

The Torontoic Dialogues: Neurodivergent Reflections on Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: Philosophical prose has a long-standing tradition in both Eastern and Western cultures. With the emergence of Zen and Platonic dialogues, writers throughout history have used non-fiction to portray the nuances of human experience. This approach has the capacity to bring ideas to life and facilitate new ways of thinking about the world around us. Following these traditions, this experimental piece provides an autobiographical retelling of philosophical discussions between neurodivergent students in Toronto, Canada. During their conversation, the characters spend considerable time analyzing complex social and political topics, with careful attention being given to personal responsibility and the distinction between thoughts and actions. Travelling through the busy streets of modern life, the narrator eventually has a revelatory moment with a stranger that disrupts his tendency to live inside his head and overintellectualize.

Keywords: Ethics, philosophical fiction, phenomenology, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism.

Author's Note: This piece serves as a reminder that non-fiction writing can be used to analyze and interpret human affairs. By embracing methodological pluralism, scholars can employ writing styles and techniques that overcome the rigidity of academic writing. At times, creative and personal forms of writing are better suited for capturing ethical experiences and social life. As an interdisciplinary journal, *Spectrum* provides an open terrain for innovative, multidisciplinary authorship. Given this work's critical and self-reflective goals, especially with its inclusion of phenomenology, ethics, and social philosophy, the writing provides a balance of artistry and intellectual rigour suitable for a scholarly journal such as this.

I. Social Phenomena

"Oh no, not another one," Richard says to me, "try not to engage. I can already spot the fake smile, clipboard, and cause."

"Hey there! Can I talk to you for a –"

"Sorry, I can't stop to talk," Richard says as he abruptly cuts off a female in her early twenties, gently raising his hand in a manner that infers a *thanks, but no*

thanks. "I'm in a bit of a hurry." The canvasser, completely unfazed, instantly moves on to the subsequent waves of people passing by on the sidewalk.

If I had to guess, Richie is probably tired of all the grandstanding and pageantry going on with causes these days. It seems like every other day, you end up getting stopped and slapped with some new issue or protest to support. In his mind, one had better embody

the cause—live it, breathe it, lie down in traffic for it—before stopping him on the street. The relationship is akin to film dialogues where one character asks, *but how will I find you?* To which the other mysterious person responds, *you won't — I'll find you*. Basically, if you were representing your cause correctly, you wouldn't need to seek out Rich because he would have already found you.

Second, if you are being paid commission based on the number of people who sign up, Rich will also be reluctant to talk. In his mind, by doing so, you'd be compromising the value of your cause, given the overtly transactional basis of the enterprise. Formulaically, the more people who sign, the more money you make, which is a very basic compensation model. On sheer principle alone, Rich—given his OCPD nature—would find this rather distasteful.¹ Specifically, the lingering and unaddressed ulterior motive behind getting someone to sign in the first place.

Third, if the CEO of your non-profit is making well over six figures, then Rich will definitely be reluctant to talk with you.² For starters, he vehemently opposes virtue signalling, which, in contemporary society, seems to be paraded around as if we were all involved in some kind of ethical pageant. As Rich suggests, we must recognize that the displays of moral self-righteousness are mainly upheld by words rather than actions. It should be the other way around—*facta, non verba*; essentially, *put your money where your mouth is*.³ If you receive charity to help people in need, please verify that your founders, presidents, and chief officers are not receiving elite-level salaries. Similarly, if you work for a charitable organization that condemns capitalism, please be sure that the organization's representatives do not engage in excessive conspicuous consumption.⁴ When you do that, it really feels like a giant F.U. to the donors, supporters, and volunteers, which is why Rich's friendly reminder is to *put your money where your mouth is*.

In summation: When activism sounds more like business, it probably isn't as ethical as you may think it is. Therefore, a reasonable goal would be to stop bombarding people at inopportune moments with ethical-political spiels. By acting this way, you end up giving off spammer and telemarketer vibes. In

response, our minds are callousing up and tuning out the attention-seekers seeking waves and insincere smiles, and in the end, we grow increasingly skeptical and critical about what others have to say. When stopped on the street, our initial impulse is not all that pleasant these days; instead, we instantly think—*what are you trying to sell me?*

"Look, people don't take kindly to getting jumped on sidewalks. They spook easily, so their guard is up, you know?" Rich says. "Like horses."

"Or deer," I reply. "I guess the question is, where do one's responsibilities reside anymore? Here? There? Everywhere? Am I even a part of a community? Half the time, I feel like I am epistemically desynchronized from everything that is going on around me."

