

# REFLEXIVITY AS A PALIMPSEST

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## Abstract

Business policy and education is trapped the competitive advantage paradigm whose grammar is accepted without reflection. New, creative, imaginative and reflective attitudes are needed in an interdependent global economy. A metaphor of a three part palimpsest, the film Match Point, overlaying the novel Crime and Punishment and the paradigm, exposes the grammar of competitive advantage and suggests a reflective poetic approach.

Key words: deconstruction, Bakhtin, competitive advantage, poetic language.

## Introduction

We happen to be in Moscow, in the evening, in a cafe that in many ways signifies New Russia, a capitalist state or perhaps a state capitalist state. In the sign/signifier/signified model of Saussure, the array of signifiers are, the spectacle of the cafe, the customers, the sound of global pop music and the spectacle within the spectacle of non-stop global fashion videos on multiple screens, with anorexic models marching, on a stage, interspersed with Rabelaisque interviews with celebrity designers and other celebrities, celebrating their own success; signifying that the New Russia is part of the global economy; post Perestroika, post economic shock therapy, post the default of 1998, post the oil boom of the first years of the new century, following the financial crisis; currently in a recession, that is expected to be shorter lived here than in mature market economies; the future mapped out in the growth model of the BRIC report that predicts (other things being equal) increasing affluence. Ironically after the recent bailouts and nationalisations that rescued the corporate sectors of the USA and UK, (creating state owned sectors that are many times larger than the one that existed in the former USSR), perhaps New Russia is a closer approximation than they are to Phillip Bobbitt's (2008) ideal of a market state. The clientele of the cafe are predominantly quite young, in their twenties, quite affluent, emerging middle class, employed in business, or students of business, relatively unaffected by the recession, yet. They happen to be in possession of competitive advantage. Lucky.

The foundation of current business, including, consultancy, education, reporting, policy and analysis, is the model of competitive advantage. Competitive advantage seems insulated from reflection. It is a restricted metaphor, an *a priori*, beyond question, confining imagination within its own discourse; shareholder value, efficiency defined as *more for less*, misconceptions of evolution, competition, fitness and risk; confining ethics and aesthetics to signifiers that signify competitive advantage, like *best practice*, *benchmarking*, *best value*, *balanced business scorecard*, *corporate governance and corporate social responsibility*.

Consciousness can be like a screen, a palimpsest, that thoughts and pictures happen to pass over, more or less uninvited or randomly (*the luck of the draw*); impressions or voices that are superimposed on one another, as for example the scene where we *happen* to be, in New Russia and its expression of competitive advantage. *Is there an intentional metaphor that captures this moment this place, these ideas and luck?*

One that comes to mind is a palimpsest made up of Woody Allen's film, *Match Point*, a reflection in turn of the discourse of competitive advantage and the novel *Crime and Punishment*, and its theme crime, punishment, remorse or lack of remorse, redemption and luck.

We summarize some propositions in the palimpsest. Mind sets of business and education policy are trapped unimaginatively in competitive advantage. The source of creative imagination is to see resemblances between apparently diverse phenomena, Resemblances, within the palimpsest, unravel and expose the competitive advantage metaphor to other areas of imagination. The three part palimpsest is a poetic approach, using Kristeva's conception of poetic language, that *unsettles* established meaning and sense making, institutionalized in habitual and exhausted thinking; *unsettling* that we want to achieve.

### **Palimpsest**

A palimpsest is traditionally a parchment on which an original text has been partly obscured, leaving fragments of previous texts still visible but allowing them to be overwritten by new texts. Our palimpsest consists of three things, the film, the novel and the concept, competitive advantage. Thus it is a palimpsest in multimedia and the (metaphorical) parchment that it is written on is *our shared* imagination, made concrete (or visible), in that we write about it. Using Bakhtin's term, *our shared* imagination is polyphonic. It expresses what can only be expressed by multiple consciousnesses or voices. If we use creative imagination in the sense of Corbin (1969) or Izutsu (1983), it is to see relationships and resemblances between apparently distinct phenomena that reflect one another. Extending this concept of imagination to Bakhtin, it is to see relationships that would not be visible monologically; that is, it would be inaccessible to a single imagination.

