destruction of the British beef industry, the ruination of farmers, and a damaged economy. Oh, and so far 100 people have died. In other words, what was perceived to be the soppy, soft, naïve position might actually have saved the beef industry, kept the farmers prosperous, allowed all these people to keep their jobs, and perhaps saved some lives. We could tell essentially the same story in relation to the ruin of fisheries, contaminated drinking water, and other recent catastrophes.

The most fascinating thing about such awful stories is that the choice these managers offered themselves was an artificial, inane, simplistic and ridiculously juvenile one. To see these two positions as the hard-nosed pragmatic versus the naïve romantic is absurd and, more to the point, *unsophisticated*. We live in the most sophisticated civilization that has ever existed, and yet every time we have to make a decision about something serious, we revert to this profoundly unsophisticated either/or mindset. This should tell us that something is wrong with our approach to reason.

Something is very wrong with our society's intellectual methodology if we adopt an approach that is so essentially Manichean – an almost superstitious concept of simplified good and evil. We pretend to be rational, as opposed to emotional, and in doing so we adopt a religious outlook, but not one that exemplifies the best attributes of religion; we think religiously in the worst, narrow-minded sense of religion. So we regularly find ourselves, every time a decision has to be made, caught between two extremes, caught between artificial opposites.

SOME PEOPLE still argue that human activity cannot be responsible for global warming, or argue that there is no global warming – even though about five or six years ago some communities in Nunavut started putting artificial ice into their community rinks. Now, it is entirely possible that in ten years we will have a return to colder winters. It is entirely possible that we are just experiencing a natural weather cycle. On the other hand, it is also possible that humans are causing the climate to change, and that in ten years it will be virtually impossible to reverse the damage. So the question we should be asking ourselves is not, *Do we know for certain?* We don't. And the sensible thing to do, if we do not have all the facts, is to do our best to learn more about the problem and in the meantime to act in a sophisticated manner – actually a *conservative* manner – by attempting to limit our exposure to the risk of a non-reversible situation. But this would require that we take a more



Rembrandt,  
*The Two Philosophers*, 1628.

complex approach to the way in which we make decisions, the way in which we think about ourselves, the way in which we embrace our powers of reason.

The key mistake made by the people who brought us the Mad Cow disaster was to be obsessed with certainty. They felt they had to be certain. And when you reach this sort of mindset, you stop asking yourself, *What happens if we're wrong?* Humans share with other animals a real fear of uncertainty, and a love of certainty. Dogs and cats hate being in a situation where their daily certainty is threatened. The difference is that, while other mammals cannot live with uncertainty, we are actually most interesting as human beings when we actually embrace uncertainty and act on account of it. In fact, if you want to summarize the complexity of being a human being, you could say that *it is the ability to embrace the complexity that comes out of uncertainty.*

The heart of ideology lies in humanity's fear of uncertainty. That is what ideology is all about: having the answer. And it does not matter whether one is a fascist or a Bolshevik or an absolute believer in a certain religion – or an absolute believer in a certain kind of cow feed or a certain form of economics. These ideologies are driven by our fears – which concretize as a fear of uncertainty – and therefore embrace ideological certainty. Ideologies always reduce the debate to an

either/or situation. And the either/or is framed in advance. If the choice is presented as being between rationality and irrationality, it's pretty obvious which one you're supposed to choose, if you want to keep your job or be respected in society.

The argument I am making is that we seem to lack, in spite of the truly sophisticated nature of our society, a conscious sense of the tools that we have, the qualities that we have in order to act as human beings. To act, that is, as people who are happy to embrace uncertainty and to think and decide in a complex, uncertain, and sophisticated manner. As a result, we fall into these false choices. And we *know* that these are false choices, because despite our rationalizations we do know what the ethical choice is, or the common sense choice, just to take two examples. But people in such a dilemma do not want to look weak or naïve, so they tell themselves they will fight behind the scenes in a more sophisticated manner and somehow make things right, someday.

In other words, in a crisis situation the belief in complexity becomes internalized, but cannot be expressed in public. The eventual result is self-loathing. Because if you are unable to act and talk publicly the way you *think*, or imagine yourself, the next thing that happens is you do not like yourself. You know that you are not living up to your own standards, and you begin to slip into self-loathing. And since we don't really like disliking ourselves, we tend to dress up self-loathing as cynicism, telling ourselves: "How can anyone do anything positive anyway? There's nothing but corruption in public affairs." Cynicism becomes a justification for not taking the necessary sophisticated positions in public. And so that self-loathing becomes disengagement and cynicism and weaves itself into something that goes perfectly with a managerially driven, corporate society of self-interest.

What then is most admired in such a society of professionals? *Loyalty to the group. Not speaking out against the group. Speaking internally with your peers but not out of turn publicly in isolation from your peers.* So what comes out of this self-loathing is in effect a certain school of professionalism – which is to say loyal passivity, public passivity. There is a striving for that sort of smoothness in public, and a shunning of non-conformity, because non-conformists are marginal and not respected.

It is curious. We have a society that, on the one hand, takes pride in seeing itself as the most individualistic in human history, but as soon as you become non-conforming, you are marginalized. Non-conformity is not really about not wearing a tie, or having some peculiar talent in sports or the arts, or leading a bohemian lifestyle. Organizing

your personal life the way you like is a wonderful thing, but it has nothing to do with your *individualism in a society*.