"Unfortunately, we don't drink the Kool-Aid offered by sidewalk bartenders," Rich says in his classically caffeinated and hyperactive manner. The more I listen to him talk, the more I can tell it's time for his doctors to up the dose of his ADHD meds.⁵

"You may be selling, but most people aren't buying! Especially not with the pop-out-of-the-bushes sales approach. Protestors, activists, canvassers, solicitors—they're literally lurking everywhere, dude," Rich continues, "I wouldn't be surprised if some were hiding in those bushes over there or on the rooftop above!"

"How covert-op of them, Rich. You might as well call them Shadow Company.⁶ By the way, how many cups of coffee are you pulling today?"

"Yes, lurkers—I like that. I'll use that moving forward, and yes, the notorious Shadow Company! Oh, I've had so much espresso I could levitate. In fact, I could lift an X-Wing out of a swamp on Dagobah before proceeding to blow up the Death Star," Rich says.⁷

"Eyes closed?" I ask.

"Eyes closed, dude. Anyway, with the abundance of causes and campaigns, don't you ever feel like people are a bit overwhelmed by the paradox of choice? It is like the excessiveness is short-circuiting our brains, you know? The sheer voltage of all the mental stimuli is making us erratic."

"Our distracted lifestyles in a post-Internet, post-smartphone era," I add before Rich's words march on.

"I think people have really started to check out from

face-to-face interactions. Like, look at most people walking about in this city. They nosedive straight into their cellphones and apps as soon as they wake up in the morning. So, what do they do to feel like more than just consumers and job-holders?⁸ They start spreading their thoughts around like mulch all over the internet. You know, arguing about the right and wrong ways to live, or they start gossiping and slandering one another as if this is an effective means of persuasion. I also shouldn't feel like a pariah for being critical about all the complaining, debating, and petition-signing bullshit, you know? Complain here, comment there, agree with this, but whatever you do, don't agree with that! Suddenly it's three hours later and you've accomplished nothing substantive with your day—but hey, maybe you feel like you really dished out some good arguments against that unenlightened philistine."

"Three hours is an understatement," I reply.

"I'm not trying to be a dick here, dude. I just don't see it as a legitimate means for social or political change. Why would such a radically inefficient method be considered beneficial? We spend way too much time contemplating rather than taking political action.⁹ Other than voting, what are we even getting at? Electing people to act for us? And by act, I mean to determine how to spend or allocate taxpayer dollars. Of course, let's ensure that the people handing the money are always well-compensated and privy to pensions and tax breaks."

"I get that. I didn't think you were saying avoid causes and charities, as much as you were saying, let us consider the outcomes and where our resources are going."

"Of course, at the same time, people are becoming technologically anesthetized in day-to-day life," Rich laughs. "Now, let me rant for a second."

"Rich, weren't you already ranting?"

"Yes, but take that as a signpost indicating that here comes part *deux*. Let me try to work out some of this phenomenology or what I'll call the science and madness of social experience. So, it is my opinion that people are, generally speaking, becoming ethically and socially inept in everyday affairs. Is it a social phobia of sorts? Perhaps. Is it a pervasive addictiveness to technology and data? Likely. In effect, why burden yourself with

the uncontrollable and potentially uncomfortable nature of reality? The digital world and all its offerings are just so convenient, streamlined, and risk-free in comparison.

"I mean, you're not wrong. How many people are there walking down city streets buried in their cellphones? Foot traffic collisions must be at an all-time high."

"Yes, of course, the mindlessness of digital consumption makes human interaction redundant—at least, in everyday terms. And what are the implications? You end up missing cardinal opportunities to transcend your existence as an automaton.

"Sort of like turn on, tune in, drop out?"¹⁰

"Yes, wake up, be alive, and commit to doing the right thing rather than just babbling on about it. That's the problem. And personally, I can't keep hearing all the oratory because I get enough of that in graduate school. Talk is cheap these days, and I don't think those who preach without practice merit veneration."

"What are your thoughts on the environment?"

"Dude, don't even get me started on the bloody environment! However, now that we're here, we might as well. If you want to make a difference, it starts with you and every other individual. It isn't about the sum or total, you know? The rationalization that change cannot occur until x, y, or z happens or that my actions are too infinitesimal to matter. Think about your part in the world, you know? What have you done recently? If nothing, then get to work and stop buying and supporting the crap that got us here in the first place."

