

On Manners, Taste, and Style

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The following are some thoughts prepared for a lecture on Sunday, August 30, 1970. On last Sunday, August the 23rd, the point was made by a certain person who was present that the Nazi's often employed polite and correct language in connection with the imposition of massive cruelty, and the individual in question acknowledged that he was influenced by this in that he found later that among those who often used vulgar images and expressed themselves with bad manners were, nonetheless, generous and kindly in their feelings. There is presented here by implication a subject matter of considerable interest. It is the contrast between what we might call the *aristocratic* attitude and the *vulgar* attitude. Among the hierarchy of values, I would place first, true spiritual consciousness; second, a high moral sense; third, a superior intellectual understanding; and then in a position somewhat subordinate to these three, but not greatly subordinate, a fourth classification which may be listed under manners, taste, and style. This is not a matter of trivial importance. Manners, taste, and style can lead to many of the amenities of life, can make life gracious, can make it so that it is not gross and coarse and vulgar. There is something to be said, and in fact a great deal to be said, for the cultivation of these qualities. The presence of them in an individual is an authentic sign of a very important superiority. At least with Western aristocratic society, it would seem that the emphasis lies just in this domain rather than in the other three of spirituality, morality, and intellectuality.

Now, let us consider this fact: the man who is an aristocrat may be cruel or he may be benevolent, or, what is more likely, he may manifest a combination of these two qualities. And the same is true of vulgar man. Vulgar man may be cruel and he may also be benevolent or manifest these qualities in a mixed way. But what the vulgar man lacks is style, taste, and good manners. He moves in a way that is crude and course. If he is generous, for instance, he may heave a loaf of bread to someone who is starving, and let it go at that; whereas, if one with true development of taste, style, and manners were to face the same starving individual and was motivated by generous considerations, he would not simply heave a loaf of bread, he would consider along with whatever offering he made certain other considerations that are really of premiere importance. The starving individual is also a human being who has his pride, who has his self-respect, and the truly aristocratic donor would give these aspects a first consideration. He would offer food in such a way that the receiving individual would not have impressed upon him a sense of inferiority, a sense of wounded pride and lost self-respect. He might even manage things so skillfully that the receiving individual would be made to feel that he was rendering something to his donor that was of value to that donor. This is the attitude of a true aristocrat whether he has aristocratic title or not. I am not concerned with the artificial titling of people here. I'm concerned with a real distinction among essentially superior individuals or inferior individuals regardless of title. This distinction I would consider of major importance. The loaf of bread that is heaved might well keep the body alive, but

the soul and spirit of the receiver would be deeply wounded; whereas, the graciously given food with the artful consideration for the self-respect of the receiving individual would serve a much larger value; more than an animal body would be served in that case.

Now, I know that whether the individual in his scale of development is only vulgar or animalistic, in one case, and well evolved, in the other case, into the sense for subtle values, nonetheless, he may have both cruel and benevolent motivations. His acts may be cruel and his acts may be generous. And the same is true of the vulgar individual. He is in part more or less cruel and more or less generous—a mixture which in this humanity is very common. But there is a difference between the two as illustrated in the case of the food given to the starving man.

Now, let us consider the instance of the manifestation of cruelty by both types of individuals. An aristocratic individual, one who was cultured, who had a great feeling for style, manners, and good taste, might wish my death, and he might go about it this way: that with the expression of all politeness imaginable, but nonetheless with a superior skill, he runs a rapier through my body. The fallen body, then, may be placed in a coffin and the one who killed it might very well place a floral offering upon that coffin, all of which would be in good taste. On the other hand, the vulgar attitude towards the same problem or act would be well represented by what happened in the French Revolution. He would build a machine to sever my head, dividing, thus, the organism into two parts destroying its unity, and then might well spit upon the corpse or mutilate it. I'm free to confess, I'd rather face death by the representative of aristocratic culture than by the representative of gross animalistic vulgarity.

Now, this has a bearing upon things that are of importance to us. First of all, some of the very best values that come to us in life grow out of the perception of the nuances which are entirely unseen and unfelt by the truly vulgar. This is true in all of the arts where very fine subtle distinction may bring out a hidden beauty that is lost entirely upon the vulgar. This is a matter of evolution of taste. This makes life much more gracious. It brings to us the fact that man is something more than a mere animal that walks on two legs. But more especially, it has a bearing in the field in which we are most interested, namely, that of yogic Realization. When the Door to this Realization opens, one finds himself in a zone that is utterly strange to his normal consciousness. He may readily have the feeling that here is a supernal value, but he has not the resources for its clear apprehension. If he has not developed in his life before the Realization the sense for subtle nuance, he may find himself quite incapable of moving within the new realm because he does not have the sense for fine distinction. Very often there appears to one such great subtleties that they're almost indiscernible from nothing at all, and yet these subtleties may be the doors to tremendous riches, and they may become a zone in which one may dwell with firm confidence as his power of assimilation grows in these subtle realms. And furthermore, he might find that he would be utterly helpless in trying to communicate to anyone else anything but the sense of a great but inchoate Otherness which, nonetheless, had a great value for him. On the other hand, and this comes well within my own experience, the sense for nuance played a premier part in acclimatizing myself to this which at first was a strange zone; and secondly, except for those nuances, it would have been impossible to write what was written in *Pathways* or in *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*. I owe a substantial debt to the discipline of those

years when a student of mathematics. In the realm of mathematics beyond the calculus, we come into demands upon discernment that are very subtle indeed. Sometimes one reaches into a realm where there is no help from the imagination or from even the intuition, and here it is only with the capacity to discern that which is almost indiscernible that one makes progress at all. With this aid now, and perhaps the aid of other lives, it became possible to communicate what was in *Pathways* and *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object* so communicated. Therefore, cultivation of the sense for nuance is very important in the appreciation of art, in the subtleties of thought, in the fineness of relationship in living; and all of this belongs to the aristocratic spirit.

It is the tendency of the New and Old Left to devalue all of this and even to make a virtue of cultivating grossness. I deplore this to the highest degree and would urge that all here should strive in the opposite direction for the cultivation of subtlety of perception, of good taste, of good manners, and a fine style in conduct and speech, for this makes for a better life. No doubt, one who has all of this could still have motivation at times that is less than noble, is not always generous, not always benevolent; but, it is a step up in the scale of being which is of very great importance indeed. The battle between the good and evil no doubt continues, but it continues upon a higher level; and, in a way, difference of level is very important indeed.