

# Forms

by **Theodore Dalrymple** (August 2017)



*Post Mortem* by [Erik Sigerud](#), 2009. (Used with permission from the artist.)



Irrespective of the paperless world to which digitalisation was supposed to give rise (though it does not seem to me that there is any less paper than there used to be), it certainly has not reduced bureaucracy. The ease with which information may be gathered, or at any rate asked for, has brought inefficiencies and above all irritations of its own. The greatest fool, it used to be said, may ask more than the wisest man can know; but now any organisation, governmental or private, may easily demand to know more about us than we wish to reveal. Our only defence against this prepotent intrusion is lying, which in the great majority of cases will go

undetected and be without consequence.

Having written an article for an American publication recently, I was sent an electronic form a form to fill of great complexity. I was told that I could not be paid unless I filled it, as if the impossibility were a result of the operation of a law of thermodynamics rather than that of any human will or decision.

Time was, not so very long ago, when I wrote an article and received payment, and that was the end of the transaction. It was my responsibility and no one else's to declare my income to the tax authorities; but now many publications (though not all, the reasons for the variation being undetectable by human mind) act almost as tax gatherers or inspectors for the revenue. This lets the citizen know that what he receives is almost by grace and favour: the earth is the government's and the fulness thereof.

We are now used to this and hardly any longer notice its unpleasant implication; but in addition we are now often treated as if we were all money launderers, the onus being on us to prove—or rather assert—that we are not. So it was with the American publication. I was asked a large number of questions that allegedly precluded the possibility in my case; I wished only that I had been told how I could launder my exiguous payment into a fortune. The notion that anyone would write for the publication as a means of money-laundering was so preposterous that you would have thought that its absurdity would make the people in charge laugh; but where there are forms to be filled, there is no sense of humour, and an absence of a sense of the absurd is a kind of shamelessness.

I was also asked to aver (by means of yes and no answers to questions) that I had not obtained my commission to write the article by means of illicit or personal influence. Again, the idea that I was commissioned to write the article only because I was a relative of the office cleaner was intrinsically ludicrous; and it passes belief that anyone would actually bother to check whether or not I was the cousin twice removed of the publication's receptionist. Thus the questions were not really asked for any purpose at all, other than to let the respondent know that he was a worm who had to do what he was told and take part in this charade if he wanted to be paid, as almost certainly he did. He would be prepared to sacrifice his probity on the altar of a few (a very few) hundred dollars. The framers of the form relied on a cynical view of human nature, with or without recognition of their own part in the destruction of human character, including their own.

The world seems more full than ever it was of absurd and pointless questioning whose object is the humiliation of the respondent. Of course, there has always been such questioning. I remember a wonderful film by the great Bengali director, Satyajit Ray, in which an applicant for a humble pen-pushing clerk's job, one of ten thousand applicants, is asked (to establish whether he is better than other applicants) 'What is the weight of the moon?' The absurdity of the question reveals in seven words the desperation of the applicant's situation, as well as that of all the other applicants and by extension of the whole of society as well, for of course the question has absolutely no bearing on any applicant's capacity to do the menial job he is applying for; short of physical violence, his powerlessness could hardly be made clearer to him.

It used to be, on entering the United States, that one had to declare that one had never committed or participated in genocide. It was not very difficult to guess what the correct, or desired, answer was, if one wished to be allowed to enter. But woe betide anybody who mocked the idiocy of the question: he would be considered guilty of the equally terrible crime of *lèse-bureaucratie*.

About six months after the events of the eleventh of September, in the year two thousand and one, I received an official form to fill. I had been working as a doctor in a British prison for eleven years, and the form asked me to prove that I was indeed who I said I was by means of passport and birth certificate (originals required, copies not acceptable). Failure to produce these documents would mean the end of my employment. Furthermore, I was required to answer certain questions: was I, or had I ever been, a terrorist, and did I plan to become one in the future?

This form and these questions did not produce themselves. They were not the products of spontaneous generation, the process that until quite late in human history was supposed to produce maggots in rotting meat by means of fermentation. On the contrary, the idea of a form to weed out terrorists had to occur to someone, who had then to persuade others that it was a good idea; no doubt a committee was established to devise the questions that should be asked. This committee must have met, probably with a sense of urgency, and perhaps held working breakfasts, to persuade itself of the importance and urgency of its work. By its own standards it worked rapidly: only six months between the attack and the response to it!

