

Thought for the Day – Self-Delusion

While working in Romania, the vehicle I was in was stopped by police on a quiet country road. Quite a surprise, out in the wilds. There was some confusion, as I only knew 'thank you' and 'God bless you' in Romanian. My driver's vocabulary went as far as 'four beers, please', but that didn't seem wholly appropriate, either. Eventually, a policeman made it clear that he wanted to breathalyse my driver. As he lacked the proper equipment, the driver was required to blow into the policeman's nose – a test which I gather he passed. (I felt rather sorry for the policeman – my friend was big on garlic.)

But then the issue became speeding: The policemen made 'vroom-vroom' noises, accompanied by a sharp forward movement of his hand. My companion shook his head vigorously, making 'chugga-chugga' noises, and moving his hand very slowly. A dispute arose, if such it can be called. It consisted of increasingly extravagant hand gestures, and louder and louder 'vroom-vrooms' and 'chugga-chuggas'. My friend thought he'd won when the policeman shut up first, but – ominously - I noticed he'd pulled out a small black book.

There were no speed signs for miles around, and the policeman also lacked any equipment to measure how fast we had been travelling. But he was willing to take a stab at what the limit might be – and how much we might have exceeded it by - and I started looking for my wallet. I was used to paying speeding fines. In those days, we used to get fined two or three times per trip, when passing through Hungary. The criteria was *never* the velocity of the vehicle, but the fact that it clearly belonged to Western Europeans, who obviously had foreign currency. We'd get pulled by just about every squad-car we came across, and fined 10 German Marks. One time, we drove into a trap on the Budapest motorway: On an otherwise deserted road, a policeman jumped out from behind a bush with a handmade 50k speed-limit sign, and his mate up the road pulled us. He'd learnt a useful English phrase: 'You have just caused a serious accident', he said, 'that will be 20 Marks and a six-pack of beer'. I thought this was exceptional value for a serious accident, and idly wondered what the going rate for running over a policeman would be.

Back in Romania, his counterpart laboriously wrote us a ticket. Not impressed with my driver, he came round my side to show me what he was doing. He'd estimated that we'd been doing about 40mph over whatever he'd estimated the speed limit was. I nodded my agreement – I thought it was probably a charitable assessment. He pointed to the box where the amount of the fine would be recorded. *Then he wrote a large 'zero' in it.*

He gave me a copy, and went back to the driver's side. He made a slow forward movement with his hand, and said 'chugga-chugga'. My friend nodded vigorously and drove off....less vigorously.

*That policeman wasn't on the make, and he didn't want to punish. As soon as we were honest about what we'd done, he was willing to wipe the slate clean. He encouraged us to change our ways - because he didn't want our trip to end in tragedy. He actually had our interests at heart....puts me in mind of someone else I know. But the incident rather speaks of the human condition, doesn't it? That self-delusion which tells people there isn't a 'policeman' around, but even if there *is* – he'll believe they were doing 'chugga-chugga', when all the time, it was 'vroom-vroom'.*