THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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ON CHOOSING NOT TO SEE

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Purely intellectual activity cannot occur without some action by our sensitive powers, but the content of our conceptual thought is not affected by it. We can think conceptually of that which is not sensible at all, and not imaginable.

—**Mortimer Adler**

I.

One of the most instructive passages I have ever read is that found in C. S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, about the textbook writers and the waterfalls. The story goes that the English poet Coleridge records the reactions of two ordinary tourists on first seeing a particularly lovely waterfalls. One of these tourists called it "pretty," while the other called it "sublime." Coleridge, of

course, thought the tourist calling it "sublime" was correct, while the one calling it merely "pretty" was lacking in some perception or appreciation of the reality before him. There was a note of "culpability" in Coleridge's reaction, as if the said tourist ought to know that something more than "pretty" was before him.

Words mean things, just as paintings or drawings of things in a different way refer to things. However, we can have paintings of waterfalls that are themselves as artifacts "pretty" or "sublime." In this latter case of the paintings or drawings, they have their own existence, outside the mind and independent of that which they depict. I suppose it is possible to have merely a "pretty" painting of what is in fact a "sublime" waterfalls or a "sublime" painting of a pretty waterfalls. But in either case, of the waterfalls itself or of the painting, what merits the word used is the reality of a thing in nature or in art.

The first thing to notice about this passage in Lewis, however, is the possibility that a real waterfalls standing before us may be in fact only "pretty" as opposed to other waterfalls that are "sublime." It is a question of fact. "Pretty" waterfalls are both possible and do exist. I have seen them myself. Evidently, these tourists of whom Coleridge spoke were, in his estimate at least, overlooking not just an ordinary falls but something in the order of Niagara, Victoria, or Yosemite. The proper human response to what was before them thus required some description more than merely "pretty," itself a perfectly good word that can be used to describe many existing things from ladies to flowers to music.

The contradictory of "pretty" is not "sublime" but simply "not-pretty." "Sublime" does not deny prettiness in things but grasps the degrees of glory within things themselves. We seek to distinguish properly and name accurately what we observe, what things really are. This is the reason, or one of them, why we are given minds and, indeed, why we enjoy using them. It makes a difference how we say what we see or hear. We know that the same reality can be described by different words in different languages or even within the same language. Still, the words we use have a firmness of meaning about them such that "pretty" does not mean the same thing as "sublime." Both good words, but different.

To make the same point in another way, in a 1954 *Peanuts*, Lucy has just discovered the funny curly marks on her finger tips. Charlie Brown tells her that they are "fingerprints." As she continues to look at them in some fascination, Charlie observes, "Still studying your fingerprints, Lucy?" She replies, "Uh huh. Let's see yours,

Charlie Brown." She carefully examines Charlie's finger-tips. Finally, she concludes triumphantly to a dazed Charlie, "Mine are prettier!" We are amused here not because Lucy should have used the word "sublime" but because the very word "pretty" or "sublime" is not used to describe things like fingerprints. Again words have meanings that are designed to get at what is there in the waterfalls or fingerprints.

But the problem that Lewis originally presented was of another order than that of the proper use of words. Rather, he presented the problem of whether we can ever get outside of ourselves in our knowing processes. If we cannot, when we spell out its implications, it is a rather frightening prospect. It seems that the writers of English textbooks for school children explained this passage from Coleridge in quite an odd fashion. For them, the problem was not whether the waterfalls, in its own real grandeur, was "pretty" or "sublime." Neither of these two words, in these authors' view, referred to the waterfalls at all. They referred to the thoughts or emotions of the tourists about the said falls. These thoughts were, evidently, themselves either "pretty" or "sublime" according to the inner "feelings" the observers imposed on them.

In other words, shades of epistemological theory, the tourists were not seeing the waterfall at all but only their thoughts about the waterfalls. Whether they knew the actual waterfalls at all was not the problem of the textbook writers, however much it is the problem of epistemology itself. As Lewis quipped, in effect, that if someone says that "you are ugly," it does not refer to you at all. Rather it refers to the observer's thoughts about you. It means "my thoughts about you are ugly," whatever in fact you might look like, even "pretty" or "sublime." Such a theory is delightfully absurd really.

