

**2021:**

**Memoirs of a Geschwind**

*Jan Sorel*

## Setting

In 2014, I was in a cheap hotel in Pokhara overlooking Phewa Tal. I was with a Hungarian traveler who was telling me about his adventures in Iquitos and his experiments with ayahuasca. At one point he said to me: "You know, we must travel while we can, because in eight years time, maybe things will change dramatically and we will not be able to travel at all." At the time, I could only think about a Third World War or some other major conflict that would, like the Second World War, cut us off from each other and force people into more needless slaughter so that the powers-that-be could profit from it. As Voltaire writes in *Micromegas*,

"We have more matter than we need the cause of much evil, if evil proceeds from matter; and we have too much mind, if evil proceeds from mind. For instance, at this very moment there are 100,000 fools of our species who wear hats, slaying 100,000 fellow creatures who wear turbans, or being massacred by them, and over almost all of Earth such practices have been going on from time immemorial."

The Sirian shuddered, and asked what could cause such horrible quarrels between those miserable little creatures.

"The dispute concerns a lump of clay," said the philosopher, "no bigger than your heel. Not that a single one of those millions of men who get their throats cut has the slightest interest in this clod of earth. The only point in question is whether it shall belong to a certain man who is called Sultan, or another who, I know not why, is called Caesar. Neither has seen, or is ever likely to see, the little corner of ground which is the bone of contention; and hardly one of those animals, who are cutting each other's throats has ever seen the animal for whom they fight so desperately."

"Ah! wretched creatures!" exclaimed the Sirian with indignation; "Can anyone imagine such frantic ferocity! I should like to take two or three steps, and stamp upon the whole swarm of these ridiculous assassins."

"No need," answered the philosopher; "they are working hard enough to destroy themselves. I assure you, at the end of 10 years, not a hundredth part of those wretches will be left; even if they had never drawn the sword, famine, fatigue, or intemperance will sweep them almost all away. Besides, it is not they who deserve punishment, but rather those armchair barbarians, who from the privacy of their cabinets, and during the process of digestion, command the massacre of a million men, and afterward ordain a solemn thanksgiving to God."

Human beings are fools, as Voltaire rightly points out. And in *Schizophrenia and Capitalism*, I explain that it is because—as Franz Brentano explained in his *The Origin of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*—if we base our notions of ethics around thinghood rather than sympathy, we are lost. And this is what we have done ever since John Locke's emphasis on private property as the be-all-end-all of society.

But instead of a Third World War, we are confronted by the coronavirus pandemic. So much the better, one might say, for it gives humanity an ultimatum: put your faith in science (e.g. vaccination, distancing, and monitoring) rather than ideology (anti-science charlatanism and every man for himself), and sympathy and collaboration rather than greed and competition, and you will do okay. Otherwise, your life will be increasingly precarious, and you will be playing Russian roulette with your life. And so it has turned out to be: the greediest and most selfish countries like the United States have been ravaged by coronavirus, while those with some semblance of cooperation have fared better despite the libertarian ideologies of neoliberalism continuing to shine through in sporadic displays of defiance by right-wing and anti-science groups. Moreover, it is the first real challenge put to the wealthy neocolonialist countries who continue to shamelessly dehumanize, exploit, enslave, pillage, and destroy poor countries while saying of outbreaks of tropical diseases like ebola and malaria: "it is not our problem, poor people in poor countries have always been expendable... let them suffer as they have from time immemorial... our scientists have no urgency to do anything about it, as they are busy figuring out better ways to kill and enslave each other and turn it into profit." One might call it a Darwinian challenge foisted upon us by Mother Nature, a last warning before climate change irrevocably alters the face of the planet for generations to come.

But I digress. My point was to say that 2021 was a challenging year for all of us. And as a well-educated individual from a wealthy country that has traveled extensively and seen with my own eyes the realities of dwellers in the poorest slums scrounging around like dogs in order to survive to see another day, I know I can have little to complain about. If anything, war has taught us that black and brown people that inhabit the countries that contain the raw materials that we rape and pillage for are expendable, while every white imperialist troop (or well- or ill-meaning settler) can shoot first, ask questions later, and be used as an excuse for untold destruction should he (or, rarely, she) die. We should remember that half a million dead Iraqi children were deemed "worth it" by Madeleine Albright for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Meanwhile, a few American occupiers of Baghdad killed by an errant missile from the population of a country tired of unending slaughter for the good of Halliburton, Blackwater, and the rest of the neocolonial thugs was enough for Donald Trump to defy international law and take out Qasem Soleimani, who it may be argued we have to thank more than any other individual for the Middle East not becoming a macabre slaughterhouse of Islamic fundamentalism and Wahhabist Sharia Law.

