



The Truth About Human Nature

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After watching the recent cinematic version of *Gulliver's Travels* with my thirteen-year-old son, I asked him what he thought the moral of the story was. He replied, "Don't lie." That's not a bad answer: both the original book and the new adaptation, starring Jack Black as a modern-day Gulliver, have at their core the issues of truth-telling and lying, authenticity and hypocrisy, and illusion and reality. But while the new film shows Gulliver on a clear journey from self-deception to straightforwardly depicted authenticity, in his original version, Jonathan Swift presents a much more complex understanding of how lying and honesty fit into human nature.

There is a long heritage to the idea that literature is not only an image but a lie. The ancient Greek poet Hesiod tells us that it is the special gift of the muses to "speak many false things as though they were true." Plato famously banishes the poets from his ideal city, considering it anathema to true philosophy. Modern philosophy and science have advanced a notion of truth as pure and simple factuality that is opposed to the rich contextuality and ambiguity found in literature. Thomas Hobbes condemns metaphor as illusion, arguing

that true statements are constructed of exact definitions and "perspicuous words." John Locke attacks "all the artificial and figurative application of Words [that] Eloquence hath invented." The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham claims that "between poetry and truth there is a natural opposition."

The truth about truth is rather more complicated. Plato's claim that "there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry," for example, is belied by his use of the literary form of the dialogue, which attests to the more common recognition by the ancients of the power of literature—through images and indeed through lies—to lead us to the truth. Swift would surely not have disagreed that literature holds the power to deceive viciously. Yet he was on to a much more subtle understanding of how we can best find and communicate the truth—an issue whose difficulty is pointed to not only by the subject matter of his satirical masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) but by its very form as a satire. Satire purports to tear off the falsehoods that paper over our awareness; so why does it take the form of fiction—a lie?

Swift upheld the belief shared by most of the ancients that, properly

guided, the lying muses have the power to lead us to the truth. Satire is one very particular form of this lying—ancient in origin but especially prominent in the modern age. More than other literary forms, satire uses carefully crafted lies to convey truths that would be harder to accept or even recognize if presented simply as “fact.” Gulliver’s name may itself reflect this idea: Dr. Johnson’s dictionary tells us that a “gull” is someone who is easily tricked or deceived, yet the “ver” suggests *veritas*, the Latin word for truth. Gulliver’s journey then, as ours, is one of being deceived into the truth. At its best, satire—like philosophy—is able to make the familiar strange, revealing to us what has been in front of us all along.

In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift challenges the idea—advanced by his Enlightenment contemporaries—that truth, including the truth about human nature, is best understood as a matter of simple factual claims. Swift’s view, as we shall see, was that dedication to this rising scientific view of truth as synonymous with fact precisely misses the very essence of human nature. But Swift’s recognition of the subtle relationship between our capacity for lying and the essential truth about human nature also sets him apart from another modern opponent of the Enlightenment, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche picked up as a kind of motto a mis-

translated line from the Second Pythian Ode, a work by the Ancient Greek poet Pindar: “Become what you are.” In Nietzsche’s existentialist understanding (later appropriated in a similar fashion by Martin Heidegger), the phrase is an injunction to drop the delusion of an ideal *you*, along with any moral overlay it implies, and simply to identify fully with yourself as a bundle of drives. “Become what you are” means for him “Become what you happen to be, not what you think you *should* be.” That is, *amor fati*: love your fate!

There is another way to interpret Pindar’s injunction: the essentialist, or classical understanding. This better adheres to a more accurate translation of the poem, which would read something like, “Become such as you are, having learned what that is.” Plato and Aristotle held that we have a *telos*—an end toward which we are pointed. This end is our true self, and the best life is spent trying to understand what that self is, and to become it. For an essentialist, “Become what you are” means “Become who you *truly* are, and stop being sidetracked by partial lower drives.”

Although they are in a strict sense opposed to one another, the essentialist and existentialist positions share one crucial insight into the human condition: whatever we are, we are in some sense *not* what we are. We must choose between identifying with different versions of ourselves; because we act and shape ourselves

according to our self-understanding, identifying with the wrong version makes our lives something false, incapable of fulfilling their end. Yet even a correct identification does not accomplish full “genuineness” because we are always in the process of becoming fully ourselves, and thus are always in part “not what we are.”

Since Nietzsche, the choice of which version of ourselves we identify with has been widely understood as a choice between lying and truth-telling—to ourselves as much as to others. The moral ideal has become authenticity—a particular kind of honesty. Of course, just about any philosophical ideal is grounded in some sort of honesty: the search for Truth requires truth. Yet Aristotle describes honesty as a virtue only of self-presentation—the balance between self-deprecation and boastfulness. And Plato never lists honesty as a virtue at all, and even distinguishes between “true lies” and useful or noble lies. From the modern to the post-modern era, honesty and authenticity shifted to become much of the *telos* of life, where before they had been but means in our progress toward that end.

