

The Golden Age of Unctuousness

We live in a golden age of unctuousness, at least if the covers of the Lancet, one of the most important medical journals in the world, are anything to go by. On those covers, the editor, or some employee of the journal, chooses a sentence from the current edition to be inscribed upon it in large letters, presumably on the grounds of its importance or elegance.

The last time I looked, the sentence picked out for this distinction was as follows:

Put simply, planetary health is the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends.

Perhaps I should not criticise the sentence too severely for as Dr Johnson said it is useless to criticise what will not be read: but is there any other kind of civilisation, I wonder, than human? Armadillo civilisation, for example, or anaconda?

If, as Buffon remarked, the style is the man himself, then whoever wrote the above had the soul of an apparatchik: but also of a moral exhibitionist. He was not so much trying to convey a truth – it is not altogether easy to discern what the words actually mean – as convey an impression of himself as a person of vast intellectual concern and moral vision.

What is 'planetary health'? Does it mean the health of the planet itself, or of the people living on it? If the former, what exactly is a healthy planet? Is Pluto or Uranus a healthy planet because there are no living creatures on it to pollute its atmosphere?

What exactly is a healthy civilisation? A civilisation in which all people are healthy, or at least as healthy as possible? But how does health differ from civilisation? Is civilisation more important than health or the other way round? The people of many civilisations were not healthy by our standards, but their civilisations were magnificent. Are we to believe that no civilisation was healthy until our own? And will our civilisation cease to have been healthy once a future population is healthier than ours?

It is hardly worth pondering these questions, because the meaning of the words, if any, is not their point. Put simply, indeed! Put simply, our age, or at least the Lancet, seems to have an infinite appetite for high-sounding, sanctimonious, sentimental, self-righteous, Pecksniffian guff of this kind, a kind of substitute for evangelical preaching at its most nauseatingly complacent. The covers of the Lancet are like a hybrid of Pravda and Elmer Gantry.

First published in