An Effort in Agoralogy

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by a

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Acknowledgements

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Editor's Introduction:
The Story of This Book

I was just about to take the kitchen door off its hinges when the bell rang. The autumn morning was wet and windy, and in it stood a mailwoman who brought some flowers from the local florist, and a thick C4 envelope. I put the flowers at a couch, the envelope at a commode in the bedroom, and went back to the hinges upon which the door hang.

The party in the evening was to be a lovely relief from the lasting grey-brown misery of our northern October. Now, my work was cut out for me: washing, shopping, cooking. Then the guests came, and with them, cheerfulness and talking. The execution of latent friendliness. Exactly at the centre of the table stood the radiant red flowers.

It became a nice, memorable party. Our table fraternity made severe world-problems light and manageable. Then, as we gradually turned up the music, *all* problems correspondingly lost their weight.

The next day I found the envelope on the commode where I'd left it. The house still untidy, I opened it, and immediately read the following words on

a yellow post-it: "I see you edit and publish books. Here's one. Sincerely," – but no signature.

Sincerity is often brief in form, so the abrupt message made me curious enough to sit down to give it a look, even if I was still a little tired after last night's fuzz.

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What I found was, funny enough, a manuscript about a world-problem. We'd solved world-problems the night before, and this pile of sheets reported a similar undertaking. Only without a party.

Although our problem-solving at dinner had been reasonably serious, I'd say, we all knew that in a way we were just partying. We weren't really considering downsides. We didn't weigh the costs of our ideas. We and our ideas were warm and protected indoors – the real world is wet and cold.

The manuscript I was now beginning to read didn't produce that same pleasurable feeling of weight off from one's shoulders. It was too serious. *Curiously* serious, because it took on so much more than we *normally* do these days, when all great problems are being cleaved into ever smaller pieces, and distributed to specialists who take care of every little piece.

Editor's Introduction

The manuscript was simply a prolonged party-mode investigation. Irresponsibly grand, recklessly ignoring expertise demands, but still at the same time queerly sincere. Not responsible to stitch things together to everyone's methodical and ideological satisfaction – yet still, it seemed, responsible to *truth*.

It was a party-mode investigation, but at the same time also a *hangover-mode* investigation, with self-scrutiny and self-criticism.

*

I finished reading the manuscript the following day, unable to make up my mind about it. Although fascinated by its grand undertaking, I didn't know whether its accounts and arguments were in line with acknowledged knowledge and good sense. The thing appeared to be fairly solid, but for all I knew, experts could crack it to pieces by knocking on a weak spot.

Therefore, I asked an acquaintance with contacts among experts on political philosophy if he could have it checked for major mistakes. He so did, by taking it to an academic philosophy research seminar attended by knowledgeable people.

Now, their response, as I was told about it, was generally dismissive. Not because they found any

particular errors in what is being said – but because they didn't appreciate the form of investigation. The piece, though consisting of philosophical reflections, simply isn't a philosophical book in the modern sense. It presents itself as a piece of philosophy, but doesn't stand up to today's demands to philosophical writing. Irresponsible party-mode investigation is not the way of serious professional philosophers. As I'd already thought myself; *this is not how we normally do it*.

However, one participant remarked that it would be nice to read this material in a *fictional* work. Perhaps the author could rewrite the piece into the form of a novel? As part of a story, the party-mode irresponsibility wouldn't be as troubling to the serious reader. The material, it was suggested, might actually become a pretty good read. Others seemed to share this judgement.

After receiving this report, I considered the idea. In one way, the suggestion is wonderful. Thoughts, as we know, belong in *lives* – so to have a narrative around philosophical ruminations is both natural and proper. If philosophy could be made more accessible by being presented in a different form, in another *genre* than the treatise, that would clearly be worth considering.

On the other hand, a novel makes thoughts into something else than just *thoughts*. Which is tending to

be disrespectful to real efforts of thinking. As if thoughts can't be digested as *thoughts*. And the manuscript as I read it clearly intended to be *just thoughts*.

I've come to realise that the genre of the thing is simply *philosophy*. Not academic philosophy, but neither that digestible sort of philosophy produced by people like Yuval Noah Harari or Jordan Peterson. Not the sort of literature that tries to teach you ideas of how everything hangs together. The piece speaks questions, and proposes answers. It speaks to your capacity to think. It asks you to *read*, and *think*, and *respond*. It is the beginning of a discussion.

Although this philosophical genre isn't the most popular these days, I believe it would be strange to rule out decent attempts to revive it. So, I decided to have it printed.

I had just made that decision, sitting by the kitchen table with my notebook in front of me, when I realised that the door was still off its hinges. So, I went and put it back on, slowly, as the operation requires.

It's strange how things come together, sometimes, or how things *hang* together. How life provides material for one's imagination. Ideas unhinged; ideas hinged. Thoughts and reality; how there is *sometimes* a connection. How there may even be a passage from fantasy to reality. Which is also what the

current book is about, in more than one way: Connecting thinking and reality.