In Swift’s poem “The Beasts’ Confession” (1738), written several years after *Gulliver’s Travels* was published, he makes clear that lying, as a human condition, is neither accidental nor escapable. The beasts, speaking as the voice of this poem, do

confess their faults, but they defend themselves also, on the basis that what they do is simply who they are. If that weren’t true—if the beasts could be mistaken about who they are, or could deceive themselves—then they would “degenerate into men.” Swift’s essentialist understanding of human nature—what distinguishes it from all other natures—is that we are the creatures who lie to ourselves about who we are.

This is why in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift presents his ostensibly ideal race, the Houyhnhnms, as an entirely different species—a kind of horse that speaks, but is incapable of saying or comprehending “the thing which is not.” But if the distinction between humans and animals is the capacity to lie—which is entailed in the capacity or perhaps necessity of being other than we are—then the Houyhnhnms are the perfection or the fulfilled *telos* of animal nature, not of human nature. The Houyhnhnms are passionless and perhaps compassionless. They are a projection of the mistaken British empiricist view of what we truly are. The Yahoos, meanwhile, are humanlike in appearance, and a grotesque cartoon of the existentialist understanding of what we truly are—creatures that are a random tumble of irrational drives. The Yahoos and Houyhnhnms are mirror depictions of humanity shorn of its capacity to deceive; yet neither the self-less Houyhnhnm nor the selfish Yahoo is a picture of our

true nature—not its source, nor its perfected or authentic state. It is far from clear, then, that getting beyond the capacity to commit falsehood perfects human nature.

Houyhnhnm reason is the purely unimaginative, non-speculative, dispassionate grasping of bare facts. When Gulliver tells the Master Horse where he is from and how he got to their land, the horse replies

that I must needs be mistaken, or that I said the thing which was not....He knew it was impossible that there could be a country beyond the sea, or that a parcel of brutes could move a wooden vessel whither they pleased upon water. He was sure no Houyhnhnm alive could make such a vessel, nor would trust Yahoos to manage it.

What the Houyhnhnm cannot easily imagine must be untrue. Their inability to knowingly lie is identical with their inability to see beyond facts—to imagine, to speculate, and even to have opinions. As Gulliver reports, “I remember it was with extreme difficulty that I could bring my master to understand the meaning of the word *opinion*, or how a point could be disputable; because *reason* taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain; and beyond our knowledge we cannot do either.” Despite their seemingly hard-nosed rational empiricism, there is in fact dogmatism in their rejection of anything beyond what is familiar to them.

The irony is thus that, in their insistence on not saying “things which are not,” the Houyhnhnms do not truly understand what is—and so are after all capable of speaking falsehoods. The Master Horse, for example, claims to *know* that there could not be a country beyond the sea. And without opinions, they are incapable of genuine and potentially truth-revealing speculation and inquiry. Moreover, not understanding what could be, they cannot even begin to grasp what *should* be. (Indeed, Swift tells us that the word Houyhnhnm even means “the perfection of nature”—and of course when in a state of perfection, the notion of *should* has no meaning.) In the Houyhnhnms’ incapacity to see anything as representing, evoking, or pointing to something else, they are enemies of the muses. Houyhnhnms show no concern for a search for Truth; they are a species that simply tells the “truth”—or at least, the facts of the matter. To those who never delude themselves, nothing is ever hidden—and therefore truth is not something that need be sought, but rather something that lies always plainly before us.

A life devoted to Truth as mere fact is repulsive to human beings. This is nowhere as obvious as when the Houyhnhnms look at death: They are incapable of experiencing loss, because they never abstract themselves from the immediate present and immediate facts. They are

animals that have perfected their animal nature, living lives of truth as pure factuality. It is of course a common human pretension to strive for just such a thing. Gulliver, in his narrative, claims “to relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style.” This claim, of course, is absurd, made as it is in a story that is wildly satirical fiction, and it is clearly not the view of Swift, the true narrator. The truth he seeks is not one of plain facts, plainly stated, but of something else.

So lies, which Swift takes to be part of our essential nature, are not the target of his satire. The enemy of human authenticity and flourishing is pride, the pinnacle of which is the denial of the lies inherent in our nature. After his sojourn with the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver resigns himself to the idea that he and his species are just a bunch of Yahoos, and writes:

My reconciliation to the Yahoo kind in general might not... be so difficult, if they would be content with those vices and follies only, which nature has entitled them to.... But when I behold a lump of deformity, and diseases both in body and mind, smitten with pride, it immediately breaks all the measures of my patience.

Gulliver’s disgust with the pride, rather than simply the vices of the Yahoos, brings to mind Swift’s criti-

cism of human hypocrisy in “The Beasts’ Confession”: our defining vice is fooling ourselves about our vices. The ultimate form of this vice—fooling ourselves about our capacity to fool ourselves—is what takes us outside the realm of nature; it is the essence of not being who we are.