However, it is precisely dehumanization and neocolonial slavery that created the conflicts that caused 2021 to be an extremely challenging year for me. That, and a previously-invisible condition that became too visible over the course of the year.

## Character

I have spoken elsewhere about my history of epilepsy. As in many such cases, the term “idiopathic” temporal lobe epilepsy was used to describe it. In other words “we see that you have had several seizures, but don’t ask us to tell you what causes them.” Although my seizures ended by the time I was in my early twenties, noticeable differences in me compared to others caused me to look into my own condition and try to establish a baseline for what was at their root cause. At one point, I came across work done by the neurologist Norman Geschwind, who described in the 1970s several traits that seemed to be common to various individuals with idiopathic temporal lobe epilepsy. These five conditions were defined and described as

- 1) *hypergraphia*: an abnormal compulsion to write at length — those who knew me could definitely attest to this (often to their annoyance)
- 2) *hyperreligiosity*: a great interest in big metaphysical questions of ontology and purpose — my interest in philosophy and metaphysics, beginning with Schopenhauer’s idea that reality is not “real”, but rather a combination of “will” (subjective impetus) and “representation” (objective sense-data), could attest to this
- 3) *circumstantiality*: the tendency to go into long roundabout (and needless, according to others) explanations of a central claim before tying everything together at the end — again, anyone who knows me from friends and family to professors and employers would corroborate that this describes me
- 4) *abnormal sexuality*: either hyposexuality (less than usual interest in or propensity to seek out sexual relations) or, less commonly, hypersexuality (more than usual) — without getting into personal details, I can say that both the former and the latter have been present at various stages in my life, and although this may be the case for many or most males, it is an abnormal mental state that I have at times discussed with close friends of mine who have called it “weird” that explains this behaviour and justifies this description of me
- 5) *intensified mental life*: although an ambiguous statement, a description suggests “deepened cognitive and emotional responses. This tendency may pair with hypergraphia, leading to prolific creative output and a tendency toward intense, solitary pursuits” — with four degrees in four different disciplines and the ability to write essays on any topic almost at will

including trying to make breakthrough contributions in every discipline I have taken on and having largely succeeded, as well as having essentially lived many lives and had many existential experiences that most people of my demographic could not even cite one example of, this last point could be argued to define my entire life. The “deepened cognitive and emotional responses” will be returned to later.

Although the existence of a “Geschwind syndrome” is still debated, further work into not only present but historical instances of epilepsy and descriptions of similar attributes in the likes of individuals like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche led to some degree of consensus that there was something worth investigating, and Geschwind Syndrome became known in more commonplace circles as “Dostoevsky Syndrome” after the vivid descriptions that Dostoevsky made of epileptic euphorias in Prince Myshkin, the protagonist of his novel *The Idiot*, and in reflections on his own condition in the autobiographical *Diary of a Writer*. In December of 2017, when I had a massive euphoric seizure in Toronto and was eventually picked up at Pearson Airport after taking off my clothes and slowly walking around—convinced that reality must be false and that going naked was the “ultimate self-dare” that would allow me to end what I was convinced to be a fictitious facade masquerading as reality (something akin to Plato’s Cave)—I was transported to the Mental Health Emergency Services Ward and Brampton Hospital, attended to by a psychiatrist, asked the usual questions about “hearing voices”, etc., and allowed to go home to my family. But the consequences of this incident in terms of self-reflection on my own life and sense of purpose, as well as an inability to make real progress on any of projects resulted for the first time in my life in me looking into the future and seeing only darkness. It would take me nearly a whole year before I would start to feel like myself again and regain my previous sense of optimism that all would be well in the end.

While I struggled to understand how this had happened, it took my going for an EEG to look into the incident and start to see the signs of a *petit mal* seizure that had bothered me as a child but had disappeared when I had started to have *grand mal* seizures as an adolescent. I recall that the day that I was sent for an EEG (which, unless one is in the process of having a seizure usually provides no clues to anything except the non-presence of any lesions, tumours, or more serious underlying causes) was also the day I started to potentially connect the incident in Toronto to the epileptic condition that I thought had all but left me. In fact, my original seizure had been in part due to seeing a connection between a close friend’s description of how she felt on a daily basis while coping with her bipolar disorder, and a similar feeling of “detachment from myself” and paranoia when I sometimes smoked marijuana with friends. I was partly inspired to look deeper into my own condition due to the expectation that medical “experts”