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I made but one substantial change to the material I received: Some parts of the text appeared to digress from the main line of argument. In those parts, the author dives into meta-level and self-scrutiny issues, which is interesting enough, but somewhat frustrating to the unity of the argument. Therefore, I've put those parts into frames, as a sort of editorial warning. There is, of course, no judgement of value or importance in this, only a formal distinction between two types of material.

Regrettably, I haven't managed to disclose the mystery of who the author is. That envelope gave no hints, so the message as I've interpreted it was just "Here's a book, print it if you want to". I assume the author just wanted me to publish it as the work of an anonymous writer, so I chose to give him or her the pseudonym "Citizen Incognito".

K.v.d.G.

Chapter 1: The problem

1.
The problem I want to investigate in these remarks is the situation at the *agora*.

You know, the *agora*, where we citizens meet and talk about things. The *agora*, where people form groups in which they exchange their views on things that concern them. Where some shout so you hear it all over the place. Where whispers instantly spread everywhere. Where on a speaker's corner originals talk to their disciples. Where frustration about injustices are cried out. The *agora*, where official news is announced from stands and on notice boards. Where people come to promote their own interests, or the interests of friends, or family, or customers. Where people come to vent their feelings, or argue about ideas. A place where all sorts of decisions are in the making.

I worry about the state of affairs at this place. For it is a place plagued by *lies*, *bullshit* and *nonsense*.

The problem

2.

My worry is not ethical. I do not plead that people at the *agora* should start to *behave*, and become more serious, by self- or social enforcement.

My worry concerns *the structural properties* of the place. I suspect that many *agora* exchanges are polluted by trickery because the *architecture* of the place is poorly developed. Important talk is corrupted by unimportant talk because there is, so to speak, no barrier to divide them. Lies are spreading into the most central parts of the *agora* because there is, so to speak, no security control. People who discuss vital matters are frequently disturbed by people who, so to speak, walk into their circle without intention to contribute truthfully and sincerely to whatever goes on there.

The facilities for certain kinds of talk are simply not adequate to the difficulty of the discourses. A serious discussion of complex matters in the current *agora* environment is as unlikely as a good performance of Samuel Barber's *Adagio* in a shed by a highway.

The problem

3.

My worry is that the *agora functionality* of my community is poor. Some sorts of *agora* discussions seem almost impossible to carry out at a good standard.

I also worry that this poor functionality is not recognised as a flaw of our constitution, but rather taken as a natural condition we just have to accept and deal with as well as we can. Our *agora* is malfunctioning – but we are so used to it that we think it cannot be different.

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A comment to what I have just said, because it needs some revision. Not that I do not mean what I said, but there are things to be said about it.

Review the set-up of my enquiry: The special and technical vocabulary I make use of begins with the term "*agora*", which is here to be understood as a name for the 'place' of public discourse. The *agora*, however, is not and never was a 'place' in the literal sense, for even in antiquity, the *agora* discursive business did not restrict to what went on at the town square. Public talking has always taken place wherever people would

meet. The *agora* was just the most typical of meeting places, hence the name.

Since the invention of letters, of course, people have been 'meeting', 'talking' and 'discoursing' not only in the literal senses of those terms either. So, what I refer to as the "*agora*" has never been a *place* in the literal sense at all, and no physical meeting is needed to do the *agora* business. "*Agora*" is the name of the 'place' of public discourse only in a symbolic or metaphorical sense.

What I ask is that we allow ourselves to *imagine* that all this whispering, shouting, writing, singing, liking, sharing, blogging, vlogging, emojiing, *et cetera* takes place at one great gathering place: the *agora*. The public place for emotions, stories, facts, opinions, and ideas. The name "*agora*" is a metaphor for all that argumentative activity. A metaphor; no more, no less.

Terms like "*agora architecture*" and "*agora functionality*" develop naturally from that first metaphor. This is the elaboration of a metaphor made in and through technical philosophical language. The metaphor invites new ways of thinking about a case; the philosopher's task is to follow the leads given by it as far

as possible. Hopefully he will notice it when he has gone *too* far, and trespasses against good sense.

So, here is the set-up of my enquiry: The diverse and evasive phenomenon 'public discourse' is depicted as actual meeting-and-talking of persons at an *agora*. I take this to be a promising metaphor, and plan to stick with it in order to illuminate the case – while never forgetting that it is just a metaphor.[1]

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4.

As a citizen concerned about my community, I've had worries about the state of affairs at the *agora* for a long time. Long before I began to think about the problems I noticed as *agoralogical* problems, I was frequently frustrated with how certain types of public exchange of information and ideas tend to develop.

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[1] My understanding of the nature of philosophical work in general owes much to Mr. Incognito's book, *Questions About Philosophy*. In particular, what I say here about technical language in philosophy hangs on the account made in section 29 of that book. See Mr. Incognito: *Questions About Philosophy*. CosmicusBooks 2018

The problem

I am the sort of person who wants to get to the bottom of things; unexamined cases trouble me deeply. It upsets me when something of crucial importance is left out of a discussion. It irritates me when a dubious premise is left unquestioned. It annoys me when things are settled in a relativist fashion. It provokes me when people lie in public.