So, we have this strange perversion of the idea of loyalty. It is exactly the wrong kind of loyalty for a society that takes such pride in declaring itself a democracy based on individualism. And it causes us to forget that the key characteristic of a citizen-based democracy is not really loyalty, it's *roughness*. It's that roughness around the edges. Citizen-based democracy should be noisy and filled with disagreements. And it is appalling that when a crisis arises anybody would feel they had the right to ask any citizen of a democracy whether they are "loyal." You are a citizen. You are by definition loyal to the whole. That is the unstated central assumption of citizenship. It is wrong to fall into believing that a citizen has an obligation to demonstrate his loyalty. That is a trap. The next stage would be the assertion that any criticism will be taken as disloyalty. In reality, the mark of loyalty in a democracy is *disagreement*. If you can't disagree, you are not loyal to the public good. If all you do is agree, then you are not a real citizen.

Part of this culture of false loyalty and public smoothness is rooted in the social history of the Western democracies. More and more, we have become a middle-class society. Even 150 years ago, when most Canadian voters couldn't read or write and had dirt floors in their cabins, they were coming to think of themselves as middle class. Gradually the European societies also have moved away from the idea of working class, middle class, and upper class, and adopted this concept of themselves as a middle-class citizenry. One of the characteristics of being middle class is supposed to be a certain politeness. There are very valuable facets to this politeness; it reflects our sense of how citizens are supposed to treat each other: with respect and tolerance and helpfulness. There are also, of course, the silly, finicky, and prudish aspects of middle-class manners. That's just the way we are. The problem begins when we start confusing middle-class manners with the superficial public smoothness of corporatist loyalty. That is where corporatism and democracy go wrong – when any action which is not polite is considered to be a default in democratic terms. And we're quite far down that road today.

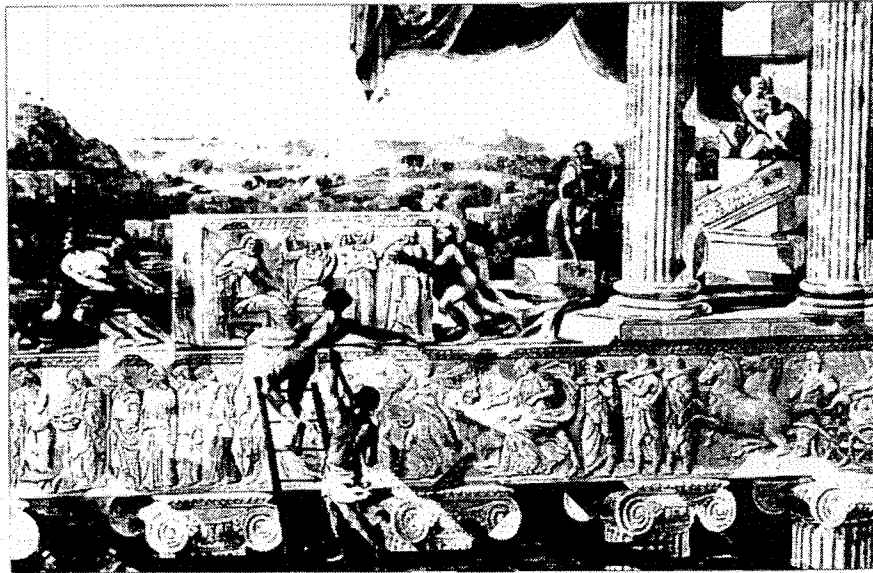
Just after the Second World War, Camus wrote about the institutional torture that occurred during the German occupation of France. He discussed the different classes and ranks of torturers. The Gestapo or collaborator bosses tended to have chauffeured cars to go to and from work. But being an actual torturer is not really an upper-class

occupation. The ordinary torturer would take the Paris Metro to work. Camus notes that these men, having been well brought up, would have regularly given up their seats to old ladies in the subway. This is an exact, if frightening, illustration of public smoothness, and how it is not to be confused with being a good and loyal citizen.



**S**OCRATES, 2,500 years ago, made a very strong argument that corporatism does not work. He presented one of his Socratic stories about human beings having first lived alone, which was boring and difficult and pointless. So to create a real human society, Zeus sent Hermes out to distribute skills and talents among the people, setting up some as carpenters, others as cooks, and so on. And while technically this worked out much better for humanity, these societies soon fell apart – because of course it is a corporatist model. And the point of this story is that societies based simply on self-interest and expertise fall apart – because they're not really societies. Socrates in effect was dismissing with contempt the classic Chicago School approach to economics and the classic management view of organizations – what has become the ruling truism of our day – that we are driven by self-interest as defined by what we do. Of course, I am not the first person to make these observations. Sensible people have been saying this sort of thing for thousands of years.

So Zeus called Hermes in again, and instructed him to go back to the mortals and this time to distribute among them *aidos* and *dike* – which is to say “reverence” and “right.” Reverence means a sense of community, shared knowledge of restraint and belonging, a sense of community. And Right means freedom of speech, debate, justice, decision-making, social order, public truth. Hermes was nervous about this new mission, since the last one had gone so badly. He asked Zeus for more specific instructions: should he distribute reverence and right the way he distributed expertise – a bit here and a bit there? And then, in one sentence, Zeus summarized what society is. He told Hermes to distribute *aidos* and *dike* to everybody, “for societies cannot exist if only a few share in the essential qualities of the human race.”



