

Pale Bodies, Soft Voices

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Human beings care about what gets said and what does not get said. Rightly or wrongly, human beings also tend to regard as more important what is said or not said in public. There is something about philosophers that gives off the impression that they are not properly public (or manly). Staying out of the public, like any practice, is likely to have effects. See the philosopher at work as Nietzsche presents himself, as a “subterranean man,” beset with “the distress which any protracted deprivation of light and air must entail.”¹ See the grown-up philosopher through the eyes of Plato’s Callicles “become unmanly through fleeing the central area of the city and the agoras, in which the poet says men ‘become highly distinguished,’ and through sinking down into living the rest of his life whispering with three or four lads in a corner, never to give voice to anything free or great or sufficient.”² See the philosopher deprived of the sunlight and of the limelight, pale of body and soft of voice.

This state of skin and voice is a bodily emblem for a state of the psyche. Many philosophers famously withhold or even dissemble their wisdom; they speak ironically; they do not speak their minds in public. We are even familiar today with branches of philosophic thought that champion the “politic” self-censorship of philosophic discourse. These branches make a virtue of staying silent and even of lying at the right moments. The faculty of prudence is supposed to determine when the moment is right. I will

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröte*, Vorrede 1. All translations are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted.

² Plato *Gorgias* 485d-e.

not be inquiring here as to what prudence is or as to how it makes its determinations; rather I wish to inquire here into the cost of prudence. Of course, in the end, the cost of prudence itself would have to be factored into judgments claiming to be prudent. What does it cost the philosopher, the seeker after truth, either to speak lies in public or to remain silent about what he believes to be true, or to abandon the public realm and only express what he believes privately? What does it cost the philosopher not to speak his mind in public?

The Urge to Speak One's Mind

Human beings want to speak their minds. By speaking one's mind, I should point out that I do not mean speaking the truth. In order to speak the truth, one must know the truth, which in many cases is a very tall order. However, by "speaking one's mind" I do mean what most of us mean by being truthful, that is producing in speech the thought that one has in one's own mind. This is probably more properly regarded as honesty than as truthfulness.

Consider the simple aphorism:

"A on his lips and *not-A* in his heart."³

What is your reaction to this aphorism?⁴ Dwell on the little sentence. Do you not squirm a little? With few words and little setting of the scene, Lichtenberg manages to convey the discomfort felt when what one is thinking⁵ is not what one is saying.

³ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London, Penguin Books, 1990), 80.

⁴ It occurs to me that this aphorism might anger you. It would certainly anger Achilles (see *Illiad*, IX, 312-13). Try to look past the anger and see what else the sentence evokes in you.

⁵ We may have some tendency to associate the heart with feeling rather than thinking, but it is clear from the text that what is in the heart of the person in question is a logical formulation *not-A*. Further, Lichtenberg is probably right to

Lichtenberg does not even have to specify anything about the content of the thought. The content does not matter. In confronting the scenario set out by Lichtenberg's aphorism, do we not feel the pressure of the *not-A* in the heart? Do we not feel the urge of every thought to let itself out through the lips?

I mean the confrontation with this little aphorism to be an experiment that shows us something about ourselves. But because no experiment can be decisive in the positive case, and because what I am talking about here is not the analytic consequences of some logical structure, but our subjective responses or comportments to the conditions of the world, I cannot offer one decisive and sufficient argument. Instead I will pile up some evidence and offer a merely suggestive basis for my claims.

We probably all have felt the desire to speak out a thought we had and have felt the pressure and pain of restraining that desire. This restraint is often the result of a prudential calculation of the likely acceptability to or permissibility for the audience at hand. The flipside of this kind of experience is the familiar experience of the great pleasure felt in discoursing with friends. I do not mean the pleasure of the friendship, but the pleasure of speaking without self-censure or restraint. A similar pleasure is found in speaking to those who are not friends exactly but who are like-minded individuals. A similar pleasure is perhaps also found in the telling of "forbidden" jokes, and in naughty language, and in cursing. In all such cases we experience an affect of release. We have been thinking things but keeping those thoughts to ourselves. We have been "holding our tongues," but now we let our tongues go, and we let the thoughts out.

present the location of this thought as the heart, because the urge to speak a thought may stem from conceptualization mixed with some feeling.

