

I

The Common Article

“Has anybody ever told you, you have potential, and you can do whatever you want and have whatever you want if you just apply yourself?” Nobody in fact ever told Wyl any such thing and more than merely unfamiliar, he found the proposition completely alien. Fae evidently anticipated as much then explained, “You see, we never say things like that to each other and that is why it is unfamiliar to you but down south, they talk like that to each other practically every day. None of them would ever think such an idea unfamiliar or struggle to comprehend what it means. Do you understand what it means?”

“It seems to possess a certain intuitive quality.” Wyl remarked.

With a vague indication of approval, Fae nevertheless equivocated, “I have been to the south a few times to spy out military situations and the likelihood of hostile activities in our direction, and along with a number of similar gratuities, I actually heard someone say those very words and those particular words always stuck with me.”

In something along the lines of reminiscence, Fae confided, “This one autumn, I’m down there with two other scouts and I’m sitting alone in this crusty little shack they call a ‘pub’ listening to a group of locals talk about their money and I get real curious about it because parts of it sound to me like another language. Under the circumstances, I don’t want to ask a bunch of stupid questions that will expose me as a foreign rube, so I just shut up and listen then later with a little bit of effort, I end up finding this pocket sized textbook on the subject in a general shop. I never really read much more than the first general overview segment because basically, just that much convinces me I’ll never care about the rest of it but that opening overview introduces what the book calls the ‘*Theory of Subjective Value*’. In an example, it explains that if an apple farmer and an orange farmer trade an apple for an orange, they both walk away with something of greater value because they each consider the uncommon article more valuable than the common article. Now, I thought it sounded like some real bullshit right from the start and I read that segment at least six times over because every time I finished reading it, I could swear I just read, ‘one plus one equals something greater than two’, and I know that’s impossible yet there it is in text. This text reads like something written by academics mind you, so it occurs to me these are probably the most educated men on the subject telling me math is wrong and by all appearances their confidence in this is supreme.

Even though it was getting late in the season, I was on a mission and I didn’t care if I spent the rest of my life in that place, I just had to know how educated men convince themselves math is wrong so I sent the other two scouts home then I watched the people around me real carefully. I paid close attention to the way people interacted, especially in transactions, because I wanted to see if I could detect something in practice that conforms to the theory and I never saw an apple farmer trade an apple for an orange or anything like that but what I did see is that the hungriest always got paid the least. You see, the book paints a pretty picture of two fellows getting rid of something they have too much of and don’t care about, and then walking away with exotic treasure. Now, I said I never saw anything that looked like the example in the book but I saw that the greater the need, the greater the desperation, the less a party is willing to settle for. Furthermore, I very quickly and easily figured out that the landlord aristocracy that already has too much of everything and doesn’t really need anything is always in a position to propose grossly unfavorable terms on a ‘take it or die starving’ basis. After I saw this, I went back and I read that segment in the book again several more times, and I at last discovered that what I saw happen, happened exactly the way the book says it should happen.”

With sudden and demonstrably grave emphasis, Fae further explained, “The book says if an apple farmer and an orange farmer trade an apple for an orange, they both walk away with something of greater value because they each consider the uncommon article more valuable than the common article. When I looked for that principle in applied practice, I discovered the desperate man considers food the ‘uncommon’ article while the man that has too much of everything considers everything ‘common’. I discovered that even while the desperate man will trade what all others easily determine as grossly disproportionate value for the food, the desperate man yet walks away with food that from his desperate perspective he regards as of greater value than no food... and this is at last what ‘subjective value’ means. This is at last what it means to ‘apply’ yourself and your ‘potential’. You see, what the book says is when you and I encounter the desperate man, we encounter potential, an opportunity to benefit disproportionately, to exchange comparatively small quantities of things we regard as common for vast quantities of things we regard as common, while the desperate man walks away with food he considers of greater value than no food. That is how the desperate man and I both walk away with ‘greater value’. That is how one plus one equals something greater than two.