5.
I want to get to the bottom of things. Which is what many *journalists* want, too. So, when explaining what my worry is, it is natural to look at some troubles that journalists meet in their work. Like those of BBC's Tom de Castella when he tries to get clear about how toxic his and other people's car exhaust is.[2]

As the owner of an old petrol combustion motor, de Castella worries about his share in the guilt for London's poor air quality. So, in the spirit of wanting to get to the bottom of things, he sets out on an investigation of the case.

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[2] Subsequent information and citations concerning this example are taken from de Castella's article "How toxic is your car exhaust", published 17 October 2017; retrieved 28 March 2019: www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/how_toxic_is_your_car_exhaust

The problem

Ultimately, the problem of car emissions belongs at the intersection of science, economics, politics and morals. It is a complicated case for several reasons: The factual matters de Castella would want a clarification of are relatively intricate. The collection of emission data requires special equipment, and the interpretation of the data is not straightforward. What really complicates the case, however, is that the evaluation of the *importance* of those data once interpreted is dependent on one's outlook on many highly difficult issues. Questions of economics, health, environment, the good state, and the good life are relevant for one's attitude to the whole problem. Therefore, political, moral and philosophical issues need attention in order to get a good general understanding of the problem.

The case is a complicated one – but de Castella's frustrations are not of the complexity of the case. He understands that it's complicated. What is troublesome to the journalist is how hard it is to get in contact with the right people, and how hard it is to make them join him in investigation and discussion. It is *complicated* to get clear about the facts of the matter by the help of competent people – but nearly *impossible* to get central

agents of the case to talk seriously about the import of those facts.

6.
Here is a brief account of Tom de Castella's experiences as an investigator of his own car exhaust: As engine emissions has been a matter of great public interest for a rather long time, one would think that both governmental and non-governmental agents had put in considerable effort to provide unbiased factual information about the case. Such information is obviously needed by both consumers and legislators to make wise decisions about transportation. As de Castella says, "I assumed there would be a government-funded research centre to study vehicle emissions."

His assumption, however, turns out to be wrong: "The closest I can find [...] is the Transport Research Laboratory, which [...] was privatised in 1996. But they don't have a PEMS-kit [Portable Emissions Measurement System]."

The PEMS-kit is the measurement tool that was used by scientists at the West Virginia University to spark "dieselgate", the VW diesels scandal, and known to be the most accurate system for measuring vehicle

emissions in real-world conditions. De Castella finds two private companies that are in possession of such kits – but neither is willing to help with what they call "ad-hoc testing". Their customers are mainly car manufacturers, and they more or less openly admit to the journalist that they will not contribute to an article that could turn out to be bad publicity for their customers.

The journalist's frustrations come to an end when he finds a small, independent company that can run the test for him. He gets the PEMS-kit installed on his own car, and his investigations can proceed. From this company de Castella also gets to see the results of other tests the company has run. It turns out that much of the data they've collected is surprising: Official emission limits are exceeded many times in real conditions by cars that are supposed to comply with the regulations.

So, one would think, here are matters of fact that are worthy of being discussed in the public. Questions one would like to ask include: What is the best way to test vehicle emissions? What sort organisation ought to do the testing? How come the numbers found in real life testing by an independent company are different from official numbers? What emission limits are reasonable?

The problem

How clean can combustion engines realistically become?

Journalists, as well as many concerned citizens, would like to get to the bottom of these things. We would even want to continue digging further into related issues: Should we seek to replace combustion vehicles with electric vehicles? What is the total ecologic footprint of vehicle electrification? Is there economic realism in the electrification scenario? Is there social realism in it – will consumers and working force accept the changes it requires?

Ultimately, what we wonder about is, what is a good system of transport altogether? Any serious discussion of emissions and vehicle technology links with that question.

7.
Now, in order to have a serious discussion it is necessary that people who know things about the case share their knowledge. Central agents must contribute if we are to make real progress in our quest for the best possible answers to the questions we have.

The problem

For example, we need car manufacturers to illuminate us concerning technological possibilities and limitations. We have fantasies – they have the knowledge (or more knowledge, at least). We also need them to illuminate us concerning commercial possibilities and limitations. Our fantasies may be impracticable, and we need them to illuminate us. Consequently, if car manufacturers are *unwilling* to discuss the vehicle emission problem, the discussion is thwarted.

Just this problem – unwillingness to discuss – is what Tom de Castella runs into. The independent research company he used to measure the emissions from his own car have several findings worth discussing. For instance, the Nissan Qashqai (N-Connecta DCI CVT) in real-world emission tests produces 1.46g of NOx per kilometre; more than 18 times Europe's 0.08g/km limit. When asked in an email correspondence to comment on these numbers, Nissan replies:

"Nissan is committed to upholding the law and meeting or exceeding regulations in every market where we operate. All our vehicles sold in Europe meet the Euro 5/6 standards."

