

MARK TWAIN, PSYCHOLOGIST

SIR JOHN ADAMS

MARK Twain was no exception to the rule that humorists long to be taken seriously; so I should not have been so much surprised as I was to get from him, a generation ago, a letter dealing seriously with one of the heaviest subjects—psychology, no less. The post-mark was Vienna, the date 5th. December, 1898, and it contained the gratifying information that Mark liked a book I had just published under the depressing title of *The Herbartian Psychology Applied to Education*. I had wanted to call the book *Idola Scholarum*, but my publishers knew their business too well to allow a new author to make his bow to the public under a Latin title. It will be admitted that the one they selected could hardly be called cheerful, and I have always regarded it as one of the bravest things he ever did when Mark tackled a book with such a forbidding name—in bed too! For he starts by saying:

It came at a fortunate time for me, I will remark in passing; for my wife had ordered me to stop work and spend the day in bed and rest up. And so between 10 yesterday morning and 12 at night I was able to read to page 232 without a break—an uninterrupted view: a good thing that. It is not fast reading, but then I cannot take things in swiftly if I wish to understand them—and also make marginal notes.

I was glad to learn that the bed was the cause, not the effect, of the reading. But my interest was soon directed to more important matters that rather startled me, for Mark began to psychologise;

In my mind scheme as written down last summer (it is not going to be published) there are one or two theories which I do not seem to find in your book, so I do not know whence they come to me.

Then follow seven and a half lines skilfully deleted in the most effective form of obliteration, a running series of circular “wammles” as schoolboys call them. No doubt Mr. Yardley, the cryptogram-solver, could decipher the whole in a few minutes: but I have made no attempt to bring to light what Mark evidently wanted to conceal, since he adds in a parenthesis the words “That was a confession—I am not strong enough to stand by it”.

At any rate, the unobliterated portion let me into the secret that Mark was doing a bit of psychology on his own account. It

was not till later, when crossing the Atlantic with his biographer, Mr. A. Bigelow Paine, that I learned that this psychological work must have been contained in the document colloquially known in the Clemens family circle as the "gospel", or alternatively the "bible"—a work greatly admired by its humorist author, but much disliked by his wife. I believed that these psychological researches had at the time just been begun; but the introduction to the Edition of them published in 1910 shows that I was wrong. It runs:

February, 1905. The studies for these papers were begun twenty-five or twenty-seven years ago. I have examined them once or twice per year since, and found them satisfactory. I have just examined them again, and am still satisfied that they speak the truth.

Every thought in them has been thought (and accepted as unassailable truth) by millions upon millions of men—and concealed, kept private. Why did they not speak out? Because they dreaded (*and could not bear*) the disapproval of the people around them. Why have not I published? The same reason has restrained me, I think. I can find no other.

The keynote to his "audited-and-found-correct" attitude may perhaps be found in his comments in my 1898 letter:

A curious thing is the mind, certainly. It originates nothing, creates nothing, gathers all its materials from the outside, and weaves them into combinations automatically, and without anybody's help—and doesn't even invent the combinations itself, but draws the scheme from outside suggestion.

Mark is very honest in his examination of his own fitness to discuss such matters:

For I put upon paper last summer my notion of the nature of the mind and its manner of working, aware all the time that these notions had all been drawn from exterior sources, but wholly ignorant of these sources until your book revealed them to me; for, (shall I confess it?) I have never read Locke nor any other of the many philosophers quoted by you.

Why he took up this subject, interests Mark very much. The only thing he is sure of is that the suggestion came from outside. He is convinced that nobody ever has a thought that is genuinely his own:

So all these months I have been thinking the thoughts of illustrious philosophers, and didn't know it. I merely knew that they were not my thoughts; that they all came from the outside; that neither I nor those philosophers nor any other person, has ever had a thought which was his own; a thought born on the premises; a thought not brought in from the outside.

All this tends to dampen Mark, and he confesses that his meditations have "much diminished the vanity I used to feel in being a member of the human race." He then proceeds to deplore the lamentable state of the human mind. His words run:

It does seem a little pathetic to reflect that a man's proudest possession—his mind—is a mere machine; an automatic machine; a machine which is so wholly independent of him that it will not take even a suggestion from him, let alone a command, unless it suits its humour; that both command and suggestion, when offered, originate not on the premises, but must in all cases come from the outside; that we can't make it stick to a subject (a sermon, for instance) if an outside suggestion of sharper interest moves it to desert; that our pride in it must limit itself to ownership, ownership of a machine—a machine of which we are not a part, and over whose performances we have nothing that even resembles control or authority. It is very offensive. Any tramp that comes along may succeed in setting it in motion, but *you* can't. If you say to it "Examine this solar system, or this Darwinian Theory, or this potato," you can only say it or think it when the inspiration has come to you from the outside. And to think that Shakespere and Watt and we others can't even combine our ideatches on plans original with ourselves, but that even the combination scheme must come from the outside, gathered from reading and experience!