But such theory is not harmless. Its real effect is to deprive us of the world itself, including the waterfalls, sublime, pretty, prettier, or even ugly. We thus walk about in a world in which nothing, as it is in its true being, can affect us. Things are not what they are but what we think they are. And if we think that a waterfall is "pretty," who can disagree with us since there is no reality available to us, as there evidently was to Coleridge, by which we can inquire whether our ideas correspond to it. We cannot be moved by what is, because reality does not get through to us. We are not concerned about what our thoughts refer to. We are concerned with the thoughts themselves and try to describe them, not what they are said to know.

We are, so it is said, “free” of reality. We are liberated from things. They do not impinge on us for their truth, but we make them what they are. In looking at our thoughts about waterfalls, then, we are only looking at our own feelings as if they mattered, not the waterfalls. Just how we know these “feelings” are even about waterfalls themselves is not clear. The content of our feelings is said to be imposed by us on ourselves not by the waterfalls. If we cannot distinguish between “sublime” and “pretty,” why can we distinguish between a waterfalls and, say, a tree or a goat? What is there to respond to besides ourselves and our feelings?

II.

Aristotle thought that our “feelings” or “passions” were indeed an elemental part of our being, of what it is to be man. But these passions in turn were not ordered simply to themselves. They were ordered to whatever was out there, about which we were primarily concerned. Reality, what is, thus included not merely the world of things, but a being within it who had powers to know and react to these things as they are. Through knowledge man could “become” the thing without changing it. Some fundamental relation between word and thing seemed to exist in the structure of things. But simply because the world existed and we had power to know it, it does not follow that we always used our minds or explained our passions about reality adequately or accurately. Hence, like Coleridge, we could talk, in the area of senses, of an education in “taste,” because it was not right to use words inaccurately.

This position is not to deny the principle, *de gustibus non est disputandum*. If someone insists on disliking lovely ripe tomatoes in the summer or in liking garlic ice cream, we cannot simply call them mad. But we are probably not wrong in suspecting that something is wrong with their evaluation of these things, which, in our evaluation of them, will always have something objectively to like or dislike about them. The accurate naming of things what they are is a work given to man even from Genesis in Adam’s naming the animals. We cannot act unless we know what things are and are able to speak what they are to those who understand us.

On the other hand, we are to like what is to be liked. We are to enjoy what is to be enjoyed. A proper response to things is something we must cultivate, if we do not have it spontaneously. If our teeth are crooked, we straighten them out. If our taste is skewered, we, analogously, do the same thing, always granting the possibility of a better appreciation of things. We may have to learn to appreciate a fine French wine or the gait of a thoroughbred horse or the music

of Mahler. Few of us lack the experience of gradually coming to appreciate what we once thought distasteful. The opposite is probably also true; we learn to dislike what we once thought quite good. Both movements imply that there are standards or criterion by which we can judge whether our response to things is adequate or fine, yes, "pretty" or "sublime." We exist that the highest things be appreciated highly. But we also exist that ordinary things can be appreciated ordinarily. Pretty things ought, in fact, to be called precisely "pretty." And indeed, some pretty things are "prettier" than others.

III.

But I am not so much concerned here with an epistemological theory that would, when spelled out, cause us so to doubt our senses that we can really say nothing of anything outside of ourselves, even whether there be things outside of ourselves. Rather I am concerned with something that I found in Aristotle, among other places. It is not directly a problem of epistemology or even of metaphysics, but rather of morals, of choice. Indeed, I often think that, for most people, thinkers included, the epistemological and metaphysical theory comes from the morals, not vice versa. I think that most of such intellectual aberrations are consequences of an effort to defend what one does or chooses to do. They are not derived directly from perplexity about objectively understanding what is.