But why does this “letting out” seem so pleasurable to us? Merely having something inside us does not immediately lead to the conclusion that the situation is unpleasant. In order to explain the pleasure of letting out we must assume that the thing inside is not content to remain so. Are thoughts like that? Do they want to get out? When we speak our minds, we engage in an activity that externalizes or “lets out” a thought that was inside. A passage in Nietzsche suggests a similar structure of “letting out” may be found in all organic activity. The passage in question is one in which Nietzsche says that the cardinal instinct of an organic being is “above all to *let out* [*auslassen*] its strength.”⁶ Nietzsche goes on to try to understand all organic functions – growth, metabolism, perception, movement, and more – in terms of this instinct, which he dubs “the will to power.” Can the urge to speak our minds and the pleasure we take in doing so be understood in terms of a condition shared by all organic beings? Do some of our most distinctively human acts share something with the movements of the amoeba?

There is some evidence of a connection between our urge to speak and all of our other organic urges in the most primitive and yet still typical uses of our vocal capacities. Why do we burst out in violent and inarticulate noises when we are hurt, when we are tickled, when we are saddened? What do human beings do when they climb up to great heights, especially when they are alone? How many mountaintops have born silent witness to unrestrained shouts? Why do young human beings, like young animals of many other species, occasionally and fitfully burst into running and leaping and shouting?⁷ Consider the therapeutic value of primal scream therapy. Consider the appeal of Whitman’s barbaric YAWP

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gute und Böse*, 13.

⁷ Compare Plato *Laws* 653d-e.

that he “sounds over the rooftops of the world.”⁸ Consider the burden of an itch and the burden of a secret.

Words Matter

Of course in the case of speaking our minds the things inside are thoughts, thoughts such as may be expressed (pressed out) in terms of words. Words, at least words of a certain sort, may be distinctively, or at least primarily, human things. Aside from whatever primitive organic urge we may feel to speak our minds we must, of course, consider what belongs to conscious deliberate beings – the effects they wish their speech (or lack thereof) to achieve. Words and their effects are the primary story of politics. However much we may be tempted to think it is deeds and not words⁹ that matter in politics – the power of words is, in almost every case, the greater. The personal deeds of any one man, limited by the physical limits of his body, never extend very far. In politics, force is never really a straightforward concept and never really a simple contrast to persuasion. Politically meaningful force always consists in a group of human beings acting in concert because they have been persuaded to do so by some other human being or group. No army ever acts because it has been personally overpowered by its commanders. Political force is always complex and consists in good measure of words. Thus what gets said or not said, and how it gets said plays a significant role in most if not all political action.

Now it may be tempting to think the importance we tend to grant to public speech is entirely dependent upon its significance in political action. But in order to resist this temptation it is helpful to

⁸ Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, 52.

⁹ Consider Ajax's characterization of Odysseus as a “talking hero” when the two of them contend for Achilles' armor in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Book XIII, 11-14.

return to Nietzsche's suggestion about the primitive form of all organic action. There remains a lot of evidence that the mere speaking of thoughts is important to us regardless of any effects those spoken words may have. Spoken words matter to us in a way that is independent of their expected secondary effects.

The speaking of a thought is an effect for us all by itself. When a thought is spoken, even when we speak it in solitude, that thought acquires a power for us, a power over us, that unspoken thoughts lack. We often feel we can deny or avoid a thought until we speak it aloud. This sense that speaking a thought may bring the speaker to some kind of point of no return is often evident in Socratic dialogues, as Socrates' interlocutors frequently show reluctance to speak out explicitly the necessary conclusions of the arguments they have been led to pursue.¹⁰ The talking method of psychoanalysis is predicated upon the power the spoken word has upon the human psyche. The paradigm breakthrough occurs when the patient is able to speak out the underlying thought, the root cause of the problem.