Amid this depression, comfort is not altogether lacking, for Mark reflects:

However, I have one consolation: my automatic mental machine is not one of the fine and good ones, but a lubberly and ill-made one which is always likely to combine its raw materials into foolish and mistaken patterns—but getting its scheme from the outside, and therefore not personally blameable for its crazy work.

The noteworthy point in the whole is the genuine interest Mark displays in a subject far removed from the atmosphere with which he is usually associated. He proves his interest by his concluding statement:

It is the longest letter I have written in ten years, I think; but I do not apologise, for that would make it still longer.

We cannot wonder that a spirited man like Mark resents this interference with our mental freedom, and complains that "it is very offensive". But there is a silver lining to the cloud. We may not be able to bring our own mind to heel. But what about other minds? With them *we play the part of the tramp*. Offensive as our apparent lack of control over our own mind may be, it sug-

gests a pleasing aspect when we consider our control over the minds of others. All of us stand outside of our fellows, and therefore occupy the tramp's position of advantage. If he were but given an outside fulcrum, Archimedes claimed that he could move the earth. To each of us this fulcrum is granted so far as our relations to other people's minds are concerned, though the trouble remains about our own inward control. Naturally Mark was not content with the limited monarchy within his own head. The situation remained offensive to him: so he proceeded on his psychological career. But I was not aware of this at the time. Not knowing anything about his *gospel* or *bible*, I urged him to give to the world the results of his studies, even though he ranked among the exoterics in psychology.

The public is divided in its treatment of the expert outside his own field. One section regard the expert, after the Carlylean fashion, as intrinsically great, and invite his opinion on all manner of subjects quite outside his specialty. Another would confine him strictly to his proper beat. Without doubt he is entitled within his own domain to play the part of Sir Oracle, though most of us resent his attitude when he objects to the outsider's different bark. It is a wise plan to listen to the expert in one subject when he ventures to speak on another, basing our respectful listening on the assumption that the expert brings to the new subject a mind that is intrinsically of high quality, even though lack of specialised knowledge may disqualify him from speaking authoritatively outside his own beat. For myself, whenever I catch a man of first-rate ability dealing with a subject outside his own field, so far from neglecting his opinions, I listen with respect. He has not a sufficient background, and will often make blunders from which special knowledge protects the expert: but the intrinsically brilliant outsider, who looks in upon a specialised field, will often use his fresh eye and his undifferentiated ability in such a way as to bring out points that escape the *blasé* expert.

Accordingly, I was keen to get Mark to publish his psychological reflections, but was unsuccessful, which does not surprise me now that I know their exact nature and the influences that were at work in his home to suppress them. When in 1906 the humorist's *gospel* was printed under the title *What is Man?*, it was not particularly well received. The authorship was kept rather carefully in the background; otherwise the book would in all probability have roused a good deal of criticism, though when it did get into circulation, there was a noticeable chill among the professional philosophers. The experts found that there was nothing par-

ticularly new in the views expressed, and they could easily have produced expositions of Mark's doctrines from preceding writers. But they would have had a good deal of trouble in getting it so well expressed as in Mark's pages. The value of the book lies in its mode of presentation. Interest is roused by the freshness of approach. Here we have a remarkably vigorous writer making a direct attack upon a difficult problem. His point of view may have been adopted by others before him, but he reached his conclusions on his own account. Mark approached his subject from the standpoint of the highly intelligent "plain man", uncontaminated by the conventions of the schools. He is innocent, no doubt, of the refinements of the professional schoolmen, but he is also free from all their disqualifying inhibitions. If he cannot write in the technical language of the schools, he can present his matter in a clear and vivid way that is quite beyond the reach of the majority of philosophical experts.

It is not that he lacks a vocabulary sufficient for all the real needs of his subject. When in my letter he says:

Meantime, *which is I and which is my mind?* Are we two or are we one? However, it is not important, for if we say, "I will think", neither I nor the mind originated the suggestion—it came from outside,

could we express the meaning more clearly by introducing the terms *subjective* and *objective*?

The final name "What is Man?" given to the *gospel* when it appeared in book form helps us to decide whether we should treat its author as a psychologist or as a philosopher. Naturally he is a philosopher, as all thoughtful men are; but somehow if he is to be considered in anything approaching a technical sense, he has more in common with psychology. In any case we may shelter ourselves under a saying that is becoming exceedingly popular: "We are all psychologists, more or less".

Though Mark decided to put his title in the form of a question, he has no difficulty in finding a satisfactory answer. He puts his view quite definitely. Man is a machine: that and nothing more. In order that there may be no doubt about the machine-nature of humanity, we are told in the text that man

is moved, directed, COMMANDED, by *exterior* influences—*solely*. He originates nothing, not even a thought.