As a doctor in the prison it was often my job to try to enter

the minds of those who had committed the most awful things, but no mind was more mysterious to me than that of those who devised this form and sent it to be filled by the thousands of employees of the British prison system. Could anyone really have supposed that a terrorist was like George Washington in his youth, unable to tell a lie? And did anyone take the trouble to sift the answers to the questions as if they might yield valuable information?

The harm done by such a form is only that of the waste of time, effort and money involved: in other words, merely that of normal bureaucratic pathology (if, that is, pathology can be normal). But there are forms of distinctly more sinister or harmful type, designed to further an undesirable end.

During my annual appraisal, itself a procedure of doubtful value, my appraiser asked me whether I had any concerns about my own probity. The appraiser was a colleague for whom I had some regard as a man, and he asked me this question only because it was prescribed for him to do so by the form about me that he had to fill.

'I will answer the question if you answer two questions first,' I said, and he asked me what they were.

'The first is, "What kind of man would answer such a question?" and the second is, "What kind of man would ask it?"'

'Oh, I know,' he replied, 'but just answer it to get it over

with.'

Of course it was a formality; no dishonest person would reply, 'Now that you come to ask, I am a little worried by my own dishonesty.' But to comply with absurd formalities only because compliance is a condition of continued employment is to lose a little of one's probity, as is to ask so absurd a question because it is required. Hume said that it is seldom that liberty is lost all at once, and the same might be said of probity. It is eroded rather than exploded: death by a thousand procedures.

But there are yet worse forms. In Britain, at least, one is increasingly asked to state (by ticking a box) one's race, religion and sexual orientation. The reason, or pretext, for this is that it enables bureaucrats to monitor the proper distribution of jobs, emoluments and privileges among people of different groups on the assumption that there could be no difference between outcomes that was not the result of unfair discrimination (which, of course, explains why there are no Vietnamese heavyweight boxing champions of the world).

No racist could be more obsessed by race than the bureaucrats of racial justice. Their categorisation of people by race makes the South African apartheid regime seem casual on this matter, even while they deny the reality of race, or that race corresponds to any reality other than social. That, no doubt, is why the forms generally ask what race you consider yourself to be, not what race you actually are. You are Amerindian if that is what you feel you are, though how you can feel yourself to be a member of a category that does not actually exist is a little mysterious.

Be that as it may, we are fast approaching the number of categories known to the French authorities in the half of Hispaniola when it was still called Saint Domingue and full of slave plantations. Even so, the bureaucrats omit certain races, such as the Melanesians, Australian Aborigines, Micronesians, Pygmies and Ainu from their purview. However, Rome wasn't destroyed in a day, so there is yet time for their inclusion.

As for sexual proclivities and orientations, the bureaucrats display a remarkable lack of imagination. I once recommended to them Krafft-Ebing's work, though it is much behind the times and the number of orientations has increased greatly since, like the choice of restaurants. But what about the poor fetishists, and the various categories thereof, who have been waiting so long for recognition? Is it fair that they should be left out?

As yet, there are two ways of not answering (other than refusing outright to fill such forms). The first is to tick a box indicating none of the above, which is different from claiming asexuality, which has a box of its own. The second is to tick a box indicating a desire not to answer this particular question.

What is done with all the information gathered in this way? I suspect that it is nothing at all—which, of course, is by far the best thing to do with it. This is not quite the same, alas, as saying that the gathering of the information serves no purpose: it serves the occult purpose of informing people that they are objects or pawns to be moved around the

chessboard of society by grandmaster social engineers.

One effective way to argue against the partisans of such information-gathering in the name of the promotion of social, racial and sexual justice is to tell them that the reason that 75 per cent of Dutch Jews were exterminated by the Nazis, but 'only' half that proportion of the Belgian Jews were, was that the Dutch bureaucrats, unlike their Belgian counterparts, had kept meticulous records of the religious affiliation of their population before the war, as if awaiting a genocidal use. That this may not be the true historical explanation (in fact, it almost certainly is not) is beside the point: I have found it to be rhetorically extremely powerful, even if it is not entirely scrupulous from the empirical or logical point of view. All is fair in love and war, particularly the war against malicious, oppressive and potentially totalitarian nonsense.



---

**Theodore Dalrymple's** latest book is