

The Lowly Ideals

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1 It is said that civilized nations see, in the uprightness of man's stature toward the sky rather than its bending down to the earth, a symbol of what befits the cultivated, distinguished soul: namely, ascending into the heights of refinement in pursuit of the loftiest ideals. And it is likewise said that the human soul which concerns itself with the petty and the base is unworthy of man, who was created for perfection, or at least for striving toward perfection, and is fit only for the animal, whose body bends down toward the earth, and which is condemned to live in obedience to its instincts, never going beyond them nor transcending their slight, debased purposes, which scarcely exceed the body's needs, and only rarely at that.

2 So it is said, and much like this is said besides, and many who concern themselves with upbringing and refinement content themselves with this abundance of talk, so that no sooner does a child begin to understand things and people than he is subjected to an unceasing, unrelenting downpour of counsel and admonition, of lessons and proverbs and maxims, all of it urging him to lift his head rather than lower it, to fix his gaze upon the sky rather than the earth, and never to look down at the earth except to draw from that look some knowledge, or understanding, or culture, that might return him to the sky, proud and unbowed; for he was created to gaze upon the sky, and then to strive toward it, and then to ascend within it, and then to live there in the highest company, happy, content, distinguished, raised above petty things, set apart from base things, leaving the dust of the earth to the animal from which he was made and to which he shall return.

3 And man's body was indeed created from the dust of the earth, and to it he shall surely return, there is no doubt of this; but man's body is nothing more than an instrument for his soul, his mind, his heart, and his spirit; for man is, first, a soul, and only afterward a body that serves that soul; it serves the soul so that it may test what is on this earth and come to know it, until, having satisfied its desire in all of this, it casts off this body to its origin and rises up to its own higher sphere, dwelling there in enjoyment of what it knew before it descended to the earth, and of what it discovered while it dwelt upon the earth; for the soul is, in every respect, heavenly and not earthly, and is, in every respect, created for

ascent and not for descent, for loftiness and not for lowliness, for rising and not for sinking.

4 And the child continues to hear this talk and the like of it, until, by the time he reaches youth, it has settled in his conscience that he is a distinguished being, created to dominate creation, to hold sway over the world, and to dispose of life as he himself wishes, not as life wishes; and the outward appearance of things confirms this vanity in his soul, and adorns this pride in his heart, and fills him with admiration for himself, and contentment with himself, and love for himself; so he harnesses matter and force to his own purposes and interests, and makes use of the animals for his own needs and designs, and exploits the weak among his own kind to satisfy his pleasures, his desires, his ambitions, and his aspirations, and because of all this he believes in himself, trusts in his own superiority, and is certain that he has been appointed, by right, as God's own vicegerent upon the earth.

5 And I do not know whether this reasoning holds true, and this talk proves accurate, when measured against this generation of Egyptians among whom we live, or whether it fails to hold true and proves false! For it is nothing but idle talk upon idle talk, words upon words, surplus from the realm of foolish discourse; for the stature of Egyptians rises into the air just as the stature of other people does, and their eyes are equally capable of looking at the sky and of looking at the earth, and their souls are equally capable of ascending into the heights of refinement in search of the loftiest ideals — but the wretched among them find no means to any of this, for the life of their bodies occupies them at the expense of the life of their souls, and their immediate interests divert them from their distant interests, and the base ideals consume the whole of their efforts, leaving them nothing to spend in pursuit of the loftiest ideals. And the matter is exceedingly simple, requiring neither depth nor investigation to understand and establish.

6 For the nature of the teacher is to be occupied with knowledge to the exclusion of all else, and to be occupied with knowledge so as to elevate himself by it, and to elevate his students along with him to the loftiest horizons, and thereby to grant people, first, the means to rise, and, second, the means to make use of nature in the pursuit of that rising. And the nature of the student is to look upon his teacher as elevated above all this, and so to take delight in him, and to cling to the means he offers, so as to rise as his teacher rises, and to ascend with him to his loftiest horizons, and to enjoy with him this good that we call knowledge,

and art, and letters.