"People are sort of like bystanders—always waiting for someone else to deal with the problem."

"Yes, I call 'em Kibitzers," Rich says, "and as much as Papa Elon, Uncle Bill, and Grandpappy Warren may have the wealth and power to make an impact on climate change, we should not hold our breath expecting they will miraculously save us from the ensuing threat of global catastrophe.¹¹ There is a sense of religiosity when we think about wealthy saviours."

"I agree, even though you sound a bit like Rorschach."¹² We turn left up Palmerston on our way to campus, knowing we will stop for a quick visit at our local collegiate watering hole on College Street. A good friend of ours just lost their mother, and as friends, we figure it is appropriate to see them—not to bring it up with them at work, but to just be in their presence for a little while. My therapist calls this

sharing space, which has started to make more sense recently. As Rich says: “You would be surprised how far a little face-to-face interaction goes these days!” I agree with this *vis-à-vis* sentiment. Most people would probably just throw a text or a Facebook message and be done with it. But hey, how sincere is something like that?

II. Modern Hypocrisy

“First of all, dude, I love this street!” Rich announces.

“One of the best.”

“Now, getting back to whatever you want to call this conversation,” Rich says, “can we now direct our attention to the incongruity of millionaire celebrities.”

“Well, only if you think that Ricky Gervais left anything for the rest of us.”¹³

“True.”

“If you think it will help you direct this rant towards an eventual conclusion, please, by all means, delve right in, Rich.”

“Be patient. The magician will eventually reveal his final trick.”

“I am all ears.”

“Well, have you not noticed the number of ultra-rich celebrities claiming that we need to do this or that? I’m talking things that fall into ethical, social, and political spheres.”

“Yes, of course.”

“For example, one I often get is—join or support x or y. You know, like causes or agendas. *Prima facie*, I can understand this intent; however, looking at the person behind the statements and how they live always makes for an interesting assessment. From personal experience, the celebrity or influencer—God, I hate that word—is usually suspect.”

“I follow. But are you sure that your assessment is not *ad hominem* or relying on a genetic fallacy?”¹⁴

“No fallacies here, friend,” Rich replies, “this has more to do with the incongruity between words and deeds, which I will now clarify. Let’s say you announce to the world that everyone needs to be environmental, but in the next twelve months, you circle the globe like eight times in your private jet! What would you call that?”

“Hypocrisy.”

“Precisely. Another common one is fighting for poverty and human rights. On the one hand, you make your statements to the public and get a nice pat on the back. On the other, you go and buy three mansions and a waterfront property somewhere for your family of four! Sure, you may be vocalizing important concerns, but have you also not done what was in your power? Have you not just reinforced economic disparity? You know, why not make space for those orphans and refugees in your twenty-thousand square foot home?”

“You mean one of their twenty-thousand square foot homes, Rich. We must not forget that they own multiple properties and leave a Shaq-size ecological footprint each year.”

“Precisely! My point is that hypocrisy is a pervasive impediment to change. Yes, let’s all join this great environmental cause or policy you mention. But it isn’t like we are really following your lead, especially when you’re sitting in front of an eighty-five-foot infinity pool sipping some primo Dom Pérignon.”

“So, what are you trying to get at Rich? Or do you plan on starring as Holden Caulfield in some forthcoming movie or theatre project I am unaware of?”¹⁵

“Hilarious, dude! No, I’m just trying to say in that proverbial ‘glass house’ sort of way that people must embody the virtues and changes they constantly talk about! You read some Lao Tzu and Sun Tzu, and you start recognizing the value of leading by example.¹⁶ Why would anyone follow you if you don’t even follow the path? So, all you social-political crusaders, maybe turn off some lights and heaters? Maybe consider the carbon emissions and forests before you start importing all that exotic wood, which, in a couple of years, you’ll end up changing anyway.”

“Well, Rich, the wood did tie those twenty-foot ceilings together quite nicely,” I add, “so what if they came from some thousand-year-old redwoods.”

“Was that a Lebowsky reference?”¹⁷ Kudos.”

“Yes, it was.”

“First of all, a classic film worthy of acknowledgement,” Rich says. “Second, it’s all just a lot of social martyrdom, but with superficial sacrifice and commitment. We believe in the idea of change, but that requires that we change—that we put in the effort and organization. So, we stick to

our life narratives and live under this fantasy. You have to eventually say no, take a stand, and commit to action. Vandana Shiva is a good example of this.¹⁸ Unfortunately, it just seems like we've lost sight of our priorities and what we are trying to do collectively as a species."