Here the idea of *outsideness*, that we have already seen emphasized, is again emphasized by the italics, while the helplessness of the

individual man is so complete that Mark cannot content himself with italics, and has to rise to capitals to give vent to his vehemence.

In view of the humble estate to which Mark has reduced us, it is a little unfair of him not to let us alone. But he yields to the temptation that seems to be irresistible among those who lower us to the machine grade. They are not content with taking from us all those spiritual qualities on which we rather pride ourselves. When they have brought us to the level of machines, and put us into our humble place among the soul-less, they might at least leave us there in peace. But they seem unable to let us alone. They must proceed to preach to us. Preach to machines! Mark is no better than the rest of them, and starts in with some gusto to deliver his sermon.

For the little book is really a sermon, though it takes the form of a dialogue. The argument is carried on between an old man and a young one. The senior gets the better of the argument, so you may safely assume that he stands for the author. It has to be confessed that the youngster is allowed to make points now and then, for the dialogue has a briskness that as a student I should have welcomed had I found it in the pages of Plato; and Mark's old man is not so uniformly triumphant as Socrates was in the ancient dialogues. But in the long run the result is the same. The old man makes the final score.

Mark's trouble is that common to all who reduce us to machines—how to get things going. Motive power is the first thing needful. It is not difficult to imagine and describe a thoroughly satisfactory man-machine. But, with the problem of setting it going and keeping it at work, the trouble begins. Mark finds the necessary motive-power in a certain inherent demand that he discovers in human nature. According to him there is one thing, and one thing only, that we all demand if we are going to live a reasonably happy life. This is *self-approval*. If we are able so to behave ourselves that we can honestly approve of what we do, satisfaction inevitably follows. There is a sort of balance of forces set up in our experience that results in a wholesome equilibrium.

The scheme is not so gross as may at first sight appear. It is not a case of prudential selfishness. The required self-satisfaction must not only be genuine, but it must be reached on a high level. A man must take account of all the higher impulses that, whether he will or no, enter into the considerations that affect his conduct. We all, even the worst among us, have at least faint intimations from within that certain lines of activity are not really justifiable: but in this imperfect world many of us deliberately suppress these

faint whisperings, and more or less deliberately deceive ourselves. Still this suppression, though it may temporarily free us from active uneasiness, by no means qualifies for the moral self-approval that plays the part of the Motive Power in Mark's moral world. It is in emphasising the need for sincerity in our moral appraisalment that he finds scope for preaching.

The resemblance to a sermon is increased by the fact that Mark has sought out a text, a text that evidently pleases him; for he not only sets it forth with some vigour, but, after the manner of the really effective preacher, repeats it. In the text it is printed twice. The *Admonition*, as he calls it, takes this form:

Diligently train your ideas upward, and still upward, toward a summit where you will find your chiefest pleasure in conduct which, while contenting you, will be sure to confer benefits upon your neighbour and the community.

A good text, and a capital sermon, if only they were found anywhere else than in a dialogue that reduces its readers to mere machines. What has a machine to do with ideas and their training? But they all preach, these man-machine-makers. They all beg the question of their hearers' power to respond to the sermon.

Every philosophy sooner or later comes to a point where it must make at least one assumption. This philosophical weakness is starkly evident among those who adopt the man-machine doctrine. When La Mettrie in his *L'Homme Machine* has reduced us comfortably to the mechanical level, he gets out of the inevitable difficulty that results by shamelessly raising us to the rank of machines *that wind their own springs*. Obviously by this outrageous assumption he raises us out of the machine class altogether. It is just this *self-windingness* that marks off the organism from the machine.

Not all the machine-philosophers fail to see the inconsistency of preaching to machines. Arnold Bennett was a born preacher, and in his brilliant little book, *The Human Machine*, almost inevitably enters the pulpit. But he preaches with more right than does Mark, for at the expense of a little loss of consistency he acquires the right to preach. Throughout the booklet he treats man consistently as a machine, but in the process he courteously but covertly begs the question by introducing an *ego* into the machine, thus quietly raising it to the rank of a personality. He frankly tells his reader: "Your brain is not yourself. It is only a part of yourself, and not the highest seat of authority". A little further on he puts the first great principle that governs the human machine into the italicised words: "*The brain is a servant, exterior to the*

central force of the ego." At the cost of a little inconsistency, Bennett puts himself right with his intelligent readers. In this assumption it will be noted that the word *exterior* is not equivalent to Mark's *outside*. Bennett includes both brain and *ego* in the one whole of personality: they act and react upon each other from within. They are both, as Mark puts it in his quaint way, "on the premises". They do not work from *outside*.

