

☆ OBITER DICTA ☆

THE WORSHIP OF P:

An Open Letter to a Brother Psychologist

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MY DEAR JACK: You told me this afternoon that late last night you discovered some deep meaning in my reference, earlier in the day, to Psychology with a capital P. I assumed at the time that there had been a meeting of our minds on this subject.

Now, I am not sure whether we met on the same spot. This epistle is intended to describe to you where I stand and what I see from where I stand.

I stand in the center of my own world, of course. In the middle of the only world that is real to me. You stand in the middle of yours. So do our brother psychologists with whom we shook hands this afternoon.

As psychologists, we feel we all have something in common. At least, that's the way we say it: *something in common*. And this something we call *psychology*. When we take ourselves in earnest, we call it *Psychology*, with a capital P.

Tonight I am trying to get hold of that Psychology with a capital P (let us call it P for short), and I find the darn thing very elusive. It reminds me of what Poincaré said of the physicists of old who wanted to get hold of *heat* and could not, even when they gave it a Greek name (*phlogiston*) to conjure up its presence by 'scientific' means. You remember the sequence, don't you? 'Nouns are substantives. Therefore nouns refer to substances. Substances stand by themselves. Substances are material *things*, (unless of course they are "spiritual" like angels). Therefore, *heat* is a thing, an element like gold, iron, sulphur, etc.'

But the pesky thing did not answer the urgent beckoning of the physicist who called it out of his magician's hat — or was it his magician's head? Try as he may, he could not perform the expected trick. He called *heat*, he called *phlogiston*, and nothing came out but the hollow sound of the scientific wand on the magician's hat — or was it on the magician's head?

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I AM AFRAID we are trying a similar magic trick when we want to conjure P out of our heads. There is something there. I imagine there is. But this something, is it *something*? Is it a goddess, like Minerva out of Jupiter's brain, which we must revere in blind obeisance? No, Jack, I won't have it that way. How can we be so anthropomorphic? 'Allons, allons!' a Frenchman would say.

'Well, what is it, anyway?' you ask me.

Word your question differently, my dear Jack. Otherwise I can't answer you. It is as if you divided a ruler in ten units and directed me to state in decimals what its exact third is. You know I couldn't answer that. Well, your question: 'What is P?' is just as unanswerable. As long as you dissect 'reality' in terms of 'what,' 'is,' and 'it,' you make it impossible for me to talk sense.

P is just a conventional symbol on paper, or a sound wave when I utter it as I trace these lines. To my six-year old daughter, P was a symbol for a type of activity that has little in common with the scientific outpourings we got at our annual meeting. To my wife, when she speaks to our canary, P means something different. To our president, when he gave his formal address, P meant *Put* of *Put away*.

To me, in the present context, it means a process, a happening, a 'going-on,' an electro-colloidal event, or a whole series of such events that fan out in a chain-reaction pattern. These events never stay put, and you can't take a still picture of them. They move too fast for our *camera obscura* (our brain, in common parlance), and our camera itself is carried away in the whirl.

So whatever picture we have of it is not a true picture at all. It is a man-made, static idol, made of brass like our laboratory gadgets or of paper and ink like our dissertations, this one included.

This process goes on in you, in me, in everyone who observes others — to forget himself, to bolster his ego, to get things done or undone, or just to make an honest living. It is in everyone who talks to himself about it, lectures about it, writes about it, or plays various little games which he calls experiments.

A COUPLE of generations back, some of those writers and experimenters went through a ceremony of self-anointing and gave themselves the rôle of keepers of the P. It was the spontaneous emergence of a sacred caste: *the high-priests of the P*. The rest followed as of necessity, like the conclusion of a syllogism once the premises are given: 'Since there are high-priests of the P, there is a P, pure, holy, and perfect in all respects.'

Well, Jack, call me iconoclast if you will, but know once and for all that I don't believe in P. I won't worship at the altar of P. I don't want to be identified with the high-priests of P.

Once, I was corrected by the editor of our *Journal* for writing something

that suited my conscience, but did not jibe with the tenets of our 'religion.' I had said in my presidential address, in May 1949: 'Go into the world of business and industry, and you will find in it more psychology than you expect.' When my paper appeared in the *Journal*, I read to my astonishment: 'Go into the world of business and industry, and you will find in it more room for psychology than you expect.' I confess that I was too cowardly at the time to restate my conviction in no uncertain terms. But my conscience has been pricking me ever since, Jack. Today I want to become a *clear*, as they say in dianetics. There is psychology in business and industry, yes, indeed. Not the kind we advocate, perhaps. But there is some, by Jove, and its capacity for prediction is not negligible, either. Whether they *make* things happen as they predict is another matter. By the way, how much of the eventual results of our counselling, directive or nondirective, is due to our manipulating the subject, the environment, or both?

The point of all this outburst, my dear Jack, is that the process of *psychologizing* has been going on for centuries in millions of human brains and nervous systems. It continues today with accrued intensity, to the point that at times I see it as a St. Vitus' dance. I wonder if the scaring increase of maladjustments that we broadcast so complacently is not due in part to our ostentatious worship of P, the goddess who ensnares its worshippers into neurosis? You remember the Great Charcot and the *grand mal* he unconsciously and unwillingly suggested to his all too 'predictable' patients?

AS FAR AS I am concerned, I will not waste a minute in the worship of P. I shall pick up my tools, those still very primitive tools that my academic brothers are forging and that practice has shown me how to handle, and I shall try my best to reduce, if possible, the percentage of maladjustments in this teeming crowd of humans marching on to better things. If the percentage of maladjustments increases, no sacrificial offerings to the goddess P will assuage my feelings of guilt. I shall hide for shame, and take to the pick and shovel for a living.

Yours faithfully and faithlessly,

SAM

... in things abstract, men but differ in the sounds that come from their mouths, and not in the wordless thoughts lying at the bottom of their beings. HERMAN MELVILLE, *Mardi*.