What then do we share? The argument I am making is that we share a series of qualities of equal value. I have listed six, and have put them in alphabetical order because I think they are of equal value – common sense, ethics, imagination, intuition, memory, and reason. These six are a pretty good approximation of pretty well everything that's been argued in the past. It's a larger list than most, but I think it actually glues together the arguments which have been made over the past 2,500 years. The thing about these qualities is that they are tools – for shaping ourselves and shaping our society. And they exist whether you admit they exist or not.

When you are being forced to make an absurd choice between what is presented as the hard-nosed versus the romantic, these six qualities can help you find ways to get around the stupidity of that artificial choice, to help you think and act in a more sophisticated manner. If we were not able to get around the obstacle of the false either/or choice, the whole of society would have fallen apart long ago. So we use these qualities all the time, even if our society does not allow us to use them in a conscious, sophisticated, admiring way. You almost have to use them through a process of subterfuge, which is very peculiar and rather self-destructive.

I have believed for some time that of all the great eighteenth-century thinkers the Neapolitan philosopher Vico is perhaps the one who makes the most sense for the early twenty-first century. Vico said human nature has the principle property of being social. This is also the true nature of knowledge, of normal action, of the heroic act, of the public act – inclu-



sive, in other words, even of the professional life. Vico is saying exactly the same things as Zeus, and exactly the opposite of Milton Friedman and his associates.

CONSIDER what happens in a case like that of Mad Cow Disease. If any scientist working for the company producing the feed expressed her anxiety about the potential dangers of the product, the company could remind her that she had signed an employment contract in which she acknowledged that her *understanding* of such issues and her *opinions* on these matters belonged to her employer. The same is true of any government-employed scientist. In fact, some of the British scientists became so ethically troubled that they contacted friends at McGill University and asked them to organize an international conference. If invited and questioned, they would feel obligated to tell the truth. This international conference was held in 1996 in Toronto. However, the organizers made one fundamental error. Being honest people, they held the conference on record and invited the media. The media, seeing that it was on record, assumed that nothing truthful or interesting would be said and didn't bother to come. And so, while virtually everything there was to be said about Mad Cow Disease was said in Toronto in 1996, there was practically no media coverage.

If you were to summarize what had gone wrong in the whole terrible story of Mad Cow Disease, I think it would be the fear of uncertainty, the fear of imagination. The scientists had introduced *part* of a highly imaginative idea – taking dead sheep and putting them into cattle feed. But they quickly aborted their use of imagination. Uncertainty was not allowed to play its role. Those above them demanded results as rapidly as possible and so settled for false certainty. There was a betrayal of the central role of imagination as the motor of progress. They were too eager to get the answer.

They forgot that you should always avoid unnecessary answers. Our society is obsessed by answering all the time, striving for certainty. We don't need most of these answers. We need a lot of questions. We need a lot of uncertainty in order to keep our minds moving, in order to keep ourselves going as human beings. Answers shut us down. In fact, it blocks our mental advance to produce answers all the time, because once you have an answer, you don't have to think anymore.

In the aftermath, there was a Royal Commission to study the Mad Cow epidemic. It was chaired by Lord Phillips, a perfectly decent

judge, I'm sure. I read key parts of the commission's report, and it seemed to summarize the whole terrible affair very honestly. But something about the language of the report began to strike me as quite bizarre. Lord Phillips writes that information was held back from the public, and that the public has been left with a "feeling of betrayal." It was only after reading on a while that I began to realize why this language was nagging at me – *that the withholding of information had left the public with a "feeling" of betrayal*. No it hadn't; they *were betrayed*. Why speak of a *feeling* of betrayal? Now, Lord Phillips would probably not even realize that he had done this. He would agree that the people had been betrayed. But because he was on the side of politeness and loyalty and answers and professionalism and rationality, he automatically put it in terms of feelings – as opposed to common sense or intuition or reason or imagination. The sub-text, of course, is that loyalty is far less emotional than the truth; emotion is not good when we are dealing with truth and facts and answers and choices. Emotion is fine around it but not in it, so we have to marginalize it.

And our distorted way of looking at the world has far wider ill effects. For decades now, many people have come to the conclusion that the debt levels in a number of Third World countries have become so high that they have been bringing these countries to their knees, leading to disastrous cutbacks in education and health care, and fuelling violence, poverty, disease, and malnutrition. Many of these countries are so destitute that they can barely service the debts, let alone think about paying them down.

When I first started to write about this, in 1980, I suggested doing what they did in Athens 2,500 years ago – rip up these debts. This is precisely what has been done successfully a number of times over the last 2,500 years. The Greece we all claim to admire was entirely founded upon Solon's default on the debts. Everything we admire about Greece came out of this non-payment of debt – philosophy, art, sculpture, theatre.

Of course the debt situation in the developing world got worse and worse from 1980 on. We actually started giving them money just so they could give it back to us. We have been humouring our delusions by pretending that they were paying the debt and the interest on the interest on the interest. At this point, we and they entered into an even larger state of delusion: the delusion of certainty that money has a moral value, debt has a doubly moral value, and the repayment of debt is as important as any moral or ethical issue. Why delusional?

For a start because history doesn't support any of that – and neither does economics.