The book asserts this is how we establish the ‘real’ value of everything because I might say the apple is worth two oranges while you might say the orange is worth two apples. We might argue about that forever and never exchange so much as one apple or orange in the process but once motivated by our unique individual circumstances to agree to an exchange, no matter how disproportionate, with our choices and actions we prove the ‘real’ value of the apple and the orange as it might apply at that unique moment. Most crucially with these principles we conclude, when the desperate man says the pair of shoes is worth a dozen apples while I say one apple is worth a hundred pair of shoes then you step in and suggest you agree with the desperate man, none of us are ever mathematically ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ about any of these values. Because of our unique individual subjective circumstances, we each arrive at unique individual subjective values and that means when you step in and agree with the desperate man, **you are wrong**, Wyl. That means you need to **butt out of this**, stop trying to impose your personal opinions on me and the desperate man, and let us determine our own values by our own free will. After all, this is between me and the desperate man, this doesn’t involve or concern you and it’s **none of your god damn business**.

You see, the book says nothing, not even food, is of any natural intrinsic value, we all have unique individual ideas about value, none of us are ever right or wrong, we all just have equally valid personal opinions, and it’s not ‘fair’ or ‘moral’ for any of us to think we know the true universal value of the apple. Consequently, the only ‘fair’ and ‘moral’ way to trade is to feel each other out for various levels of hunger and desperation then exploit that misery for advantageous disproportion, and that is how we grope our way through the disorienting fog and haze of all our confusing and contradictory subjective personal opinions to finally arrive at ‘true’ and ‘accurate’ values.

That is precisely what the book says only the book chooses to say it in the most improbable yet most sentimentally appealing terms with the apple farmer and the orange farmer trading an apple for an orange, as opposed to just stating outright the desperate guy is vulnerable and will do just about anything for some food. That’s what it means when somebody tells you, you have ‘potential’, and you can do whatever you want and have whatever you want if you just ‘apply’ yourself.”

Wyl stared fascinated to a degree while perhaps also bordering on boredom with the subject but Fae rolled his eyes, huffed impatiently then demanded, “Do you see how the book not only insults your intelligence but strips you of your humanity?”

Deep in contemplation, Wyl slowly inhaled while evidently impatient or perhaps even dismissive, Fae directly asserted, “The book is telling you that you’re too stupid to figure out any kind of practical value for anything like an apple or a pair of shoes because it’s all just too complicated for you and everything you think is always wrong anyway. The book is telling you, just shut up, butt out of everybody else’s relationships and keep your stupid personal moral opinions to yourself. The book is telling you when you feel sympathy for the desperate man or feel compelled to intervene on his behalf because you think something is universally right or wrong, that’s always just because you’re too stupid and uneducated to understand that nothing is ever universally right or wrong. You need to educate yourself by reading the book so you can learn that whenever you think, feel or believe something, that’s always just because you’re stupid and once you reach the educated level of academic sophistication of the book then you’ll realize how wrong, how ‘unfair’ and ‘immoral’ it is to ever think, feel or believe.

The educated academics that wrote the book are telling you in their educated academic opinion, academic education is the worst thing that could ever happen to you and you’re always much better off not learning or thinking. They’re not sharing what they’ve learned with you, they’re telling you beware of learning, beware of thinking, feeling or believing, don’t do it because it will always only make you stupid-”

“-The book is right about at least one thing, Fae.” Wyl commented, “This has got to be about the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Don’t rush to conclusions.” Fae countered, “I haven’t finished yet. By the time I’m done I assure you, you won’t call any of this the stupidest thing you’ve ever heard.”

Wyl flexed his eyebrows in disbelief while Fae paused to drink from his glass then he ignited a smoke, puffed on it and blew a cloud toward the ceiling. Revisiting his initial subject, Fae advised, “Now, I said I found this book while spying in the autumn and I sent the other scouts home so I could stay to observe and learn, so I was still there when harvest came around. I suppose these farmers must have had a string of good fortune because even with a harvest coming in, all the enterprises that buy and sell food product were already stocked up and with or without a harvest, already had more than enough in store to last until at least the next harvest, and that made food real ‘common’. Under these circumstances, the enterprises and captains of commerce all subjectively determined the value of the current harvest as zero but all these farmers still had all kinds of debt and obligations to pay while money was suddenly real ‘uncommon’. After sweating it out for a little while, the enterprises started buying up the yields and the farmers were so desperate facing the potential of zero value for their crops, they couldn’t sell fast enough at any price greater than zero then they walked away thinking they just applied themselves by converting something worthless into a disproportionate positive value. In pretty short order, maybe a dozen or so enterprises ended up in possession of every crumb of food within maybe a hundred mile radius and then with such vast quantities of something so common and so worthless, they decided to protect the value of their stock by burning off half of it. At that point, the merchants and enterprises in possession of all the food stocks had successfully applied themselves to their full potential by relieving all the farmers of their harvests and suddenly, food was not so common anymore.”