The distinct phenomena in this essay are the contents of the palimpsest; the novel, the film and the concept. They resemble one another and each becomes self reflexive when it is realised that it is contextual to *its own* set of *a priori*s, many of which are unconscious or taken for granted. Interpretation of each reflects and is relative to *its own grammar* which is particular to a specific time and place and to the identity of the viewer or observer. The identity of the observer is not a single identity. Bakhtin argues that for example Raskolnikov's reflections or meditations in *Crime and Punishment* are polyphonic voices within himself. The same idea is contained in Buddhism, Sufism and Taoism and in the writings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky where a person's 'I' is seen as fragmented and identified with a multitude of materialisms, things, events, possessions and obsessions. Dorian Grey is dramatically presented with the portrait of his Other, that he secretly reflects upon.

In figure 1, the film Match Point [A], the novel Crime and Punishment [B] and the discourse of competitive advantage [C] appears as a palimpsest, one text overwriting another (1, 2, 3 and 4 in figure 1) but still visible within one another. There is more than an inter-textual relation since they express different grammars (morphology, syntax and rhetoric). Each text carries the imprint of another, revealing similarity, differences, deference and absences which we call collectively, resemblances. There are strong relations between all the texts in the palimpsest (4) and weaker relations between just two of them (1, 2 and 3) and differences (5, 6 and 7). Differences constitute an *Other* for each text. Also, as in figure 1, there is the excluded *Other*; the *texts* that are excluded from the palimpsest entirely. In that sense, texts are endless. *Text* is used in a very general way. It may refer a concept, discourse, narrative, or theory, and as is so with the texts in our palimpsest, they may be in different media.

The grammar of a text is deeply influenced by the medium in which it is *written*. Now we are not so concerned with the medium. Grammar possesses morphology, syntax, and rhetoric; epistemes and genealogy, paradigms, *a priori*'s and mind sets that are mostly unconscious are part of grammar.

The parchment's contents reveal one another. Each makes an impression that shows through as similarity or difference and since what is present in one, is absent or excluded from another impression. We will use the word *resemblance* to include notions of similarity and difference and exclusion. *Resemblance* as used here corresponds quite closely to Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances as '*Something [that] runs through the whole thread, namely the continuous overlapping of ...fibres*' (Wittgenstein, 1963; page 67), but we have extended it to include the *Other*. *Resemblance* cuts across boundaries; in so doing *resemblance* is transcendental. Because it cuts across grammars it occupies the space between grammars. In so far as our palimpsest expresses poetic language, it is an '*unsettling process ...outright destructive of the identity of meaning..*' (Kristeva, 1980; page 125). We are concerned here with the extent to which the reflections of one phenomenon in another reveal the grammars that limit them and create resemblances. The argument is represented in Figure 1.

The contents of our palimpsest as subjects of our gaze also become individually self reflexive. This kind of self reflexivity also draws the attention of our gaze to what is excluded from the individual texts (the film, the novel and the concept, considered as single texts); the *other* that is excluded by the *own grammar* of each phenomena written on the parchment. Each has an exclusive grammar (that is partly determined by the medium in which it is expressed) and the excluded *Other* of illuminates each phenomenon as it emerges as a result of self reflection.

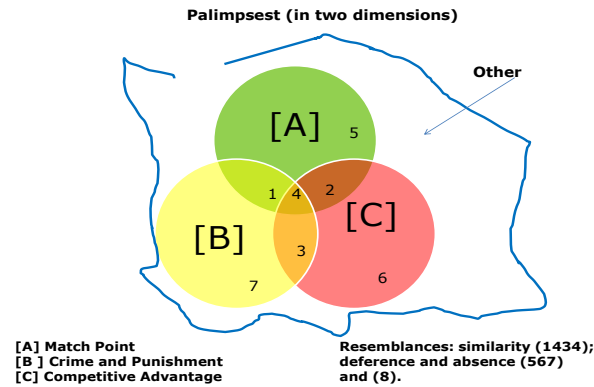


Figure 1

## Reflexivity

We distinguish sense making from reflexivity. Academic reflexivity, is interpreted (on the Sc'Moi website) as; “(i) the act of an academic in examining one’s assumptions on one’s scholarly activity within the standpoint of the political economy and its material conditions.; (ii) Sense making that is skewed toward a managerialist orientation by rewards and other institutional disciplinary apparatus; (iii) communities of practice that have included or excluded the answerability of the ethics of one’s own complicity in what gets made sensible.”