Of course these references both to Socratic dialogues and to psychoanalysis would tend naturally to draw our minds toward examples within our experience that might challenge the contention

¹⁰ There is perhaps no more dramatic presentation of this kind of avoidance of uttering a conclusion that has been in principle granted than in Plato's first *Alcibiades*. Socrates rapidly leads Alcibiades, in their first ever conversation, to the conclusion that he is unprepared for the grand political career that he intends to pursue. Despite this, Alcibiades shows great reluctance to state the conclusion explicitly himself or even to admit explicitly that he is himself responsible for the conclusions of their conversation. I count nine times in that dialogue where Socrates asks Alcibiades to accept responsibility for the conversation and its results. Only once does Alcibiades explicitly say "I say it" (see 112e, 113b, 113c, 114d-e, 116a, 116d, 116e, 135d; cf. 135d). Alcibiades avoids speaking out the thought that in principle he grants, even though he and Socrates are alone, and thus he could deny later anything he admitted then. Alcibiades has no reason here to fear any of the possible secondary effects of anything he says to Socrates alone. And yet Alcibiades seems to fear rather strongly the power of spoken words.

that human beings universally wish to speak their minds. I have been suggesting that every thought contains or is attended by the urge to speak. Is this true? I am not inclined to regard the reluctance to speak that manifests itself in Socratic or psychiatric encounters as an exception to my suggestion. I am inclined to think the fact that both Socratic and psychiatric methods can have some effect on their interlocutors is more a confirmation of my suggestion. If the interlocutors did not feel some urge to speak the thought they are also reluctant to speak neither the analyst nor the gadfly would be able to have much of an effect.

It does seem to be the case that we occasionally have thoughts within us that we are reluctant to share with others because we think these thoughts are ugly or deviant or immoral. It may even be the case that we are uncomfortable having these thoughts inside us. We do not like to think of ourselves as beings with thoughts such as those. However, it does seem that these thoughts, as unwelcome as they are, contain or are attended by the same kind of urge to be spoken as our other thoughts. The best evidence for this is the tendency of these unwelcome thoughts to slip out into our discourse, supposedly when we do not want them to slip out, and the pressure we feel when we try to prevent these thoughts from being spoken. Thus bad thoughts do not seem to constitute an exception to my claim that human beings wish to speak their minds; however, such thoughts do point to a complication within the notion of speaking one's mind. It is right to say about such bad thoughts that we wish to speak them and we do not wish to speak them. This could also be said of thoughts that are censored by our prudential judgment, for the judgment of our prudence is also an expression of our wishes.

This suggests that our minds are not simple things. I am not a box of sentences waiting to be opened and read. Are our thoughts inside ever exactly like what we say when we speak them?

Sometimes we have in mind a complete sentence or statement and we face the decision to speak it out or to refrain. But in many cases, perhaps most cases for most human beings, we may feel the urge to speak without being conscious of containing within us an exact replica of what we in fact end up saying when we do speak. We often are not fully aware of what we are going to say before we do actually say it. And we are capable of surprising ourselves, and of seeming to change course in the middle of our speaking, and even of running into impasses.

In trying to make sense of these things it may help not to think of our mind as too unitary a thing. If the cardinal instinct of organic beings is “letting out,” one must consider the basic locus of organic action. *What* wants to speak my mind? Me or sub-me? One thing, or its part, or some member of a collection? If I do not think of myself in all respects simply as one living thing, but in some respects as a number of living things (all of which wish to let themselves out), it may make some sense of wishing to speak a thing that one is also reluctant to speak. This kind of consideration may also help to make sense of the apparent instability of even our conscious thoughts and how we can lose our train of thought and stall or end up saying something we in no conscious way intended to say. Of course if we understand ourselves as complex rather than simple beings this would tend to make the distinction between what is inside and what is outside less easy to demarcate.