Pausing perhaps to allow Wyl a moment to digest the particulars or perhaps simply to stress the severity of the occurrence, Fae then recounted, “In their desperation to recover some form of value from the otherwise presumably worthless results of their efforts, the farmers traded off their yields for money they couldn’t survive on for even just the winter. Now, more than half these people are farmers and most of the rest are completely dependent on trade with farmers so as the farmers ran out of money, they stopped trading then everybody else soon enough ran out of money.

By this time, the first snows had fallen and already choked off the pass, so I’m stranded and I’m in it for the winter, and from what I observed over this one season, I consider myself today probably one of the foremost experts in the world on the *Theory of Subjective Value*. A population so desperate was ready for just about anything that might put food on a table or prevent the punitive consequences of delinquency in debt and obligation so as winter progressed, some people with some money in their possession bought food over the winter at prices that might have purchased three years of supply any other time. Some people borrowed money and promised their land, their homes and all their possessions if they couldn’t pay later. Some people worked for the enterprises, merchants and captains of commerce all day every day all winter for just enough food to survive and maybe just barely hold onto their possessions while slipping deeper into debt. Most people however, didn’t have any money, couldn’t borrow any money, couldn’t pay it back anyway, and couldn’t get any work from the enterprises. They didn’t have any of those options so those people ate mice, ate dogs or boiled their leather shoes and boots for food. Eventually some of those people and others as well fell behind on their debts then they surrendered all their possessions and lived outdoors, and some of them froze to death while others starved to death. Throughout the duration of the winter, many people froze to death while less than a mile away, the home they occupied maybe only just a couple weeks prior stood empty and many more people starved to death while less than a mile away, more food than they could possibly eat in a lifetime wasted away in store.

I saw hundreds of people starve to death in that place. That’s what ‘subjective value’ means. That’s what it means to ‘apply’ yourself and your ‘potential’. When somebody tells you, you have potential and you need to apply yourself that means they think you’re the kind of fellow that has what it takes to starve half the children to death and work the other half to death to make all your crazy perverted grandiose dreams come true.”

Perhaps even a bit angry, Wyl glared for a significant period then finally declared, “I don’t know how to believe this story, Fae.”

“If you told me this story, I wouldn’t believe you.” Fae confessed, “I would assume you must have misunderstood something you observed or you’re not explaining it correctly but it doesn’t matter if you don’t believe it.” Although Wyl might have otherwise thought as much impossible, Fae exhibited an even more serious expression then confided, “The reason I’m telling you this is because I want you to remember it... forever. What I have described to you tonight is what most humans believe and they will eventually win the war of belief. It is only a matter of time, if it hasn’t happened already, until someone trades the apple for the promise of a thousand apples then it is only another matter of time after that until someone trades the promise of a thousand apples for the promise of ten-thousand apples. Subjective value will become more abstract with every transaction until one day, traders will trade wholly imaginary values merely described in text on a piece of paper in exchange for wholly imaginary values described in text on a piece of paper.”

Wyl gawked nearly confounded by the hypotheses but Fae only nodded in confirmation of his sincerity then furthermore asserted, “Imaginary value will expand exponentially until one day it dwarfs material value, for how could the mere finite material of the apple ever possibly compete with the incalculable value of boundless inexhaustible imagination committed to text on a piece of paper? One day, production of food will be so worthless a subjective value that the effort to produce food won’t merit trade value in food then everyone will desperately avoid all such occupation or they will starve to death but in any event, every human will believe irrevocably that the greatest certainty of starvation always coincides with the production of food.

When the production of food no longer warrants the reward of food, no humans will ever again produce food and after they eat the last apple then feel the urgency of hunger, they will frantically trade evermore imaginary and astronomical subjective values committed to text on paper in evermore desperate attempts to apply themselves and their potential. They will recognize desperation and misery fit to exploit for advantageous disproportion then they will attempt to negotiate, induce and threaten each other into producing food but most assuredly, the one thing they will never consider a plausible solution to starvation is the direct constructive production of food... and then...

