

Truth Or Consequence

by J. Mykell Collinz

At the Friday open forum in the university auditorium, an unusually large gathering awaited the arrival of a celebrity speaker and, as those in attendance talked loudly among themselves, the current speaker's words could barely be understood beyond the first few rows of seats:

"Our universe came into being out of infinite homogeneity when a latent impulse to differentiate set off waves of reactive forces which irresistibly separated into peaks and valleys then proliferated into distinguishing features at an exponential rate. That very first impulse contained within itself an awesome plan, including time, energy, space, matter, and human consciousness. Please, do not waste this incredible potential that you represent, my friends. Do not allow the greed mongers to dominate your thinking. Reverse this deterioration in our global ecosystem. Yes, it will require vigilance and sacrifice. Still, by using history as our guide, we can work together to accomplish this. Let us rally around a unifying purpose, to assure our continuance on this planet."

"Yes," a woman shouted from a front row seat.

Their eyes met for just an instant.

Then the forum moderator, without an explanation or an acknowledgment, nudged the speaker away from the microphone and proceeded to introduce the much-awaited celebrity who had finally arrived to take the stage.

The young woman followed the interrupted speaker as he headed down the hallway. "Excuse me, sir," she shouted ahead.

He waited at the exit for her to catch up.

"What is your name?" she said: "And what is this unifying purpose of which you speak?"

He eagerly absorbed her presence. She wore no makeup, no fancy hairdo, no frilly dress, just a plain cotton pullover and slacks; yet the sparkle in her eyes, the radiance on her face, the mantle of her hair going in every direction gave her the appearance of someone

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blessed. Smiling, he said: "The unifying purpose can be difficult to explain. Even though, in reality, it's simply a matter of attitude."

"More like a matter of faith, I'd expect," she said: "I'm Gertrude Goethe, a professor here at the university."

"Ron Rollins," he responded, leaning forward to open the exit door. Once outside on the path leading to the street, he said: "It's easy to use faith as a catch all. I'm too analytical for that. Try using logic, or even creative imagination."

After falling into step, she chanted breathlessly: "The idea of a benevolent god or goddess whose divine will animates a potentially harmonious world is appealing to me, I must admit. And, although I don't allow myself to think in such terms very often, on a non-verbal level, I have a feeling it could possibly be true."

Ron looked down at the pavement as he walked, and slowly drawled: "The political world requires a much more basic approach than that, for purely humanistic reasons, which may coincide with divine purpose, yet they must be attacked on a more obvious level."

"Attacked?" Gertrude interjected as they reached the street and stopped walking.

Ron turned to her and, using his eyes to communicate, allowing his excitement to show without embarrassment, said: "My place is just two blocks away and I have a great kitchen."

When they were finally settled inside his apartment sharing a bottle of wine before preparing dinner, he said: "Tell me about yourself."

She leaned forward on the overstuffed living room chair and, while looking at the wine glass in her hand, said: "Both my parents are still teaching. I grew up fast. When most kids my age were in high school, I took graduate courses at the university. I have a brother and two sisters who went to regular schools. I'm happy with my life, and I'm grateful to my parents for all they've done. They worked hard in order to focus attention on me, their prize experiment, and still have a normal family life. And now I work hard every day trying not to disappoint them."

"What would they say if you went into politics?"

"They'd absolutely hate it. To them, that's not the role of a teacher. They want me to keep learning, to spend all my time studying and doing research. I'm working on a law degree right now. I love the subject. But I'd hate to make my living as a lawyer, at least when compared to being a professor at the university."

"How about business and economics, have you studied those areas yet?"

"Some. After taking basic micro and macro, I covered econometrics quite thoroughly in calculus, differential equations, and statistical analysis while working on a math degree. Again, I'd hate to make a living at it, but it's fascinating stuff to study. You know what, Ron, I actually rushed over to the university auditorium from my office in the administration building just to hear that celebrity speaker, and I can't even remember his name right now."

"He's some cable television guy," Ron replied: "He's a so called journalist, hyping his new book. Here, take my copy, I'm done with it. After reading where he's trying to prove Heidegger was a Nazi, I lost interest. I mean, what's the point?"

"Heidegger, a Nazi?" Gertrude responded: "With all due respect, I'll suspend my judgment on that one for now. Besides, blaming individual Germans isn't totally fair, is it? To make a long story short, irrational thinking had infected the culture. Much like what's happening here in the US, today."

"According to Heidegger, they needed a redefinition of terms, beginning with being. If I understand it correctly."

Gertrude closed her eyes and thought for a moment before answering: "Well, yes, many within the churches and the universities at that time were calling for intellectual honesty. We need a new interpretation of the dogma, they claimed. Because, God is a being in the process of becoming, is still evolving. And God wants us, God needs us, to make certain choices on our own, purely for the love of God. We are free to go our own way, free to create our own being, yes. But why not go all the way? Can we make a better choice than to team up with God, they asked? In order to advance as a species we must embrace this challenge which ontology represents, yes, to

continually recreate our own being. But we need not throw away the very concept of God, simply because someone else has abused it."

Ron thoughtfully nodded, and said: "Being, to me, is a set of events and implications. The most amazing event is self-consciousness. The capacity to love and be loved is the most amazing implication, and an exquisite joy."