"You mean—aside from destroying the planet and all manner of species in the process?"

"From a collective perspective, haven't you ever wondered what the hell it is that we're all doing?"

"Or how insignificant most of our concerns are in the face of overarching existential risks?¹⁹ Those are the real monsters waiting for us at the end of the tunnel. Myopically, we hold to the implicit premise that continuous growth and progress will miraculously solve all of the world's problems."

"A bit ironic, isn't it?" Rich responds. "Here we are putting faith in the industrial and technological devices that are the very means of ecological collapse."

"Experiencing the exhibit by Burtynsky, Baichwal, and de Pencier was eye-opening and sure did not provide much reassurance about our influence on the planet."²⁰

"Gluttony and greed for the win."

"Rather than basing our existence on default principles of self-preservation, more than ever, we need ethical transcendence."

"In the Levinasian sense?"²¹

"Yes, the human capacity to reprioritize the other, which, as I see it, includes not just other individuals but also other species and organisms. Collectively, we cannot exist in a vacuum, as our organic needs require an environment suitable for life. I often reflect on what right I have to exist, especially when said right compromises the existence of others."

"You'll have to elaborate a bit, dude," Rich replies.

"Are you aware of what an externality is?"

"Not at all."

"Okay, consider the example of smoking. Now, let us focus less on the economic costs and more on the health-related consequences. If I smoke in front of others, my habit may result in a negative health outcome for a third party."

"Like when someone smokes in front of children? Alternatively, like in the past, smoking was allowed in public areas—bars, restaurants, airplanes."

"Precisely Rich. At a certain point, our world is comprised of shared spaces. If I smoke, the odds are that someone will be exposed to my habit at some point or another. Now, if I am inconsiderate, then I may pose a greater risk to the health and well-being of others, right?"

"Yes, that makes sense, dude," Rich responds, "you might not care about whom you light up in front of or when you do it."

"Exactly. Now take that idea and apply the analogy to the ego. What may occur if I don't consider others more generally? For one thing, I may go through my life fulfilling my own needs independently or without considering the implications they may have on others."

"Sounds a bit extreme if you extrapolate it in such all-encompassing terms of being versus non-being, which is where I assume you're leading me."

"I guess I am trying to figure out how we can start thinking more altruistically—that is, in a phenomenological sense. Is it possible to experience the world more ethically? I am not talking about in a reciprocal or quid pro quo kind of way, but in a more mindful sense of personal duty and responsibility."

"Okay, Kant," Rich responds sarcastically, "what is your categorical imperative going to be? Always put others before yourself?"²²

"No, it is more primary than the faculty of reason. What I am referring to comes before the directedness of thought or reflection. Have you ever had an experience that called to you? Or pulled you outside of yourself unexpectedly?"

"Dude, I have no idea what you're talking about! I like it, but you lost me!" On that note, maybe us arriving at the bar can help 'call you' out of your head," Rich says mockingly, "you know, all phenomenological-like."

III. Student Philosophizing

"So Rich, you started this topic of discussion. How do we get to the marrow of the problem, especially when you do not have an affinity for my philosophical descriptions."

"You mean your philosophizing? Now, what would a lowly grad student like me know about anything? I spend most of my days dusting off old books in the library. My education and indoctrinated scholarly disposition are

far too archaic and isolated for actual worldly affairs.”

“Spoken like a truly self-aware academic philosopher.”

“Ah yes, all in a day’s work! You know, my primary goal in life is to mass-produce papers for journals with virtually no readership! In fact, I hope to be so isolated in this process that even my colleagues will purposefully avoid reading my drivel. Maybe I’ll write a paper on the meaninglessness of academia. I’ll call it ‘How Not to Get Shit Done: A Book on Academic Philosophers.’

“I am sure I would buy it, or at the very least, add it to my Amazon wishlist. Here is an interesting question we may consider—at least until we come up with a viable solution or dissolution to the problem at hand. The thought occurred to me that we often critique philosophers, but have we ever spoken about those who may have made an impact? Which philosophers, if there are any, actually influenced the world at large?”

“Marx? But what a wonderful application that philosophy had in the twentieth century.”

“Quite often, theories do not transfer well into the world, especially not when it falls into the hands of political zealots.”

“Dear Uncle Karl, thanks for the contribution. Sincerely, the future,” Rich retorts. “Well, I’m sure Marx meant well—at least, that’s what I tell myself, seeing as I’m predominantly involved with critical theory. Perhaps the world wasn’t ready for his ideas? Or do they stray too far from human nature?”

