

The Skin of Others in your Game

How to be a whistleblower –James Bond isn't a Jesuit priest, but he is a bachelor –so are both Professor Moriarty and Sherlock Holmes –Counting the intelligent people in the P.R. firm Ketchum –Putting the skin on terrorists

A MORTGAGE AND TWO CATS

Imagine working for a corporation that produces a (so far) hidden harm to the community, in concealing a cancer-causing property which kills the thousands but with an effect that is not (yet) fully visible. You can alert the public, but would automatically lose your job. There is a gamble that the company's evil scientists would disprove you, causing additional humiliation. Or the news will come and go and you may end-up being ignored. You are familiar with the history of whistleblowers which shows that, even if you end up vindicated, it may take time for the truth to emerge over the noise created by corporate skills. Meanwhile you will pay the price. A smear campaign against you will destroy any hope of getting another job.

You have nine children, a sick parent, and as a result of the stand, the children's future would be compromised. College hopes will evaporate –you may even have trouble feeding them properly. You are severely conflicted between your obligation to the collective and to your progeny. You feel part of the crime and unless you do something you are an agent: thousands are dying from the hidden poisoning by the corporation. Being ethical comes at a huge cost *to others*.

In the James Bond movie *Specter*, agent Bond found himself fighting –on his own, whistleblower style –a conspiracy of dark forces that took over the British service, including his supervisors. “M.” who built the new fancy car and other gadgets for him, when asked to help against the conspiracy, said “I

have a mortgage and two cats” –ironically of course because he ended up risking the lives of his two cats to fight the bad guys.

Society likes saints and moral heroes to be celibate so they do not have family pressures and be forced into dilemmas of needing to compromise their sense of ethics to feed their children. The entire human race, something rather abstract, becomes their family. Some martyrs, such as Socrates, had young children (although he was in his seventies), and overcame the dilemma at their expense.⁸ Many can't.

The vulnerability of heads of households has been remarkably exploited in history. The Samurai had to leave their families in Edo as hostages, thus guaranteeing to the authorities that they would not take positions against the rulers. The Romans and Huns partook of the practice of exchanging permanent “visitors”, the children of rulers on both sides who grew up at the courts of the foreign nation in a form of gilded captivity.

The Ottomans relied on janissaries who were extracted as babies from Christian families and never married. Having no family (or no contact with their family), they were entirely devoted to the Sultan.⁹

It is no secret that employers like people with a family, those you can own with downside risk, particularly when they are choking under a large mortgage.

And of course most fictional heroes such Sherlock Holmes or James Bond don't have the encumbrance of a family that can become a target of, say, evil professor Moriarty.

Let us go one step further.

⁸ In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates: "I, Sir, have a family, you know, and was not born "from oak or from rock"—this is again an expression of Homer*—but from human beings, so that I have a family too, and indeed sons, men of Athens, three of them, one already a teenager and two who are children. But nonetheless I will not beg you to acquit me by bringing any of them here."

تركت الخلق طرا في هواك وايتمت العيال لكى اراك

To make ethical choices you cannot have dilemmas between the particular (friends, family) and the general.

Celibacy has been a way to force men to implement such heroism: for instance, the rebellious ancient sect, the Essenes were celibate. But they did not reproduce –unless one considers that their sect mutated to merge with what is known today as Christianity. A celibacy requirement isn't the greatest method to multiply your sect through the ages.

Financial independence is another way to solve ethical dilemmas, but such independence is hard to ascertain owing to the lack of independence of seemingly independent (and married) people –while, in Aristotle's days, a person of independent means was morally free, this is no longer possible in modern days.

Intellectual and ethical freedom requires the absence of the skin of others in one's game, which is why those are free are so rare. I cannot possibly imagine the activist Ralph Nader, particularly when he was the target of large motor companies, raising a family with 2.2 kids and a dog.

But neither celibacy nor financial independence make one unconditionally immune, as we see next.

FINDING HIDDEN VULNERABILITIES

So far we saw that the requirement of celibacy is enough evidence that society has, traditionally, been implicitly penalizing some layer of a collective for the actions of a person. This is never done explicitly: nobody says "I will punish your family because you are criticizing the big agricultural firms" when in effect this is what happens in practice when there is the threat of the reduction in the volume of the objects under the Christmas tree, or the degradation of the quality of food in the refrigerator. ~~The method of harming whistleblowers and the spreading of such stories deters those the great majority who need to feed progeny.~~

I have *f*** you money* so I appear to be fully independent. But there are people I care about who can be affected by my actions and those who want to

harm me may want to go after them. In the campaign against me, the unethical public relation firm Ketchum (hired to discredit those who were skeptical of the risk of transgenics) couldn't threaten my livelihood. Nor could they tag me with the "anti-science" label (the central part of their arsenal) since I have a publishing record, a history of standing for probabilistic rigor in science expressed in technical language, and several million readers who understand my reasoning. It is a bit too late for that, now. In fact, by creating analogies between some passages and those the new age guru Deepak Chopra, they have caused people to suspect that he was a logician, an application of Wittgenstein's ruler¹⁰: *by measuring the table with a ruler am I measuring the ruler of measuring the table?* Far-fetched comparisons are more likely to discredit the commentator than the commentated.