Gertrude pondered Ron's words, and said: "Throughout human history, philosophy has consisted of two parts, a theory as to the nature of the world, and an ethical doctrine as to the best way of living within that world. Failure to unify the two is a major source of confusion. And today, our self-conception struggles to keep pace with the accelerating advance of technological change."

Ron filled her glass with more wine, and said: "I guess human consciousness still needs to grow up some, doesn't it? To harmonize with the existing order of the universe, to find its place in the evolution of the cosmos. If we can intelligently conceptualize the unifying purpose, and if we can cooperatively concentrate our aggregated energies, we can colonize space and re-engineer the universe to our liking."

FBI Agents Monty Clark and Jeff Heck were sitting in the back of a mobile surveillance van listening to a live audio feed from Ron's apartment.

Agent Clark said: "I have no idea what they're actually talking about in there. It sounds like they're sitting around smoking pot, drinking wine, and speaking encrypted gibberish. Who's recruiting who here?"

"That's how academics talk, Monty," Agent Heck responded: "Just keep listening."

"Too bad there's no video yet. Judging from these photos, she looks too young to be a full professor. Not a bad looking woman though, if she'd comb her hair, put on some makeup, and wear a dress. He's certainly not her type, too polished, too old."

"Just keep listening, Monty."

Gertrude leaned back in the comfortable overstuffed chair, and said: "We should learn simple kindness here at home before we attempt to colonize space."

Ron acknowledged her comment with a nod before continuing: "We'll need men of genius. And women of genius, of course. Who make no mistakes, whose errors are volitional, are portals of discovery, to paraphrase Rousseau."

"Rousseau? He, who inferred non-human knowledge from human emotions? Who allowed his heart to decide questions that his mind left doubtful? Who reintroduced the habit of metaphysical abstraction, making it possible for the mystic identification of a leader with his people? Such a leader has no need of confirmation by so mundane an apparatus as the ballot box."

"According to Rousseau, Gertrude, a leader cannot impose what is useless to the community because human beings have natural rights, and needs."

"Rousseau himself, Ron, lived a lifestyle that was anything but democratic. Did his followers interpret him correctly? Can a valid opinion on the subject even be substantiated by the facts, due to the breadth of his influence? And are we still floundering in his wake?"

"Well, Gertrude, the roots of American history do, of course, grow from European soil. Not exclusively from France, but greatly intertwined with it. On the other hand, I also see America feeding back into Europe. Our modern times have changed things dramatically. The whole planet has become, as they say, like a global village. Or like a Rousseau city-state. And now, more than ever before, the direct participation of every citizen in a representative government may be possible on a global scale."

"Today's popular world culture, Ron, is no less a creature of style than clothing, or any other fashion. Mass media thought control, from consumer advertising to political sloganeering, is creating a new generation of irrational thinkers. If this trend continues, one day soon we may find ourselves under the control of some genius gone haywire."

"Irrational thinking isn't something new, of course."

"No, irrational thinking isn't new, Ron, but global mass media advertising is something new. It's a child of modern technology, replacing billboards and the like. It's tirelessly influencing our actions on every level. And, in today's globalized media paradigm, its power has become concentrated in the hands of a very few at the top. They can now fool all the people all the time. That makes my head spin just thinking about it."

"Okay, let's say you're right, Gertrude. And, once again, it is time for a paradigm shift, a redefinition of terms, ontologically speaking. If people had the capacity to think with clarity and logic, both personally and socially, no amount of force or coercion could make them do what they did not want to do."

"Yet today's consumer capitalists are successfully manipulating us through our own government, using power slogans, virtually brainwashing voters and consumers alike. Let me say again, when illogical reasoning is used like this to sell products and to gain political power, a clever dictator will eventually take full advantage of this general condition of unclear thinking, this through-the-heart irrationality."

"What freedom means can change, Gertrude, laws can become less difficult to understand and obey."

"Which implies a universal standard for good behavior. How is that possible in reality?"

"It's worth trying, isn't it? Don't be so pessimistic. Even in terms of creating individual freedoms, society will be much better off when everybody agrees on each and every single issue and behaves cooperatively. We're not there yet, no. But isn't it worth considering?"

"I'm not being pessimistic, Ron. I'm being realistic. For all we know, nothing is truthful in an absolute sense. The more a person brags about their virtues, the more certain you can be of their vices. The self-described heavy tipper may actually be a ferocious tightwad. The family values politician may have a well-developed taste for bondage. Reality is simply a descriptive notion. And we

should judge events by their practical consequences, not by metaphysical speculation."

"Yes, a dualistic view of human nature is very tempting, isn't it? It even fits our anatomy. The imaginative right brain is gestalt and connected. The articulate left-brain is linear, analytical, and detached. Does this encourage a degree of false separation in the way we process information?"

"It may also encourage a creative synthesis."

In the FBI van outside, Agent Clark remarked: "There's been nothing but heavy breathing for the last half hour. Do you see any case developing here? We can stay with it if you like, but I'm not sure it will help. He's obviously a weirdo, but where's the crime in that? She's a little young for him, so? She's also a full professor at the university. I supposed she knows what she's doing."

Agent Heck responded: "His name keeps coming up in the agency's computer, Monty, and it's our job to keep tabs on him. Maybe it's the groups he belongs to, the people he knows, the books he reads, the places he goes, how do I know? Whatever, if we keep sifting we'll probably find something."