“Well, Nietzsche did warn us of the impending existential-spiritual void that would emerge in the twentieth century, but then again, it is kind of hard to make out what he actually meant in his final book.”²³

“Sad that such a brilliant mind would be brought down by untreated syphilis. And yes, rather religiously, the fascists, nationalists, communists, capitalists, and socialists all saw their way as the right way to salvation. Envisioned utopianism at any cost.”

“You mean under the auspices of the greater good? It seems humans can rationalize just about anything if they believe it intensely enough, although propaganda helps ensure compliant Kool-Aid consumption. How does that proverb go? Something like—the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

“You know, it’s funny, after the fall of the Soviet Union,

and by proxy, communism, many neoliberals thought we’d reached the end of history!²⁴ And in Marx’s defence, even Plato had a rough time manifesting political thought into action. Do you remember what happened in Sicily under Dionysus the Younger?²⁵ Hard to make anything work when you have hypocrites and tyrants in power. Philosophers can write all the bloody things they want, but if they don’t leave the Ivory Tower every once in a while, their ideas start to smell stale. Just a friendly reminder, please go and stretch your academic legs or else they’ll atrophy at your desk.”

“Unfortunately, a lot of brain power and funding is wasted on scholars quibbling over what Hegel meant or why so-and-sos interpretation of Aristotle is wrong. Now, finish your drink. I want to make it to campus sooner rather than later,” I add while giving our friend, the server-bartender, the little writing-in-the-air bit to indicate we are ready for the tab. They gesture back with two fingers, and then I gesture back with one. Yes, one bill is quickly established through our hospitality industry sign language.

“By the way, do you still want to attend that political philosophy talk tonight?”

“Is it with that guy you said looks like a sewer rat?” I ask.

“Hah! You mean Master Splinter?²⁶ Yes, but I must admit he’s better than that other guy. You know—the one with the bad Anton Chigurh haircut and dorky Eighties glasses.”²⁷

“That guy is the worst. I can never get a word in edgewise with him around. He sucks all the air from the room with his incessant know-it-all attitude about morality and politics. I remember I asked him a question once, which he then proceeded to answer for the next thirty minutes without any redirection. I am surprised he remembered to breathe. Why is it that the people who preach about morality the most are the ones who act the most immoral?”

“I’ll tell you what’s immoral, pal! Now, it’s one thing to walk around in public with that haircut—let alone the rest of the assemble, but it’s a whole other thing to do so possessing zero class,” Rich adds.

“Zero class,” I say as I pick up the tab for the drinks, “I have this round.” I throw down a few twenties, leaving a large tip for our friend, who, I assume, would have had to

take time off from work to attend the funeral and be with their family. At that moment, the money felt irrelevant to me. What was a couple of hours of teaching assistance compared to this person's irreversible loss? The finality of death suddenly eclipsed whatever culturally-constructed rules I had previously internalized on tipping percentages.

I give a quick wave to our friend from across the bar, noticing how busy they are with their other orders. A great time to leave with the money securely enclosed in the billfold, as I can escape without having to go through the whole 'no, you left too much' discussion.

IV. An Ethical Encounter

Walking down the street near Spadina, Rich and I are working through a new round of *Who is the Better Director?* Rather than emphasizing cinematic taste or preference, the game prioritizes one's logical and argumentative prowess. Tonight's topic is Nineties directors, and at the moment, I am currently edging out Rich's position that Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* and *Casino* handily defeat David Fincher's *Se7en* and *Fight Club*.

"There is no way that *Se7en* can compete with *Goodfellas*. That is like *the* quintessential gangster film!" Rich proclaims. "I can't even take someone seriously if they don't like that film!"

"Yes, I am not claiming that *Se7en* is the superior film. Instead, I argue that the question pertains to both era and genre. From a sociocultural perspective, we need to consider *Se7en* in conjunction with *Fight Club* to fully appreciate Nineties culture—the grunge, the cynicism, and the collective disillusion about modern culture that resonated with Gen Xers. Yes, we have two great crime films from Scorsese, but we cannot overlook Fincher's sheer creativity and idiosyncratic style. Think about the existential moods and capacity for world-building in Fincher's films, which, again, connects well with the spirit of the times."

