



Commentators and Character

Granted, the hypocrisy of “intellectuals” has long been noted. The problem, though, is that those who have done the noting have usually been *right-leaning* intellectuals, and those intellectuals on whom they have set their sights have been *left leaning*.

And the temptation to which I refer has nothing at all to do with politics or ideology, for commentators of every conceivable bent are alike in danger of succumbing to it.

The commentator spends much of his time identifying all that is wrong with his world. He criticizes politicians, other commentators, and pretty much anyone else who he judges worthy of criticism. This enterprise in and of itself isn't necessarily objectionable; in fact, we might even want to say that, if prosecuted honestly, civilly, and respectfully, it is an enterprise from which society reaps no small measure of value.

But this doesn't change the fact that, like the hero of a classic Greek tragedy, the commentator's strength has the very real potential to be his undoing.

Given his excessive focus on the moral failings of others, it is far too easy for the commentator to lose sight of his own character deficiencies. And since most of his energies are invested in speaking to such grandiose moral issues as war, government corruption, immigration, abortion, and the rest, he is that much more at risk of not taking stock of the beam in his own eye, for he is that much more disposed to regard the morality of everyday life as almost intolerably insipid by comparison.

Yet it is the morality of daily life that shapes one's character. A person's very identity as a moral agent is chiseled out over the course of a lifetime by each and every choice that he makes. His virtue is his *habit*.

Unfortunately, his *vice* is his habit also.

And this is the point.

Because of his preoccupation with calling attention to the vices of others, the commentator is in much danger of ignoring his own vicious habits. This negligence, in turn, can only result in the strengthening of those habits and the formation of new ones.

There are certain vices to which the commentator is particularly prone.

For starters, his confidence in his ability to diagnose *and* recommend “*solutions*” to the planet's ills pits him never more than a step away from succumbing to *arrogance*. To put this another way, *if* it can be found there at all, the virtue of *humility* is never in a more precarious position than when it dwells





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within the character of the commentator.

Secondly, in seeking as wide a hearing as possible for his ideas, what the commentator basically seeks is fame. In itself, the desire for fame, for recognition, is no more blameworthy than the desire for pleasure. Yet once it becomes one's *summa bonum*, "the supreme good," then it becomes an obsession. All obsessions breed vice. But *this* obsession gives rise to the most hideous of character defects: *greed*.

The commentator who has become obsessed with fame is covetous of his colleagues' recognition. He will, at best, ignore them; at worst, he will steal their ideas and repackage them as his own. The virtue of *generosity* or *charity* is hard for him to come by.

This obsession with fame can all too easily give rise to other vices, namely, *dishonesty* and *cowardice*.

For the sake of fame, the commentator will stake out positions that are popular, but in which he doesn't really believe, or which he will refuse to question. For the sake of fame, he will avoid tackling issues that, though critical in their own right, are nevertheless taboo; the commentator will not risk being ostracized.

The commentator's love of fame also explains the *inconsiderateness* that he is wont to own. He is unlikely to give much thought to anyone who isn't instrumental in securing for him the fame that he craves. Thus, he replies only to those inquiries that come from those who will serve his career purposes. And even then, depending on the degree of importance that he assigns to others, his e-mails are devoid of all traces of thoughtfulness: There are no introductions, sentences are truncated to the point of being barely coherent, words are misspelled, letters that should be capitalized are lower cased, etc. At least he responds, but the character of those responses unveils the excessive self-absorption of their author, a person for whom no day can have enough hours. The commentator can barely pencil anyone into his schedule.

Of course, not all commentators embody these vices. But all of *us* — I am no exception — are never far from acquiring them. So, what can the commentator do to avoid rendering himself into a despicable human being?

I would suggest that, first of all, he strive to overcome his sophomoric jealousy of his colleagues. If a commentator is a radio-show host, he should mention, *by name*, those of his colleagues to whom he would otherwise only subtly allude, and if he is writer or a television personality, he should do the same.

Also, the commentator should try, every once in a while, to *commend* rather than criticize.

Thirdly, if at all possible (and this may not always be possible for some), he should respond, thoughtfully, to every e-mail that isn't bitter and hateful. Those people who take the time to ingest the commentator's work *and* compliment him on it *deserve* to be answered — even if only by way of a simple "thank you." Responding to e-mails may detract from the commentator's own work, but he owes what recognition he has to precisely those people who contact him. Plus, the objective here is to avoid selfishness and hypocrisy, so it is necessary that he should reciprocate his fans' considerateness.

Finally, the commentator must recognize that fame is fleeting. His work is a sham if it is untruthful. He must tell the truth, even if that means that he will not be loved by "the respectable crowd" — even if it means that he will be despised and reviled by his contemporaries who don't engage reality.





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