This response clearly qualifies as bullshit. It is not to the purpose.[3]

But what to do with it? The journalist, having no means of further pressure to apply can do nothing but put the statement on print. This is all the company is going to say; this is how they choose to use their right to a reply. De Castella can only note: "Auto makers rather than trying to meet the spirit of regulations are trying to meet the letter of the law."

8.
The agoralogical worry I have is that many important *agora* exchanges come to a premature end because it is so easy to succeed with this sort of rhetoric trickery. It's obviously problematic that factual information can be hard and even dangerous to retrieve. Ideally, important facts should be researched by unbiased organisations. Yet, what is even more problematic, is the fact that it's often plainly impossible to get central agents to participate in open dialogue about the factual information available. Journalists, beginning their investigations with high hopes of clarification, get

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[3] For an analysis of the term "bullshit", see Frankfurt, Harry G.: *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press 2005

nowhere near 'the bottom of the case' as long as key people of the case refuse to participate in discussion.

De Castella's type of journalist is the *agora's* failing hero, an almost tragic character: Their intentions are noble, but they lack the means to achieve their aims. Their tools are inadequate to their tasks. If an agent involved in the case is unwilling to contribute to the case, even a moderately skilled spokesperson of that agent easily destroys the discussion.

So, de Castello is left with two possibilities: either to express a subtle but inconclusive criticism of the industry and the regulation directives, or to turn to something more or less like activism. In neither case will he get to the bottom of things. In neither case can he feel sure that no-one fools him, tricks him, deceives him; that he is not a victim of propaganda or prejudice. Maybe there are good reasons for things being as they are, maybe not. Maybe commercial agents deceive him, maybe conspiracy theorists do.

When exchange of views and information ends prematurely, one's foundation for developing reasonable opinions and making well-informed choices is not as

firm as it ought to be. And that's a real problem, in my opinion.

9.
The task of getting as close as possible to the bottom of things is, admittedly, in many cases terribly complicated. The world as we know it isn't simple. However, the complications are sometimes just as much due to the *agora* conditions as to the case itself.

Consider a truly complicated case: The question of the nature of the material world, as explored in the subject of physics. The *agora* has special buildings with good facilities for collective exploration of physics. Those buildings are closed to unqualified persons, but open to exchanges across most national and ideological borders. Because of these facilities, the complicated case is examined efficiently. The case would have been incomparably much harder to explore if it was not investigated in peace and quiet, but went on in open air at the *agora*, where everyone is entitled to have their say. You wouldn't get far in developing string theory if you were constantly disturbed by religious or political zealots who claimed your attention.

The problem

Consider on the other hand a comparatively simple case: In the development of electric vehicle technology it is obvious that our communal interest would be that the functionality of the available products is optimised. For anyone concerned with the problem of the state's system of transportation altogether it is obvious that we should develop devices that work as well as possible altogether. One central issue in this connection is *industry standards*, since standard solutions normally give more efficient use of natural and human resources.

As a consumer and a concerned citizen, I may dream of a standard for replaceable battery packs in electric vehicles, so that independently of car model, batteries could be exchanged on any station along the road in two minutes, and charged when the network has the capacity. This appears to me a smoother solution than waiting 45 minutes for the car's battery to charge, with special equipment available only relatively few places, during a peak hour of energy consumption. This is just a dream; I don't know how realistic – but some kind of optimised standard solution can probably be found.

The technology needed for an optimised solution might be more complex, or must involve higher-level functionality than whatever technology manufacturers

develop independently. Compared to the technology developed for the CERN, though, optimised technology would be uncomplicated. It may not primarily be *technological* complexity that makes it difficult to develop optimised technology, but the conditions for *discussing* the case in an efficient way. It is *agoralogically* complicated to agree on the development of such technology because there are many strong, special interests involved. Competition between manufacturers, even between countries, may be affected by which standard is chosen. Some manufacturers and states will fall behind in competition if a certain standard wins through, while others will gain. At least, manufacturers and states may *fear* falling behind. So even if we from the viewpoint of consumers, network companies and 'the planet' would want a standard that secures the best possible use of limited resources, it is highly complicated to land on an agreement about what standard to choose.

The complicated thing is to arrange an *agora* exchange about what solution is optimal without being interrupted by liars, bullshitters and nonsense-speakers. We lack the 'architecture' to host the necessary exchanges: the case in itself is not so difficult, but we seem to be unable to

examine it adequately, since we have no good 'place' to do it.

10.
There are many matters of direct practical consequence that deserve better treatment at the *agora* than they currently get. Transportation issues is one example, issues around food production is another.

Another type of cases in need of better *agora* conditions are *life-view issues*. We are all more or less concerned with the questions of 'metaphysics', 'philosophy', 'religion', 'ethics'.

These questions are in one way of little public interest in a liberal democracy – people can largely think whatever they like about such questions – but this must not be taken to mean that exchanges about them are inconsequential.

11.
One central difficulty in exchanging information and ideas about life-view issues is to understand the nature of the problem. The problem of developing a reasonable life-view is different from any other practical or theoretical problem we encounter. It is a question with

no meaningful and correct answer of the kind that paradigmatic theoretical problems have (say, in geometry). It has no meaningful and correct answer in the way of empirical sciences either. It is not a scientific question. Still, it is not properly a practical matter either in the way paradigmatic practical problems are (say, in carpentry). It is not just a matter of thinking reasonable things that *work* in the sense that it keeps you out of trouble.

