

Credit card numbers

S.I.N.

M.C.P. Numbers

What's your number?

000011100010100000111010001010

Serial numbers

Number 1

10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1

New Year. Old Year. Another Year.

Zero. Nothing. Everything.

—Dion Tubrett

Of

To be *of* something, to belong, to be thought of. But to be robbed of something! Or gotten rid of! To be made an enemy of, and thus be left alone. How sad, to die of a disease. Or worse—to be *of* what's coming. All that anticipation, all that weight. So: to work only with what's present, what's passed? A rearrangement? To never write another statement of intent again; to prefer that nobody know? To be unable to think of anything to say that would change all that.

—Michael Turner

Optimism and Pessimism

At a certain point in the 1990s it became clear to me that ethics was to be substituted for politics in the discourses of my contemporaries both in and outside of the academy. Where politics remained it was in the sense of office or career politics. It is true that for the professionalised worker, whose conditions of existence are represented by the modern university, the time that can be allotted to politics in the old sense—work for social or communal causes, goals and interests—is seriously limited by the demands of work. This dilemma is real and shared. These areas of the practise of life take on the status of charity, and, at least in principle, charity work is a viable political practice. However, such activities remain on the margins of the real workings and mechanisms of the accumulation of power, as the agenda of many fiscally conservative regimes testify.

In any case, there is a slippery slope that leads from the projection of a life in comparative poverty, perceived mediocrity or insignificance, to that sacrifice of time required to “build a life.” Some like their work, most

don't. Some accumulate capital far beyond their needs, most don't accumulate enough. Through this sacrifice the gatherers gamble on a delay of their lives (work) in the name of a later delay of work: a dream holiday, a house, a car, retirement, medical care, perhaps a child, a "cause," or simply food and shelter for themselves or others. If we sift through this list or examine other such lists, what we find is a profile of the political disappearance of the worker, for it is like the infinitely expanding list of things that must get done but never will.

Nevertheless, any strong separation of ethics and politics risks missing the truly difficult thing about ethics which is not only the impossibility of knowing and the need for healthy scepticism when it comes to applying moral claims in the world. That view quickly turns into an academic conceit. The really difficult thing about ethics is the politics of one's own actions. It is the field and implication of our errors, our conceits, but also and even primarily, of our lucid decisions. It is the latter especially that make ethics difficult—the effects we foresee or justify and pretend not to, all our active minimizations, maximizations, rationalizations of consequences and intentions. So, yes the blind spots are bad. Inexperience and ignorance produce mistakes, and these are elements of the accident that is a life. Then there is the negotiation of said accident.

In this light all talk of the "end of history" and related talk of the "end of politics" reveals a shortness of historical perspective that is that is both bemusing and horrifying. Good politics always has and always will require a vigilance which demands time and interest, and even something like belief. No good ethics without good politics. It seems they are always conjoined, ethics and politics, as if ethics is the obligation this vigilance answers to.

The tendency and dynamic represented by the ideology of professionalisation, of eclipsing the possibility of good in the world, is not new. However, it demands that the possibility of politics be sought out and that it take on new forms.

Politics is in many ways about predicting the future because it is ultimately concerned with assessing and mediating powers and potential powers. Optimism and pessimism effect action itself, in advance as it were. Optimists will attempt more, perhaps fail more often, but will succeed on occasion: "nothing ventured, nothing gained." Pessimists sabotage actions by questioning the realization of necessary conditions. They thereby impoverish existence, as Nietzsche would have said (though Nietzsche sometimes called himself a pessimist, it was certainly not in this sense). Pessimism makes the world appear unworthy of us (an underhanded way of making "us" look better). Optimists set themselves up for a fall, so it is safer to be a pessimist. In this sense pessimism is a kind of social-psychological safety feature of modern ideology.

Critical pessimism, grounded in epistemological pessimism, can be very dangerous here since it undermines the notion that things can be done in advance, a priori. Yet this is why such pessimism is rampant in a professionalised society and its philosophies: there is no time for anything but pessimism, and pessimism justifies this lack of time. Of course the attempt to realize good in the world can lead to oppression or be claimed by those seeking to justify oppression, but what is at issue is not movement or change as such, but rather the form these changes take. This means we must distinguish between the movement of time, or change in general, and the forms of movement or change that continue to destroy us, other beings, and the world.

