I, Daniel Blake

Industrialised humanity:
why and how should we care for one another?

Fraternal wisdom from a film maker

David Zigmond

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How do we best assess the complex needs of others? Are these best served by always increasing *systems* – now particularly computerisation and proceduralisation – to determine our human contact? A recent film *I, Daniel Blake*, cautions with courageous wisdom.

A system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to any one such aspect.

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– Jorge Luis Borges (1962), *Labyrinths*

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[Spoiler Alert: the review of this film discloses much of the plot]

I, Daniel Blake is a consummate masterwork from veteran film director Ken Loach. Fifty years ago he made *Cathy Come Home* and this later film clearly carries his lifetime's hallmark of compassionate social realism: subtle observation of society's disadvantaged and dispossessed, struggling not only to survive but to do so with dignity, meaning and belonging.

Daniel Blake is a widowed, childless carpenter in his fifties recently rendered unemployed by a substantial heart attack. His slow and uncertain recovery renders his incapacity administratively ambiguous and so he becomes caught between two benefits – Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Job Seekers' Allowance (JSA). He is thus in danger of being paid neither, or at all. Blake is a kindly, disciplined, responsible and intelligent man, but has limited education. In particular, he cannot use a computer: this has serious consequences for his fate, as he is told 'the System is 'digital by default' and his truthful but pencilled CV is 'just not good enough'. He demurs and the system begins first to exclude, then to punish him.

He forms a platonic, quasi-paternal, friendship with a much younger, struggling, single mother of two, Katie. This adds tenderness and depth to Loach's portrait of our corporatized and capitalised Society's casualties. The loving caretaking that mutually evolves between Daniel and Katie contrasts starkly with the rigid and

depersonalised proceduralism they experience when attending their local office of the Department of Work and Pensions.

For her own and her children's survival Katie resorts first to minor shoplifting, then prostitution. Blake is ravaged by wounded grief but will not compromise: 'Once you lose your self respect, you're done for', he says with glum defiance. 'I am not a National Insurance or case number, a customer, a Service User, a benefits claimant, a blip on the screen, a scrounger … I am Daniel Blake, a citizen…' he later wrote in his pencilled hand to be read to an Appeals Tribunal. It was not: he collapsed and died immediately before the hearing. 'I swear to you, the State drove him to an early grave …' says Katie with sweet, angry grief to the small gathering at his Monday morning State-funded 'pauper's funeral'. So the deceased's last words – his tenacious protest of self-affirmation – are heard only after his death: read out by his loving survivor. So ends the film with a black and silent screen: suitably we are each left with our own projections.

Loach's directorial qualities in conveying this world are superb: the script, editing, acting, camera work and sets all draw us into the rich and painful struggles and endurance of others with immediacy, wit, subtlety and deep resonance.

The realism is magical: Loach's narrative is mostly straightforward, but he conjures scenes and images of poignant and trenchant symbolism: the pitiful vulnerability of a three-legged, stray dog trying to survive on the council estate; the slipping and shattering of bathroom tiles as Katie cleans the surfaces of her new family home; Daniel's ever-obstructed attempts at personal phone contact with officialdom – the

(?deliberate) delays via hour-long answerphone queues mollified ceaselessly by repetitive loops of musak …

Days after Katie's tearful farewell to Daniel, echoing his own and final words, I, too, am left with wonder, grief and gratitude for the (fictitious) presence of these people – briefly – in my life. Such is the integrity and power of this filmmaking.

I have heard many others speaking similarly of this film: of their intense personal engagement and then arousal of social conscience.

But let us return to the black and silent final screen: our projections. What do we make of such human waste and tragedy? What should we do? It is here that we are likely to construct different views.

For example, two very thoughtful published reviews are emphatic in attributing the human tragedy and humiliation to 'a desperately important exposé of an unfair system'[1] and 'the human cost of the austerity era's welfare budget'.[2]

I can align myself wholeheartedly with the indignation, less so with these analyses. The human disconnection that Daniel Blake expresses with such humble yet powerful eloquence cannot be simply undone by providing greater funds or 'fairness': such primary elements are essential but insufficient – our problems are more complex. Yet funds and 'fairness' make for the easiest, most straightforward and emotive initial targets. They also offer us rapid ways to moralise – it then seems easy to place others on the 'right' or 'wrong' side.

I think the film conveys this complexity. Loach does not sharply divide the characters into 'good' and 'bad'. For example, the various benefits, security or police officers are shown mostly attempting to do their very difficult job with courtesy and correctness. Often, though, their tricky predicaments are betrayed by phrases such as: 'I'm only trying to help you' and 'I'm afraid there's nothing I can do: that's the way the system operates' – usually these are delivered in the sing-song tone adopted by frustrated corporate employees who must repeatedly carry out instructions they can see little correctness or purpose in.

Loach shows us the doomed milieux of all who become engaged with such bad systems: within the system we have three primary, symbiotic roles: *perpetrator*, *victim* or *bystander*. Often these interchange and overlap. The only other possible role – a fourth – is *opponent*, which is incompatible and must be silenced, excluded or eliminated: this revealed the fatalistic courage of Daniel Blake. The film's other players mostly occupy the three primary roles, to survive. However, we see how sometimes alongside their corporate role they slip sympathetic, even collusive, glances.

One exasperated supervising benefits officer growls menacingly at his restive claimants: 'Listen to me. There are rules here that we have to follow … people are just trying to do their job here (and be fair) …' This can take us to some crucial understanding. For benefits systems – rules, regulations and procedures – are initially devised to avoid favouritism, whimsy, corruption, inconsistent official judgement … all the hazards of human vagary. The devisers, designers and managers of these systems are usually intent and genuine in their wish to ensure a *fairer* system. Likewise, they want an *efficient* system to ensure that the right funds go

to the right people at the right time, with minimal losses to either the taxpayer or subsidiary services. So, they think, our systems can now be augmented, streamlined and vouchsafed by computers, algorithms and standardised coding. With this kind of thinking and technology can we not bring industrial and manufacturing-type efficiency and reliability to all our Welfare services and payments?

