

A Game of Chess

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I gaped, my mouth drawn wide by the magnificence of the building, and wondered why I had never been there before. The incessant sheet of rain falling aimlessly to the ground struck my face as I gazed at the gentle rainbow of light streaming through the panes of stained glass. It was as if the light was being choked by the air outside, and was only allowed to travel freely once it passed through those coloured walls. Impatient as always, I shook off the spell and pushed open the building's imperial doors, which swung open easily at the simplest touch, almost encouraging me to enter.

As I closed the doors behind me, I felt, if only for a moment, that I didn't belong in that place. Walking towards the end of the small antechamber, I realized that my shoes were soaking wet, so I dried them off on the mat and proceeded inside. It was strange that I had decided to wipe my feet because I had never developed that habit in my youth. I guess I just didn't want to dirty the place; it was incredibly beautiful and well kept.

I passed through another set of doors that led me into a large room with seats spread throughout, and as I looked around I wondered where everybody was. I knew that places like this weren't very popular these days, but oddly, I didn't feel out of place. There was a kindness that I detected before anyone even entered the room, and it was only enhanced when a man in uniform approached from behind a small door and introduced himself to me.

"Hello there," he said cheerfully.

"Hello to you to...sir," I said, unsure of how the man should be addressed.

"That's not necessary here, friend, just call me Alex"

"Fair enough."

"So, to what do I owe the honour?"

I could tell this was going to be a long conversation.

"You're here about a problem, a question, a friend?" he inquired.

"What are you kidding? I've got tonnes of friends, and they're all great," I said defensively.

"I see."

"See what?"

"I see one thing we will have to remedy."

"What's that?"

"Your definition of a friend."

"A friend is your buddy, the guy you hang around with and do stuff with."

"Is that all?"

"No, I guess he helps you when you're down and goes double with you if your girlfriend brings out one of her friends."

I thought that was clever.

"I see."

"See *what*?" Now he was getting on my nerves.

"I see where you are coming from. Tell me, why are you here?"

"I hear you give some great advice."

"There is no such thing as 'bad' advice, only 'bad' judgment."

"Well, I heard you help put people back on the right track."

"No. I just try to take them off the wrong one."

This was going nowhere.

“Someone told me to ask you about your ‘solution’.”

“To what?”

“To everything”

“My ‘solution’, as you call it, is simply a philosophy that I have developed under the patient guidance of time and experience, but I don’t think you would benefit from its message, at least not yet...”

I wasn’t going to let some barn-yard philosopher tell me that I couldn’t understand his message.

“Please. I really need your advice.”

“How’s this ... I’ll introduce my personal philosophy to you, and if you’re still with me by the end of the ‘introduction’, we’ll proceed from there.”

“Fine by me.”

“Very well. My philosophy is very simple, but it requires you to interpret many things in ways you’ve probably never considered, and it is bounded by certain essential principles. First and foremost you must admit that the age of definition is over, the age of creativity is long gone, the age of wonder is lost forever, and the age of civility has past. Man was once a resplendent creature, full of life, full of love, full of interest and curiosity. Now all that remains is the faded shadow of a glorious past, the left-over singe from a bright blast of development. As a result, mankind is left with the unenviable possession of mind-numbing boredom, searching the past for trinkets and souvenirs that might bring us back to an age when man’s mind was his weapon and unanswered questions were his adversaries. Life has lost its flare and has instead become a drudgery, fit only to be abused by life’s simple pleasures.

“Today’s youth are ‘Generation X’, in the most literal terms. The letter ‘X’ has always been held as a symbol of indeterminate substance. Planet X, Product X, Variable X; all of these examples show the ambivalent nature of the letter. So too is ‘Generation X’ a symbol of ambivalence, with its hallowed “diversity” and ubiquitous “acceptance” of everything and anything that was once repressed or considered taboo. But truly, Generation X is the generation without an identity, that is to say a *specific* identity. Generation X’ers are content to effectively ‘bum’ identities from the past, like the hippies in the 60’s and the punks in the 80’s ‘bummed’ smokes off their listless, unmotivated peers. They try to relive the glory of the past without creating it or earning it themselves. Their cheap make-over festivals like Woodstock II and Big-Band reunion tours are more intent to make a buck than to promote the same sense of social awareness and rebellion that once filled concert venues around the world. So desperate are the youth of today to achieve the glorious heights of past generations that they are content to climb up on the very same pedestals their ancestors built and claim them as their own. Even Sir Isaac Newton, in his disguised immodesty, gave credit to the ‘shoulders of giants’ that allowed him and his scientific genius to flourish in the 17th century. The youth of today don’t even make that humble concession when taking praise for their borrowed success.