would probably maintain a non-committal position of “idiopathic” and I would be no better off than I was before. I reasoned that the only person that could know my brain was me, and therefore that I must try to follow this lead wherever it might take me. While meditating on my condition and its connections to Dostoevsky, I came across an excellent article by the science popularizer Anil Ananthaswamy in the *New Scientist* entitled “Ecstatic epilepsy: How seizures can be bliss”, and it talked about the fact that although we were only beginning to understand the cause of euphoric seizures, neurologists had seemed to put them down to a neuroanatomical abnormality in the insular cortex. Based on the links I saw to my friend’s severe bipolar disorder, I looked into a relationship between the insular cortex and bipolar disorder in medical journals, and sure enough, I came across an article saying that in a study of bipolar and unipolar depressive patients, bipolar people had a problem with their right insular cortex while unipolar people had no such problem. I had a lead.

When it finally came time for me to see an epileptologist for the first time in almost fifteen years, I had gone into the meeting having rehearsed my spiel and thinking to myself “I will blow this person’s mind and we will start to make real progress”, it proved to be as I suspected rather than I had hoped. I met with a newly graduated student who was doing a residency. I launched into my description of my subjective mental state in Toronto and what drove me to take off my clothes, I cited the relation I saw between my condition and my friend’s bipolar condition, I cited the medical journal that had corroborated my hunch, and I cited the description on the Wikipedia entry of “insular cortex” that neurologist Fabienne Picard had hypothesized occurs when a euphoric seizure occurs. Essentially, the insular cortex is responsible for what he calls “emotional confidence”, which depicts one’s willingness to make certain decisions (or refuse to make those decisions) based on the conception that a hypothesized future state should result. Euphoric seizures are explained as instances where one’s mind no longer functions correctly, and the ability to discern between real and predicted outcomes breaks down. Thus, in a euphoric state, one is convinced that the predicted future state of reality *must* come about because no other outcome seems possible. This perfectly describes my abnormal behaviour at Pearson Airport where I was absolutely convinced by my subjective experience that the objective reality that everybody conducts their life according to must be flawed. Or, as Ananthaswamy cites *The Idiot*,

“I would give my whole life for this one instant,” the prince says of the brief moment at the start of his epileptic fit – a moment “overflowing with unbounded joy and rapture, ecstatic devotion, and completest life”.

I had iterated all of this subjectively “mind-blowing” information to the epileptologist. But as I continued speaking at length, her expression was not one of interest and

engagement, but rather one of growing discomfort and lack of understanding. By the time I had finished, I looked at her and said “you think I’m crazy don’t you?” And she slowly replied “it’s not that... it’s just... well... I can’t *prove* that you had a seizure... but would you like to go on medication?” And that was the end of that.

## Theory

I will briefly try to explain what is going on in my brain in contrast to “normal” brains. I say “normal”, because it is well-known that there is nothing about Dostoevsky’s revelations about epileptic euphoria, and there is nothing normal about Nietzsche’s collapse and insanity after throwing his arms around the nag getting whipped in the street. In the last chapter of *Schizophrenia and Capitalism*, I describe a progression of development of the human mind from birth: space, other, self, nothingness. Let us suppose that the left side of the brain is the “Self” side of the brain, and that the right side of the brain is the “Other” side of the brain. As human beings are led into capitalist enslavement, their minds are trained to focus on less and less. In Chapter 1 of *Schizophrenia*, I contrast this with Hunter S. Thompson’s notion of “edgework” that expands the breadth and depth of our brains (remember, “Playing Chess Against Ahistory” is Chapter 0). I call this phenomenon the “polynomialization” of the brain in contrast to the non-polynomial brains of children. If we think of a computer, machine learning algorithms are non-polynomial: they allow us to find a solution without understanding the path, but in adulthood, our minds are trained to become “path-dependent” so that we can survive under the auspices of capitalism. In *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor describes how there is the class of vocational workers and the class of Ivy League managers. As greater demands are placed on workers, the depth and breadth of their minds decreases as they tread well-worn paths in order to survive. Slowly, their minds get shoehorned into smaller and smaller lifeworld potentialities. The communication between—or even existence of—the “Self” hemisphere and “Other” hemisphere becomes completely debilitated. The extreme form of anomic capitalism seen in xenophobes like Donald Trump imply that the Other side of the brain ceases to be accessible, and the treatment of the Other is done by consulting the Self. If one finds, e.g. whiteness, then equivalence implies that the individual is “human”, and if one finds, e.g. otherness, then non-equivalence implies that the individual is “non-human”. But when it comes to workers, everything becomes a schizo-capitalist mess of Self as survival and Other as *means* of survival.