Whenever I have had the opportunity to speak to senior people, responsible for designing and running these services, this is the kind of sincere account I hear.

There is much we can initially agree on: the State cannot simply provide whatever people ask for whenever they ask for it; there is a limit to how much tax people will pay for the welfare of others before resentment, concealment and malfeasance damage our communal economy; state-funded assistance should be as fairly and efficiently delivered as we can make it. Yet it is more doubtful that the way to implement this is to get the frontline welfare workers *always* to adhere rigidly to algorithms, procedures and regulations drawn up elsewhere by expert executive committees: remote control welfare.

Yet those senior people responsible for designing and running our Welfare services have come to depend increasingly on the ideas and devices of such remote control. 'We need more and better systems', they usually conclude as both explanation and justification.

But *I, Daniel Blake* shows us how far these assumptions can take us from our human sense, and then any compassionate response. The film starts, as it ends, with a blank, black screen. We hear two voices: one is Daniel's, the other the interviewing (or

interrogating) 'healthcare professional' (HCP) benefits officer. HCP is sticking doggedly to a long but mandatory sequence of algorithmic questions. Daniel's voice becomes querulously irritable: 'Look, there's nothing wrong with my fingers or my arse: they all work like a dream. I've already said all this several times, and on the fifty-six page form I filled in. Can we just talk about my heart: that's the real problem.' But HCP's responding voice persists in a telling mixture of singsong professionally armoured 'tolerance' and cautionary reprimand: 'can you just answer the questions, Mr Blake? We can't help you unless you answer our questions…'

In this first minute, before the faces are seen, the film is already conveying an impasse of comic absurdity with insidious menace. The next one hundred minutes explore that impasse with many more voices and faces. For those who might object that this is 'just a film' and thus fictionally and theatrically distorted, I know this objection is void. For many years, as a frontline GP, I have been witness to, and caught in, increasing and innumerable similar tangles. Such grotesque proceduralism has become a staple of our Welfare culture. In my own profession colleagues exchange taciturn counsel and commiseration: 'We can't carry on like this' and 'You've just got to play the game' are common expressions.

Daniel certainly personifies the human cost of the foolish overextension of our systems. But the film, more broadly, illustrates also the economic folly of such runaway proceduralism: the amount of time and money spent on unyielding adherence to regulations – for example: mandatory yet often indiscriminate data collection, collation and coding; similar strict obedience to decontextualised behavioural requirements – is often more humanly and financially expensive than

the benefit that is (possibly, eventually) offered. Absurdly, we can then often spend more on procedures than payments.

The film shows Daniel caught in this trap. He must 'demonstrate evidence' (on a computer) of looking for jobs that medically he cannot yet do, in order to be eligible for JSA, while appealing to be reinstated on ESA … The administrative cost of all this is enormous. From some of their implicit (body) signals it appears that many of the benefits officers can see the absurdity and extravagance of this impasse and its cruel consequences. Yet they can do nothing: 'it's The System, I'm afraid'. And systems – by definition – are larger than the individuals: submission by all becomes a condition of survival.

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Intent and consequences are often very different. This is the basis of our sense of both comedy and tragedy. The opening unfaced dialogue between Daniel and HCP portends both, yet it is the tragedy that will command and darken the last scene.

What we witness in between is a dramatised portrayal of our fate under Technototalitariansim[3]: a computer-commanded hermetic system designed to eliminate human vagary.

So, how might we disentangle this tightening cluster of folly-amidst-good-intent? This will be hard, for we must be willing, if discrete, to reengage with those human indeterminates, those uncertainties of *trust* and *risk* – the very things that technototalitarianism attempts to eliminate. Yet such indeterminates are essential to

personal bonds, understandings and relationships: little that involves human vulnerability and interdependence can be trust or risk-free.

If we are to have systems that serve our humanity – rather than the other way round – then such systems must have space for flexible coexistence with our individual discriminations: systems must not have rigid and automatic pre-eminence. This means that systems become guides, not mandates. It means that practitioners and officers are given licence to intelligently override systems, yet always be accountable for those decisions of cancellation, deferral or dissent.

Many would see this as a retreat, a hazardous retrogression. They will say: 'Individuals will make mistakes! Systems protect us from these'. Yes and no. Certainly mistaken judgements would occur, but they would be individually accountable. As it is, every day there are thousands of Daniel Blakes showing the egregious fallibility of our massively impregnable – so personally unaccountable – current system that is designed for 'fail safety'. It is unlikely that more direct and intelligently vigilant ways of re-enfranchising our State officers and citizens would fare worse.

I like to think that Ken Loach's final black and silent screen – the passing of Daniel Blake – is suggesting that possibility.

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A good civilisation spreads over us freely like a tree, varying and yielding because it is alive.

A bad civilisation stands up and sticks out above us like an umbrella – artificial,

mathematical in shape; not merely universal, but uniform.

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– GK Chesterton (1910), *Alarms and Discussions*

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References

1. Hutchinson, Pamela. *Sight and Sound*, November 2016

2. Johnston, Trevor. *Sight and Sound,* November 2016

3. Zigmond, David. 'Edward: Shot in his own interest. Technototalitarianism and the fragility of the therapeutic dance', *Journal of Holistic Healthcare*, Vol 2, Issue 4, November 2005.

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