Amid my rebuttal to Rich, I notice a homeless person huddling in front of a building just beyond St. George Street. Having just hit a red light, we stand there motionless for about half a minute. Maybe all the ethical talk triggered a mental acuity of sorts, or maybe I had not been paying attention to the world around

me today. Whatever the case, I snap out of rationalism mode and tune into empirical mode instantaneously. As I look at this person sitting there, hunched over in the cold, trying to protect their face from the rain, a sobering sense of awareness overtakes the moment.

Despite hearing Rich's refutation of my claims, I am only half-listening as my attention fixates on the barrage of emerging questions and concerns pouring into my mind. How many people pass by this location on a given day? Outside this massive institution, with all the foot traffic, streetcars, cyclists, and cars, thousands of people must avert their eyes, ignore the call, and suppress the guilt of inaction. Are they even aware of it? Or is it something unconscious?

I look up and notice the light as it switches to green.

"Hey man, you listening?" Rich asks. "I just dismantled your creative director argument by mentioning that *Goodfellas* and *Casino* converge to create an ultimate cinematic crime collection, which, as I have so cleverly indicated, will culminate with the premiere of *The Irishman*. Yes, the film will be out in 2019, but the magic of Scorsese, De Niro, Pesci, and Liotta will merge the twentieth and twenty-first centuries! Thus, from an aesthetic and cultural perspective, the films signify that they have stood the test of time. I am saying that modern anticipation is still inextricably bound to the legacy of these films from the Nineties. Hell, even Ray Ramano is supposed to be in it!"

"Right, let me think about that for a second," I say, "but know that you cannot pull out *The Irishman* to support your position. This is a Nineties discussion, not one that includes 2019. You must stick with the exclusionary criteria and recognize that a 2019 film has no bearing in this analysis. I can devise a simple counterargument. If continuity and relevance are key variables in your analysis, then why don't I just pull out *Zodiac* or *Mindhunter*? Regarding the crime genre, Fincher's more recent films and television projects rank among the best of the twenty-first century. Scorsese's films have a distinct style, which is great and all, but is there not a bit of repetitiveness in terms of narrative, structure, and delivery? Conversely, akin to actors and actresses drastically altering their persona, appearance, and behaviour, directors with the protean capacity for change and innovation, should be prized for pushing their capacities as artists."

Before Rich even responds, I recognize that in my tangential response, I am back in my default hyper-rational mode, which leaves me oblivious to my surroundings. The ‘headiness’ of my conversations with Rich results in a rather imperceptive state of consciousness—almost as though I am on autopilot or cruise control. Consequently, I have already passed the person who previously tore me away from my discussion. In acknowledging this, I feel the polarity between my head and heart pulling me in opposite directions. It is almost as though the experience has short-circuited my operating system, and I am now stuck in a liminal state. It dawns on me that I just did the exact thing that I was criticizing others for doing.

As I glance at the distinguished buildings of one of Canada’s premiere education institutions, I find the whole scenario incomprehensible. Inundated with a radical awareness, I recognize just how estranged from the real world I have become—a product of my educational environment and academic socialization. Raised in the priority of publication, the paper trails of theory continue to miss the practical and lived aspects of human experience. In this duality between thought and action, I see ethical transcendence vanish under the piles of thoughts, ideas, and concepts occupying our headspace. The enfolded human experience, as I just witnessed, is merely a fleeting afterthought wedged between strings of occupied states of distraction. Unfortunately, akin to a computer with too many background programs running simultaneously, our random access memory (RAM) is insufficient for running basic operations like attention and interaction.

How can we ever achieve an open cognitive terrain, especially when the hustle of modern metropolitan life constantly fills that space? Socially, we live together—but ethically, beyond the scope of the welfare state, everyday embodied existence is founded on epistemic and existential divisibility. With the industrial complex of modern academia, this mindset reigns supreme, as hyper-industriousness becomes the most prized virtue of ‘academicians.’ Academia, as I envision it, will never cease its endless preoccupation with theory, knowledge production, and publication metrics; thus, the principle of self-preservation will persist *à la* publish or perish fetishism. With an expectation that borders on myopia, indexes, rankings, and statistics constantly quantify and

compute the self-worth of students and scholars in true capitalist fashion. Alas, we arrive at an intergenerational dehumanization that is too busy to care. The naïve and doe-eyed youth of tomorrow continue to come with the hope of one day taking their place among the ranks of the intelligentsia.

“Dude, are you coming? I don’t want to miss this dog and pony show.” Rich says. “Or are you busy having a stroke?” Unresponsive, I think about how I continue to listen to so much endless banter about moral life every week, every month, year after year. What would happen if everyone actively pursued the problem instead of just talking about it?

