

DRIVING THE POINT HOME

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Relational thinking can affect every aspect of our existence—even driving.

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Young adults enjoy the experience of growing into their power. I remember a ‘high-point’ of this experience in my own life. It had a surprising twist in the tail.

Driving is a heady experience for young adults. I was alone in my car, driving along a Sydney street. The sun was shining, the radio was loud, and a surging sense of freedom welled up within. I could point the car wherever I pleased, sing as loudly as I liked, do whatever I wanted. I was the Autonomous Western Man, a powerful free-radical of humanity, untouched and untouchable by the will of others. German dance artist, ATB, displays signs of this impulse in the song *Killer*: “So you want, to be free?! To live your life, the way you want to be?”

We’ve all been there.

Although such thinking can take a deeply pathological turn—we know examples of it being taken to logical and antisocial extremes—something unexpected happened to me instead. A flood of anxiety began to rise around my pulsing sense of power. I realised that as I drove, I was trusting the capacities of dozens of other drivers.

The surface I drove upon, the vehicle I sat in and the radio I listened to were the result of hundreds of hours of effort by thousands upon thousands of people. The traffic lights I approached represented not just an effort in design, planning and construction, but were the salient peaks of a massive underlying tradition of justice. The food I had eaten that day, the people I had come from and was going to, the entire city that surrounded me...I actually sat atop a huge pyramid of humanity-in-partnership, all under a sun gratuitously given to us all.

I had noticed social reality. I had noticed relationships.

I’m told that on the Asian subcontinent, the Western notion of free-wheeling autonomy seems piteous. In their eyes,

Westerners live out a peculiarly unaccountable delusion that flies in the face of reality, and is proven unliveable in our lonely melancholy and dark, bitter thoughts. As ATB continues in *Killer*: “Solitary brother, is there still a part of you that wants to live? / Solitary sister, is there still a part of you that wants to give?”

How *can* we begin to see the social realities that are daily before our eyes? How can we develop an *ongoing* awareness of what I noticed on the road that day? Michael Schluter and John Lee are an invaluable help to us in this regard. In two books, *The R-Factor* (1993) and *The R Option* (2003), they argue that our *personal relationships* are the real ‘stuff’ of our lives. Our personal relationships are not the ‘white noise’ or background for some other plan or project at the forefront of our lives. Rather, relationships are what give our lives

can improve them. The authors mention their debt to Judaeo-Christian thought, but write in such a way as to make the book accessible to all.

I’ve found three shortcomings in *The R Option*. First, the authors cover so much interesting ground that observations don’t always cohere. For example, an Amish man keeps his phone connected to an answering machine in a booth on a neighbour’s property. The authors approve of how he has taken these steps to limit the impact of interruptions upon his relationships at home. But on the other hand, mobile telecommunications are ‘new realities’, and “we have to find ways of making [relationships] work effectively within these new constraints” (p. 29). How, then, should I evaluate technology? Should I subject it to searching enquiry, asking it to justify its existence? Or do I accept its



Copies of *The R Option* can be purchased through CASE at New College for A\$20 each (+p&tp). Ph. (61 2)9381 1999 or email case@newcollege.unsw.edu.au.

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meaning. They are what all the other plans and projects, rightly understood, are for.

By ‘personal relationships’ they do not just mean that intimate circle of people who really matter to us. They draw the boundaries of our relational-consciousness ever-wider. They ask us to consider unnoticed relationships, such as with *clients* of companies where we are a shareholder. They ask us to consider the impact of technology upon relationships. For example, do mobile phones assist or hamper our relationships? Do they keep us connected with each other, or do they dangerously interrupt the connections we already have?

The later book (*The R Option*) should be read before the earlier one (*The R-Factor*), which considers the place that relationships should take in economic thought (in which Schluter has been trained). *The R Option* begins at the beginning. Aimed at busy professionals and management executives, it takes an elementary tour of our ‘relational inventory’, showing what makes our relationships tick and in what respects we

‘reality’ as a ‘constraint’, and accommodate to it accordingly? There is a complex collection of relational questions here which need more teasing out than we are given in Schluter’s book.

Second, the authors are less than explicit about the Judaeo-Christian thinking which undergirds much of their work. The relational approach is indebted to some theological notions such as the trinity, the God who makes promises, and the ‘love your neighbour’ ethic. Although *The R Option* is written for a general readership, this theological basis deserves to be on display. Little is made of how a reader might develop his or her own understanding of the biblical background to relational thinking. As a ‘way in’ to understanding biblical theology, this is perhaps a missed opportunity.

Thirdly, *The R Option* might have offered greater assessment of our all-too palpable emotional reasons for avoiding relationships. There are short-term emotional advantages in individualism, and significant pain is

sometimes associated with investing in relationships. In Christian thought, these difficulties result from a universal human disease called sin, which requires a divine diagnosis and cure. A chapter on forgiveness does come part of the way towards redressing the imbalance here.

But the book is an excellent way to bring sight where there is such relational blindness, such as I had driving my car. *The R Option* will repeatedly cause you to stare off into space, as you see anew your time, communications, money, mealtimes, sex life, family origins, health, security arrangements and more, all in relational terms. Reading *The R Option* might begin a personal revolution, rippling out to change your home, your workplace, and even your entire society. ©