Sense making is an attempt to interpret events, situations or phenomena entirely into a preset pattern or grammar, although as is most often the case the pattern or grammar is imposed unconsciously. Business students are, for example, asked to analyse a case from the point of view of whether the firm is question is successfully achieving (or failing to achieve) competitive advantage. Rhetoric is part of the grammar of competitive advantage. This rhetoric is not open to question. The unstated (persuasive) *a priori* is that things should be seen entirely from within the paradigm of competitive advantage.

Reflexivity, we see as awareness of the underlying grammar of a situation or text and as having two aspects

- (a) reflexivity via self reflection and
- (b) reflexivity via resemblances.

Both are polyphonic. The palimpsest that we write about has three voices (and we might have extended it to more voices). Reflection via resemblances takes places in a Menippean discourse of the three part palimpsest of [A], [B], and [C] in figure 2.

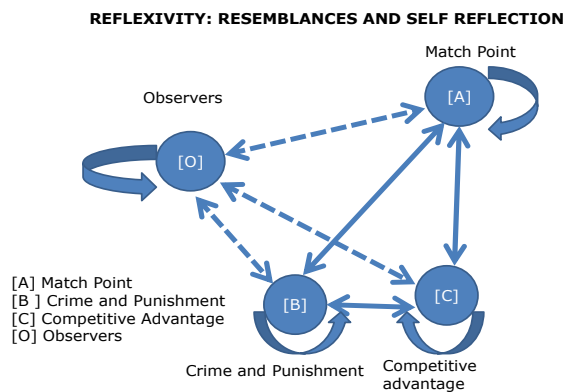


Figure 2

Reflexivity in the palimpsest as illustrated in figure 2 there are 16 ( $2^4$ ) polyphonic relationships (1 relation between all [A], [B], [C], and [O], 4 three part relationships, 6 possible dialogues, 4 self reflections, and 1 empty set).

### Reflexivity via self reflection

In figure 2 self reflection is illustrated by the four reflexive arrows. We discuss them in each of the three texts. Only in [B] is there overt self reflection. In [A] and [C] it is covert. Self reflection can only occur through deconstruction which discovers (i) contradictions that exist within the (apparent) unity of a text and (ii) the presence of an excluded *Other* or *Shadow* that a text appears to deny. Deconstruction is endlessly reflexive; first, considering a text in a limited way as a set of logical propositions because not there are always propositions within a text that cannot be shown to be entirely consistent with a text and second .

It is expressed in [B] in the polyphonic voices in discussions with Raskolnikov (with and Razumihin, Luzhin and Zossimov, and with Porfiri or with Sonia) and in his phantasmagorical dreams. Self reflection appears overtly in the conflict in Raskolnikov's mind before the murder. It is interesting that Nabokov (1981) sees the conflict merely as the author's confusion, confusion that permeates the text. Our reading is that it is an internal debate that illustrates the lack of a *single 'I'*. Raskolnikov is described by Nabokov as neurotic: the issue for Bakhtin is the contradiction and inconsistency in the polyphonic voices. He simultaneously wants to prove himself not an ordinary man but an extraordinary man, fully in charge of his destiny and capable of making his own moral laws in Nietzschean fashion and living down the responsibility of conscience and guilt. Yet he sees himself as sacrificing himself for others and murder and the thought of the murder beforehand, immediately brings only suffering and torment. Guilt and the need for redemption appear only late in the novel. He is shown to succeed in the murder initially as a result of a series of accidents, rather than through the exercise of free will. Mankind, he writes in his article, is of two kinds, *Supermen* who make their own laws and ordinary people who follow other people's laws. Ironically it is ordinary people who have to be placated as part of his redemption. Yet redemption can only come through public self abasement. He thinks he

wants to use the old lady's funds to help his family, but when the murder is committed the money and trinkets become things of little consequence.