It is worthwhile in this context to mention another experience that might also complicate our sense of what is inside and what is outside. When someone else says in public what we wish to say there is often (when vanity does not intervene) pleasure that *someone* has said it. What is the source of this pleasure? Can the pleasure be reduced merely to the hopes attached to the effects we expect from the speech? I think not, as it seems to me we can feel the same

pleasure hearing someone else speak our mind even when we can expect no advantageous effect to ensue from the speech. But how can someone else's speaking out the thought that is in our mind let that thought get out of our mind? This experience highlights the way in which the spatial metaphor of inside and outside can be misleading. A thought that is in my mind has no geometrical coordinates and its getting out does not depend upon any kind of locomotion. The getting out of a thought may be more some kind of seeing than a kind of moving. It could be that for the purpose of psychic letting out another person speaking is little different than having one of the parts of our own complex mind speak out. The other parts can have the experience of release, even though they are not performing the act of speaking. Perhaps this is not unlike the pleasure we experience when we find someone who agrees with us. In those cases, although they are speaking (or writing in the case of the discovery of an author), it feels as though we are letting our thoughts out.

In thinking of ourselves as complex beings it is helpful to consider that not everything that goes on in or presents itself to our psyche has the form of what I have been calling thought. Some psychic conditions do not correspond well to concepts and words and sentences. I have in mind what we typically call feelings. Feelings, too, contain or are attended by the urge to be let out, but typically feelings do not call for the form of letting out that is speech. When what I have inside me is a feeling, I often do not wish to speak; I wish to act.¹¹ Frequently (I am tempted to say typically) when we have a thought in mind it is not there by itself. It is either

¹¹ Consider Rousseau's claim that Love "has livelier means of expressing itself" than words [Jean Jacques Rousseau, *On the Origin of Languages*, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 6]. Compare Hamlet's suggestion that unpacking your heart with words is the way of whores (II. ii. 583-88).

attended by or even mingled with a feeling. This complication may help to explain why thoughts are often not easy to speak out even when we try to do so. This might also explain experiences where we seem to have a thought and seem to feel no urge to speak it.

The Public and the Outside

Thinking about our complex relation to the inside and outside may help us to consider why the public realm matters to us beyond its considerable, and not to be ignored, power over the material conditions of our lives. As much as we have learned to prize the private and as much as we, in modern times, have moved toward becoming more private beings, the public sphere still tends to exercise great power over our psyches. We tend to say the things most important to us in private but have trouble not regarding what is said in public as more important. When the public sphere is divided from the private sphere there remains a massive and crude fact that seems to trumpet the superiority of the public: the public authority determines the boundary between public and private. I think we should have little doubt that this massive crudity, the manifest power of the public sphere, insinuates itself into our psyche.

Consider the case of religion. A scheme of public toleration was offered to religions in modernity. This scheme purported to be in the interest of religions. Toleration would protect religions from the violence of religious wars and from the violence of persecutions. It would allow religions to rededicate themselves to their genuine spiritual ends. All religions had to do in order to enjoy these vast benefits was to become private, to abandon claims to public authority, and to accept whatever bounds upon their practices and pieties that the public authority should impose. What has been the

effect? A person's religion used to be one of the major factors in the determination of whether we regarded that person as good or bad. What is the situation now for private, tolerant religions? Thomas Jefferson summed up the American attitude toward religion under a regime of toleration: "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."¹² What is said by a tolerant religion causes no injury, it has no effect. How many human beings today judge the overall goodness or badness of a human being based upon their particular faith? How many human beings today take faith into consideration in the most important decisions of their lives, such as whom to marry?

By abandoning the public sphere, religion seems to have deprived its speech of much of its power. It may be that the failure of a privatized religion to retain the power of its speech can be illuminated somewhat by considering the exterior orientation of our basic organic instincts. When we have a thought in mind, we have not just a sequence of symbols for sounds but a meaning in mind. Getting that meaning out, seeing it outside of oneself may require other human beings. It may be that what we let out of ourselves must go into [*angehen*]¹³ something else in order to seem to us to have gotten genuinely or fully outside. If that is so, then in the case of meaning it would seem that there may not be any genuine outside for us other than other human beings. After all does meaning expressed at the non-human ever really go into it? Paradoxically we may be led to the conclusion that the world that is not like us (the non-human) is less outside of us than the human is. Our solitary

¹² Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on Virginia," in *Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, Modern Library, 1944), 275.