“Nevertheless, we must not despair, for there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Potential. More precisely, *mankind’s* potential, for with this potential lies the seed of something better. But before anything gets better, believe me, it will get worse.”

I knew that when I went there I would be introduced to a new way of thinking and understanding, but I couldn't have been more unprepared for what he had said, and even more significantly, how intensely it affected me. So we sat there, staring at each other, both fully aware that I was meant to respond, but neither surprised that I hadn't. Finally I spoke, but the words seemed to come, not from my head, but from some place further down.

"It's true..." I sighed, letting the air push by my lips as the words seemed to take form in front of me rather than in my mouth.

"Possibly. But you should always be ready to question any new information that is fed to you."

"Of course," I replied dim-wittedly, "you could be wrong."

"I question your sincerity, but the truth is always out there. Sometimes it just remains hidden, like an iceberg below the surface, waiting to be found."

"How can I find it?" I asked, looking at myself like a pet in front of a mirror, puzzled by what I saw, and yet intrigued by its likeness.

"By stripping away the layers that have accumulated on your personality."

"I need more than that," I pleaded.

"And so shall you have it."

He crossed his legs and folded his arms neatly in his lap, sucking in each breath as if it contained some sweet nectar, while radiating a humble glow that seemed to brighten the already well-lit room.

"You see, Nature left her cruelest joke for man, and man accepted it without the slightest sign of a struggle. She made man the agent of his own undoing. By doing this, she challenged man to escape the shackles of ignorance and save himself from this desolate fate. Yet at this he has failed miserably. Lethargy has settled on his soul like a mind-numbing frost and has left him defenseless against the snares of moral decay. But all is not lost. There is still hope."

That word 'hope' seemed to float in the warm air of the room.

"But hope is useless without a positive human spirit," he continued, "and that is where today's man falls short. A live-in-the-now mentality is running rampant through much of society with devastating results. By seeking pleasure that will satisfy only the present, people are neglecting the responsibility that they have to the future. Without foresight, the direction of society can't be controlled, and inexplicable injustices can and will result. Mind you, on the off chance that something does go right, that will only serve reinforce this dangerous lifestyle. In not taking responsibility for the future, a person neglects to face their problems one after another (had they the foresight to plan ahead), choosing instead to face them in a clump at the end of the line; an insurmountable task to say the least. Man treats his future 'self' as another person, who needs not be satisfied because that alter ego has no present impact on his life. We are effectively alienating ourselves from the future, giving up all control over the happiness that we will experience later in life for the ephemeral pleasures of the moment.

"So basically, imprudence breeds impudence. When the masses all decide that the live-in-the-now mentality shall reign supreme, and a massive chunk of the population decide to forgo the responsibility of foresight, society loses its majesty and reverts to its more animal roots, running in herds like sheep in a pasture."

This last point struck me across the face like a harsh slap. The futility of it all overwhelmed me. The struggle needed to overcome such a misguided social convention seemed to loom over any courage that I

might have had. One tiny aspect of man's character stirring terror in the immensity of man's mind, like a simple mouse raising terror in the eyes of a gigantic elephant.

"It is essential," he continued without skipping a beat, "that we as people accept our fate as solitary creatures, not social beings like most people believe. The self is the ultimate entity that man seeks to please, and all actions, taken in this context, can be seen as selfish. I'll give you some examples in a second, but first let me illustrate the harm that can arise from categorizing man as a 'social being.'"

"By convincing himself that he is a social being, man is straying from his naturally introverted nature. Ultimately his self-deception is revealed through civil unrest -- that is to say, *crime*. Crime is the manifestation of the every-man-for-himself mentality, resurfacing after years of social conditioning. People commit crimes out of self-interest, whether it be crimes of petty theft (in order to placate sudden deficiencies), crimes of assault (in order to placate sudden desires), or crimes of violence (in order to placate sudden rage). The end which the means provides is one of self-interest in every case. Man is naturally anti-social and self-involved, but through his inability to adequately provide for himself, he gathers together with other people, not for their benefit, but for purely personal, self-indulgent reasons. If man were to accept the true nature of his personality, and the reality that others face the same fate as him, he might be able to compensate for any conflict that arises from his interaction with others. But as of yet, man's self-interest reigns supreme.

"One obvious example that helps bring my point to bear: death. Not wanting someone to die is selfish, because you don't want to face the pain of loosing them. There is no consideration for the person's death directly, only indirectly by how it will affect you. Love, too, is purely an exercise in self-interest, and a very profitable one too. People will disguise their self-gratification with the excuse that they have the other person's interests at heart, but isn't the end result of pleasing someone else really just pleasing yourself?"