This disturbing *ego* is hateful in the eyes of all those who want to reduce us to the machine level. Professor Huxley could not speak peaceably about it, and waxed satirical at its address. He maintained that it is a mere figment of the imagination of those benighted philosophers who make much of that thing called consciousness. He has no use for this mysterious consciousness, treats it as for all practical purposes non-existent, compares it to the mere whistle of the locomotive, and refers ironically to "that masterly entity, the *ego*". He might be expected to leave it at that. But the preaching instinct comes out even in the coldly logical Huxley, and we find him, by implication at least, entering the pulpit. He does not go so far as Mark, and supply an actual text, but what could be more homiletic than that figure of his in which Man and Nature are pictured as opponents at the Chess Board of Life?

Mark does not greatly concern himself about the *ego*, though we have already seen that he is fully aware of the subjective-objective paradox. He is content to base his theory on the hard facts of life and experience. He practically challenges his readers to deny any of the data on which he builds his theory. He is full of confidence in the fundamental truth of his doctrine, as is shown by the apparently naif but really subtle declaration in his preface that he had kept the book in cold storage, as it were, for a long period during which he had taken it out and read it every year, only to find it annually more sound than ever. It was, as we have seen, "audited and found correct".

The curious thing is that many of his readers feel impelled to append their initials to Mark's note, and pass it along for inclusion in the file of documents labelled "Approved". But they would do so with regret. Even if they felt impelled to admit the truth of the arguments in *What is Man?*, they would share Mrs. Clemens's dislike of the book. Many of Mark's readers are inclined to bracket this with another of his productions that ranks high in artistic merit, but is generally disliked because of its moral atmosphere. *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg* appeared a couple of years after the *gospel*, and may be reasonably regarded as an illustration of the doctrine of the earlier book. Of the two, the Hadleyburg

story is resented more than the *gospel*, for the reason that it is an artistic presentation, and produces more personal reactions than a reasoned statement could. Readers may argue with Mark about his theories, point out what they think to be errors, and retain their own opinion still. But to the artistic presentation as found in the story they cannot but give the appropriate aesthetic response. Accordingly, if we wish to attack Mark's position, we shall do well to make our approach from the psychological side.

Falling back on the *gospel*, it may be possible to find a vulnerable point in that assumption which underlies every philosophy however clear and honest it may be. What does Mark assume in the development of his theory? What is the source of that firm conviction which he manifests so clearly, and which is shared by so many of his readers? What makes me turn from *Hadleyburg* to the *gospel* is the fact that the dialogue is really based on the assumption that we are all normally sound at bottom. We ought to be grateful to Mark for being so illogical as to preach to machines. No one denies that human nature has many evil elements, and it is perfectly fair in an artistic production to confine our attention to the evil side. But there is another side, and both must be taken into account when we come to argue about them. The dialogue form forces Mark to consider both sides of the question; and, being the fair-minded man that he was, he must bring in the good side of human nature as well as the bad. No doubt evil is more attractive artistic material than the good—hence the preference novelists feel for the villain, as shown by the amount of space given him in their books—but good must be given its legitimate place in any logical argument.

Here comes Mark's assumption, imposed upon him—one would almost think unwillingly, in view of his generally pessimistic attitude—by the nature of things. The moment he starts preaching, he is lost. His *Admonition* urges us to train our ideas upward. There is an upward, then, and we can imagine Mark smiling a little grimly as someone supports the *Admonition* by quoting Tennyson's

Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die.

But we are not only to gratify ourselves by our behaviour: that behaviour must lead to results which will be of advantage to our neighbours and the community. Now, a devil's advocate might argue here that the "benefits" conferred on the community may be in themselves evil, and that we can never be sure that our

actions will work in the right direction. But no straightforward reader of *What is Man?* will be troubled with any such misgivings. Mark is writing clearly and honestly, in his usual direct way. The illustrations that he uses, while taking away somewhat from the glow of satisfaction that comes from good deeds deliberately done, all tend to emphasise the genuine good that results to our neighbours and the community in general. Anyone who turns from *Hadleyburg* to Mark's *gospel* cannot but feel a definite change of atmosphere, and the change need not be attributed to either fickleness or inconsistency. In the story we are dealing with an aspect of morality: in the *gospel* we are treating morality as a whole.

The truth is that Mark's assumption is a turning back to the old Moral Sense as found in Adam Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*. His dialogue assumes the existence of some sort of moral standard within each of us, that enables us to determine which of our actions deserve that self-approval which Mark holds must be attained if there is to be moral equilibrium in our experience. Common sense may suggest to some the question: Why not call it plain conscience? Indeed, why not? It looks, in effect, as if in naming the document *gospel*, Mark had spoken more truly than he thought; had, after long wanderings, verily come home with "good tidings", which, as we learnt at school, is the literal meaning of *gospel*.