Raskolnikov is in dialogue with issues of time and space, both aspects that were emphasized by Bakhtin in Dostoevsky's novels. Time and space have their own voices in the polyphonic novel. There are brief interludes of furious activity (the murder, the dreams) between long periods of apathy and illness. Characters are unhealthy, shiftless, restricted, compressed by the atmosphere of a place. Raskolnikov is afraid of the living space inhabited by his victims. He reacts to the atmosphere of different rooms; in some he is a student, in the others, he can be a friend, a lover or a murderer. Each space has its own noise, smell and atmosphere that make them comparable with bodies (living bodies quite often look dead). Even when heroes leave St Petersburg physically, they cannot leave it in their hearts, and everywhere they appear, they bring its atmosphere of poverty, hopelessness and distorted values. Regret and redemption occur only when Raskolnikov leaves St Peterburg. Space and time (there is always before the murder a feeling of urgency) simultaneously provoke Raskolnikov to commit the crime and awaken self reflection and the moral torment that many of Dostoevsky's characters experience. The 'I' of self reflection exists in the *Other*, and it turns out to be a process of endless reflection; regress backwards, or progress forwards in time, present time that we might have thought to be the location of a single 'I', turns out either to disappear in the void between instantaneous explosions of creation and extinction of present time, or is a trail of multiple polyphonic 'I's stretching through time and alternating locations, waking or dreaming nightmares in St Petersburg.

In [A] the self reflection is almost entirely limited to the exchange between Chris and the murdered women (mirroring the murder scene in [B], involving Raskolnikov, the women he murders, the old woman Alyona Ivonovna and her sister, Lisaveta). After their murder, in a dreamlike sequence, the two murdered women state their case to Chris, in a parody of the murder scene in [B]. They pose his deception, their innocence and his guilt, against the (competitive) advantage he has sustained (he has protected his family position, and wealth) that paradoxically absolves his need for remorse. Whereas Raskolnikov's personality is quite repulsive, he is antisocial, solitary rarely exiting his own room, Chris is very social, easy going, nice to people, attractive, apparently sincere, always networking and making important links, impressing people. The film more overtly than the other texts involves the audience [the reader] in self reflection. The author (Woody Allen) makes little attempt to make sense, or solve the moral dilemmas posed by the film: this is left open. The audience becomes the *Other*. For the most part the novel [B] is polyphonic but the author's voice clearly appears in the epilogue, the last chapter, in which his remorse and Sonya's compassion acts Lazarus-like to bring Raskolnikov back to life.

Place is important in film [A] where it is essentially consumerist; luxury, success, plenty, easy access to riches through financial deals, if the right people are cultivated, and the hero is an accomplished cultivator and superficially cultured. The film is predominantly shot in art galleries, investment banks, opera houses, expensive restaurants, a country house, a modernistic apartment overlooking the Thames and an exclusive tennis club, which is the source of the central metaphor: luck.

In [A] Woody Allen's characters are deliberately static; a good girl from a good family, a neurotic girl/lover, caring parents, admiring friend, class bound friendships, deferential police. They are happy and do not want to be disturbed by problems of the less successful. The crime is not really investigated but made sense of; a vagrant addict is allowed to bear the responsibility, which he apparently, happily does and to which the police happily accede. The hero is alone in evolving as a character, but he does so only in terms of social status, wealth and comfort. His success occurs through luck. Being lucky becomes a criterion that differentiates people and the major source of success in a seductively materialistic society. The authors' voice is surprisingly neutral on the moral issue of the murder: values are relative, open ended, molded according to success that is measured in terms of possessions.

Self reflection in [C] takes place primarily between the discourse of competitive advantage and the polyphonic absent *voices*; the Other that is always murdered by a sticking to (the grammar of) a particular discourse. Self reflection is largely a matter of suppressing the Other but it re-emerges as an unwelcome ghostly Jungian shadow when we undertake a deconstruction process or listen to the *voice* of events.

*Who and what is excluded in the process of seeking competitive advantage? What is distorted?* The imperfections of competition are excluded. Darwinian selection is distorted; fitness in Darwin refers merely to successful reproduction, not to the evangelical notions, for example, of Tom Peters [In] Search for Excellence. Schumpeter a forerunner of competitive advantage bracketed creation and destruction, the light and the dark. Darkness or destruction, that is, failure of firms, industries and individuals to fit an environment that is constantly in flux, as a result of waves of new technologies opens up society to the creation of new firms industries and employment. Schumpeter was in no doubt about the instability of capitalism. Darkness alternated with light until disenchanted leaders allowed the light finally to fade out. But this shadow side is muted in the discourse of competitive advantage. Similarly Keynes warnings about the instability of capitalism and the dangers of inequality were quickly assimilated into a (so called) neoclassical model in which all would be well if prices and wages were flexible. Even after the lesson about the instability of a system based on the search for competitive advantage, that should have been provided by the most recent financial crisis, the most serious since the Great Depression of the 1930's (and at least two financial crisis in every decade since the 1960's), the model is largely unchallenged. In the carnival of competitive advantage, the fool (the shadow or the Other) that would whisper about the fragility and mortality of the notion is silent.

