

SGEME 4: Promises, Promises!

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This will, I hope, be a fairly commonsense pointing to something all we SGEMERs might do in some way that is related to the founding bent, “something should be done”. The title is humorous, but you may cut it back to find the topic, which is **Promises** as they should be present in our economic exchanges. Some of our group are working on that topic: indeed, it is at the centre of a volume (August, 2010) that I am editing for the Indian Journal *Divyadaan: A Journal of Philosophy and Education*, the writings in it being (in order of appearance!) Phil McShane, Mike Shute, Derek Melchin, Bill Zanardi, Darlene O’Leary and Pat Brown. In the previous volume (May, 2010) there appears my sketch of the project, under the title “Do You Want A Sane Global Economics?”

Our efforts towards that set of articles is tough work, and I would draw attention to that here by recalling a favorite quotation of mine: “The necessary mathematics all developed from the fundamental principles of mathematical probability laid down by Fermat and Pascal in about three months by the painstaking application of uncommon sense.”¹ Don’t let that reference discourage you. It points, as note 1 below indicates, to problems in the present analyses of banking and hedging operations that refine our ethical considerations here.

In the latest film of Michael Moore there is a section in which various experts are asked, “what is a derivative?”, and the answers are hilariously vague: were not the whole thing so tragic. A recent e-mail to me contained an even more hilarious audio-video. It was British, and you must echo in your imagination the plummy accent of the expert. A journalist poses the question to a banking expert. The expert gives a ten-minute talk, which I abbreviate: ” Well you see, the credit person finds a poor old fellow sitting on the stoop of a derelict house. The credit person says: “I say, old man, would you like to own this house?” The credit person arranges

¹E. T.Bell, *The Development of Mathematics*, McGraw-Hill, London and New York, 1945, 155. I note here that another version of this essay appears in the series *Bridgepoise* as *Bridgepoise 4*. The notes there are fuller: e.g. there are flaws in the consideration of probabilities in CDSs analyses (CDS: Credit Default Swaps) that would distract us here.

credit, gets a commission the debt is weaved up into the world of derivatives and so on :
 on, perhaps, to a bail-out by the citizenry.”

Now I have commented on that weaving in various places in a vulgar way: people up-stream pissing in the drinking water. One occurrence of this commenting occurs in the article posted as *Bridgepoise 3*: “Liberal Arts as the Core of Future Science,” an article sent out already to you. But let me nudge you to some insight with regard to that underpinning of science by artistry. The vulgar expression makes a point, a little bit like e e cummings’ brief poem on the politician: ‘a politician is an arse upon / which everyone has sat / except a man’ ... or something like that. Our goal in SGEME is to promote effectiveness. To shift to effectiveness in the scientific economics of promise one needs to move from metaphor to myth. “Metaphor is revised and contracted myth and myth is anticipated and expanded metaphor.”²

A decent well-spun yarn is worth a thousand deductive texts. Is there a point here that strikes at the Greek bent, and the consequent European bent, towards inhuman presentations? Michael Shute begins his article on “Real Economic Variable” in the journal mentioned by recalling weir-fishing in his grandfather’s village. “When I was a child my parents sent my brother and me each year to my grandparents....” Bernard Lonergan, in the first lecture I ever heard him give, told the yarn about the lady who invited Einstein to tea. The yarn cuts to the heart of the yearning in axial humans for *haute vulgarization*. Terry Quinn, who is quite at home in axioms, nonetheless tells two tales to convey the two basic insights of the calculus: insights that, remarkably, are not “offered” in any text I know at any level in any language.³ Derek

²*Insight*, 569. I am not going to enter here into the context that this brings to the problem of teaching.

³Terry Quinn’s Tales are in “The Calculus Campaign”, *Journal of Macrodynamical Analysis*, Volume 2 (2002), 8-36, and also in *Primus: Problems, resources and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate Studies*, Volume XIII, Issue 1, (March 2003), 55-74., under the title “Getting Started in Calculus”.

Melchin carries Mike's yarn forward in a way that cuts to the heart of the uncaring idiocy of much of accepted trading: I'll come back to that shortly.

When I taught the nature of belief it was in humorous terms of people being lost, being misdirected, being subtly suspicious of guidance: an abundance of yarns that lifted us out of the university room. If I were to write adequately about promises promises I would have to think up some *Pilgrim's Progress*, and if I were to write to you effectively about promises and personal relations I would need a yarn that would slide past your censor, psychic or academic (in the usual sense of *academic!*), and tell you thus, sideways as it were, how to go about really being a friend. Do you possibly think here of the Gospel parables, or of such films as *Paying Forward*? My wife Sally tells yarns to the kids in the Church, and the great thing is that the adults are off-centre, off-censor: they sometimes get the message! Those of you who are expert in *Method in Theology's* display of related names on page 48 may benefit from pausing now over that display. How would you present it? How did you already ingest it? Look at the display and also read Lonergan's words e.g. "A first step will relate four terms"⁴ Not exactly "When I was a child my parent sent my brothers and me" A little later Lonergan does better: "the moment.... is strikingly illustrated by the story of Helen Keller"⁵ but he does not tell the story with the verve of the film *The Miracle Worker*. Do his reader's tell themselves the story? "So I'll tell myself a story ..."⁶ Telling yourself stories is part of living, and preparing to live, the adventure of the making of you and your friends.

