

New Pugs Club Member?



by Theodore Dalrymple

Our cleaning lady in France brings her dog with her. The dog has been a great solace to her during a difficult stage in her life. She bought her from a breeder who used her as a mother of puppies, but since she (the dog) was well past her peak fertility, the breeder had no further use for her and wanted to discard her as a battery chicken farmer discards chickens who no longer lay sufficient eggs. Even so, the cleaning lady paid what seems to me like quite a lot for her.

The dog is one of the few breeds of canines for which I do not much care, namely a pug. Pugs run to fat and are extremely ugly. Their pushed-in faces render them almost expressionless, and they always seem to have difficulty breathing, like men with very fat necks. They seem to have no personality.

How, or rather why, anyone came to breed them is a mystery to me. Did they have a kind of Platonic pug in mind to which, generation after generation, they approximated the dog? It seems to me a cruel thing to have done. I cannot believe that pugs get much fun out of life.

And yet I have grown rather fond of the cleaning lady's dog. It is not only that she is doing her mistress a good turn by existing, by bringing her solace in the midst of tragedy, though all that is true; it is, rather, that the dog now seems to show some liking for me, comes to me unbidden with as much pleasure as a pug can show, and likes (as far as I can tell) to be stroked my me.

There is more, however. I find myself thinking, "It is not her fault that she is so ugly, she was born that way." To turn away from her, to reject her advances, just because she is ugly, which she cannot help, would be wrong. By slow degrees my pity turns to liking or at least affection—though I hasten to add that I still would not choose a pug as a dog, or any breed of dog, in fact, with a squashed-in face.

I daresay Nietzsche would have had contempt for my sympathy with and compassion for my cleaning lady's dog. For him, I would be demonstrating my slave mentality in stroking the dog and speaking to her sentimentally, rather than shouting at her and giving her a good kick because she is a mere *Unterhund*.

Still, the thought that she cannot help what she is always remains present in my mind and leads me not merely to tolerate her but to make a fuss of her.

As it happens, the last time the cleaning lady came we had a psychiatrist staying with us, of the *to understand all is to forgive all* school. This is what G.K. Chesterton meant when he said that, after Christianity, the Christian virtues would not be lost, they would run mad. With the death of God, people would replace Him in the forgiveness stakes, and in their

universal but grandiose benevolence they would go round ostentatiously forgiving everyone—for what they did to others, of course.

Anyhow, the psychiatrist who wanted to bestow his absolution on all the wrongdoers of the world said that criminals had had terrible childhoods. I said that this might be true—although *all* would be an exaggeration—but that it might not have the consequences that the psychiatrist did not, at least consciously, wish for.

If it were true that criminals committed crimes because of their terrible childhoods by some kind of unbreakable link, and if, as a matter of empirical fact, their past could not be altered, then having had a bad childhood would be as good a reason for draconian severity as for lenience—a better reason, in fact, insofar as the function of the criminal law is to protect the law-abiding.

“Yes,” reiterated the psychiatrist, “but criminals *have* had terrible childhoods.” As Napoleon long ago pointed out, repetition is the only really effective rhetorical device.

Now, of course, philosophers among my readers (if any) will immediately point out that the distinction between what we can help and what we can’t is one that, as the psychiatrist pointed out, is not black and white. We grow into freedom and responsibility rather than having it pinned on us all of a sudden like a medal on a military chest. Clearly, there are things for which we are not responsible: Who by taking thought can add a cubit to his height, etc.? But there are those who try to make the inability to add a cubit to one’s height the model of all human existence. We cannot help but be what we are, or do what we do.

The coinciding presence of the pug and the psychiatrist brought me back to the questions of free will and the nature of morality. The pug, like most pugs, was fat, and the

cleaning lady said that she (the dog) would eat any quantity of food placed before her and continue long after her physical hunger must have been assuaged. This is a question of breed: There are some breeds of dogs that are not greedy—in this context, I use the word without attendant moral connotation or condemnation—and retain the same weight however much food is put before them. They stop eating when they have had enough, physiologically speaking.

The difference between these breeds of dog is, of course, biological rather than moral, and indeed there is a breed of mice, the ob/ob mouse, that has been genetically engineered for obesity. Needless to say, these observations have been seamlessly transferred to humans. No one is fat or thin but genetics makes him so.

The same goes for all that we do. I recall a conversation with a burglar in the prison in which I worked. I asked him why, if he kept on being caught, he continued to burgle.

“I’m a burglar,” he said. “Burgling’s what I do.”

And I’m a writer. Writing’s what I do. Still, I can’t help wondering about the source of our differing fates, without coming to the conclusion that either of us is an automaton.

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