However well your life-view gets you around in your current daily life it may turn out to be absurd and collapse in simple trials later. Thinking well about one's life in the world is not a *technique*. What you now think of as reasonable ideas you may later understand as positively *false answers* to the question of life and the world.

The nature of the life-view problem is peculiar beyond description. Therefore, it is shockingly easy to be fooled in life-view exchanges. We assume that some answers lead us right and some mislead us; some aid and some deceive – but there'll always be some trouble left, so strictly we should all constantly review our life-view.

12.

A friend of mine recommends a novel: It is about some stone age people and their natural way of moving about across the land. They *run*, far. It is a story about how natural running is for mankind, my friend says. There's a gleam in his eyes.

I take this as a life-view suggestion: My friend suggests that I read the novel and consider sharing in the life-view it offers, that man is to be thought of as *homo currens*. That we are *runners* is supposedly an important part of our identity. As a natural sceptic, I reply, however, that medics would not without qualification recommend running long distances; that the book maybe exaggerates the benefits of running. Although I, too, am familiar with the *flow* experience of moving my feet fast and steadily across the ground for an extended period of time, my heart and my bones, I say, do not accept any measure of this pleasure.

Well, my friend replies, but it remains a fact that by studying our forefathers' lives we learn that *man is constructed for running*.

This answer, for some reason, leaves me dumbstruck. Maybe it is because I usually do not quarrel with

scientific evidence, in this case the scientific studies of our forefathers. Maybe because inferences from what man *used to be* to what man *essentially is* have some mysterious argumentative impact. In any case, my natural suspicion to simplistic life-view suggestions is temporarily checked.

13.

Maybe that gleam in my friend's eyes comes from a fire lit on philosophical waste – but almost regardless of how stupid the ideas that burn are, it feels heartless to put out a source of heat and light. People need something to believe in.

But what on earth do those words, *constructed for running*, mean? Of course, an idea like "man is constructed for running" can't be equated with a *proposition*. It is not the spoken sentence's propositional qualities in a system of truths and falsehoods that creates the gleam in my friend's eyes. The propositional sentence that expresses the idea is only, as it were, the surface of a complex compound of pictures, memories, personal and communal experiences, prejudices, arguments of various kind and complexity, of intuitions and personal inclinations, hopes and fears. The life-view

idea is a compound of many pieces, and thus of another order than any proposition that serves to articulate it.

It is complicated to understand what is *really meant* by the proposition "It remains a fact that by studying our forefathers' lives we learn that *man is constructed for running*." My perplexity at hearing it might therefore in one way be a sound reaction: Maybe my sensor for philosophical junk is hypersensitive; maybe I exaggerate the weight of the words I hear. Or maybe not, but it's better to be perplex and cautious than certain and rash.

After all, my friend's idea might be much less of an *idea* than it sounds to me. The *homo currens*-thing was something that came into *my* mind; *he* did not say it. Maybe what I see as "a gleam in the eyes" is not a gleam at all, or not *that* sort of gleam. Maybe what he intends to do by his words is only to help me understand that I spend far too much of my life seated. Which is probably right.

14.
The art of exchanging information and ideas about life-view issues is difficult: Considerate people do not want to hurt their interlocutors' feelings by calling their deepest beliefs into question. Considerate people will

not even assume that they understand their interlocutor's dubious statements correctly – they keep the possibility open that the life-view error might lie with them.

Still, the life-view question is a matter of *common* interest. It's an ancient insight that if I lose an exchange for better arguments, then my life-view improves – which means that it is really *I* who win. In a good discussion, the looser wins. That we arrive at a truer outlook together is a common interest that helps both, but the weaker part more than the stronger. So, in reality, if we are to be considerate in these exchanges, we need to be *in*considerate. Strictly speaking, in these situations we ought to be as heartless as possible.

It is a curious but important fact that any real exchange of life-view ideas requires some degree of heartlessness, as well as some degree of narrow-mindedness. If progress is to be made, the sentences spoken must be treated heartlessly and narrow-mindedly as *propositions* about how life and world is to be viewed. Our sentences cannot be understood as gestures towards something mystical and inaccessible – they must be taken as claims about how things really are. We must simply assume that what one hears people say is what they mean; that they

try to guide me through the jungle of truths and falsities by means of propositions.

Hence, I should have fired back at my friend, if I were not so inconsiderately considerate and muddy-mettled: "*Constructed for running*? Just as much as constructed for sitting and standing, wouldn't you say? Surely our forefathers preferred sitting over running, mostly, just like most of *us* do. That's why they invented traps, I suppose. So, they could sit and wait by the campfire instead of running after the prey like wild beasts. No, my friend. 'Man is constructed for running' is sheer nonsense."

My friend's simplistic life-view component should be mercilessly crushed. Ridiculous stone-age romanticism needs correction. If he's wise, he'll thank me for putting him right.