A prime source of this delusory pride is the detachment of reason from passion and the apotheosis of mere fact-grabbing as the essential nature of reason itself. In the land of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos, we see reason and passion precisely separated, housed respectively in these two creatures. In the Houyhnhnms, we see reason without passion, and in the Yahoos, a depiction of our raw nature, absent reason—and that nature is shown as grotesque, suggesting that our reason masks our natural depravity. Yet it is not at all clear whether simply “adding” reason to this nature, if we somehow could, would ameliorate or intensify its odiousness.

When Gulliver’s Houyhnhnm host hears his sympathetic account of the ways of law and war of contemporary Europe, Gulliver reports that he responds, “When a creature pretending to reason, could be capable of such enormities, he dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself.” Gulliver’s host later adds that he views humans as having been given “some small pittance of reason,” of which we have made “no other use than by its

assistance to aggravate our natural corruptions, and to acquire new ones which Nature had not given us.”

Indeed, through most of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift seems to present rationality as enslaved to passion—which might lead us to consider the liberation of reason from passion to be Swift’s ideal. But in his depiction of the Houyhnhnms, we begin to see that rationality detached from life and feeling would make us strangers to ourselves. This point is even more obvious in *A Modest Proposal*, the famous 1729 tract in which Swift proposes a decidedly novel solution to the problems poverty and unemployment. The satire in that work rests on the trope of treating human affairs as if they were only factual matters—in this case, questions of economics.

The pretense is that moral thought can be reduced to practical calculation. Swift criticizes the moral weakness of mothers who have abortions or commit infanticide, which he describes as a “horrid practice,” while himself posing the more economically sound solution of selling children for food. The joke, of course, is that, in earnestly proposing a solution to monstrosity, the author casually proposes one far greater. It is the reduction of moral thought to nothing more than calculating rationality that is the true source of the writer’s cruelty—and perhaps of the peculiar track record of modernity for the same, in spite of its Enlightenment.

Gulliver’s Travels ends with an illustration of those ills to which detached rationality and truth-telling are prone. Gulliver begins the story as a man typical of his society, subject to its prejudices and cruelties—and to the pride it shows in having a ready, articulated defense for those prejudices and cruelties. The scene in which he explains those mores to the Houyhnhnm is something of a microcosm of the whole story: in defending his own land in the context of another, Gulliver reveals to the reader its absurdities—and begins to realize them himself. When Gulliver returns home, he has become as disgusted by England as were the Houyhnhnms.

It is easy to read this conclusion as a straightforward story of enlightenment or revelation of the false beliefs and horrible cruelties then concealed beneath the edifice of order and civilization so carefully constructed atop European, and especially British, society. And though one perhaps ought not to take too seriously the new Jack Black version, it is notable that it basically adheres to this simple reading: the movie ends with a man who, by learning to tell the truth, magically overcomes the rational illness of our time, ironic alienation, to become an honest man of virtue.

At the end of his travels Gulliver similarly thinks he has progressed from being a ‘gull’ whose thought was polluted by attachments and passions to being an honest rational man. He concludes his story

by characterizing himself as someone with “an utter detestation of all falsehood or disguise” and claims that “truth appeared so amiable to me, that I determined upon sacrificing every thing to it.” His journeys transform him from an ordinary person muddling through to an angry, absolutist idealist who will not touch his wife, despises his own family, and seeks only the company of horses.

But the meaning Swift himself intends to convey is both much more and much less radical than Gulliver’s rejection of the imperfectly woven passions and reasons that constitute any real human society. Swift shows us that Gulliver’s self-delusion and cruelty are spurred by his realization of the falsehoods that hide or make palatable the depravities and cruelties to which every culture is prone. His newfound love of passionless truth is the source of his truly cruel treatment of those he should love.

Gauging himself by the unnatural “natural” standard of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver learns to scorn his own nature. He would rather talk to the physical images of purified rationality (domestic horses) than to imperfect but real exemplars of enmeshed and tangled rationality, his family and community. He violates the central principal of Swift and his fellow Tories—that imperfect traditional life has organic wholeness, and all-encompassing rational projects of

improvement are often ignorant of the sinews and tendons they tear. Ripping rationality from the human passions, disengaging fact-seeking from imagination, and then using this denuded rationality to disassemble one’s culture and connections is as absurd as deciding that it is better to be a horse.

While the pride of the common human being may be a willful ignorance of our faults, the pride of the rational absolutist is a mixture of self-hatred and pious self-worth. In contrast to either interpretation of “Become what you are,” Gulliver scorns what we happen to be while canonizing and longing for what we are not. His dedication to truth—the bloodless facticity of the Houyhnhnms—is his madness. Dedication to the truth of abstracted rationality, and perhaps most of all to the pursuit of seemingly concrete facts that scientific empiricism promotes, tends toward this absolutism. As with many misanthropes, from Molière’s to those who “just keep it real” today, Gulliver’s professed dedication to a narrow sort of truth-telling makes him a liar in his very core.

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