After all, it is the violence, indifference and cruelty of our societies that we resist, as much as the narrowness of the goals that are imposed by cultural and material inertia. Progress as “more progress” or more of the same, gives us an oblivious illusion of movement as if nothing else could ever be imagined. It does not create goods or a good, it circulates cultural capital and capital itself.

There are forms of inertia that are positive and which sustain creative movement. These must be distinguished from the destructive forms. Change can be good, but so can endurance and repetition.

Consider the “subject,” that human individual and institution that is so close to us all. Sometimes having or being a subject helps us (we may have certain rights that protect us) even as it destroys us (we are liable to the forces of capital, seized “as” subjects, addressed by advertising “as” subjects of desire, and so forth). So to some degree this “subject” works as a kind of lifejacket for existence which provides a way to pass through time, clumsy device though it be. Some will go even further: it is the institutions themselves that preserve the conditions of the Good. Rule of law, educational institutions, quality control, security, confidence, the list goes on. Note that many of these institutions involve anticipation of risk. One would have to break down the good and bad of this list and retrieve the being or beings that were meant to be sustained, allowed to be and to become, if they could be found among this institutional dispersion. Perhaps we would be left with only education and hospitals and lives lived in spite of all that, passing on ways, truths, compassion and so on. If the buffer of life doesn't allow passage then a neutral circulation, indifference and intolerance will prevail because the problem will be reduced to one of personal survival. A kind of animal limit appears with two fronts: one the death of the subject, the other the spirits that meet us in the world.

At least we have come to learn that this subject is collective and that the self is constituted by and through collectivities. The self is not such a private property after all! Deleuze helped us conceive this membrane of the self, ephemeral, vibrating at the point of becoming collective, pointing the

way beyond the tautological human hoards to the earth, to the animals who are after all more subtle, less befuddled by epistemology, more worldly, more optimistic.

I think of the Parisian composer Messiaen's musical transcriptions of bird calls of the 1950s and 1960s. "No one gets to hear them in the city," he explained in an interview. I imagine him throwing them pieces of bread. "There is some for you too. What do you have to tell us?" The world becomes good just hearing such a story. I hesitate to add that Messiaen earlier wrote his *Quartet for the End of Time* (*Quatuor pour la fin du temps*) while interned in a Nazi camp, a piece which is today much more famous than the bird transcriptions. I imagine him listening to the birds in the camp; I imagine them helping him to compose—singing, coming and going, keeping the way open.

—Lang Baker

Patagonia

Name of uncertain origin. Pata = foot (?), Gonia (?). The "ultimate ultimate" according to Bruce Chatwin who literally wrote the book *In Patagonia* about the vast, featureless lands of southern Argentina.

Early explorers called Patagonia a land of fierce giants and monsters. Later Charles Darwin called the inhabitants—the all-too human Fuegian Indians—"wretched" creatures. Paleontologists noted that the monsters were merely oversized sloths.

Legends of rivers of diamonds and rubies lured opportunistic Spanish and English privateers to a land that instead yielded wind and dust. Stories of a lost City of Caesars (inhabited by a race of robust Aryans and bursting with gold) nestled deep in the heart of the Patagonian Andes kept fleets of intrepid Jesuit missionaries busy as they plunged deeper and deeper into the heart of the Patagonian wilderness in search of Christian souls in need of salvation.

Later, homesick Welsh settlers (marooned in Patagonia after buying one-way tickets to what they thought was a New World paradise) established tidy farmsteads and proper tea rooms overlooking the barren pampas. The American cowboy Butch Cassidy was rumored to have made Patagonia his hideout (the Hollywood movie version of his life and death later changed the location to Bolivia).

Patagonia's modern day cachet is exemplified by the eponymous, multi-million dollar company whose expensive outdoor clothing and designer catalogues are found in shopping malls around the globe. Armies of ecotourists (socially responsible masses clad in neon-colored Patagonia brand parkas) descend upon Patagonia (the land) to shoot (with cameras, of