Why, we might inquire, if there is one world, one human nature in which we all participate, are there so many convoluted and contradictory theories about how to live the one life we are given in the one world we all inhabit? Modern "tolerance" theory wants us not to "judge" other views in terms of good or bad, truth or falsity, but only in terms of "different" and "very different." Still, we cannot help notice that one claim always serves, within this world of universal tolerance, to cause bitter antagonism. That is the notion that there is a right way to live. That there is a right and wrong that is true and grounded in what is. This "right" way, moreover, is not merely another human concoction or confabulation. And if there is a right way, there must be likewise a wrong way to live. This view, which has ancient roots, as do the modern theories that oppose it, is more and more looked upon as the principle that undermines modern culture. Insofar as modern culture is based on simple, naive relativism, this is true.

Normally, if someone is not living as he should, as some objective criterion would seem to suggest that he live, we should think that

that person would be glad to have his erroneous ways pointed out to him so that he could correct himself. He would, in other words, want to call "sublime" things precisely "sublime," true things true. We soon discover, however, that most people do not like to be confronted with the notion that their way of living is not the best, and even may be quite wrong. If we know of the meaning of "original sin," we should not be at all surprised at this situation. Charges of arrogance and hypocrisy go back and forth. It all seems like a futile effort. What are we to make of it?

In *The Idler* for Saturday, 21 October 1758, Samuel Johnson made the following very Socratic observation: "It has been the endeavour of all those whom the world has reverenced for superior wisdom, to persuade man to be acquainted with himself, to learn his own powers and his own weakness, to observe by what evils he is most dangerously beset, and by what temptations most easily overcome." Behind this "know thyself" observation is the frank realization that, on self-reflection, we realize that we not only do things that are wrong or evil, but that we are tempted to do so even if we do not do them. We must then take steps both to understand the dimensions of the evil to which we are tempted and how to deal with them.

Very few of us, Johnson tells us, can "search deep into their own minds without meeting what they wish to hide from themselves…" So what do we do? We devise theories that apparently explain that what we actually do, whatever it is, is quite fine. Many simply try to avoid the issue of conscience or guilt. We can put pressing things aside. Others will be struck by examples of goodness and their own actions in relationship to them. "These are forced to pacify the mutiny of reason with fair promises, and quiet their thoughts with designs of calling all their actions to review, and planning a new scheme for the time to come. There is nothing we estimate so fallaciously as the force of our own resolutions, nor any fallacy which we so unwillingly and tardily detect." In other words, the bitterness we find in reactions to any claims of truth has its roots here in our defensive intellectual reaction whereby we construct an alternate truth to the truth of what is.

Johnson put the main blame for our refusal to recognize what is right and change our ways to the very Aristotelian difficulty of changing any habit once we are set in it. We think it is an easy thing to reform, but for most people, it is not. Yet, beyond this difficulty, there are those who actively seek to defend at all costs their option for a freedom the content in their actions. They do not discover this content but define it. They are autonomous. This counter

formulation is no easy task, to be sure. "Those who are in the power of evil habits, must conquer them as they can, and conquered they must be, or neither wisdom or happiness can be attained…"

What interests me about that passage, in conclusion, is the relation that Johnson draws between the possibility of "wisdom or happiness" and our failure to conquer our own evil habits. He leaves those of us in evil habits no alternative: either we conquer them or they stimulate us to establish counter-theories of what happiness and wisdom are. We then proceed to live according to our own theories, themselves concocted precisely to justify what we do and formulated against what is classically defined as good.

In the beginning, I cited Mortimer Adler, who told us that "we can think conceptually of what is not sensible…" In context, this observation was merely a summary of the relation of our senses to our intellect. But in view of what I have been saying, there is perhaps a more sinister implication. We can think conceptually of a world we create for ourselves that is not itself connected with the world, "pretty" or "sublime," that is revealed to us by our senses. In this conceptual world, we define what is good and what is evil by denying that such realities are discoverable and not ours to formulate. Deep in our minds, as Johnson told us, we seek to "hide things from ourselves." This is what happens when we choose "not to see." We have the uncanny power, because of our evil habits according to which we seek to live, to establish our own content of what is called "wisdom" or "happiness." It is this power that, more than anything else, rules the modern world. The only proper anecdote is our ability to "know ourselves," to be able to properly distinguish between what is "pretty" and what is "sublime," what is true and what is false, not of our own making.

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