– Or he may defend what he said. Maybe he has more scientific evidence to bring in, maybe he has some perspective from Rousseau that supports what he said, or maybe he did not mean to say anything about overall life-view at all. Maybe it wasn't ridiculous stone-age romanticism after all. Maybe it is *my* ridiculous craving for generality – making me see in his innocent little

remark something of enormous proportions – that must be crushed. In which case I should thank him for illuminating *me*.

The exchange should be extended as much as our powers allow. The nature, strength and quality of a life-view can be measured only if the exchange continues heartlessly and narrow-mindedly long enough.

15.
Exchanges about life-view issues typically do *not* continue long enough to properly challenge the ideas of either side in the exchange. This is problematic for two reasons: First, our life-views are not made to be as good as they could have been. We do not gain in wisdom as we could have. Second, and from a communal point of view more importantly; without such exchanges we gradually *drift apart* from those who view life in the world differently.

16.
Now, of course, the example with my friend and his favoured novel is awkward in the context of agoralogy, since our conversation was more private than public. We were not talking at any *agora*. I have no *agoralogical* worries about what went on in that situation, and I would

not claim that we should try to treat seriously every life-view issue we have with friends. It is often better to let disagreements drift. *Socratics* say they like to win understanding through loosing discussions, but most people don't. Most people care little about whether man is constructed for running or not: Maybe it's even right to say that most people care little about wisdom – whereas almost all care much about *friendship*.

Stubborn inconsiderateness is bad in friendship, and in any other social relation. Of the two evils *confusion* and *enmity*, the former is often preferable.

17.
At the *agora*, however, we should not allow too much of the laxity that ordinary forms of friendship often require. For many different purposes from legislation to education we need various degrees of *consensus* about life-view issues. If the level of agreement about such issues becomes weak, problems of *polarisation* begin to grow.

Consensus is needed in any community – and there is no chance of stable consensus without good *agora* exchanges about life-view issues. One worry I have as a citizen, therefore, is this: That the quality of our life-

view exchanges is not high enough to prevent us from drifting apart. If we give up too easily on understanding other people's ideas about life, we become a divided, polarised society.

18.
It is frustrating to witness life-view exchanges at the *agora* because so much is tossed into the air, and so little is adequately evaluated before it hits the ground.

Think of the question about the origin of the world and of man; a topic which arouses a lot of interest and emotion. It is a terribly difficult question. There are many things to be said about the case. Empirical studies are highly relevant. Physicists and biologists must have their say. But so must the various sages, the priests and mullahs, the philosophers and the poets.

Ideas are thrown into the *agora*, but the *agora* offers inadequate facilities for discussing them. Such unregulated clashes between world-views often resemble street fights, where dirty tricks are necessary for winning. This creates frustration, since it's hard to find one's deepest hopes and fears unrecognised. As a result, *echo-chambers* develop, in which those hopes and fears *are* recognised.

The poorer the quality of *agora* exchanges about world-view questions, the more polarised becomes society. If world-view battles could have been fought more like an organised boxing match, in suitable surroundings with clear rules and a judging authority, the *strength* of each party could have been better evaluated, and more consensus could be found.

19.

My principal agoralogical worries concern the two sorts of exchange I have mentioned so far: complicated matters of direct practical importance, and life-view issues. There are, of course, public exchanges in which these types are mixing, such as some exchanges around the topic of climate change. That man is assumingly changing life in nature at a grand scale raises both questions of life-view, and questions of direct practical consequence. These questions cannot be treated separated from one another. What practical solutions we should pursue depends on what life-view we should take.

From a purely abstract point of view, though, one can speak about two types of exchange. From a sociological point of view, too, one may discern in this way, since matters of practical consequence are connected to the

civic problem of *corruption*, whereas matters of life-view are connected to the civic problem of *polarisation*.[4]

There is, however, a third type of frustrating *agora* experience that deserves some attention. What I have in mind is exchanges about "meta-agoralogical" issues; exchanges about exchanges.

If it appears that someone lies or bullshits their way through an exchange about important things, then it is worth finding out whether what was said can be justified or not. That's an issue in its own right, separate from the first order issue under discussion.

Say that one person during an important public exchange calls another person "lyin' Ted". My reaction as a concerned citizen is that I would like to know whether this instance of name-calling could be justified. Does this obvious rhetorical trick contribute to the illumination of the important issue? Maybe there are adequate reasons for applying this nickname, maybe not.

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[4] Two rough & ready definitions: By "corruption" I mean untruthfulness for the sake of personal economic or social gain. By "polarisation" I mean (at least) two parties' unwillingness to listen to different perspectives than their own (whatever their reasons for being unwilling should be).

The problem

Maybe Ted actually is a liar of such extraordinary measure that it makes it fair to call him "Lyin' Ted" – maybe he isn't. From the outset neither possibility can be ruled out, so we need an exchange of reasons to get to the bottom of the case.

However, only rarely will there be an illuminating exchange in this sort of case, and almost never do we feel that we 'get to the bottom' of these cases. There is little hope of coming to the point where we've settled that nicknaming the opponent 'Lyin' Ted' was unsupported (or well supported).

