# Fruit of the Spirit

**by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2023)**

*Fate,* Alphonse Mucha, 1920

**No one ever peeled an** apple as well as my father. When I was about eight or nine, he would pick an apple from a tree in the garden, sit down on a stone step, and start to peel it. More than sixty years later, I have never seen anyone peel an apple better.

For this purpose, he would use his penknife, which had more than one instrument attached to it. For example, it had a kind of thin metal poker with which he would clean out the stem of his pipe of its black slime. He used the knife blade itself to clean out the bowl of his pipe, and did not wipe it before starting to peel: he relied on the first curl of peel to do that for him.

He peeled it without ever breaking the peel, which curled off the apple like the interior of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Then he would cut a slice for me, without tobacco stains.

The apples—Cox's—were always sour, which is the only way I like apples to this day, indeed all fruit. Sweet fruit repels me. (One of my constant laments is that the yellow grapefruit has been replaced commercially almost entirely by the pink variety, though whether in response to, or in order to mould the taste of the public, I do not know. The yellow variety are sourer, of course, but sugar now suffuses our food like slow poison insinuated into it by a mass poisoner, so that the absence of sugar is more noticed by consumers than its presence.)

Oddly enough, it never occurred to me to ask why a Cox's apple (which in my mind's dictionary was spelled Coxes) was so called. Indeed, the question never came into my mind until just now, when Wikipedia informed me—so it must be so—that the apple was named for Robert Cox, a nineteenth century British horticulturalist, who apparently never lived to see the triumph of his variety of apple.

While I was at it, I looked up Bramley, the nonpareil variety of English cooking apple, sour enough for my father and I to eat it raw. Bramley was a nineteenth century butcher who, it seems, appropriated the variety from the woman who first developed it. *Typical!* I hear some readers exclaim. Perhaps they will start a movement to boycott Bramley apples until

they are renamed, or even attack shops that continue sell them under that name. There is no more pleasurable emotion, after all, than righteous indignation.

Now when I think of my taste for sour fruit, which I seem to have inherited from my father, I wonder how exactly it was passed on to me. By genes? No doubt research would show some kind of concordance in taste for fruit among monozygotic twins separated at birth, thus establishing the part played by genetic factors in taste, but the concordance rate is unlikely to 100 per cent even if it is greater than could be expected by chance.

Perhaps I imitated my father's tastes because I admired him and thought that he was an authority in all things. (He was inclined to believe that his tastes were 'correct' in some objective sense, and that those who had tastes other than his own were wrong. In this, I am all too aware that I tend to follow him though, unlike him, I try to control my inclination. Could this inclination, too, be genetic?) And of course, habit becomes taste with time: one likes what one is used to. Fed sour fruit, I came to like no other. Alas, I have never acquired my father's skill in peeling apples.

Increasingly, when I look in the glass, I see my father: the resemblance grows stronger by the year; at one time it was hardly visible but is now obvious. I even catch myself making gestures that he would have made. Until a few years ago, I was not aware of this, though whether anyone else who knew us both was aware of this similarity of gesture I cannot say.

The puzzle of how we become what we are is insoluble. When I was young and callow and a hard-line determinist, I would simply say that we become what we are by the influence of heredity and environment, for what else could there be? Heredity and environment, and that was that.

The philosopher, Galen Strawson, was, or is, of like mind. He

provided a kind of syllogism proving that no man was responsible for his behaviour. It goes, if I have understood him correctly, something like this:

> *We all act as we do because of how we are.*
> *We cannot help how we are.*
> *Therefore, we are not responsible for our acts.*

Is it true that we act as we do because of how we are? This seems to me either false, or unfalsifiable. To take the latter possibility first, we estimate the rather loose idea of 'who we are' by the way we behave, the preferences we have, the habits we develop, and so forth. But then we go on to say that what is to be explained is the explanation of itself. We behave as we do because of how we are, and we know how we are because of how we behave. I have seen this argued in court by psychiatrists trying to exculpate a murderer and once (but only once) saw it work. Poor lambs, the murderers could not help what they did because they had the type of character that inclined them to go round murdering people.

There is a weaker version of the idea that we do what we do because of how we are: namely, that if I go for a walk, it is because I am the kind of person who likes going for a walk. This, however, is not quite the same as saying that I can do no other than take the walk that I actually do take or am taking. A habit, however strong, is not destiny. I have a drink in the evening, but this does not mean that I have no choice but to take a drink in the evening, or that I do not have to decide to take that drink, that it happens without any intervening cerebration on my part.