I wasn't sure if he wanted his question to hang in the air, but I knew that if I answered, it would be in disagreement. I had been in love before, and as much as I received a personal pleasure from devoting myself to my girlfriend, I genuinely placed her happiness over and above my own. Rather than disappoint him or veer him from his train of thought, I kept my mouth shut, which as I later decided, was the smartest thing I had done since first deciding to meet with him that morning.

"I see I've struck a chord."

"I'm not sure I catch your drift," said my lips as my mind thought "*Busted.*"

His demeanor was calm throughout the entire pontification, but his expressions were rather intriguing. Smiles and frowns chased each other across his crystal countenance like the sun and the moon on the black sheet of space. His body bubbled with excitement when he spoke of man's virtues, and steamed with choler when he spoke of man's ills. Of the two, the later often prevailed, but even though his views were radical, I didn't find them too hard to accept, or at least acknowledge. I guess what he was saying didn't completely throw me off because I felt that most of what he was saying all along was true, or at the very least nearer to the truth than my mind had traveled in quite some time. After all, authors and philosophers are just people who take note of things that everyone else takes for granted, and this guy seemed to keep some pretty great notes.

“We’ve been going on for a while now. Would you care for a drink?” he asked.

“Sure, if you’ve got anything.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.” And with that he left the room almost as silently as he came. It almost seemed that his feet made no sound when they pushed off the floor.

This little refreshment break gave me another chance to look around the room, this time in much greater detail. From what I could tell, there were several rooms in the building, each slightly different in aesthetic form, but linked inscrutably by some aura that I noticed the second I set foot inside. When I first entered, the magnificence of that place struck me like a splash of cold water in the morning. If any gloom was to be found in that particular building, its sole repose was beneath the regal red carpet, for there was not a dark corner in the entire room, and I guessed from its nature, the same could be said for the entire building.

Even the humblest of furnishings seemed to glow in the presence of that light. Take for instance a rickety wooden chair I saw, waiting idly beneath an antique mahogany table. In that place, under that light, the chair seemed as appropriate for the table as any, if not more so. The wanton discrimination that prevailed outside the walls of that building would have labeled such an object worthless without a second glance, and certainly an unfit partner for so precious a table. But there, in that place, such a judgment would be like calling a hero a villain, or a virtue a vice.

Just then, in his ghostly fashion, he appeared behind me. It looked as if he was concentrating on something in the distance, but somehow I knew that his glance was not as stray as he would have me believe.

“Your drink, coffee as you requested.”

“But I didn’t...”

There was no use. I did want coffee anyway.

“Just admiring the furniture?”

“Yeah. Just checking the place out.”

“What do you think?”

It was funny that he asked because, at that point, I really wasn’t sure.

“I noticed you were looking at that chair,” he said, pointing to the rickety antique.

“Only for a moment.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right. I have a question for you though. Which piece of furniture has the greater value?”

“The table, of course. That thing’s got to be worth at least five thousand dollars.”

“So money is the core of your system of value?”

“Mostly, yes.”

“Mostly?”

“Well I guess the story *behind* the story counts a bit too. You know, its history.”

“Ah, so character is important too.”

“Well, yeah,” I answered, not sure where this was going.

“What if I told you that the table was made on an assembly line?”

“It’s still a great table.”

“What if I told you that that chair was made by a man for his wife?”

“I’d still go for the table.”

“All right then. What if I told you that that man lived in an area rife with fields and baron of trees? And what if the man had to walk for four days to fetch the wood, then travel four days back? And what if that man then slaved over the construction of that chair from sunrise to sunset the next day just to finish it? And what if that night a group of raiders came into his workshop and smashed up the chair, still wet with paint, and set it on fire? And what if that man went back the next day on the same eight day journey to bring back some more wood? And what if I told you that when he returned, he found his house robbed and his wife raped and killed by those same raiders? And what if I told you that he still made that chair and placed it on the grave of his dead wife as a last tribute of his undying love? Now which of the two objects has the greater value?”

“The chair, of course. The chair,” I pleaded emphatically.

“So maybe money isn’t as important as you thought.”

“No. No it’s not...”

He stopped to take a sip of his tea, and I stopped to take a breath. The guy was right – I had to admit it – and silently wondered how man had managed to stray so far from virtue in the first place. Was it through small, unnoticeable changes, or did the world just give up all at once? Either way, there was definitely something wrong with the *status quo*.