Part way into the '90s, we started to realize that there was little real choice but to start forgiving this debt. And it is to Canada's credit that we have been in the forefront of this movement. But this whole initiative was vigorously resisted by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, banks, and some countries. There was a real blindness here on the part of the banks to their own self-interest. If the banks had consented to forgiving much of this debt, local economies would have been left in much better shape. When we all started forgiving debt, we always seemed to do so about 50 per cent too little about six months too late. So it never actually had the effect of releasing these societies from their debt burden and allowing them to start over.

By late 2001, *The Financial Times of London* was warning that Argentina's economy was about to go over the edge; that if we did not rip up their debt *right then*, we would lose fifteen years of Argentina putting itself back together again. The number two of the IMF then announced that new structures were needed to free developing economies from impossible debts. Unfortunately, she added that these structures would take several years to put into place. Shortly afterwards Argentina did go over the edge, and the banks who had been so reluctant to cancel the debt lost their money anyway.

At approximately the same time, K-Mart held a press conference to announce that it was seeking Chapter 11 protection from its creditors, so that the company would have the breathing room required for a major reorganization. Executives boasted that following this debt cleanout, they would be back stronger than ever. Industry analysts applauded. Why do government administrators, bankers, economists, and the private sector in general say that it's brilliant for K-Mart not to pay its debt and to take time out to reorganize when the same groups find it reprehensible for a country to do so? I suspect that if revocation of your debt is good for K-Mart, it would be good for Argentina.

A few days later, the same IMF announced that they would be generous enough to give one year's grace on one billion dollars US owed by Argentina – out of the fourteen billion they owe in total. Now there is no chance that this is going to be respected, or could be respected in any way. So it is a fantasy, a delusion, but it is presented as hard-nosed common sense. In reality it is nothing but a denial of common sense. A denial of the knowledge which we all share.



Angry Argentines take to the streets, December 2001.

TWO HUNDRED odd years ago, manufacturers were exploiting all sorts of exciting new technologies, creating new machines. There was a true revolution in the marketplace. Of course this was all very expensive, and so they had to come up with an equally revolutionary reorganization of financing structures in order to allow capitalization. What they came up with was a brilliant and rather theatrical idea. It involved an astounding suspension of disbelief – that from now on, we were all going to pretend that corporations were people before the law. A brilliant idea, it started in England and quickly moved to other English-speaking countries and then on throughout Europe. It allowed the industrialists to capitalize beyond anyone's dreams and so fully exploit the wondrous new machines of the industrial age. Of course, there were also a whole range of social issues which I am not dealing with here.

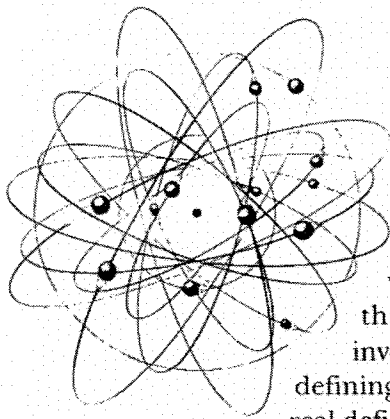
So the West led the world in a race towards larger corporations able to produce better and cheaper products and services of all kinds. It was a great use of the imagination to pretend that corporations were people – when we know perfectly well, as we have always known, that

they are not. This should also remind us that the most romantic thing in human society is our idea of the "free market." So much in the private sector depends on a deep romanticism and a constant suspension of disbelief, because you cannot really afford to have too much memory in the marketplace; that would be disastrous. Think of the real estate boom in Toronto in the late 1980s, and the huge bust that followed. A few years later, the same bankers are lending the same money to the same developers to build the same sort of buildings. If they really remembered what had happened a few years before, they wouldn't be able to do it. A marketplace with any real memory would not be able to function. It requires a suspension of disbelief on a scale that is nothing short of romantic.

Two centuries after the invention of this theatrical device – that corporations are people like the rest of us – it is possible to raise and concentrate enormous sums of money to pursue private ventures. But our new problem is that we have too much money concentrated in a limited number of institutions – huge banks and massive corporations – to the great disadvantage of capitalism. It has become very hard for small and medium-sized corporations to borrow money, because so much money is held by the large banks and large corporations in a managerial and administrative way that has very little to do with competition in the marketplace. And should it really be so surprising that something designed to work 200 years ago does not work very well anymore? This mechanism is actually being used to prevent balanced capitalization, even to prevent competition. It's being used to prevent transparency.

For example, because corporations are treated like people, they have protection under bills and charters of rights, so they can use things like libel laws. If a citizen tries to criticize a certain product, the company that makes that product can often marshal its tremendous resources in suing that individual for libel. They can sue other corporations for libel. They can prevent people from understanding what they are doing because this fantasy of corporations-as-people destroys the whole principle of transparency as a motor of the marketplace. This pretending that corporations are people has become very dangerous to our society. It is bad for the marketplace and, worse, it has also caused us to lose sight of the difference between a social contract and a commercial contract. We can no longer tell the difference between them. This is a key reason for our misdirected sense of loyalty, our inability as citizens to feel that genuine non-conformity is a good thing.