¹³ Consider Nietzsche's use of the verb "angehen" in sections 34 and 226 of *Jenseits von Gute und Böse*.

mountain climbers also often seem to like to produce echoes. But echoes will not cut it when the meaning of a thought is what we are trying to press out. We experience some degree of letting out of our thoughts when we encounter other minds that agree with us, that speak out what we think. It is a strong temptation to want greater numbers to agree with us, or even to want everyone to agree. The public is organically the biggest frontier. Every other human being is a potential occasion for us to let out our burdensome thoughts. Does not every human being that does not yet agree with us give us the appearance of an "outside" into which our thought has not yet gone? Is not the public a siren call to our organic urge to let out our thoughts? Does it not present us continually with the impression that our thoughts have not yet gotten outside of us?

Solitude and Ugliness

Most of what I have been saying so far has been about human beings in general in their relation to speaking their minds. Is the situation different for philosophers? One thing I would suggest is that in many respects the philosophic interior is clearer than that of most human beings. Their thoughts tend to be less conflicted and less unstable. This may not make it easier for the philosophers to deal with the difficulty of restraining themselves from speaking what they think. Because their thoughts are clearer and more lasting, they may bear a greater burden. They may find themselves possessed by the urge to speak more frequently and more lastingly than others.

In addition the philosopher has inside himself something that others do not possess with the same degree of consciousness or clarity, an image of the order that they seek in pursuing the truth. This image of order gives the philosopher a finer sense for the fitting and the beautiful. This finer sense may make it harder to stomach

the intrinsic disorder, the unfitness, the ugliness involved in circumstances where what is said does not fit with what is thought. The philosopher is more inclined than most to see the ugliness of lies. Does the philosopher find remaining silent ugly as well? For in such cases there remains still a disjuncture between what is said and what is thought. This applies as well to creative or clever ways of presenting a thought to the extent that the creative or clever shaping is not true to the thought itself.

So far then, it looks like it might be harder for a philosophically minded soul, one that seeks the orderliness of truth and that cares about the meaning of words to a higher degree than others, to stomach the cost of prudence. It might be helpful in thinking about this situation to consider the end of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and to compare it with Lichtenberg's simple aphorism that we confronted earlier. The final act of the narrative told by the "hero" of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, is a lie told to the fiancé of Kurtz. Kurtz's fiancé wants to know his last words, and Conrad lets us see the interior struggle undergone by Marlow, whom I would call a somewhat philosophic soul. He has a terrible time lying. He has Kurtz's last words so clearly in his mind that he is tempted to cry at the fiancé "Don't you hear them" as if the "dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us." The last words "The horror! The horror!" scream out in his mind. Instead of speaking those words, he tells the fiancé that Kurtz's last word was her name. Marlow feels this lying is a momentous event—"It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head." His philosophic soul feels that his words have not given Kurtz the "justice which was his due." He wants words to mean something and matter. And yet he immediately sees that "nothing happened" as a result of his lie. "The heavens do not fall for such a trifle." Marlow sees in this passage

that the fiancé is a kind of fool, and, despite some of his urges, he controls himself enough to play along and let her remain a fool. The picture at the end is not very likeable: Marlow seems to regard as ugly both the foolishness of the fiancé and the lie he tells to preserve that foolishness, but he also thinks they are less dark than would be the attempt to tell her what he really heard and knew.