What about my brain? Based on the way I live my life (and this is the problem of other minds) and what I conclude about bipolarism and the right insular cortex (the Other side), I would suggest that schizophrenics have a similar problem with the left insular cortex (the Self side). The result is that while normal people usually conceive of the

interests of one Self and one Other, schizophrenics maintain a “quantum superposition” of Selves and bipolars maintain a superposition of others. And for a Geschwind individual like me, I simultaneously maintain quantum superpositions of both Selves and Others. This makes it so that I am forced to practice an extreme form of alterity: my mind is constantly calculating parallel universes of Selves and Others so that at every moment, whenever I make a decision I must ask myself “which decision is most likely to result in the optimal result for all in the future?” In other words, I am a walking moral calculating machine. If I act poorly towards others, the existential guilt will consume me. If I see a dirt-poor individual in a slum in Mozambique, or a person on the street of Montreal forgotten passed over and forgotten by all, my mind cannot help but think “How can this person wake up every morning knowing that *there is no hope*? How can I intervene to provide some perturbation of a life of perpetually being ignored and dehumanized so that there might be a ‘butterfly effect’ that might provide some momentum for the individual to break free from this cycle?” In other words, how can I transform this individual into a potential *he-who-hopes* a la Ernst Bloch?

And when I am continually wronged by the people and institutions that I trust, I am driven into an extreme form of moral rebellion: it drives me further to help all people that I can because I calculate that my own abuse implies a lopsidedness in the moral good that I must take it upon myself to remedy. So while I am starved of any sort of income by my university, I am driven into a downward spiral of moral obligation, spending more time and money than I have on more people than I can in order to try to recruit as many street people as I can into a moral army of *he-who-hopes*. At every moment, especially when it comes to those friends of mine living in dirt-poor conditions (that most white Westerners could not conceive of at all), I think “calculating futures, I must give money now so that this individual can have the best future possible, because they have so much potential and their time is as precious or more precious than my time because they are younger than me and therefore have *more* time and more potential to surpass me if I can provide proper support in terms of finances in order to survive and knowledge in order to transcend a life of no opportunity. And because my mind is so non-linear, while I am consumed by this moral obligation, I can only weigh the *results* of my moral calculus: these people have too much money and no obligation, and these people have little money and no hope. In a world dominated by rational self-interest and “me, me, me”, survival becomes increasingly dicey. And with friends and family who do not understand this way of thinking, I get individuals that are very close to me telling me “why would you send \$10,000 to Tanzania when I need \$10,000 for a nose job?” Or “you were stupid to send the money to Tanzania instead of keeping it for yourself” when I weigh the two potential futures and think “but in a country like Canada, \$10,000 *should* be easy to come by, whereas if I wait to send the money, X number of years of potential benefit to this poor community will have elapsed... you



can always make more money, but you can't get your time back, so time is infinitely more important than money, and to *give time* to the maximum amount of people who have no opportunity is the only way to maximize the future potential of humanity. But nobody else thinks like this, and I end up destitute and impoverished as my superiors justify greed and I get more desperate and slowly go insane.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of writing this memoir is several-fold. First of all, it is for me to collect my non-linear thoughts into something cohesive so that I can better understand myself and communicate to others my condition. And because I have been in and out of psychiatric wards, tortured by narcissistic jobber psychiatrists who, when I tell them "I have this epileptic condition, please help me figure it out", either reply to me something along the lines of "I'm the expert here, so let me tell you what I know and how I'm going to treat you" or say something like "you're too unstable, take some pills." In the case of Ottawa Civic Hospital, a HORRIFIC Foucauldian laboratory, they took away my rights, gave me Abilify despite me saying "it's making me hypoxic and confused, please stop", and when they released me and I came down off of it, my brain gobbled up the oxygen and nutrients by about noon thinking that it was going to get another fix, and spent twelve hours with a hypoxic dry brain just wanting to die. I have had enough of being David Rosenhan, seeing the horrible state of how people are treated by Canadian psychiatry. Along these lines, it is also for my family and friends who, as my epileptic euphorias have become more frequent and my behaviour more erratic and unpredictable, have increasingly turned their backs on me and blamed me for my own condition and poverty, even though it is the institutions—the universities, hospitals, and police, who I have naively relied up to keep their word—who are really at fault, and who I have begged and pleaded with to try to understand me, correct their dishonest and immoral behaviour, and compensate me for it.