So Ketchum resorted to the harassment of the university's staff by using web-mobs to flood them with emails –which includes overwhelming a defenseless secretary and people who had no idea I worked for the university since I am there only part time. This method –of hitting you where they think it hurts –implies hitting people around you who are more vulnerable than you. General Motors, in the campaign against Ralph Nader, desperate to stop him, resorted to harassing Rose Nader, his mother, calling her at three in the morning –in the days when it was hard to trace a telephone call. Clearly it was meant to make Ralph Nader feel guilty of harming his own mother. It turned out that Rose Nader was herself an activist and felt flattered by the calls (at least she was not left out of the battle).

These methods are eventually ineffective. For morality to end up prevailing over history, a reverse minority rule has to have been at play: the conditional probability is that odious people have to be usually dumb and the moral people more intelligent. True: it appears that those who engage in smear campaigning are fundamentally incompetent at everything else –and at that business too, so the industry tends to accumulate the rejects prone to ethically stretches.

¹⁰ *Fooled by Randomness.*

Some heinous people (say those in the P.R. and lobbying business) are so stupid that they do not know that we know that they are stupid.

Did any of your business-smart, street-wise or academically-gifted peers in high school declare that their dream was to go work for Ketchum the P.R. firm and become the world's expert in smearing whistleblowers? Or even work as a lobbyist or public relation expert? These jobs are indicative of necessary failure in other things.

Further:

To be free of conflict you need to have no friends.

Which is why Cleon was said to have renounced all of his friendships during his office.

So far we saw that the link between the individual and the collective is too fuzzy to interpret it naively. So let us consider the classical situation of the terrorist who thinks he put himself in a situation immune to harm.

HOW TO PUT SKIN IN THE GAME OF SUICIDE BOMBERS

Can someone punish the family for crimes of an individual? The scriptures are self-contradictory enough that you can get both answers from the Old Testament. *Exodus* and *Numbers* show God as "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third or fourth generation". *Deuteronomy* makes a separation: "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin."¹¹ Even today the question isn't fully settled, nor is the answer clear-cut. You are not responsible for the debt of your parents, but German taxpayers are still responsible for war reparations for crimes committed by their grandparents and great-grandparents. And even in ancient times when debt was a burden that crossed generations, the

¹¹ Exodus 20:5-6; 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18 vs. Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18:2; Job 21:19. And Deuteronomy 24:16.

answer wasn't clear cut then: there was a balancing mechanism of periodic (literal) cleaning of the slate, with jubilee debt forgiveness.

Sometimes the answer is clear, as in the case of terrorism. *You kill my family and think that you have impunity; I will make yours pay some price for it.* Indirect responsibility isn't part of the standard crime and punishment methodology of a civilized society, but confronting terrorists (who threaten innocents) isn't standard either. For we have rarely in history confronted a situation in which the perpetrator of a crime has a completely asymmetric payoff, an upside from death while committing it.

We are totally defenseless in front of a deluded person willing to kill scores of innocents without any true downside, that is, skin in the game: he believes that both successes and failures are upsides. In Northern Lebanon, Alawi are terrorized of the Salafis wearing "jackets" since they can activate them in a public place and there is no way they can be "caught" without activation. Killing them on sight leads to false positives, but we can't afford false negatives –with the result that we have instances of private citizens cornering and "hugging" the perceived self-bomber in places where detonation is less harmful. This is a form of counter-suicide bombing.

Explicit communal punishment can be used where other methods of justice have failed, provided it is done as an explicit method of justice and well-defined prior to the event so it becomes a deterrent and not an emotional reaction. One who is sacrificing himself for a perceived upside for a given collective needs a deterrent, so it is a form of injection of skin in the game in the system where all other methods are lacking. And the skin is visible: that very collective.

The only way we have left to control suicide-terrorists would be precisely to convince them that blowing themselves up is not the worse-case scenario for them, nor the end-scenario at all. Making their families and loved ones bear a financial burden –just as Germans as still paying for war crimes – would immediately add consequences to their actions, inject that element of skin in the game that is needed. This requires some care in preventing their families from feeling martyrdom –the penalty needs to be properly

calibrated to be a nuisance without imparting any form of heroism to the person.