Gaining power was a theme of the imperfect/monopolistic competition models of Joan Robinson and Edward Chamberlin. Competitive advantage is largely gained through market power, stifling competition (and being lucky) through barriers to entry, rather than the kind of selection imagined if competition is perfect. Failure to question or even to be conscious of the a priori's attached to competitive advantage leads to the efficiency properties of perfect competition being falsely attributed to a global business which is deeply permeated with monopoly and market power. In Adam Smith the selfishness and egotism in seeking competitive advantage was absolved by introducing (a beneficent) Invisible Hand. As in

Match Point, egotism and selfishness have become self justifying in the pursuit of competitive advantage.

### **Reflexivity through resemblances**

The principal actor in a voiceover at the beginning of the film, showing a ball hovering over the net says;

*The man who said I would rather be lucky than good saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how much of life is dependent on luck. It's scary to think so much is out of one's control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net and for a split second it can go either forward or fall back. With a little luck it goes forward and you win: or maybe it doesn't and you lose.*

This could be a statement of gaining competitive advantage, the narrative of underlying business programmes which runs as follows; under capitalism (or in market state) where property and assets are for the most part privately owned, firms seek competitive advantage, a return above normal or average for the sector or more precisely the risk class in which they compete. If they are successful in achieving competitive advantage then they are threatened by new competition, so they constantly have to seek new sources of competitive advantage; otherwise they fail, releasing resources for more profitable uses. Thus capitalism is a dynamic system. But and this is often forgotten or denied, it is also unstable.

On competitive advantage in the novel the polyphony, using Bakhtin's notion, between Raskolnikov, Zozimov and Luzhin. The discourse is introduced by Raskolnikov as a cliché; "He's learned it all by heart to show off; and Zozimov: "A commonplace. "

Luzhin presents it in terms of pseudo science 'You must admit...that there is advance, or as they say, progress in the name of society and science and economic truth....' and continues '[F]or instance, if I were told "love thy neighbour", what came of it?' [Luzhin] went on, perhaps with excessive haste. 'It came to my tearing my coat in half to share with my neighbour and we both were left half naked.....Science tells us love yourself before all men, for everything in the world rests on self interest.....Economic truth adds that the better private affairs are organized in society –the more whole coats, so to say- the firmer are its foundations and the better is the common welfare organized too. Therefore in acquiring wealth solely and exclusively for myself, I am acquiring so to speak, for all, and helping to bring to pass my neighbours getting a little more than a torn coat, and that not from private personal liberality, but as a consequence of general advance. The idea is simple, but unhappily it has been a long time reaching us, being hindered by idealism and sentimentality'....."

Ramumhinis is impatient with the banality of the argument: ".....'Let us drop it.....I've grown sick ... of this chattering to amuse oneself, of this incessant flow of commonplaces.....so many unscrupulous people have got hold of the progressive cause of late, and have so distorted in their own interests everything they touched, that the whole cause has been dragged in the mire'....."



Luzhin is offended:” .....*Do you mean to suggest so unceremoniously that I too....’....*” but silenced by Ramumin: “.....*that’s enough!*’

The relationship between [A] and [B] (appearing mainly as 5 and 7 in figure 2) is through resemblance rather than similarity. Although ideas are similar the sense is quite different and they operate within different grammars. Some resemblances are illustrated in table 2.