Consider what our society says to us as individuals when it comes to our personal wealth. Our society suggests that it is all right to remain a real person up to an annual income of about \$150,000. But once you are making more than \$150,000 a year you really should register yourself as a corporation, because you will pay less tax, and you will be better protected by the law. In other words, our society has so confused the difference between the social contract and the commercial contract that we actually say, *If you are mediocre in commercial terms, then remain a real person. But if you are a success, the only sensible thing to do is to become a company pretending to be a person.* Should it be so surprising then that it is difficult for a real person to apply ethics as a normal part of daily life in our society?



**M**Y argument is that we can think of our six key human qualities as six atoms – moving around but held together by their relationship to one another. They are both attracted to each other and repelled by one another. In other words: do not try to define reason. I think that the false idea of formal philosophy involves defining your terms, defining reason, defining ethics. This won't get you anywhere. The real definition of ethics is ethics illustrated, encouraged and limited by its relationship with the five other qualities. If you want to know what reason is, look at reason in its relationship – in its tension – with the five other qualities. If you want to stop memory from becoming maudlin and romantic and politically exploitative, then look at it in the context of its relationship to reason and imagination and ethics. It is a moving relationship of uncertainty. Being human is all about tension and limitation and uncertainty.

Our six qualities have been known, of course, for thousands of years, and their misuse over all that time can make them seem grizzled and scarred and worn out. People have tried to scrawl their own marks of ownership all over them – claiming to be the only true voice of common sense or ethics or reason. Those who had a technological advantage also had the power to define these terms for everyone they conquered. We often find these words cheapened by references like "plain, simple common sense." There is nothing plain or simple about common sense. The concept is extremely complicated. The whole

concept of sharing knowledge with strangers, exchanging knowledge, is a very complicated idea. After all, we manage to function as a society even though we don't actually know, let alone understand, one other.

This should remind us that there is no such thing as inevitability. We are constantly told that everything important is inevitable, which is very insulting. It is very demeaning to all of us to be told that we lack the intelligence to have any impact on how our world changes. Common sense frees us to use our intelligence and our ethics through uncertainty, and if it is used in the context of the other qualities, there is no danger of its being misused.

Finally, it is important for us to accept that we actually live on what we know and do not understand. As small groups of specialists, we may understand a great deal, but as a whole we understand almost nothing. From the Enlightenment on, a great deal of understanding was developed, but in the twentieth century there was an explosion of new knowledge, new inventions, new arguments. I think you could argue that today, if you look at the total of what we *know*, we have never *understood* so little.

Because of the explosion of complex knowledge and complicated technology, we are dependent on a vast array of things we do not understand. I fly in airplanes with no real understanding of the technologies that make them work. Even for those more mechanically inclined, when you look under the hood of a brand new automobile, with all its computer-controlled functions, there is very little anymore that one can tinker with in the driveway. But that does not mean we should surrender our ability to control, use, indeed shape the use of what we do not understand, but do know, in order to change our world. To reject the idea of common sense as a human quality is to reject the possibility of doing anything. If humanity had refrained from having sex until we properly understood it, we would have had to abstain until about the late nineteenth century.

We have a strange way of looking at ethics. We all know the importance of ethics, of ethical behaviour, and yet we have come to believe that it is virtually unusable. We think that something as important, as central to humanity as ethics cannot be used except by some sort of ethical hero, some great leader or martyr who will act ethically for us. You will notice that this way of thinking is very corporatist. We are always being told that *we need more heroes* and *we need more leaders*. But what we really need is more engagement by citizens. Why would we need these heroes and leaders except to remind ourselves that we are incapable of doing anything ourselves? Built into this idea of the hero



Jean Moulin

is the notion that ethics are something utilized only by heroes. Of course we do have real ethical heroes, like the French Resistance leader Jean Moulin or, in a different way, Canadian General Romeo Dallaire. But such individuals are usually presented to us on a pedestal – or a cross – as examples not of what *we* can do, but of what we cannot do – because they are heroes, and we are not. The reality is that ethics should be a perfectly normal daily activity in every detail of our lives, and if we do not treat it as such, it *will be* unusable. If you look at our ethical martyrs, you discover that they are perfectly normal people, acting

normally. The problem was that the society around them chose to act unnaturally, and they just went on acting naturally and normally. They stuck to normal behaviour in abnormal circumstances.

The use of everyday ethics has been structured out of our normal lives. Each day, we feel the best we can do is just get on with the business of life, guided by the conventional wisdom that everyone is simply driven by self-interest. It is true that we all have self-interest, but most often at a tertiary level. Self-interest is rarely the main driving force in our lives. To accept the idea that you are driven by self-interest is demeaning. It is as if you are saying to yourself that you operate at a tertiary level of human existence, that you are unable to rise above it. It's like admitting that you are essentially a dog, whose major preoccupation is five o'clock, when the little food pellets go into your bowl.

And even when we feel obliged to address the issue of ethics, we find ourselves making excuses for it. When people try to address a particularly shocking scandal like the Enron affair or the deregulated money markets, they talk about the need to *integrate ethics* within society. But they put this in terms of self-interest – that ethical behaviour *pays*. *You should be ethical because it's profitable*. We have had fifteen years of articles and books from the right, left, and centre, arguing that ethics can be normalized because it pays to do so. Can you imagine anything more insulting? In fact, that is even more insulting than to suggest you are driven by self-interest.