7 But where are the teachers and the students of Egypt, amid all of this?! Is it truly the case that knowledge occupies them to the exclusion of all else?! Or is the whole truth, rather, that the teacher thinks of his own food, drink, and clothing, and of the food, drink, and clothing of his family, far more than he thinks of knowledge and teaching? And because of this, he takes knowledge and teaching as a means — not to rising himself and raising his student, but to living, and enabling his family to live; and because of this, he notices that knowledge and teaching do not provide for him as they ought to provide; so he demands more provision, and then goes to his fellow teachers so that they might all together demand more provision, and then they organize this demand together, and then they struggle together in its cause, and then they persist together in this struggle, and then this struggle occupies them to the exclusion of knowledge and teaching; so they gather only to disperse, and disperse only to gather again, and write memoranda, and hold conferences, and publish in the newspapers, and give speeches at assemblies, and occupy themselves with themselves, and occupy the Ministry of Education with themselves, and occupy parents and children with themselves as well, and amid all of this, education itself is lost; so that no teacher delights in it, and no student profits from it.

8 And if the teachers are granted some time, and withdraw to be alone with their students and pupils, do the students and pupils then give their full attention to the lessons their professors and teachers deliver to them in these brief hours, snatched away from their struggle for a livelihood? Or do the students and pupils grant their professors and teachers no more than half, or a third, or a quarter, of their attention, occupying the rest of it with their own near or distant future, with the value of the diplomas and certificates they are pursuing — because education, for them, is not a means of elevating the soul, refining character, raising morals, and purifying taste, but rather a means of obtaining the certificate or diploma that stands in place of these pounds, which will allow them, once they become men, to buy what they eat, drink, and wear.

9 So students and pupils are eager above all to make certain of the value of their certificates and diplomas, and that this value must rise, because the prices of food and clothing rise every day; and they pay for their education sums that the state collects; so it follows that these sums must yield them, in return, diplomas and certificates that give back to

them what money they have spent. The whole affair, then, is nothing more and nothing less than a piece of commerce: the teacher sells knowledge, so the state must pay for this knowledge a price that allows its possessor to live; and the state sells the knowledge it takes from the teacher to the students and pupils for these fees it collects from them; so this transaction, between the state and the young, must be a profitable one that allows the young to live once they become men. As for upbringing and cultivation, and the refinement of character, and the purification of taste, and the raising of morals, and the elevation of the soul to the highest company, to suit the body's upright stature rising into the air, and the making of man into man in the precise sense of that word in civilized societies — all of these are things no one looks to or troubles over; they simply are, or are not, and come, or do not come, and are welcomed if they come, and go unasked-after if they do not; what matters is only that the teachers and their families should live, and that the teachers be provided with the means that enable them to live; as for anything beyond this, it is mere incidental detail, of no value and worth no thought.

10 And set aside the teachers and students, and look at the other cultivated classes; you will find that their individuals, too, are occupied with food and clothing to the exclusion of the loftiest ideals, the noblest purposes, and the highest hopes; for people must, it seems, live before they can even think of progress, let alone strive toward it, let alone attain their own share of it, let alone increase that share further still. And do not ask yourself, after this, why civilization, in all its various branches, advances in the civilized countries of Europe and America while remaining stagnant in Egypt, even though it had advanced through many stages of ancient Egyptian life!

11 For the cause of this is exceedingly close at hand and exceedingly simple; for civilization does not advance unless the cultivated, of every class and every shade of culture, are free to devote themselves to its advancement, and they are not free to devote themselves to it unless their own stomachs and bodies are relieved of the burdens of food and clothing, and the stomachs and bodies of their families are likewise relieved of the burdens of food and clothing and the costs of this foolish material life. And God has not given a man two hearts within his breast; He has given him but a single heart, and this single heart will either be occupied with knowledge, learning, and the loftiest ideals in all their variety, or be occupied with food and clothing; but that it should be

occupied with the loftiest ideals and the basest ideals both at once is a thing beyond any possibility at all.

12 And so long as the cultivated among the Egyptians, of every class and every persuasion in life, remain occupied with what sustains them and sustains their families, and keeps for them and their families this material life that resolves, in the end, into food and clothing, and a wakefulness consumed by struggle, and a sleep haunted by foolish dreams that likewise concern nothing but food and clothing — then expect from them no good for culture, and expect from them no advancement for civilization; and do not say that Egypt has generations of cultivated men raising up the human soul to suit its upright, elevated stature, aspiring themselves and spreading aspiration toward the loftiest ideals; but say instead, whether you like it or not, whether it pleases you or grieves you, that Egypt has cultivated men who take culture as a means and not an end, and take it as a means to the basest ideals, not to the loftiest.

13 And God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves, and when God wills evil upon a people, there is no turning it back, nor have they, besides Him, any protector at all.