

HAVE MEN ANY RIGHT TO BE STUPID?

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WE cannot analyze experience into any absolutely fortuitous mass of conscious moments, for it would be more a precocious segregation than a mature sorting of life's data which would be so rash as to try to exclude the connection by *probable cause*, by the series-structure of all the functional activities in the vital economy and its consequent abhorrence of all so-called "pure accidents." Bare consciousness is not all there is in any certain experience-function: for one thing there must be intentionally directed attention as well as bare sentiency if there is to be anything intelligible in either consciousness or functional experience. The essential and substantial characteristics of experience are sentiency, consciousness, directed attention, and active or creative use of what is experienced; it must be recognized and accepted as responding only to what is real and actual, while it is only its adjectival and postulative aspect which permits of all manner of skew-sight delusion, hysterical ascription, malassociative contradiction, dyslogistic assertion and prejudicial negation.

Men may crystallize their thoughts and actions into dogmas and conservative habits, they may even boil their past experience down until it becomes a categorical conserve of persistent tradition and imperative proverbialism; but that strategy will not guarantee the *intelligence* of their action-patterns, no amount of *given* prestige will ever prevent them from remaining stupid and averse to that more amiable accommodation (functional adaptation) which requires original and perhaps heroic effort of each individual mind and body as it comes in contact with life. The power to modify at will any one of his particular tropisms, any one of his personal viewpoints or functions, is all the freewill and self-determination a man has or is capable of; but it is the directly opposite characteristic

to that psychic inertia which renders a man both stupid and lazy, neither willing to be disturbed by others nor ambitious to work transfiguration on himself. Such a one misses the true discipline of experience which always tries to teach a man to be generous rather than selfish, intelligent instead of stupid, openminded rather than prejudicial.

Life and Nature are forever trying to make men see that their true progressive function is adaptive, not recessive; that their minds must be agile and their thoughts flexible instead of slothful, stiff and unyielding. The average man seems never quite able to believe that life is a continuous process of give and take, trial and experiment, creative will and appreciative taste; that it is an endless series of contacts with the spiritual as well as the material facts of existence in which he succeeds or fails in reaching a proper understanding of its various contents and activities in direct proportion to his functional success or failure in dealing with the peirastic stream of Life in general. Empirical content as well as intuitive conscience must be well attended if he expects to be wholly conscious of his full capacity and duty as an intelligent member of the Cosmos and of human society.

No one is as free as he thinks he is, and can never be as free as he would like to be. Even if a man could realize in his own affairs that unlimited freedom of action which was Proudhon's great social desideratum, he would still have the task of proving by constructive achievement that his code was not a sterile individualism, if not also a destructive anarchism. Even when an intelligent man sees that the usual procedure of political government proves it to be "that brute engine which has been the only spring of the vices of mankind" (Godwin), he does not feel that his condition would be very materially improved by establishing a universal freedom or even by sanctioning the usual ravine and corruption of so-called republican representative forms of government. The prime requisite for enlightening and ennobling the world, provided we assume that political government in *some* form is necessary to give us safety while so employed, does not rest in any program of absolute individualism, any out and out freedom-theory whether moral, political, social, economic or industrial, but consists simply in somehow or other getting each and every man to sincerely seek such improvement on his own mind and character

first, and then with honest anxieties for the welfare of humanity seek to aid and comfort his neighbors. If this first foundation is never laid whatever superstructure of culture and civilization we may find occasion to build will never be staunch and true and durable. The salvage and refinement of the individual soul is the first and most necessary move.

Thus, taking this world at its best, it is not the gayety and color of a material development alone nor yet the grandeur of great industrial exploits and political hegemony, but simply the deeper and more secure functions, thoughts, deeds and aspirations which make for the social superstructure of courage, the enlightened moral sense of generosity and tolerance, the supremacy of a philosophical conscience and creative genius. Now we know of course that requiring these to make up the fulness of life is a purely human necessity whether in Utopian dreams or in idealized states of cultural theory, but to actually realize them in honest functional possession and active social practice by virtue of intentional search and decisive achievement—this is what marks the divinity and melioristic power of man. We should likewise know that our vaunted progress is really a retrogression if the vulgarian's exile of grand and noble people is permitted to make our loves more lonely and our inspirations less exalted. The whole matter is hereby shown to be grounded on the question of the meliorability of the world; of the individual human character first and of the human social community (city, nation, and world) second. The basic meliorism of our morality is what we aim to doctrinaire to the heavens so as to be a fit goal for popular aspiration and devout achievement. It is ethical accomplishment, to spiritual devotion and philosophical this feature of betterment which spurs us on to moral decision and applications of theopathic guidance.