In the end time, the last humans ever to walk this earth will starve to death while apples tumble from branches above and bounce off their heads... -because they will neither recognize the causal relationship between constructive action and the direct proportionate occurrence of material benefit nor will they know natural abundance even should it fall from a tree and strike them on their heads... -because they will no longer know that food grows on trees, that apples are food or that food is intrinsically valuable.”

With mouth agape, Wyl stared for a painfully protracted duration of contemplative silence then finally asserted, “I don’t know about that, Fae.”

Fae glowered and sternly rebuked, “With my own two eyes, I **saw** them burn their food, eat their shoes then starve to death... I understand how preposterous all this might sound to you now but it is really not so difficult to comprehend if you appreciate the simplest facts. When these farmers pulled in their harvests, they were each sitting on enough grain to feed a family for maybe twenty years. Obviously, grain won’t store that long but the point being the farmers were sitting on more grain than they could possibly eat by the time the next harvest rolled around but because of the sense of desperation they felt under the pressure of their imaginary economics, because of their theory of subjective value and all their perverted beliefs, they sold a twenty year supply of grain for an amount of money that wouldn’t buy enough food to even survive until spring...

You see, Wyl, when you remove the money from the equation and you just describe the bare essential facts of what they did, they traded a twenty year supply of food for a one month supply of food. If you think I’m talking a lot of shit and you disregard everything I have told you tonight, I want you to at least pay close attention and fully appreciate the magnitude of what I am about to say... **They traded a twenty year supply of food for a one month supply of food... They starved to death because they made more food than they could eat...**” With a sharp nod for emphasis, Fae rhetorically inquired, “What do you think sounds more absurd -- that a man would trade a twenty year supply of food for a one month supply of food or that a man would trade the promise of a thousand apples for the promise of ten-thousand apples? They both sound equally absurd, don’t they, but one of those is imaginary while the other is real.”

Inhaling deeply, Wyl reflexively recoiled with a growing sense of appreciation for the blunt simplicity of the analysis and Fae exhibited indications of satisfaction to detect at last some measure of impact then in reinforcement he authoritatively declared, “That’s a true story, Wyl. If you proposed to those farmers in literal terms, they trade you a twenty year supply of food for a one month supply of food, would any one of them ever agree to something like that? You would think not... but when you introduce subjective value in between, all the sudden they just can’t figure out any more that they just gave away a twenty year supply of food for a one month supply of food... and you can’t even explain it to them either, no matter how hard you try. Even starving to death, with their last dying breath they’ll argue about it and insist the twenty year supply of food and the one month supply of food are unrelated. That’s subjective value. It means everything is imaginary, nothing is real and no two actions or consequences are ever related. It means everything is always just potential, every bullshit opinion is potentially more true than any truth and every truth is potentially more bullshit than just any old stupid bullshit opinion.

In the textbook scenario, the apple farmer trades the orange farmer **one** apple for **one** orange but in the real life scenario I witnessed, it’s like the apple farmer trades the apple farmer two-hundred and forty apples for one apple... You see how that works? -and once you figure out that equation then you listen to these people explain to you how your equation is all wrong and you just don’t understand the sophistication and complexity of it all... that’s when you have that revelation... and then you know... these people are fully prepared right now to starve to death for their economic beliefs. For the economic true believer, no matter what experience or reality ever contradicts, nothing exceeds the power of these articles of faith. One day these people are going to find an opportunity to tell a next generation of ours that they have potential and need to apply themselves, and then our children are going to burn their food, eat their shoes and starve to death while apples tumble from branches above and bounce off their heads.”

In spite of words and ideas that struck sheer terror in his heart, Wyl stubbornly smiled in appreciation of all the outlandish scenarios Fae proposed, and Fae even sarcastically smirked in appreciation of the humorous undertones but in conclusion, he nonetheless forcefully counseled, “It’s okay if you don’t believe it. Just remember it, write it in your journal and never forget it then one day pass it on to someone else. That is how we will survive the end time. I won’t be around for it but you’ll have more contact with these people in your lifetime than I ever did and you will know even better than me that what I am describing to you right now is what the big great last war to determine the inheritance of the earth is going to look like. Everyone will think, look and behave about the same, it will involve hardly any action, almost no one will wear uniforms and it will involve almost no weapons. No one will really know what side they’re on and in fact, no one will even understand that there are really any sides involved... and the only way you’ll ever figure out which ones to kill... is by paying real close attention to which ones tell you... you have potential... and you need to apply yourself...”