

# The Eye in the Sky

By Theodore Dalrymple

From time to time I receive, unsolicited, messages from insurance companies about “how to keep myself safe,” to use an odious modern locution. Mostly they are about the weather, reminding me that ice is slippery, or that the sun can be hot—for, as Shakespeare observed more than 400 years ago, sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines.



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t weather, my insurers tell me, I should stay indoors, or if I venture out, stay in the shade; I should wear light clothes, drink plenty of water, and so forth. This, of course, is all perfectly sensible, but I cannot help wondering how many more people seek the shade when they walk in the sun for having read the message from their insurance company.

What is the real purpose of these messages? I suspect that it is to give the impression to the recipients that the insurance

companies that send them care about their welfare and not just about their premiums. It is natural egocentricity for humans to suppose that any message that they receive is directed at them, and not at the 1,350,000 other people who also receive it. The strange thing is that, however much you tell yourself that the message is completely impersonal, you nevertheless think that someone, somewhere, must be thinking of *you*. It is difficult, sometimes, to align our innermost feelings with what our rational minds know.

“I discovered what I had not previously suspected, that one can hardly move in public without being watched.”

These messages do not write themselves (though perhaps with artificial intelligence they soon will). Someone, somewhere, must have written or at least authorized them, presumably under the impression that while he was doing so, he was working. Particularly in the public sector, activity is often mistaken for work, if by work we mean labor that results in something worthwhile. I do not have the figures in hand, but I suspect that at least half of human activity commonly known as work is not really work in this more refined sense. It is more like occupational therapy for those who would not otherwise know what to do with themselves; and such a class of person would be very dangerous.

Recently, however, I received a message from an insurance company that was more interesting than that to wrap up warm when it was cold. It informed me how to recognize a car accident in which I was involved that had been arranged by insurance scammers. Such accidents are apparently a growing industry (all organized activity is now called an *industry*, just as all activity performed for pay is work).

Such scammers take advantage of the general principle that the driver who drives into the rear of another vehicle is invariably at fault and there is no defense for having done so. The scammers have various ruses for producing such accidents. After the accident, there are various indications

that the driver of the vehicle driven into is a scammer. He is, for example, abnormally calm, and neither shaken nor angry, as most victims of such accidents, when they are genuine, usually are (I once recognized a murderer by his abnormal calm after a death that occurred in his presence). He is more than usually ready with all his details, as if he had anticipated the supposed accident. He has generally chosen his victim, who will belong to a category most likely to have an accident, the young or the old. In the case of the latter, he might be very understanding and accommodating: He may offer to forget the whole affair in return for a cash payment, and may even kindly offer to take the unfortunate supposedly miscreant driver to the nearest cash machine to withdraw the money.

The insurance company's message suggested clues to fraudulent road "accidents," including exaggerated claims by passengers to immediate whiplash injury (an injury that does not persist in countries in which it is not legally recognized as an actionable injury and no compensation is possible for it, the possibility of compensation being the cause of much unnecessary suffering).

But it also suggested a means to avoid such pseudo-accidents, prevention being better than cure. The latter in this case would require the insurance company to fight the case in court, which it would be most unwilling to do, insurance companies being more interested in settlement than truth.

The best method of prevention, said the message, was to install a dashcam, a camera on the dashboard of your car to record all your journeys in your car. According to the insurance company, if the scammers see such a dashcam in your car, they will desist from practicing their wiles on you and rather choose another driver to victimize.

I do not know the empirical evidence that this is so, but it does not sound implausible. Nevertheless, I found the message slightly disturbing: yet another part of our lives that must

be recorded, in this case to avoid an eventuality that must, statistically, remain rare. Soon, it seems, the totality of our lives will be recorded.

I first became aware of the increasing tendency to such recording when I appeared as a witness in murder trials. This was thirty years ago, when I was astonished to learn how much of our lives is now recorded on CCTV cameras. The movements of the accused in the street or in the entrances to buildings were all filmed (the quality in those days was often so poor that it required experts to decipher what was recorded, but it has since greatly improved). I discovered what I had not previously suspected, that one can hardly move in public without being watched.

When Pope John XXXIII was told that he should not make himself so visible when he walked in the gardens of the Vatican, he asked, "Why, is it that I misbehave?" But it is not because one wants to misbehave that being under constant observation makes one uneasy and makes misbehavior difficult. It is rather that such constant surveillance tends to undermine the distinction between what is properly public and properly private, to the detriment of the latter and the expansion of the former. Where everything is recorded (and we are increasingly complicit in this), we become performers rather than characters, and the boundary between the real and the bogus is extinguished.

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