If we suspect someone to deceive by rhetorical means, we may expect him to continue in the same style when the topic shifts to his own deception. For example, if a responsible official person comments a grave social event in Emilysville by mentioning that he owns a winery in Emilysville – a paradigmatic piece of bullshit – then if he were asked what that has to do with the case, his answer would probably not be of much help. He wouldn't admit that he was just bullshitting. He would probably rather mention other estates he owns, to underline the point that he has the power to rule the exchange by brute rhetorical force.

The problem

The point is that our *agora* has inadequate facilities for this sort of challenge. A deceiver's rhetorical deceptions easily destroy exchanges about deception, too. Which is exceptionally annoying for any citizen who hopes to get to the bottom of important things.

20.
Now, "annoying", "frustrating", "irritating", and "worrisome" are some words I have used to describe the problem. This, regrettably, reveals that it isn't clear just what the problem is – for my personal negative emotions are not *the* problem, if there is one. Maybe it is I who am out of equilibrium in some way since my emotions are stirred; in that case there is no *civic* problem at all. Maybe I entertain illusions about a totally unrealistic ideal society. Maybe I have failed to understand something fundamental about the nature of public exchange of information and ideas.

After all, there are many who do not worry about these things. Those I would call deceivers do not worry, of course, but others, too. Many seem to take the situation for granted; we just have to deal with deceptions and strike back as well as we can. We just have to continue arguing. The *agora* is what the *agora* is, the 'place' is nothing to worry about. Advocates of all sorts of ideas

and interests meet there to fight for their causes. May the best win! The *agora* is a street where people fight, simply. I should, it may be argued, rather worry about the cases themselves: I should protest against Nissan and Volkswagen, deal world-view strikes at priests and professors in Biology, work to expose deceivers of all kinds. I should just show up and deal blows wherever blows are dealt.

21.

If there is really an 'agoralogical problem' that our community should try to fix, it must be framed in a less emotional way than talking about *my worries*. My worries are beside the case.

If I want to proceed with my enquiry, I should try to show that it is wrong to think of the *agora* as just a place of unregulated fighting, and also point to things about the place as it currently is that are objectively substandard.

22.

Here is an objective observation: The *agora* has changed lately. The *agora* is not like it used to be, for now we have social media. A grand Zuckerberg-built structure has been erected next to the older Murdoch-built

structure, providing much more efficient echo-chambers than the old ones. We have new types of journalistic structures, we have the houses of fact-checking organisations, and various other private tents and buildings put up to forward the quality of public discourse. The *conditions* for public discourse are not like they used to be.

The *agora* has changed: That is an objective matter of fact, and a significant one in this discussion. Whether it has changed for the better or the worse is irrelevant to the point I want to make; the point is that the *agora* is *a subject to change*. Some acts in the public discourse have become easier to perform, other have become harder. Political and medial entrepreneurs have made it so. Therefore, it is not to be thought of as a similar sort of thing as a street where fights happen now and then, which is forever the same sort of place.

23.
The *agora* is not like a street for rough and tumble, but rather like a complex machinery:

Things can happen that alter the functionality of an *agora*. Things can be done to actively alter that functionality. An *agora* can work more or less optimally.

The problem

It is a *machinery of discourse* that can function or malfunction. The stuff you put in – emotions, opinions, information, ideas – can be processed in more or less satisfactory ways. When the processing is finished people may be brought closer together – or further apart.

The problem as I see it is that the '*agora* machinery' of our society is not running well. This is not an emotion that *I* have, but a matter of fact: Western liberal democracies currently struggle with increasing polarisation, which is an objective feature of community. Likewise, the level of corruption is unsatisfying, and an objective feature of community.

Arguably, the levels of polarisation and corruption are closely connected to what goes on at the *agora*.

24.
What is it, more specifically, that malfunctions in the *agora* machinery?

Imagine a fully mechanised bakery, designed to bake something – bread and cakes – from raw material that a mixed group of farmers dump at an assembly line. The quality of what the farmers bring in is uneven: some come with wonderful crop, some with indigestible stuff,

even poisonous things. Imagine that we are in the position that we must accept this as an unchangeable precondition; the quality of the farmers' goods is beyond our control. Our job is with the machinery.

Now, *sorting* would be a crucial operation of this system. It would need to distinguish digestible things from indigestible things. Rocks, roots and poisonous things should be kept out of the produce.

I suggest that we understand *agora* functionality by this analogy: The *agora*, too, needs a 'sorting mechanism' in order to work well. As it is, there is too much lying, bullshitting and nonsense-speaking that mixes in with the good stuff. What we need is to get rid of these evils.

25.
It is, I admit, a much more complicated task to recognise lies, bullshit and nonsense in a public exchange, than to recognise rocks in a load of grains at an assembly line. For what is a lie, really? Is it, for instance, a lie to say that your company's product complies with the standards when it complies with the letter of the standards creatively interpreted, but not the spirit of the standards? Is it a lie to call someone "lyin' Ted" because Ted has been caught lying on some occasion?