<b>Semantics</b>	<b>Raskolnikov (modern character)</b>	<b>Chris (postmodern character)</b>
Crime	<i>Murder</i>	<i>Moral torments</i>
Punishment	<i>Moral torments</i>	<i>Murder</i>
Risk	<i>Lose self-respect</i>	<i>Lose reputation</i>
Norms	<i>Be the selected one, able to determine overcome moral norms</i>	<i>Be competitive lucky flexible moral norms, relative</i>
Goal	<i>Prove one’s power</i>	<i>Use one’s power</i>
Motivation	<i>To be above the society</i>	<i>To be within the society</i>
Mode	<i>Rationalism Idealism Antisocial (repulsive)</i>	<i>Intuition Sensuality Socialiability</i>
Victims	<i>Unattractive, repulsive</i>	<i>Attractive sensual</i>
Innocent victims	<i>Unwanted accidental</i>	<i>Expendable deliberate</i>

Table 2

### **Menippean absurdity**

Let us think of Match Point [A] and Crime and Punishment [B] as theatres for Menippean satire; as ‘*having a comic element*’ and being, ‘*a genre ...[of] bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic, justified by and devoted to a purely ideational and philosophic end; ...extraordinary situations for provoking and testing of a philosophical idea*’ Bakhtin, 1984; page 114). Raskolnikov is a rationalist. He fashions seemingly logical, intellectual theories, that are rather absurd, in an idealistic, romantic mode. Finally he awakens dormant emotionality and spirituality that has always be present in him but formerly overburdened by absurdity. The complexity of his reflections prior to the murder is in contrast to the simplicity, (almost the banality, in Nabokov’s view) of the redemption scene. Chris manages to achieve his goal, wealth, status luxury, by using his momentum; being in the right time in the right place, thanks to his strong intuition and luck. He believes in what he *feels*; in his intuition rather than logic; that is how his sensuality not so much finds himself in the trap of an affair with Nola (and an unborn child), but sets the trap for himself; his luck, metaphorically, *hovering over the net*, he always seems confident that in his case there will be ‘*a little luck [and] it goes forward and you win*’ and enjoying the thrill of the possibility

that, *'maybe it doesn't and you lose'*; with the detachment of a spectator witnessing the absurd.

Raskolnikov is a modernistic character with logical rules and rationally structured core behavior, although his form of rationality may be absurd in the contest of society, it evolves through the novel. Chris is a postmodern, intuitive; his moral norms are flexible, relative to circumstances and to goals. His approach lets him manage the risk of losing his reputation, his position and (after the murder) his freedom. Raskolnikov is punished and that is important for society. Chris is not punished; he does not confess or repents or feel either is necessary; what is important is success. Whereas Raskolnikov is deeply involved. The limit of Chris's reflexivity is this: he gives the impression (to the reader/audience) of watching an absurd carnival of contemporary consumerist manners; he is attached deeply to the kind of life that it offers; and not only detached from the other players in the carnival but quietly and secretly contemptuous of them. al manners is luck and it does not give the place for reflexivity and development.

### **Concluding remarks**

Luck features strongly in models associated with competitive advantage. Casino financial markets signify capitalist or market states. Asset prices are said to be randomly determined, in Brownian motion over time; martingales whose best estimate future price is the current price and price variations are limited by assumption (though every decade since the 1960's has produced financial crises that contradicts the assumption) to a normal or Gaussian distribution. Risk is limited by assumption, if not by events.

Luzhin's statement of competitive advantage is absurd. But its absurdity rarely intrudes on the idea of competitive advantage as it is applied in most business education, consulting and practice. Often the main purpose of MBA programmes is to enable MBA graduates to communicate with one another in a mutual discourse. Business courses establish literacy in basic functional areas, but these areas are often taught in such distinct boxes that it is difficult to see how they are related and business problems. Certainly strategic problems, supposedly to concern MBA graduates, do not come in discrete boxes but involve multiple functional areas, finance, human resources, operations and so on, if we insist on such categories. It is difficult to believe that such a limited discourse as competitive advantage should take so long to teach. Titles like *The 30 Day MBA*, *The 10 Day MBA* capture the idea that the content of most MBA programmes can be grasped much more quickly than the length of the usual 1 year or 2 year programmes suggest. What is missed out in the 30 or 10 day versions and the like is perhaps but not necessarily, relationships and networks with fellow students. But longer courses deserve different material.

How is absurdity of competitive advantage as a creed to be revealed? It is extremely robust; the discourse has survived the latest global crisis. What does better material mean in business education? We argue here for a poetic approach: open to the element of the absurd in any human activity or philosophy.

**References will be provided later**

**(March 8<sup>TH</sup> 2010)**