If *ethics* pays, then the first question is: *does it pay all the time?* How often does it pay? Accountants should insist upon knowing the exact percentage of the time ethical behaviour pays. What happens when you come up against an important ethical decision in which there is no payoff? Are you free to be unethical in such a case, since it's clearly ethics' fault that it doesn't pay?

Once you accept this kind of nonsense, you are going down a road that will only become more and more demeaning to you as a human being and as a citizen. What is key, if there is to be a true normalization of ethics in society, is for us to find ways of admiring unpredictability and non-conformity. If non-conformity isn't normal, it will be impossible to act in an ethical way *normally*, and ethics will always be marginalized.

Imagination is another human trait with which we are having great difficulty. And yet it is pretty well what we imagine it to be – a great swirl of uncertainty going on inside individual minds, groups of minds, society's mind, civilization's mind. You can tell that we are having problems with it because you constantly hear people in our society saying: *Aren't those artists wonderful? Aren't they imaginative? Look at all the wonderful things artists do!* What they are really saying is: *The artists are pretty marginal aren't they?* And they are marginal, because they use their imaginations as opposed to being hard-nosed and rational. *They are wonderful eccentrics who entertain us when we have nothing else to do ... but of course they have nothing to do with the central purpose of society.* The marginalization of ethics encourages this declared admiration for the arts – most of the time. We end up talking of imagination as if it were of “the arts” – as opposed to being a key part of everything in society. Everything we do, everything in which we involve ourselves, all progress has imagination at its centre. This is perhaps the tool that strengthens us most against the weakness, the temptation, of certainty. Its very presence, the *uncertainty* of imagination, tells us we are not driven by self-interest.

Intuition is the most practical of the six qualities. It is certainly the least romantic. From time to time we need to make decisions about things, and when we are really concentrating on these decisions, we reach into our imaginations for a decision. And that decision is essentially intuitive. Almost everything we do is a kind of intuitive act drawn out of our imagination, with the imagination itself having drawn upon our rational processes and our common sense and our other qualities. Intuition is the closest of the six qualities we have not to utilitarianism, but to usefulness. We talk about the arts as acts of imagination, but a

sculpture is more of an intuitive act. Sculptors reach up into the imagination and pull the sculpture out. Equally, a book is an intuitive act.

If you want to compare imagination and intuition, compare Napoleon Bonaparte and his Russian rival Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov. Tolstoy captured their strange relationship in *War and Peace*, describing the astonishing decade during which Napoleon and Kutuzov were pitted against one another. Most of the story is about the spectacular successes of Napoleon. His victories have been recounted ever since in military colleges around the world. Scholars dissect his tactics and grand strategy and show how he got the better of his foes through careful planning and execution, the Man of Reason using his intellect to master a very complex situation. Of course this isn't at all how it happened. If you visit the site of one of Napoleon's great victories, like Austerlitz, and stand on the hill from which he directed his forces, you get some sense of how complex and fluid a battle like this must have been. A genius had to be able to imagine the whole and intuitively act as events swirled around, to pick the right moment and pull out that stroke of brilliant strategy.

These two military geniuses wrestled for ten years, not just with each other's armies, but with the geography, climate, political situation, logistical flow. They lived inside all of that. And periodically Napoleon pulled a victory out of that swirling uncertainty and made it look easy. In 1812 Napoleon invaded Russia, and the Russian army began its seemingly endless retreat. Everyone from the foot soldiers to the Czar was unable to understand why Kutuzov did not counterattack. By this time he was old, fat, half-blind, seemingly senile and could barely hold himself on a horse. Ordered by the Czar to defend Moscow, Kutuzov fought – against his better judgement – to a bloody draw at Borodino and then resumed his eastward retreat.

Finally, well beyond Moscow, he intuited that the great, complex swirl of events was finally in his favour. He raised his head, opened one eye, called his aide-de-camp and said, "Tell the army to turn around." His forces began marching west, and were soon busily destroying the greatest army that had ever existed. It was apparently effortless. Kutuzov suddenly, in his imagination, had been able to see that this was the moment, and then he intuitively reached up and pulled out that moment.

The role of intuition is one reason a sport like hockey is so much more interesting than chess. Of course chess is a wonderful game of logic, planning, and rational strategy, tightly confined by the board and the rules. But hockey, when it is well played, is a game of imagina-

tion and intuition. When you watch a genius of the game, like Wayne Gretzky, you understand how imagination, intuition, reason, and memory can all work together in an extraordinary way. Gretzky often looked as though he was just waiting around on the edge of things. Then suddenly he would appear out of nowhere at precisely the right instant, touch the puck, pass it to somebody else who would look down and think, "My God," and the beautiful sequence of passing and manoeuvring would take shape, ending with the puck in the net. After a while, his teammates got used to this, and together they made it look easy – but what made it so wonderful was Gretzky's ability to grasp the flow of the entire play, and the perfect moment within it.

As to memory, it is all about the shape and context needed for thinking, for questioning, for acting. Vico said that it is the power of beginning to think. Harold Innis, the greatest philosopher Canada has produced, said that most forward-looking people have their heads turned sideways. Memory is all about consciousness, shape, contour, spatial layering. Memory can be cruel. We have difficulty retaining a useful memory of many things. That says a lot about the reasons for absence of memory in the marketplace. After all, this is one of the few areas where memory is formally discouraged. You are told to shred your financial records every five years or so.