When, *if ever*, is it the right time to act?

“Hey, sorry Rich, just give me a second,” I say, returning to address the ethical experience before me in all its revelatory spontaneity and imperceptibility. In the brief moments before I arrive, my mind begins pouring over the common labels that members of society attribute to those without homes—outcast, vagrant, bum, crazy, poor, junky, addict, lazy, screw up. Despite knowing nothing about these individuals, they get torn down, stigmatized, and ostracized by ableist and functionalist mentalities, which entirely neglect that life is not a simple universal phenomenon, but one radically distinct in outcomes, experiences, and privileges.

On approach, our eyes finally meet, and I see their face emerge from the darkness and rain. In it, I recognize something fundamentally human—a relationality, sanctity, and kinship that we often overlook in daily life. Far removed from expectation and anticipation, I stand there momentarily in the purity of conscious experience. In the briefest instance, the luminosity of this vis-à-vis encounter becomes the entirety of my existence, filling me with a sense of fullness. I reach into my pocket and grab my remaining money, which I place gently into a large Tim Horton’s coffee cup.

“I am sorry. I wish it were more.”

“Thank you for your help,” they say. “God bless.”

As the interaction concludes, I smile unconsciously, recognizing the beauty of this chance occurrence. As I walk back to where I left Rich, I wonder what impedes me from doing things like this more often. A sense of

responsibility and regret strikes me as I consider what I have genuinely done to give back to the world. Would the total sum of my lived experience contribute to an overall net gain or loss? Unconsciously, we would like to believe that we are good people, but how could I honestly appraise myself? Especially when I know that the actuality of my decisions and choices are all but a marginal fraction of what I could have potentially done.

I start to make my way back to Rich, who, at that very moment, is sitting there wholly enthralled by his phone. Without even looking up, he says: "Hey, I get it. You probably needed a break from the jaws of argumentative defeat. You know, there's no shame in buying yourself some time."

"Rich, do you honestly think your argument has somehow internally defeated my earlier points?"

"Duh."

"I mean, you have not really established the director's strengths and weaknesses or their contributions to the Nineties era relative to Fincher. You are certainly colouring outside of the lines of this analysis with your 'saga argument.' The fact that Scorsese is making a film about Jimmy Hoffa in 2019 with a strong cast is irrelevant to the parameters of our current philosophical analysis. I like herring, but not when it is red."²⁸

"Oh, ye of such little faith! Always such a stickler for the rules! Yes, I have complete and utter faith in *The Irishman*, and, more importantly, my boy Marty. I'm talking about the guy who directed *The Departed* and made all the Marvel fans cry by claiming their beloved franchises aren't cinema. And even in the face of backlash, the O.G. film director didn't put his tail between his legs and back down by retracting his statement."

"Again, this is all out of the range of the topic. How does a clearly out-of-bounds film like *The Irishman* contribute to our discussion of the Nineties?"

"Hey dude, maybe we need to bring a cartographer into this discussion."

"I am not following," I add, "why would we need a cartographer?"

"Well, maybe that way, they can clearly and distinctly map my arguments out for you, Captain Analytica."

"Very clever, Rich. However, I consider myself more of a post-analytic thinker. What can I say? My need

for clarity always seems to test the Derridean way your brain works."²⁹

"Yes, getting you to think that way is like putting a cat in the bathtub," Rich retorts, "somewhat unnatural, isn't it, my friend."³⁰

And like fools, we just go on talking about nothing.

Notes

¹ OCPD stands for Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder, which is associated with traits such as being highly critical, deferential towards authority, and possessing high moral standards for oneself and others. This is not to be confused with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5-TR*.

² For more information on non-profit CEO compensation. See Peter Frumpkin's "Are nonprofit CEOs overpaid?"

³ *Facta non verba* translates to 'deeds, not words' or 'acts, not words.'

⁴ Conspicuous consumption refers to the process of excessive spending in order to signify one's worth, reputation, or status. See Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

⁵ The character Rich is diagnosed with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), which, in the ADHD community, may also be referred to as being an ADHDer or as being neurodivergent. Commonly prescribed medications are stimulants, although non-stimulant medications such as atomoxetine are sometimes used. Rich is compensating with his insufficient medication dose by using additional stimulants like caffeine.

⁶ Shadow Company refers to a highly secretive, military-trained group of mercenaries in the film *Lethal Weapon*.