I wonder how many of us read the third line of the display on page 48 without being

⁴*Method in Theology*, 48.

⁵*Ibid.*, 70.

⁶ I am quoting from a 1946 short story, *The Calmative*, by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), giving a quant nudge to those who have died already to adult growth: perhaps it is story time?! "I don't know when I died. It always seemed to me I died old, about ninety years old, and what years I'm too frightened this evening to listen to myself rot, waiting for the great red lapses of the heart so I'll tell myself a story...."

shocked by the claim that “personal relations” are on the level of creativity and growth? That third line is, so to speak, the line of disruption of the present good of order. It is the line of proleptic nostalgia. “We are changed, changed utterly. / A terrible beauty is born.”⁷ But I am not here venturing into the massive creative aesthetic complexities of the inputting into our streets and schools, our songs and sagas. I am hinting, yes, that “something needs be done” may be knocking on our own door. Are we promising friends, even to ourselves promising promising?⁸

What I am interested in here is the little uncommon sense that could seed a massive change in the culture of economic behaviour. Could we arrive at smaller group promising promising that would pay forward by attending at length to money actually in hand the way Helen Keller attended to the touches of Annie Sullivan’s fingers “in a painstaking application of uncommon sense”? I am asking us to sniff through the rot of derivatives and their ilk though the touching story of weir-repairing in Mike Shute’s grandparent’s village. Or rather, I am pointing briefly to how Derek Melchin continues Mikes’ yarn in a telling exposure of false promises, malicious lies. Mike Shute ends his yarn thus: “Because the community is small, the accounting is personal. Each knows the other and all know their obligations, a condition reinforced by a common communal celebration each Sunday. Certainly, the Karsdale of my youth was not paradise, but the complexities of our modern economic disorientations had yet to arrive, and just as the rising and falling of the tides in the Basin was clear to see, so too the mutual obligations and benefits of working together to provide for the material basis for communities’ living were plainly evident and solidly reinforced.”

Derek picks up on the goings-on of the village, and the manner in which - now in the world of allegory, myth, whatever - without money, life is carried on by barter: for instance, by exchanging a day’s work for a few fish. The few fish are needed because that worker is not

⁷I am quoting Yeat’s poem on the Irish revolution of 1916.

⁸The duplication takes on very subtle meaning when considered in the context of the transition from the second to the third stage of meaning. Go figure!!

fishing. What is he or she doing? He or she, say, is repairing the weir. Think of twelve regulars fishing the weir. It comes to someone's notice that a piece of the weir is collapsing. Two of the group are selected or self-selected to fix the problem with a few days' work. I leave you to imagine, actively, the details, how the other ten pick up the slack, etc. With the present culture of course you slip on in your reading without doing that. It is just not the way we read or think in axial times. Heavens, can you imagine someone stopping on page 70 of *Method* to go back to fanciland regarding, guarding and re-gardening, re-watering, the story of those five weeks of Helen and Annie?⁹ We are too busy following the stale censor of our axial molecules to let loose "the freedom of consciousness itself,"¹⁰ to let our nerves flex their molecules.

You get leads on the details if you read the text, the yarn, that Derek spins. First he spells out, casts a story-teller's spell, on the way the community behaves: exchanging promises regarding what a loaf is worth in terms of fish, or what a lad's days' help is worth in terms of a bundle of goods. The goings-on are initially "clear to see", as Mike says, like the colossal tide-shifts of Karsdale's Fundy basin. But repairs to the weir are supplemented by other problems and indeed by bright ideas of unbuilt but desirable changes. Promises are complexified, until Mary says to Joe, "We'll have to make a **note** of that", **that** being some promise or set of promises. So, money is born on a weir in Nova Scotia and not on a bench in Italy. But money never stops being a **note** of promise, a note laced into a melody, chords and cords of security and prosperity. So, when some small-minded mafia-family near the weir starts trading in notes and bundles of notes, the trading smells, to the little group, of the vomit of indecency. The yarn about the credit-giver succoring - suckering: what a great nice slight of tongue! - the man on the stoop moves from metaphor to myth. But I leave you to track down Derek's yarn in its fleshy fullness.

And that leaving is an invitation to contribute your own share of an answer to the challenge, "something should be done": find out for yourself what the promise is that lies at the

⁹The adventure is suggested at some length in chapter 1 of my *A Brief History of Tongue. From Big Bang to Coloured Wholes*, Axial Publishing, 1998.

¹⁰Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, 232.

heart of genuine economics, find out the rhythms that are natural to its flows. The little book of mine, *Sane Economics and Fusionism*, that is to appear in early March from Axial Publishing is a help. I offer you the challenge of the first chapter, which is a class I gave to grade 12 economics in a school in Australia. The book pushes on, of course, to larger aspects of the problem and the solution. So, my added contribution is to offer to send to each of you a copy of the book when it comes out. But you need to e-mail your address to me. There will be no charge for the book. Certainly the students among you cannot afford the \$20. IF you **have** \$20 to spare, indeed it would be welcome, but I am not fussy. Your main contribution is your own effort to sniff out what is wrong in your own commonsense uncommonsense way. AND I nudge you to persuade someone else to read the book, or at least buy it! “Go tell it to the Mounties” as the hymn sings. We might just get a move to a sane economy started.