In short, saying that we do what we do because of how we are is either true by definition or it is false. If the former, it is unilluminating, and if the latter—well, it is just false.

Then we come to the question of whether we cannot help how we are which, roughly speaking, is our character. Can one decide to have a character other than the one that one has?

It is a matter of common agreement that habit becomes character. For example, I used to have a very bad temper, but realising that it was a bad thing to have, I made a conscious effort to control it, and before long there was nothing, or at least much less, to control.

Against this, Strawson would argue that my apprehension that to have a bad temper was bad, and my decision to try and control it, was itself part of my pre-existing character, and therefore was just as much determined (by circumstances, genes, etc.) as the bad temper itself. And certainly, it seems difficult to escape this argument. Eventually we must reach a point in the past in the development of a person's character when it would be absurd to claim that he was responsible for his own character. Therefore, at no point is he responsible for what he is. When Luther said at the Diet of Worms that there he stood, he could do no other, he was absolutely right, though not for the reasons he thought, but because, on the Strawson view, no one could ever do other than what he does do.

I am not sure what the philosophical or practical moral consequences of this doctrine would be. Determinists, when they think of crime, generally think of the criminal's behaviour as determined, but on their own hypothesis so is that of the prosecutor, the judge and so forth. These are no more to be blamed for the trial, with its false distinctions between actions for which the accused can be held responsible and those for which he cannot be so held, for example because he was mad, than is the criminal. No one is responsible for anything, and all that happens could not have happened otherwise than it did happen.

I do not believe that anyone could live as if this were true,

at least with regard to himself. Amongst other things, it would make consciousness redundant. Why have we developed powers of thought, which include those of considering alternatives and choosing between them, if those powers serve no purpose, by which I mean did not cause us to behave differently from how we would have done without it? We would all be what Descartes thought the lesser animals were, namely automata. We would have to believe that our own conscious thoughts were but epiphenomena and made no difference to anything, and I do not believe that anyone is capable of sincerely believing this. Not, of course, that by itself this would necessarily make it false: it is perfectly possible that, because of our very biological nature, we are incapable of believing something that is true.

Likewise, I do not think that anyone is able to think of his fellow human beings as automata, except when he is thinking in the most abstract philosophical terms. When he descends into street, in his daily life, he is exactly the same as everyone else. If you tickle a determinist does he not laugh, if you prick him does he not bleed? And if you wrong him, shall he not be revenged?

I do not have a full understanding of how people become themselves, or of how I became what I am myself. It is a mystery that passes my understanding, and I suspect (and hope) that it is a mystery that will always escape human beings: for if it ceased to be a mystery, it would cease only for some and not for others, and those for whom it ceased to be a mystery would almost certainly abuse their superior understanding to harm, exploit, or abuse the rest. Those who understood would be in the position of extra-terrestrials who landed on earth and, observing humans as entomologists observe ants, would be able to regard them as mere animated objects (not, as it happens, that we are very good at controlling ants, and if ever there is a final struggle between man and insect, it will be the insect that wins). But however much the extra-

terrestrials thought they understood us, I do not think they would be able to understand themselves. They in turn would need beings who were alien to them to understand them fully; and those aliens in turn would not understand themselves.

In other words, no completely self-understanding creature will ever be possible, because the explainer and the to-be-explained are one and the same. This, perhaps, does not disprove determinism; but it does make it a profoundly unilluminating doctrine. We can only live as if it were not true, even if it were true.

I am still no nearer to understanding why I like only sour or acid fruit. I think back to my father as he handed me a slice of sour apple. Was this the reason? In which case, what was the reason that he, an evangelist for his own tastes, handed it to me? Was he trying to set me on the right path? Did it ever occur to him to do other than he did?

We moved away to a house whose garden had no apple trees. Twenty years later—I had left, of course, long before—my father moved again and had another garden which produced sour fruit: blackcurrants, gooseberries, Cox's orange pippins (to give them their full title). To this day, I can eat only relatively unripe mangoes or pineapples, and when fruit is advertised as sweet, I avoid it, considering it as half-rotten already.

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**Theodore Dalrymple's** latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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