⁷ Rich is specifically referring to the events that occurred in *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope* and *Star Wars: Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. In both instances, Luke taps into the Force—a metaphysical power that transcends the physical world.

⁸ Job holders is a term that Hannah Arendt uses to critique modern individuals. Rather than committing to meaningful action, Arendt believes that moderners are engaged in interchangeable roles driven by the need to fulfill organic or biological needs. See *The Human Condition*.

⁹ The tendency to deliberate and contemplate rather than act are central criticisms that Søren Kierkegaard and Arendt have of the modern age. See *The Present Age* and *The Human Condition*.

¹⁰ A famous line from Timothy O'Leary at the event Human Be-In (1967). According to O'Leary, it was actually Marshall McLuhan who gave him the line to use. See *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era*.

¹¹ In this line, I am referring to some of the wealthiest humans alive, including Elon Musk, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffet.

¹² Rorschach is one of the characters from Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' graphic novel *Watchmen*, known for his pessimistic worldview and cynical sense of humour.

¹³ I am specifically referring to the four Golden Globe Awards ceremonies that Ricky Gervais hosted before his infamous 2020 performance.

¹⁴ Ad hominem refers to arguments that attack someone's character in order to justify the claim being made, while the genetic fallacy refers to when someone dismisses or supports a claim or statement based on its source rather than its validity or evidence.

¹⁵ Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, is known for ranting about culture and society at large. This comparison is a pejorative jab directed at Rich's disorganized thought and argumentation style.

¹⁶ Rich is referring to principles of leadership that involve leading by embodied virtue, which, in turn, establishes respect between subordinates and generals (in the case of Sun Tzu) and sages (in the case of Lao Tzu). See *The Art of War* and the *Tao Te Ching*.

¹⁷ This line about 'tying the room together' pays homage to the film *The Big Lebowski*.

¹⁸ Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmentalist, and campaigner. See the documentary film *The Seeds of Vandana Shiva*.

¹⁹ Existential risks denote events that result in the termination of the human race and other species. See Nick Bostrom and Milan Cirkovic's work *Global Catastrophic Risks*.

²⁰ *Anthropocene* was an art exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) available from September 28, 2018 and January 6, 2019. See *Anthropocene* by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, and Nicholas de Pencier.

²¹ According to Emmanuel Levinas, ethical transcendence constitutes a re-prioritization of how we view and value the world with others. Rather than focusing on the centrality of Being (e.g., Heideggerian ontology), Levinas contends that ethics should be viewed as first philosophy. When we encounter the Other, there is a phenomenological capacity to transcend ourselves and the underlying adherence to self-interest and self-preservation. Epistemically, this effect is pre-cognitive and relies on sensibility via face-to-face interactions. In these scenarios, we are called to attention and responsibility by ethical encounters with other human beings. See *Ethics and Infinity*.

²² A categorical imperative, according to Immanuel Kant, is a moral rule or law that does not change regardless of the context or situation (e.g., I shall not steal or I shall not kill). This moral paradigm is commonly referred to as deontology. In this example, Rich questions what ethical encounters and responsibilities actually represent in the real world. More specifically, Rich is skeptical about how one can commit to a fundamentally other-oriented ethical worldview. See the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche's final complex work being *The Will to Power*.

²⁴ In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama contends that humanity has reached its teleological end with the fall of communism in the Soviet Union. This political evangelism also infers that Liberal democracy and capitalism will inevitably lead to the universalization of Western, socioeconomic and political models. However, in *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, Fukuyama acknowledges the limitations of his previous position.

²⁵ Plato was called to Sicily by Dion to assist his nephew, Dionysus II, with politics and the proper conduct of rulers. Despite his efforts to assuage Dionysus II to become a philosopher-king and overcome his hedonism, Plato left Sicily having failed to accomplish his objective. See *Plutarch's Lives*.

²⁶ Master Splinter is a character from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles franchise.

²⁷ Anton Chigurh is the main antagonist played by Javier Bardem in the film *No Country for Old Men*. The character's hair is regarded as one of his distinctive features.

²⁸ This passage is referring to the use of red herrings—a fallacious argument pattern that occurs when using irrelevant information to distract or mislead another person.

²⁹ Derridean refers to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose writing has been accused of being non-systematic, confusing, and at times, incomprehensible. See *Derrida/Searle: Deconstruction and Ordinary Language*.

³⁰ In this passage, distinctions in neurodiverse thought patterns are discussed, with the autistic character being more analytic, systematic, and rigid in nature. See the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5-TR*.

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