Second of all, it is for the institutions themselves to take a long hard look in the mirror, think about the coming generation of individuals who are hungry to make a difference, and ask themselves "should we really be keeping tenure-track 'professionals' monopolizing the research positions and pushing papers to justify their salaries while, instead of saying 'let's collaborate on a real project to help people', say 'not my specialty, not interested, get out of here' or "I am the expert here, and you will do as I say and you will not challenge my position or you will be out of here." This has essentially been the story of my life: every degree and project I've gone into, I have always had the attitude "I don't want to just have a piece of paper, I want to do something *meaningful*, and I have been met with self-admitted jobbers who essentially tell me "finish and get out of here and don't bother to follow up" while the myriad

potential contributions that I have tried to make, in climate change, in masonry, in concrete materials, in social theory, in economics, in so many disciplines continue to go unevaluated. Why? Likely because the powers-that-be are afraid that their specialized knowledge will be criticized and / or superseded, and their comfortable positions will become threatened.

But it is not just for the *academic* side of these professors and institutions, it is also for the *funding* side of these institutions. As we increasingly base funding on private interests, academic whistleblowers who say “this isn’t right” will be excommunicated lest the vested interests of those providing the money have *their* positions threatened. And these are the people with real who, if called out, have the power to destroy or kill the people who threaten their “investments”, especially those that are predicated on the continued neocolonial enslavement of poor people and *know* that their profitmongering is both immoral and illegal, but hide behind the fact suggested above that the subjugation of poor people has become so normalized that they have no moral responsibility to do anything about it. When I have the following exchange with a professor from a well-know university

Me: Instead of worrying about fixing sewers in Paris, why don’t you build them in Dakar for the first time?

Him: You should see the work that we’re doing in Cote d’Ivoire.

Me: That’s only because Ouattara is selling out West Africa to France for another fifty years on the Eco.

Him: But it’s not just us, it’s also the British.

to me this amounts to *admitting to neocolonial exploitation and crimes against humanity*, but it has become so normalized that the professor is not afraid to say it without batting an eyelid—everybody else is doing it so why can’t we?—as the Cranberries put it. In a moral world, this individual would be terminated and put in prison. But in our neocolonial world, this is simply “business”. And this is the sort of business where, if one says “you can’t do this to people”, *other* people behind multinational corporations that maximize their profits through such neocolonial enslavement might potentially say “this person knows too much, eliminate.” And I want to tell these people that I am not some investigative journalist looking to disrupt their supply chains, I’m simply thinking about all of my friends in poor countries struggling to survive and saying “I don’t care about your profits. These are my friends. You can’t do this. And look, I have a chronic mental health condition that forces me to say this, so please go easy on me.”

Finally, it is to try to contribute to a better understanding of mental health. This would have several consequences:

- 1) The beautiful people on the street who I have created strong bonds with and are struggling to survive because they don't understand how to interact with the world like everybody else and *we* don't understand how to help them interact can be looked at with greater sympathy, and we can begin to support their contributions to society (like the fact that they can panhandle enough money to build their own shelters that are looked at with admiration by the police and other inspectors... where are the engineers to learn from them and reward them for their creative perseverance?).
- 2) Others with similar conditions to mine might be able to better understand their own conditions and help to come forward... for example, one Somali man who is on and off the streets of Montreal and well-known to businesses but often shooed away as a nuisance is actually an *extremely* intelligent individual, and once I found out how to deal with him, I intervened on another occasion to gently usher him out of the restaurant that was shouting at him to leave, and before departing said to him "I'm sorry that humanity is so terrible", to which he replied "it's not so bad... I have to believe that, or I will just calculate." Is this man another Geschwind? How many are there out there? What can they contribute?
- 3) The same neurologists and epileptologists and psychiatrists who say "let me tell you what I know" or ignore me completely when I say "this is my story" might actually choose to work with me and give me an fMRI and allow me to develop the theory of connectome-harmonics so that maybe we can make real inroads into understanding the human brain instead of blundering around in the dark, feeding people pills, and giving them no leisure or any reason to live as they exist entirely on borrowed time within these Foucauldian laboratories, deferring judgment to those that theorists like Irvin Yalom, R.D. Laing, David Rosenhan, and, more recently, Gabor Maté have cautioned might not actually know what they're talking about and may require us to do something different than follow the "eliminate from society to maintain harmony" approach described by Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*.