“Man,” he continued, “is no more than a tremendously overqualified animal. It has been a recent trend to place false expectations on each and every member of society to “be all that you can be,” filling the minds and hearts of everyone with utopian propaganda. The fact of the matter is, we are not all equal in *everything* that we do. There are some members of society who are destined to be leaders and executors, but likewise, there are some members of society whose field of expertise will be factory work, or refuse management, or administrative assistance. There is a strong push these days towards a completely white collar workforce, but unfortunately there is no way any economy can function without the stratification of labour. That’s not to say that executives are more important than physical labourers, and in fact the opposite is true. Without blue collar workers, the market couldn’t function. Take, for instance, the production or refinement of any necessity good like fresh produce or water. Executives could set up purchasing contracts and manage distribution, but without the workers to manufacture and refine the product or provide the service, no transaction is complete.

“One of the obvious downsides of utopian propaganda is the false sense of security that it intreats among developing generations. Everyone has been told that they can have anything if they want it enough, and from that fallacy stems the assumption that whatever the future holds, as long as its outcome is coveted enough, the right strings will be pulled and everything will go your way. When the future is taken for granted, the present isn’t respected for what its worth – as a building block *for* the future. Of the 168 hours available to us each week, we have a responsibility to spend as many as we can looking towards the future and preparing for it, whether it be going to university to get a diploma, or setting ourselves up with a stable job. That is *ideally* what should happen. The *reality* of the situation is, with very few exceptions, almost everybody wants a cushy, white collar job. Nobody wants to get their hands dirty with manual labour because there is a general notion that such work is menial, and that those who partake in such work somehow contribute less to society or are somehow less important, much like your perception of that rickety chair sitting beneath the

majesty of our mahogany table. This popular consensus falsely portrays the ‘menial’ worker in the grand scheme of things by creating a climate of improvidence in which such tasks are considered below man’s dignity. What we really need to do is just accept ourselves for what we are and find as much happiness in that as is humanly possible, because spending time complaining about the inevitable only takes time away from enjoying it.”

After that last sentence he paused for a while. His face, placid as ever, stared thoughtfully past my seat and beyond, out through the walls of that place, out through the streets of the city, up past the clouds and beyond. But to where? The expression on his face gave me no clue, but I sensed that if I too had spoken those same words only moments ago, I too would have joined him in that enchanting place.

At this point, my ghostly confessor was gazing out through the window and into the rain that tried with every drop to penetrate the glass without much success. It was odd, though. I could have sworn that, had the droplets actually made it inside, they would have hung, suspended in the air, before being carried back outside on a gentle puff of air.

“Before you leave, I want to leave you with a bit of that advice which you so eagerly sought from me earlier this morning.” He continued with a sigh, “Always remember, my friend, that this life of ours is plagued by all that is evil. Man is born neither totally good nor totally evil, but is instead born ingrained with qualities of both. By the definition of man itself, these archetypal tendencies are sewn into the very fabric of our being, and as part of a society of beings we have allowed them to become so intimately associated with our social infrastructure that they now pass almost unnoticed. What determines our relative ‘goodness’ is the ability to choose the inherent good over the inherent evil.

“In choosing, however, one must be careful not to inaccurately judge the nature of the choice to fit one’s own agenda. If it seems fitting to lie to someone in a particular situation, by convincing yourself it is okay to do so, you do not negate the fact that what you are saying is still a lie. Likewise, if you consider charity a waste of time, when you could be doing something ‘better’ like *sleeping*, you must reexamine your premises. Fiction does not become fact, simply because we wish it. Only through sincere consideration is it possible to properly judge the quality of an action, and the little time it takes to do so is justification enough for the process.”

With those final words he finished the last few sips of his tea and fell silent. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to answer him, as I was getting a little tired and had missed the last part of his speech. He obviously could see that my eyes were glazing over and knew that I had had enough, at least for the time being.

“Well, are you satisfied with the time you’ve spent here so far?”

“Yeah, sure I am. But I ... uh ... gotta go pick up my sister from daycare now. Do you think I could come back sometime?”

“Most certainly. These doors are never closed. Just remember, maturation is a slow and developmental process. If it could be done any other way, someone would have bottled and sold it by now!”

With that he bid me farewell and saw me to the door. As I left that place and returned to the once familiar outdoors, I looked around. Before me was a world I once knew intimately, a world I had once embraced and accepted. Now, the scene seemed different somehow, like a painting under a different light. I

wasn't quite sure how that afternoon had affected me, but I knew full well that I would soon return to that building. Even then as I looked back, it stood there like a pillar of spiritual and intellectual strength in the middle of an ashen wasteland.