

THE NEED FOR

COST/BENEFIT ANALYSES OF INTENDED ALIENATIONS

THESIS: As (says a wag) life's what happens to you while you're planning other things, it's to be expected that most alienations at any moment in the world's time-flow are unintended, unplanned, not engineered. Scratch all those for this Thinksheet, which is about the other alienations, the meant ones, products of calculation. While God works for good in & through both kinds (Ro. 8²⁸), **we should undertake cost/benefit analyses** of past, present, & projected actions both of our own & of others, both of our cohorts (social groups) & of others'. **Target:** What I'm attacking here are (1) the uncritical, comfortable settling into alienation-making (v. peace-making) as a life-style, and (2) the self-righteousness which seduces one into self-stroking, self-rewarding, for always coming on as alienator.

1. When in sapiential mood, Jesus sets us to calculating consequences--kings wondering whether to start a war (ultimate intended alienation!), builders figuring whether they've enough \$ to finish, his hearers balancing the benefits of sinning over against losing not just their bodies but their souls. (Yes: when in devotional mood, he asks us **not** to calculate consequences, his cross being our central model for this form of consciousness & behavior. But that's not for this Thinksheet.) Following Jesus obligates us to responsible continuous **self-examination**, critical self-consciousness, as to the effects of our actions insofar as those effects are projectable even though that's seldom very far. And this process is esp. important when our mind-set is inseparable from our **self-definition**, with the identity-individuality of our being-in-the-world as that singularity is both self- & others-perceived. Since we exist as persons-in-community, the subtlest ego-trap is so to self-present as to maximize stroking--as a cat will continue to press its head up under your hand till you tire of stroking (opposite of a goat, throwing off your hand on the first stroke). Society wants to "type" you (to use a showbiz term), slot you into a category for neat handling, provide you with a permanent **social definition** which then is in danger of becoming demonically self-confirming, **addicting**. The test of whether you've become **role-addicted** is the same as for any other addiction. For one thing, do you get irritated &/or anxious when somebody questions you as to the protections, satisfactions, & comforts your role is providing you?

2. The Bible is savvy to this phenomenon, warning against **professional prophets**, who are nice (for profit) even though they began as nasty ("true" prophets). In letting themselves be corrupted, they switched from calculating sin's cost to society to figuring the benefit angles to themselves. Yes, ELMER GENTRY again & again. Further, everybody's social matrix, web or network of social sanctions, is complex. If you're for peace, your peace group will reward you though, if it's wartime, the wider society may punish you. It's hohum (as I said to him) when a peace-church theologian such as Jn. Howard Yoder writes a book "proving" Jesus was a pacifist, but it was ohouch when in the 16th c. his Mennonite ancestors did the same: on the scale, the same behavior that was for them on the cost side was for Jn. on the benefit side. The question whether Jesus was a pacifist is another question: my question here is whether Jn. was tempted to write as he did, & my answer is no but only if he'd have done the same in an unfriendly social context--& to that I don't know the answer, nor does he....Let's call all this **self-critical contextuality**.

3. Some folks are **constitutionally contrarian**, "naturally" behaving like heroes/fools (the two possible judgments on the same action). They should find out who they really are & then not automatically behave that way, the contrarian style, like all other styles, not always being appropriate. How can you know if you're one of these? You have more fun alienating than reconciling. (To me, the all-seasons reconciler is even more repulsive, in being more apt to coopt the Christian religion into self-confirmation.)

4. Bertolt Brecht's **alienation effect** (Ger., *Verfremdungseffekt*) does on stage what in other media (the plastic arts, esp. painting) post-WWI artists have attempted, viz,

the deliberate distancing of the audience from the art. Let's call this **critical distancing**. Using dramatic techniques of contrast & contradiction, Brecht has as his proximate goal that the spectators become more sharply aware of the difference & distance between fantasy & reality (the viewers detaching themselves from the theatrical action rather than, in suspension of disbelief, identifying with it); and as his ultimate goal that they become mature citizens, able to see their sociopolitical surround with eyes weaned from propaganda, candidate managers, spin-controllers (though these last two, & many another public-relations term, did not exist in his time). To use two more recent expressions, Brecht was into **consciousness-raising** & teaching the **hermeneutics of suspicion**. A classic instance of all this is his antiwar play, "Good Soldier Schweik," which I saw on the marquee of his theater the first time I was in E.Berlin after the War....The benefit of his droll, sardonic social criticism was & is an improved critical ("prophetic" being the biblical term) sociopolitical consciousness; the cost is that the total effect is not (as he had hoped) to nerve for more humane & courageous political action but rather to enervate, to increase an immobilizing cynicism. I have gone into his case in some detail because I see parallels in the Christianity-motivated "movements" since WWII.

5. The trick, in prophetic motivation, is to sour the faithful on society up to the point of creative, rehabilitative, redemptive, sometimes even revolutionary **action** without so souring them as to push them over the brink into cynical & despairing **inaction**. I didn't know how to feel, what to think, what to do if anything when Sunday my pastor said in worship that the USA is 19th in infant mortality. Given our pluralism & our growing underclass, is 19th about what you'd expect? And if somebody should do something about it, who? Do "rights" & "the right thing to do" here correlate negatively as well as positively? Should the churches pressure Big Daddy to do more about it &/or do more about it ourselves? We should listen to preachers, but also to sociologists who tell us (as does P.Berger) that we must become more rational about "entitlements" both because they're outrunning our ability to pay for them & because they have some direct evil effects (eg, encouraging highschoolers to get pregnant & get gov't. support). I never get cynical when "social action" preached at, but I do find most of it depressing (though, our beloved brother Paul modeling for me, I never despair [2Cor.4⁸]).

6. Mind you, I'm not philosophically opposed to **Brechtian behavior**, having done what I suppose is my fair share of it, including **street theater** in "the movements," including a demo on the Library steps with Dan Berrigan at the height of the Berkeley disquietude of the '60s. But I've always been leery of the rabblouser's charmed circle (in religion, politics, whatnot) & never willing to put more than one foot in or (koan!) clap with more than one hand. Exceptions: (1) briefly in my teens I put both feet into fundamentalism, & (2) briefly in midlife I put both feet into the black movement, including very active support for Jim Forman's "reparations" crusade.

7. **Ralph Nader** in economics, **Tim. O'Leary** in personal lifestye, & **Dan Berrigan** in sociopolitics are contemporary instances of Mr. Outsider, the perpetual alienate & dissident, intending & scheming & effecting alienations, with both beneficent & baleful consequences. What a portrait gallery I could furnish of this type, this social role, in many areas of human groaning & caring! Jeremiah with both feet out, instead of Isaiah with one foot in the establishment.

8. Distinction: Some prophets are **attitudinal**, going around looking for conditions to be negative about, & become nervous when things are going well for the soul & society. It's hard, but important, to distinguish them from **situational** prophets, who would rather live in peace but find a fire in their bones against something they judge evil & unacceptable.

9. Yesterday, **Alan Boesak** joined a hunger strike, telling the S.African gov't. he's willing to starve to death if that's what it'll take to make the gov't. "understand the evil of your ways," esp. detention without trial. **Walter Wink** is minded to find evil "principalities & powers" everywhere. **Eliz. S.-Fiorenza** teaches to sniff out the evil of androcentrism in Bible, church, & society. Cost/benefit analyses? St.Valentine & I wonder.