In any case, how important is the marketplace to human memory? When archeologists started excavating in the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys in the late nineteenth century, they uncovered thousands and thousands of clay tablets. The vast majority of them recorded commercial transactions – which the archeologists tended to ignore, usually just leaving them in the ground. They were no doubt very important to someone at some time, but that was only for a fleeting instant of history. And of course after several millennia, they had no memory attached to them at all; they were essentially meaningless. What caused the archeologists to go wild with joy was the discovery of tablets containing an epic poem, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is a wondrous work about human nature, memory, fear, striving – perhaps the first Western dramatization of our mortality. It is every bit as relevant to us as it was when it was written down 4,000 years ago.

So far, these qualities have all been about denying certainty. So it would follow that the sixth and final one we are examining – reason – would also be about denying certainty. But it has been a difficult issue for us as human beings, because we have spent the last couple of centuries saying – God is dead, we are God – and then we found that rather an exposed position. So then we said – reason is God, and we



Plato and Aristotle express two opposing strands of philosophy. Plato holds the *Timaeus* and points upward toward lofty aspirations, while Aristotle holds his *Ethics* and gestures to more earthly reasoning.

are rational. We are very clever in this way; we have created an ideological structure to cover for us. And, of course, if God is reason then how do you apply it on earth? You need a papacy, a structure; something humans can run, under the cover of reason. So we came up with the idea of instrumental reason, applied reason on earth. This is simply a repetition of the classic models of absolute ideology. We have spent 200 years agonizing over the nature of applied reasoning, instrumental reason. And after the Second World War, when we found ourselves so damaged by the awful things we had done to each other in the name of instrumental reason, a lot of very fine people like Charles Taylor set to work to somehow figure out an instrumental reason which would not be evil.

**I**would argue, quite simply, that there is *no such thing as instrumental reason*. It has never existed. It is a delusion of ours in our search for certainty.

Utilitarianism is not instrumental reason. Efficiency is not rational. Managerial methodology and structures are not rational. Who says structural equals rational, except of course the people who put together the structures? This defence of the theoretical high nature of structure is self-interested, to put it mildly.

When you hear people – all of us – making their various arguments these days, each key sentence uses this constant recitation of “rational” and “reason.” The next time you hear that sort of sentence, try a little game of substitution. When you hear “reason,” replace it with “by the grace of God.” You may well find it is the same sentence. We are talking ideology here.

Reason is thought and argument, and that is already a lot. Why does it have to be anything more than thought and argument? Thought and argument are not about application. You can get close to application through common sense or through ethics or intuition. We actually damage reason by attempting to apply it directly. What makes reason fail to work is our insistence on certainty, which is to say, our interest in the existence of instrumental reason. In my opinion, reason is the least utilitarian of the six qualities. You can see instrumental reason failing and failing: in the way we organize technology, in our management approaches, in our structures of conformity and misplaced loyalty.

Most of us know that when Jews entered the Nazi camps during the Holocaust, a five-digit number was tattooed on their skin, usually at



the wrist. But very few people know the origin of the number. They are shocked, as I was, to learn that it is an IBM number, designed to work with the IBM Hollerith punch-card counting machines that preceded today's computers. IBM dominated the international market with their ingenious machines, which enabled institutions to run hospitals, public works, and organize vast amounts of information. But technology or methodology or structure contains no innate ethics. Such innovations are just methodology and structure and utilitarian knowledge and managerial application.

So when the Nazis came to power in 1933, one of the first things they wanted to do was complete a census of Germany in order to find out how many Jews there were and where they lived. A task like that would not be that complex, and would probably take only a year or so. But the task becomes much more complicated if you are trying to locate all the half Jews, the quarter Jews, the one-eighth Jews, and one-sixteenth Jews. At this point, you would be looking at years of painstaking work. So IBM, with its European subsidiaries, offered to undertake this task. They were perfectly conscious of what they were undertaking, because these punch cards were designed for each project for gathering specific types of information. It took them a few months.

By the time this process reached its logical conclusion, the major death camps had rooms for IBM counting machines, to facilitate the complex logistics of the Holocaust. So there was IBM, not just renting

or selling the counting machines, but actually helping to manage the whole process, making it possible.

When the United States declared war on Germany, any IBM subsidiary could expect to be seized by the Nazis as war booty. But there was a brief breathing space provided before the legal ramifications of trading with the enemy came into effect, and during that period of time IBM managed to turn each one of these subsidiaries into a locally owned company – a German company, a French company, or a Romanian company – so that they could continue their work. At the end of the war, as the Allies liberated more and more of Europe, the process was reversed, and the companies once again became American subsidiaries to prevent their seizure by the Allies as war booty. Of course during this whole period IBM's technological expertise was also helping to organize the Allied war effort.

Whenever we look at such structures of technology, it should be clear that our attitudes towards efficiency, self-interest, management, and professionalism contain no thought or argument which could be dignified as reasoning. It is simply utilitarianism. It is without any purpose in the sense that a conscious, responsible human being could call purpose.

