

Truth Or Consequence - 2

by J. Mykell Collinz

Gertrude hadn't intended to get romantically involved with Ron and she wasn't quite sure how it actually happen. She arrived home later than usual and, when she entered the kitchen to get a glass of ice water, her house mate, Sue, asked: "Where have you been all evening?"

Not having a ready answer, she mumbled: "I went to an impromptu discussion after the weekly forum at someone's apartment. I drank too much wine. I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

Alone in her bedroom, she sat at her computer. She liked Ron's website, its clever graphics, good music, interesting quotes, and links. However, it didn't actually tell her much about him. He presented his ideas well, but he seemed to be hiding something behind them.

"His motivation isn't clear to me," she said, thinking aloud: "What is he after? What is he selling? Where does he get his money? He says he wants to organize society into its most efficient configuration with everyone thinking alike and willingly cooperating. Only then, he believes, can humanity reach its full potential. Yet he's opposed to the use of war and violence to get there. Does he really expect humanity to willingly participate, to the point where each and every individual understands the advantages of cooperation in all essential activities, leaving competition to game playing?"

She turned off the computer and laid down on her bed, staring into darkness. She could still feel Ron's arms around her, his caressing hands, the touch of his lips on her skin. Surprised at how completely she had committed the experience to memory, she eagerly allowed it to reenter her consciousness.

Ron noticed the van pulling out behind him as he drove away from his apartment building early the next morning. He expected them to be there but he didn't think they would make it so obvious. In the past, while working as an independent investigative journalist doing

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research, he could rationalize a legal defense for most of his actions. But now, under homeland security provisions, he knew he could be secretly arrested and detained without even being charged.

Gertrude awoke the next morning with the sun in her eyes. "You're late," she muttered, heading for the bathroom. While still caught in the afterglow of a dream, she stood motionless in the hot shower, eyes closed and head bowed. Dreams were important, she believed, but most of her dreams faded so quickly she could hardly make sense of them. The dreams she did remember were sometimes frightening. This dream left her with an agonizing emotion, which she could not identify. "What the hell is going on here?" she wondered aloud, opening her eyes and reaching for the soap. "You have to get moving," she shouted. The pressure of her daily routine was so demanding, there wasn't much time for relationships. She didn't even remember Ron until she was completely dressed and reaching for the door. "Wow, that was fun," she muttered, standing in place, wanting to savor the emotions flowing from her heart. "But you're late," she shouted, slamming the door behind her.

Later that morning, Gertrude was surprised to see Ron when he accidentally stumbled into her lecture hall. He was on campus looking for the location of a press conference being held for visiting presidential candidates. His unexpected appearance momentarily disrupted her train of thought. But she soon recovered, and continued with her lecture, saying:

"We must be careful when using the word realism. It can mean different things to different people. In simplistic terms, it's an attitude based on facts, as opposed to emotions or imaginings. In science, it can mean that objects of sense perception have real existence. In art and in literature, realism usually means fidelity to life as actually perceived and experienced.

"In philosophy, realism refers to the doctrine that universals have an absolute existence outside the mind. Using this last definition, a characteristic opposition exists between realism and nominalism,

the doctrine that universals are merely words, abstract concepts, or names arbitrarily applied to similar things for convenience.

"Other characteristic oppositions occur in philosophy. Monism, dualism, and pluralism in metaphysics. Materialism and idealism in cosmological theory. Rationalism and empiricism in the theory of knowledge. Utilitarianism, self-realizationism, and strict adherence to duty in moral theory. Logic and emotion in the search for a responsible guide to life.

"However, the central opposition throughout history, at every level and in every field, is that between the critical and the speculative impulses. These two divergent motivations tend to express themselves in two divergent methods. Throughout the history of philosophy, each of the two traditions has made its claim. For your assignment, I want you to write a fictional narrative comparing and contrasting opposing ideologies through the use of character, plot, and setting."

Ron caught up with Gertrude as she exited the lecture hall: "That's what you teach, creative writing? Did you tell me that last night? I must have forgotten. I assumed it was philosophy, or history."

"Yes, Ron, I teach philosophy. I have them write about it, making them think creatively rather than just memorizing facts."