According to the melioristic conception, the pinnacle expression of man's rational nature is justice while the highest function of his sensitive nature is benevolence. The purpose of man's life is to enlighten and ennoble himself first and to be just and generous toward his fellow men second; not merely serve some more or less exact dispensation of rewards and deserts to his immediate family, friends, city or country, not to share the usual fate of justice and intelligence during wartime when everyone is expected to be willing and ready to die (morally and intellectually) for his country, but

to carry his justice and generosity on out to that wider world of all humanity, to all existences known or unknown, so that his philosophy will not be devoted to finite Realities at home, nor his religion to automorphic Gods in exile. The final cause of the action need not always be found in self-love or any other goal of private satisfaction; it may often be seen to arise from a purely disinterested aim to know that others have their true deserts, their proper share of life's blessings and beatitudes. An intelligent and generous man will always exercise a normal regard for the *needs* as well as for the *rights* of others because he views life and values humanity from the melioristic standpoint. He will be both just and kind because these are the automatic and spontaneous expressions of his spiritual nature, not because he is shrewd and finds such conduct occasionally expedient. True altruism exerts more force in *doing* good than in trying to *make* people good; it performs the benevolent action itself, not merely voicing anxious exhortations for others to perform the action. It is just and generous rather than legislative and demagogic; it always sharpens a man's wits for the public good rather than his own, making him take care that his thoughts and deeds are not merely beneficent and patronizing, but benevolent and just and rational. Stupidity being perhaps a greater enemy to altruism than downright selfishness and finite interest.

Men of the present day, even some of our leading religionists and moral uplifters, do not seem to think and act in the inner light of an eternal purpose and viewpoint. They seem rather to take aesthetic delight only in the false originality of variation and piquancy. I wonder if they really have no fundamental convictions regarding the moral concord of righteousness and happiness; I wonder if they really would rather *live* the fallacies of their strange doctrine when it gives sly sanction to the specious present with all its expedient situations and pragmatic values read in the sophist eisegesis of an opportunist will. If they do then they are but so many shrewd vulgarians flourishing in a golden age of folly and hypocrisy; not one of them lacking somewhat of a covert inclination to reverse Goethe's great discriminative choice. And even with the whole race of modern reformers, he is surely a sage in sanctity who, a Goethe in the present turbulent age, does not soon grow corrupt and choose gainful error (*Nützlichen Irrthum*) rather than what often appears in the tragic paradox of painful truth (*Schäd-*

liche Wahrheit). It is a common but by no means philosophical thing nowadays for people to demand what suits their immediate need, instead of adapting both their needs and their demands to the propitious aims of a nobler life and destiny. It is an inexorable law of Nature and an inevitable fact in the life of man that a moral theory rooted in pleasure and acquisition is bound to take noticeable complexion from the soil wherein it flourishes, and its fruit cannot help but be of rich or poor taste in the same proportion.

Modern culture is a mosaic of all the desires and thoughts and beliefs of world history, supplemented by all the desires, thoughts and beliefs which have fired the soul of man altho not enjoying the prestige of since appearing in the literature of recorded history. Happily the less noble aspects of our vaunted civilization are to be found only in scattered places. But by this mention of a sporadic decay and degeneracy I do not refer complacently to the cultural disparity between our modern commonwealth and the loose village life of some cannibal tribe, nor to the intellectual departure we have made from the remote empire of uncouth but world-wide savagery. Rather am I like Macaulay who has taken shrewd choice of honest English to tell us that civilization breeds its own Huns and Vandals amongst its own palaces, churches and libraries who will someday rise up to destroy their parents with a fiercer ignorance and a more destructive form of viciousness than were ever displayed by the hordes of Attila and Genseric. Never will we have security against this future disaster until our culture is made honest and spiritual instead of clever and wordly; never will our culture become honest and spiritual until we have supplemented our scholastic curricula with a thoro instruction (if possible with *living examples*) of Righteousness, the *fourth* "R" which Homer Bodley considers the forgotten factor in education." A whole new departure in educational moralism would herewith arise showing that rectitude and integrity have both a cosmic and a human aspect and application; its main thesis would be that God's manifestations in the Universe as Law, Purpose, Beauty, Uniformity, Justice and Benevolence, reach as well to man and are the principles on which his life is given order, inspiration and significance, because without them he would never have any science, art or religion. Man's culture cannot be either durable or sincere if he leaves God and Righteousness out of his program.

The pejorist and the cynic would have us believe that the meliorability of man and his world is impossible, an illusion of pretense grounded in his superiority complex. But if man can really make spiritual progress by taking honest and determined hold upon the cosmic consciousness, by making implacable decision and endeavor in his practice of the nobler aims of life, what feeble faculty the cynic or the pejorist displays when claiming that "the dogma of man's Progress is only the reaction to the dogma of his Fall" (Flaubert). The actual scene is not one of dogmatic reaction, because there has been no "fall"; the only real process that has been pursued has been man's slow struggle up from the brutal savage world, out of the muck and murder of bestial life into the music and meliorism of a spiritual transfiguration. The philosophical eclectic, if he has to be an eclectic at all, will not gloss over the spiritual pedigree of man's present status in the cosmic inheritance, but he will exercise many careful scruples in discriminating between the various deliverances from which he must make his life-choice, and having made his melioristic decision he will find affection for neither pejorist nor cynic. It is a vital decision and he will devote much time and attention to the merits of each action-pattern; he will not ignore nor take umbrage from anything howsoever base and worthless it may appear. Instead he will make stern use of his intelligence and moral discrimination to sort out the best, the truest, and the broadest-minded from the worst, the false, the narrow, shallow and inane; and in so doing he will be exercising that divine faculty which God has given him for sounding the spiritual depths and taking courageous emprise out over the farthest horizon of life's turbulent sea.