Regarding the public as fools may be the best philosophers can do for themselves. Goethe in his *Koptisches Lied* says that the wisest of all times [*die Weisesten aller der Zeiten*] agree that it is “foolish to worry about improving fools,” and he advises them to “have fools just be fools still, as it belongs to them.”¹⁴ But will such an attitude prevent philosophers from running into the streets and erecting plaques proclaiming “ULTIMI BARBARORUM”?¹⁵ What does it really mean to regard other human beings or the public in general as fools? The positive aspect of regarding the public as foolish is that one recognizes the realities of our deeper and more rewarding human relations. One does not confuse flattery for love nor fame for friendship. One does not seek the impossible by trying to be close friends with many. One limits one’s attempts to be understood to those situations where being understood has a reasonable chance. The negative aspect of resigning oneself to the foolishness of the public is that one abandons a large proportion of humanity and of the world. Whenever you lie, you say in effect “I do not care enough about this person to try to give them the truth.”

¹⁴ I have translated two different word as “fools” in the two respective lines, “Toren” and “Narren.”

¹⁵ Spinoza is said to have made such a plaque when his patron and friend Jan DeWitt was literally torn to pieces by an angry mob (August 20, 1672). Spinoza was prevented from erecting that plaque proclaiming the ultimate barbarity of the mob on the site of their murder and mutilation by his landlord, who actually locked Spinoza up. One might wonder what it cost Spinoza to have been restrained. Or could Spinoza have ever come to understand something about barbarians that would make him lose all urges to speak to them through plaques?

It is clearly not easy for us to abandon hope for the public at large, and this may have something to do with the structure of our basic organic urges. Nietzsche uses the very same phrase as Goethe, “*die Weisesten aller der Zeiten*,” in the first section of his discussion of The Problem of Socrates.¹⁶ There Nietzsche says the wisest of all times are in agreement about something other than letting fools be fools. He says they all agree that life “is not fitting” [*es taugt nichts*]. Nietzsche draws the conclusion from this agreement that we ought to have a close look at these “wisest of all times.” This close look suggests that all these men judged life this way because they all had similar, sickly natures. They suffered from the bad fit between their organic instincts and the conditions of the world. Is Nietzsche’s use of Goethe’s phrase meant to be a commentary on Goethe’s *Koptisches Lied*? If so, then Nietzsche’s conclusion about the sick natures of the wisest of all times may point to the danger philosophers face when they try to abandon the public realm. For treating it as foolish, lying to it, trying to manipulate it, is a kind of abandonment of it.

If our judgment, our human reason, abandons (either wholly or in part) the betterment of the public because it is either absolutely or practically impossible, it may not be easy or even fully possible for parts of us that are not fully human, but merely organic, to follow suit. There seem to be sources of how we feel about things, whether and to what degree we take pleasure in them, that are not fully human. Prudence cannot simply generate our feelings but must work with them as givens. And in order to do so it must try to take cognizance of the sources of our feelings. After all, how we feel about things affects the degree to which they are advantageous for us. Prudence lays claim to calculating what is fitting, but in restraining speech it has to swallow a kind of the unfitting. There is

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzendämmerung*, “Das Problem des Sokrates.”

a disjuncture between the most direct satisfaction of our organic urges and the conditions of the world that we do and perhaps must live in. This disjuncture will likely always bear a cost. I am not saying that philosophers, and other human beings, should not bear this cost. I am just saying prudence should do everything it can to try to calculate this cost. For nothing can be properly called prudence that is not cost effective. And we really should worry about this cost because in its worst forms the accumulated pain of the frustration of our organic instincts can threaten to sour our whole experience of life.

What then can we do about our situation that seems likely never to be perfectly comfortable or safe? Maybe we can attend better to the needs of that animal that resides alongside or within each of us? Maybe we can observe its functioning with much greater care and learn ways to manage its pain and augment its pleasure? Maybe we can learn better the material conditions and habits and behaviors under which our organic instincts thrive? Maybe we can even extend the scope of our humanity by making what is unconscious or instinctual in us more conscious? And if we can do something as transformative as that, maybe we can even reorient our instinctual sense of what is outside in order to make it more satisfied with the deeper and more meaningful human externalizations available to private life or even to solitary life? That is to say, maybe if we discover the real grounds of the disunity of our selves we can then do something to make of ourselves more of a unity?

Prudence needs to consider these maybes.