WE should be able to see in this how the whole idea of efficiency, loyalty, methodology, all the things which are thought to be and are presented as instrumental reason, have nothing to do with reasoning. This sort of misconception leads to the situation we have today, when government departments start talking about "client services." We are not in a commercial relationship with our governments. We own the government; how can we be its clients? Expressions like "human capital" are even worse. Our leaders talk of a fourth industrial revolution on the basis of Intellectual Property. Of course, there have to be contracts and copyrights and patents. But it is an entirely different thing to suggest that you are going to build a democracy of the future on the basis of the ownership – and therefore limitation – of as much knowledge as possible. The purpose of ownership is to control use – in effect to limit use. In other words, the purpose of the intellectual property revolution is to take a great deal of knowledge out of the domain of public debate and put it into the domain of controlled ownership for the purposes of commercial profit. This in a

democratic society which claims freedom of speech as a core value. Knowledge cannot be the prisoner of our "commercial structure."

At the heart of our debased status as thinking human beings and thinking citizens is the employment contract. The purpose of this mundane document is supposed to be the regulation, in a utilitarian manner, of the relationship between the employer and the employee. And while such a contract is necessary, today it does much more than that. Whether you work for a government department, a corporation, or even a university, your present-day employment contract is likely to state that your *understanding* as a specialist is being purchased by your employer, as are your *opinions*, that is, your reason and your ethics and your common sense in this area of expertise. In other words, even though you may have attended a public school paid for by taxpayers, then furthered your education at a university paid for by taxpayers and your own tuition fees, suddenly, once you are in the workplace, somebody gets to buy the one thing you have worked so hard to attain – your specialized knowledge and your related opinions – the thing with which you would most be able to contribute to society. You are essentially silenced as a citizen in the one area where you clearly have something important to contribute. This is a complete deformation of the purpose of an employment contract. It would be surprisingly easy to strip these contracts back to their utilitarian purpose and so release or normalize our ethics, reason, and common sense.

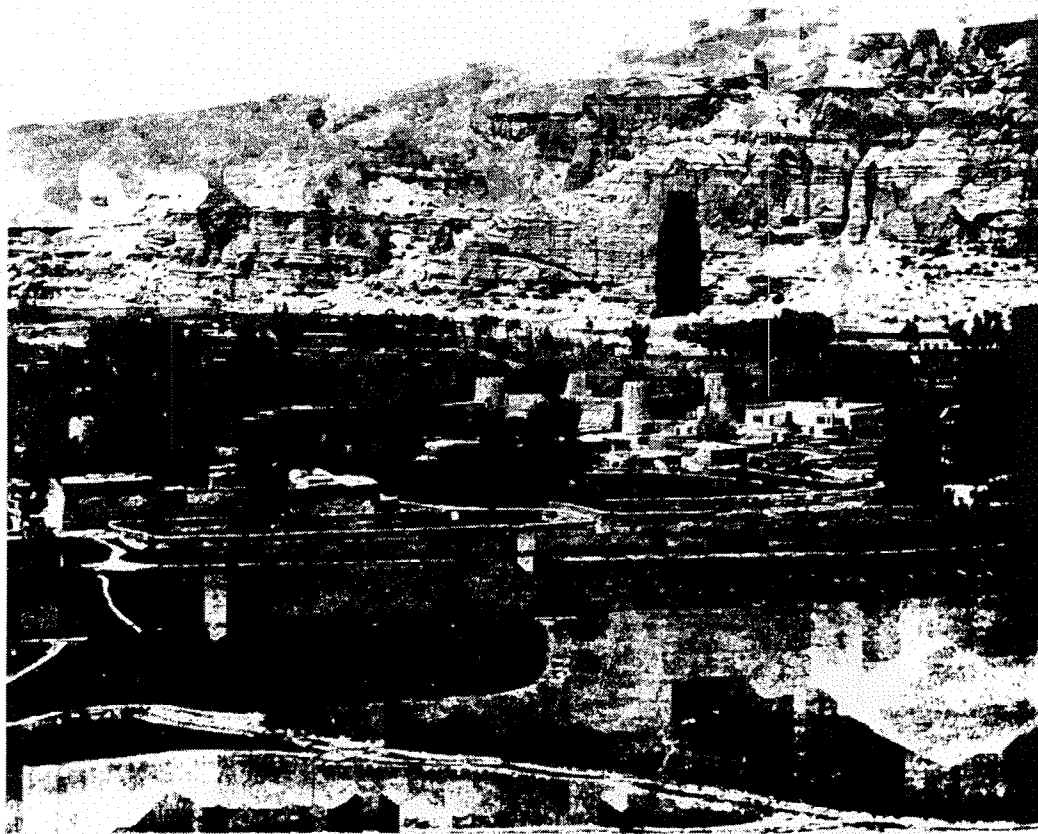
NOW, of course it would be silly – managerial in fact – to start each day looking at your list of six essential human qualities and then trying to work through your daily challenges by reconciling them. But if we make the effort to be conscious of these six qualities, they will become part of the way we do things. And making our society more rational and ethical, making this a normal part of our lives individually and collectively as nonconformists, is where our real obligation as loyal citizens resides, not in the dogged obsession with misdirected efficiency, blind conformity, and misplaced loyalty. It is rediscovering the notion that uncertainty is liberating, that we can shape our society and that nothing is inevitable. That we don't know how things will turn out – that the future is so entirely uncertain – should be the most exciting thing for us as a community of thinking human beings.







*Tanagra Seated Lady* –  
for centuries the ideal  
of balance and poise,  
third century BC.



Bamian Valley, Afghanistan, before the colossal statues of Buddha were destroyed last year.