

How to nurture a better society

In an intellectual tour de force, John Ralston Saul describes six 'tools of the human condition' that determine how well we live

On Equilibrium

John Ralston Saul

Penguin Viking, 370 pp, \$35

PETER O'BRIEN

Special to The Gazette

If you read John Ralston Saul's new work *On Equilibrium* carefully and with intention, it will leave you with a profound sense of disequilibrium, your mind swirling and your sympathies both enlivened and shaken. This is, I think, exactly

as Saul would have it.

Equilibrium is not, after all, a place of rest or resolution. It is, rather, a place of "uncertain, creative tension – an uncomfortable pleasure – a playfully permanent state of uncertainty," as Saul says here.

This book is nothing less than Saul's attempt to provide a philosophical reading of this slippery and most unattainable of human conditions, a state that we are eternally moving toward. *On Equilibrium* is also a sort of peripatetic description of how civi-

lizations can best function and how societies are best nurtured. In Canada, there has not been a better or more challenging overview of these far-reaching ideas.

Past winner of the Governor-General's Literary Award for Non-Fiction and the Gordon Montador Award for Best Canadian Book on Social Issues, in this book Saul walks us through his choice of six qualities or "tools of the human condition." Although they are alphabetically presented – common sense, ethics, imag-

ination, intuition, memory and reason – Saul is never burdened by the weight of linearity or plodding logic. His vast cache of inspiration, among which he moves freely, include Aristotle, philosopher of history Giambattista Vico, German philosopher Immanuel Kant and Irish writer Samuel Beckett, as well as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and a little Wayne Gretzky thrown in for good measure.

Please see SAUL, Page i3

Shards of brilliance on almost every page



Engaged in the cultural and philosophic life of the country: John Ralston Saul and his wife, Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson.

SAUL

Continued from Page i1

His intellectual take on each of the six qualities is almost breathtaking in its self-confident quirkiness. Common sense, he says, is "essentially complex, lateral and disinterested." Ethics "is perhaps the least romantic of all human qualities." Imagination "isn't really a means of distraction;" it is "the source of public policy and public programming." Intuition is "the most practical of our qualities. The most useful, verging on the utilitarian." Memory "has a shape - it is everywhere in our body." Reason, well no one in Canada has written more, and more intelligently, on reason. In this most recent work Saul tells us: "I'd argue that neither pure reason nor instrumental reason exist. They are a classic fantasy."

These snippets of Saul's extended commentary (he devotes almost 50 pages to each quality) cannot hope to do him or this work adequate justice. Each of these six qualities, he says at the very beginning of this book, "are most effective in a society when they are recognized as of equal, universal value and so are integrated into our normal life."

But these disembodied quotations

do give some sense of the breadth of Saul's project, the seriousness he brings to it and the passion he feels for the topic. That he has succeeded so well at a Canada-specific introduction to philosophical anthropology, of what it means to be human, is both a triumph and a pleasure.

There are shards of brilliance and crystalline insights on almost every page. Self-interest and commerce, we are told, are not foundations of society or civilization. Why? Because "neither has an inherent memory." Facts, he tells us, "are not rational" and "rationality is not based upon proof, but upon thought and argument." One more example, which is a recurring theme throughout Saul's writing: "The built-in instability of debate, doubt and ethics is precisely the key to our success."

There are also positions that some might consider incendiary: "I sometimes feel that European and North American aggressivity towards Arabs over the last half-century has had less to do with Middle Eastern politics and more to do with an almost psychotic attempt to forget that it was the Christian civilization and no other which massacred 6 million Jews." (The bulk of the book, including this comment, was written before Sept. 11, although he does refer to terrorism and the obliteration of the World Trade Centre

in the final, brief summation chapter.)

He also refers to the recently published book on IBM's complicity with the Nazi regime: "At Auschwitz, prisoners kept for labour had their forearms tattooed with five-digit, IBM Hollerith-machine identification numbers."

And there are moments of furious humour. "In other words, 'public evil' is not an abstract theory. It is 22,000 registered lobbyists in Washington."

For those who are unfamiliar with Saul's earlier philosophical work, including Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West and Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century, this book is the perfect place to begin. It is less diffuse, more passionate and more personal than those earlier works. It also deals more directly with several of his overriding concerns, which sometimes border on obsessions: his rage at the corporatist and managerial types who seem to run much of the world, and his embrace of the complex, the uncertain, the joyful shapelessness of our understanding.

Those who know Saul through his 1995 Massey Lectures, collected in The Unconscious Civilization, already have a head start on this book. In the final of those lectures he sets out these six qualities and the attendant "virtue

of uncertainty" and "psychic discomfort" that is here, in *On Equilibrium*, much more fully articulated.

Canada has had a rather parsimonious allotment of philosopher-kings, although perhaps we have had more than our elephantine neighbour to the south. That Saul and his wife, Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson, are so engaged in the cultural and philosophic life of the country is something that should make all of us sleep better at night. Politics, economy and their ceremonies best function when they are not completely separate from culture, imagination and thought.

In *On Equilibrium*, Saul writes as though thinking, wondering and considering are the most important things we as humans can do. They are, and he demonstrates this on every page. His intellectual flourish, his keen observations of the broad reaches of history as well as the minutiae of our daily lives, and his vast offering of allusions and references all demonstrate that the world, and the human mind, are still very much works in progress. That is infinitely better than if they were static or beyond redemption.

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