"Instead of inventing a fictional character, Gertrude, why not just become that character in reality? For example, you would make an incredibly effective politician. You're attractive, intelligent, and charismatic."

Alarm bells went off in Gertrude's mind, causing her to hesitate as she searched for the words to answer: "I haven't got time for politics right now, Ron. Maybe sometime later in my life, I don't know." Images connected to the previous evening's hugging, touching, and kissing came flowing from her memory into her consciousness to further confuse her as she continued: "And I haven't got much time for lunch either. We never did get to that kitchen of yours."

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"A little afternoon delight?" Agent Clark wondered aloud when he saw them entering John's apartment building around noon: "We've upgraded our surveillance on him since he was gone. We've got video now, and a satellite view. This should be good."

"I really am hungry, for food," Gertrude said with a smile as she entered the apartment: "I absolutely must get back to my office on time."

"Message understood," Ron replied, leading the way to the kitchen while continuing to speak: "A good historian, I believe, must display the capacities of a poet or an artist. But isn't that expecting too much from your philosophy students?"

Gertrude felt a mixture of relief and disappointment as she followed him into the spacious kitchen, saying: "They're not all philosophy students." Climbing onto a high stool at an island counter in the center of the room, she added: "Business, engineering, and science majors also take my classes." Then she watched with anticipation as Ron removed a large storage container from the refrigerator. "Fruit salad! Ah, perfect!" she remarked excitedly.

Ron placed a bowl and a spoon in front of her, and said: "Help yourself. We have yogurt, cream cheese, ice cream, and sherbet to go with it, take your pick. How about a sandwich? Here's bread, cold cuts, Swiss cheese, lettuce, tomato, and onions. Do you prefer water or wine?"

With a mouth full of fruit, she answered: "Water, thanks." The wine was tempting, but she feared it would throw her off schedule, judging from the previous evening, whose vivid memories still flowed through her mind. The fruit stimulated her digestive juices and she quickly built a hefty sandwich.

"Let's get back to my earlier question," Ron interjected: "Instead of inventing a fictional character, why not just become that character in reality?"

"Do both," she mumbled through a mouth full of food. After swallowing, she added: "Everyone, to a certain degree, invents himself or herself, over and over again. That's what education is all

about. I know what you're getting at with this line of reasoning. You want me to become an activist for your cause, whatever that is. But I can tell you right now, I'm not interested. Because I'm already an activist. I'm a teacher, you can't get more active than that. I send hundreds of followers into the world each year, followers of critical thinking. I don't really care what their political beliefs are, as long as they use good judgment."

"Hundreds? You could be influencing millions, billions. Yes, it involves mass media exposure. As you have said yourself, political judgments are often based on style rather than content. If they make use of irrational thinking, we must counter it with something akin to logic. But logic will take us only so far. Something more is necessary."

"Something, Ron? Can you say what it is?"

"It's a creative vision of the future, a plan on how to get there, and a purpose to unify all humankind. We all share basic survival requirements like air, water, food, shelter, and peace. I believe it's possible to reorganize society to supply everyone born into this world with these basic requirements. Going from there, we can prioritize our efforts to maximize our progress at improving overall efficiency in resource allocations. For example, instead of wasting resources on fighting wars and political posturing, we need to build a new, human-friendly, global infrastructure."

"Are there enough people who even think in these terms, Ron, to make a significant difference? I'll leave it up to my students to go out into the world and make intelligent decisions. Hopefully, there are many other teachers like myself, so that, whatever decisions are being made, they are the right ones."

"Hopefully, but I doubt it, Gertrude. There are not enough of you. That's why playing the mass media game is so important. It's where their growth is coming from, and it's where we need to counter them. Consumers and voters are making choices without totally understanding the consequences. They are intentionally misleading them."

“They, them, we, us? I don't always know who you're talking about, Ron. But your food is delicious. And I'm sorry to eat and run. I really do have to go.”

“You can make it up to me later.”

Gertrude wasn't sure what Ron meant by his last remark. She was romantically attracted to him, but not politically. His ideas were Utopian, she felt, and not worthy of further consideration on her part. While exiting the building she mumbled to herself: “What does he want me to do, go on television? To face political party propaganda machinery? Forget that.”

