A Defense of Humility

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The act of defending any of the cardinal virtues has to-day all the exhilaration of a vice. Moral truisms have been so much disputed that they have begun to sparkle like so many brilliant paradoxes. And especially (in this age of egoistic idealism) there is about one who defends humility something inexpressibly rakish.

It is no part of my intention to defend humility on practical grounds. Practical grounds are uninteresting, and, moreover, on practical grounds the case for humility is overwhelming. We all know that the 'divine glory of the ego' is socially a great nuisance; we all do actually value our friends for modesty, freshness, and simplicity of heart. Whatever may be the reason, we all do warmly respect humility—in other people.

But the matter must go deeper than this. If the grounds of humility are found only in social convenience, they may be quite trivial and temporary. The egoists may be the martyrs of a nobler dispensation, agonizing for a more arduous ideal. To judge from the comparative lack of ease in their social manner, this seems a reasonable suggestion.

There is one thing that must be seen at the outset of the study of humility from an intrinsic and eternal point of view. The new philosophy of self-esteem and self-assertion declares that humility is a vice. If it be so, it is quite clear that it is one of those vices which are an integral part of original sin. It follows with the precision of clockwork every one of the great joys of life. No one, for example, was ever in love without indulging in a positive debauch of humility. All full-blooded and natural people, such as schoolboys, enjoy humility the moment they attain hero-worship. Humility, again, is said both by its upholders and opponents to be the peculiar growth of Christianity. The real and obvious reason of this is often missed. The pagans insisted upon self-assertion because it was the essence of their creed that the gods, though strong and just, were mystic, capricious, and even indifferent. But the essence of Christianity was in a literal sense the New Testament—a covenant with God which opened to men a clear deliverance. They thought themselves secure; they claimed palaces of pearl and silver under the oath and seal of the Omnipotent; they believed themselves rich with an irrevocable benediction which set them above the stars; and immediately they discovered humility. It was only another example of the same immutable paradox. It is always the secure who are humble.

This particular instance survives in the evangelical revivalists of the street. They are irritating enough, but no one who has really studied them can deny that the irritation is occasioned by these two things, an irritating hilarity and an irritating humility. This combination of joy and self-prostration is a great deal too universal to be ignored. If humility has been discredited as a virtue at the present day, it is not wholly irrelevant to remark that this discredit has arisen at the same time as a great collapse of joy in current literature and philosophy. Men have revived the splendour of Greek self-

assertion at the same time that they have revived the bitterness of Greek pessimism. A literature has arisen which commands us all to arrogate to ourselves the liberty of self-sufficing deities at the same time that it exhibits us to ourselves as dingy maniacs who ought to be chained up like dogs. It is certainly a curious state of things altogether. When we are genuinely happy, we think we are unworthy of happiness. But when we are demanding a divine emancipation we seem to be perfectly certain that we are unworthy of anything.

The only explanation of the matter must be found in the conviction that humility has infinitely deeper roots than any modern men suppose; that it is a metaphysical and, one might almost say, a mathematical virtue. Probably this can best be tested by a study of those who frankly disregard humility and assert the supreme duty of perfecting and expressing one's self. These people tend, by a perfectly natural process, to bring their own great human gifts of culture, intellect, or moral power to a great perfection, successively shutting out everything that they feel to be lower than themselves. Now shutting out things is all very well, but it has one simple corollary—that from everything that we shut out we are ourselves shut out. When we shut our door on the wind, it would be equally true to say that the wind shuts its door on us. Whatever virtues a triumphant egoism really leads to, no one can reasonably pretend that it leads to knowledge. Turning a beggar from the door may be right enough, but pretending to know all the stories the beggar might have narrated is pure nonsense; and this is practically the claim of the egoism which thinks that self-assertion can obtain knowledge. A beetle may or may not be inferior to a man—the matter awaits demonstration; but if he were inferior by ten thousand fathoms, the fact remains that there is probably a beetle view of things of which a man is entirely ignorant. If he wishes to conceive that point of view, he will scarcely reach it by persistently revelling in the fact that he is not a beetle. The most brilliant exponent of the egoistic school, Nietszche, with deadly and honourable logic, admitted that the philosophy of self-satisfaction led to looking down upon the weak, the cowardly, and the ignorant. Looking down on things may be a delightful experience, only there is nothing, from a mountain to a cabbage, that is really *seen* when it is seen from a balloon. The philosopher of the ego sees everything, no doubt, from a high and rarified heaven; only he sees everything foreshortened or deformed.

Now if we imagine that a man wished truly, as far as possible, to see everything as it was, he would certainly proceed on a different principle. He would seek to divest himself for a time of those personal peculiarities which tend to divide him from the thing he studies. It is as difficult, for example, for a man to examine a fish without developing a certain vanity in possessing a pair of legs, as if they were the latest article of personal adornment. But if a fish is to be approximately understood, this physiological dandyism must be overcome. The earnest student of fish morality will, spiritually speaking, chop off his legs. And similarly the student of birds will eliminate his arms; the frog-lover will with one stroke of the imagination remove all his teeth, and the spirit wishing to enter into all the hopes and fears of jelly-fish will simplify his personal appearance to a really alarming extent. It would appear, therefore, that this great body of ours and all its natural instincts, of which we are proud, and justly proud, is rather an encumbrance at the moment when we attempt to appreciate things

as they should be appreciated. We do actually go through a process of mental asceticism, a castration of the entire being, when we wish to feel the abounding good in all things. It is good for us at certain times that ourselves should be like a mere window—as clear, as luminous, and as invisible.

In a very entertaining work, over which we have roared in childhood, it is stated that a point has no parts and no magnitude. Humility is the luxurious art of reducing ourselves to a point, not to a small thing or a large one, but to a thing with no size at all, so that to it all the cosmic things are what they really are—of immeasurable stature. That the trees are high and the grasses short is a mere accident of our own foot-rules and our own stature. But to the spirit which has stripped off for a moment its own idle temporal standards the grass is an everlasting forest, with dragons for denizens; the stones of the road are as incredible mountains piled one upon the other; the dandelions are like gigantic bonfires illuminating the lands around; and the heath-bells on their stalks are like planets hung in heaven each higher than the other. Between one stake of a paling and another there are new and terrible landscapes; here a desert, with nothing but one misshapen rock; here a miraculous forest, of which all the trees flower above the head with the hues of sunset; here, again, a sea full of monsters that Dante would not have dared to dream. These are the visions of him who, like the child in the fairy tales, is not afraid to become small. Meanwhile, the sage whose faith is in magnitude and ambition is, like a giant, becoming larger and larger, which only means that the stars are becoming smaller and smaller. World after world falls from him into insignificance; the whole passionate and intricate life of common things becomes as lost to him as is the life of the infusoria to a man without a microscope. He rises always through desolate eternities. He may find new systems, and forget them; he may discover fresh universes, and learn to despise them. But the towering and tropical vision of things as they really are—the gigantic daisies, the heaven-consuming dandelions, the great Odyssey of strange-coloured oceans and strange-shaped trees, of dust like the wreck of temples, and thistledown like the ruin of stars—all this colossal vision shall perish with the last of the humble.

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