The problem

It is more complicated to recognise discursive pollution than pollution of wheat and barley, I mean, since lies have no characteristic ostensible feature(s). To determine that something is a lie, in what sense and to what degree, is an act of judgement, both of matters of facts, and of morality. In the case of rocks there is only a judgement of facts, and a quite simple one, at that.

26.

It may be a complicated act of judgement to determine whether something is a lie or in what sense, but most people would agree it is still a *judgement*, not an arbitrary decision. There are differences between lies and non-lies, and reasons to be found for judging the one way or the other. There is good judgement and bad judgement; good justification and bad.

The thing we'd ideally like to know is what it is that *defines* lies, bullshit and nonsense. Such a definition, however, isn't easy to find. There's no general consensus among experts about definitions of these terms by necessary and sufficient features.

Rather than looking for necessary and sufficient features, I suggest that we think of the definition of "lie"

as the summary of all differences between lies and non-lies; as a rough stipulation of the central contrasts at play in the concept.

Although there can be no definition of "lie" in the "list of features"-sense, there can be another sort of definition, a "list of contrasts". This list would be the thing to look at whenever the question arises whether something is, or is not, a lie.

27.
The definitions of "lie", "bullshit" and "nonsense" can all be reasonably well established by a 'two-component' mix. To judge something a lie, two components are needed, much like two component adhesives stabilise when two substances are mixed.

I'll explain my view in more detail: In these definitions there is one component judging something internal of the speaking agent, and one judging something external to him. The former concerns the agent's *mindset* with regard to truth, his attitude to 'getting to the bottom of things'. The latter one concerns the relation of what is being *said* to its material, logical and discursive surroundings.

The problem

Here are, first, the definitions of "lie", "bullshit" and "nonsense" regarding the agent's mindset:

LIE: To show *anti-concern* for truth; actively not wanting to get to the bottom of things – in contrast to showing concern for truth and actively seeking the bottom of things.

BULLSHIT: To show *unconcern* for truth; indifference about the bottom of things – in contrast to showing concern for truth and having interest in getting to the bottom of things.

NONSENSE: To show *inadequate concern* for truth; incorrect judgement of the bottom of things – in contrast to showing adequate concern for truth and making correct judgement of the bottom of things.

Here are, second, the definitions of "lie", "bullshit" and "nonsense" regarding the relation of what is being said to its material, logical and discursive surroundings:

LIE: A sentence with *false* information presented as true information – in contrast to a sentence with true information.

BULLSHIT: A sentence with *unimportant* information presented as important information – in contrast to a sentence with important information.

The problem

SMALL CAPS NONSENSE: A sentence with *no information* presented as if it was information – in contrast to a sentence with information.

It is when the *agent's intention* is at the former side of the border described, *and* the *sentence content* is at the former side of the border described, that we have respectively lies, bullshit and nonsense.

28.
There are a couple of things to note about these definitions:
1) They presuppose that "truth" – without saying exactly what it is – is something rather than nothing.
2) They presuppose that "importance" – without saying exactly what it is – is something rather than nothing.

For my own part, I am 100% comfortable with accepting both of those presuppositions, like all philosophers to all times have been.

29.
I will not spend more time on explaining what lying, bullshitting and nonsense-speaking is here (or whatever other *types* one may derive by combining the two components in other ways than 1-1, 2-2, 3-3). As this is

intended to be a work in practical philosophy I should better move on before I get stuck in the mire of theory. Anyone interested in the theoretical problems around lies, bullshit and nonsense may confer theorists who write on these matters and compare what I have said to what they say. There one will find, of course, a multitude of further questions that can be asked.

My point is that there is a real difference between lie and not-lie, between bullshit and not-bullshit, between nonsense and not-nonsense. Moreover, that these differences can be traced if we walk into the landscape of discourse: There are ancient fences built and mended by the common sense that we can follow and use for distinguishing lying from truthing.

Judgements about these differences in particular cases are not, however, a matter for the common sense, but rather for expert judges. To judge well about these things is highly complicated work, although not *undoable* work.

30.
Lies, bullshit and nonsense are at the centre of my attention in this enquiry since they are, in the end, the cause of the *agora's* misery. It is regretful, therefore, that

The problem

I lack better things to say about what, *exactly*, they are. One would want a more stable the foundation for the building I want to erect; more certitude to begin the argument from.

I will, I divine, have to pay for the theoretical inaccuracy at this point throughout the rest of this investigation. But I see no way to escape the problem. Whenever something is unclear about the terms in question because my definitions are imperfect in some respect, I will just have to make my way on by help of examples and comparisons. I'll have to deal with further complications as I go; I'll have to walk through the landscape again to see if I have understood things rightly.

31.
To summarise this first chapter, the problem that concerns me is that the *agora* functionality of our community is poor for some important types of public exchange.

Or, phrased differently, and more concretely, that lying, bullshitting and nonsense-speaking flourish at the *agora* when certain types of exchanges are made. This sort of *agora* pollution increases the levels of corruption and polarisation in society.

The problem