“Nothing X-rated, too bad,” Agent Clark groaned.

“That's not what we're here for, Monty,” Agent Heck responded: “He's given us something to work with now. A plan to take control of the world? That sounds subversive to me. Maybe we need to step it up some, investigate his associates.”

“He can't even take control of her, how's he going to take control of the world?”

“We don't know how, yet. He wants her to become politically active, we know that for sure. She doesn't seem to be buying into it, but you never know. He may have planted the seed in her mind.”

When Gertrude reentered the campus area, she found herself caught in a wave of media frenzy. Presidential candidates were beginning to arrive for a debate later in the day and she felt tempted to follow them. Yet Ron would be around the candidates and she didn't want to show him the slightest interest in politics. Returning to her office, she locked the door and then turned on the university's TV channel. A list of canceled activities appeared on the screen, including her afternoon classes. Many streets leading to the campus had been closed for media and security reasons, while throngs of protesters gathered and marched throughout the surrounding city.

Ron suppressed his emotions as he walked up to the police barricade and flashed his fake ID. Passing through the initial

security check point, he thought about how he could easily have hidden weapons and explosives inside. He understood, however, the required level of violence would be great, and it would be met with even greater violence, on and on, with nothing remaining in the end worth fighting for: and there's no honor in that, he concluded. The only reasonable solution was to play the political game, and play it to win. But, in his view, none of the candidates stood out. They all claimed the central position on every issue while they actually represented the two extremes of left and right without a clearly definable center, their assumed central position being nothing more than a media creation.

Gertrude awoke from a nap at her desk with the telephone ringing. The food had made her drowsy and the TV had put her to sleep.

The dean's voice came through the receiver: "Gerta, we need you to replace someone at the debate tonight," she said: "You're the only one I can think of on such short notice who could do it."

Gertrude immediately accepted. She couldn't turn down the dean's request, that wasn't her nature. But as the reality of her situation sank in, she regretted her decision and began to panic. "You can do this," she told herself aloud, rushing home to shower and change.

As she entered the auditorium, she spotted Ron standing at the edge of the press corps looking the other way. He'll be surprised, she thought as she continued on without greeting him, not wanting to disturb her mental concentration. When she reached the stage, the dean came up to her and said: "We've been collecting and selecting questions from the people outside waiting to come in, and we'll continue collecting from the audience once in place. All you have to do is read their questions to the candidates. And perhaps occasionally field a comment. The less said on your part the better. Don't attempt to interpret the questions for them."

Gertrude watched from the side of the stage while each candidate made a statement covering the range of policy issues. By the time

the question and answer segment began, she had already formed an opinion of each, and it showed in the way she addressed them. Many in the audience and watching on television saw Gertrude as being aloof, disdainful, and cold. While others saw her as ironic and humorous. "That's what you get when you have a professor asking the questions," a network anchorwoman commented. Ron couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Gertrude moderating the segment. "She's doing it with ease, just like her lecture," he told himself aloud: "And, whenever they try to weasel out of an answer, she has them on a string."

Backstage afterward, the dean was furious over Gertrude's performance. "I told you not to showboat like that," she shouted in her face: "Do you realize how you've made this university look? I had no idea you were so political, or I'd have chosen someone else." The comments stunned Gertrude and, without attempting to defend herself, she pushed through the crowd to find an exit. Once outside the auditorium, she was swamped by the media. "Are you entering the political arena?" several voices shouted in unison. "How does it feel to have upstaged the candidates?" another voice followed. Cheers of, "Gerta, Gerta," rang out from behind the barricades where a mixture of students and protesters gathered.

Gertrude marched aggressively through the media throng without responding. "I was not being political," she shouted at Ron when he finally caught up with her at the street: "I was being logical, using critical judgment. Why is everybody so afraid of the truth? If they'd stop playing all those silly games maybe we could get somewhere. They are so preprogrammed, it's impossible to reason with them."

Sitting in the FBI surveillance van down the street, Agent Clark remarked: "Awfully chummy, aren't they?"

Agent Heck responded: "I kind of liked her before, Monty. But after this TV appearance thing with the candidates and all, I don't know. She's really arrogant, isn't she? Someone like her could easily be a terrorist."

