



The Babe and the Cynic

A certain very erudite and always entertaining social critic remarked recently that he always thought the worst of people. He went on to say — perhaps, at most, half jokingly — that he was always right about them, too. He then revealed that he actually had been very trusting as a boy; that he believed everyone and often got taken advantage of. He certainly doesn't get taken advantage of much now, I'm sure. But what he doesn't know is that in one significant way he hasn't changed at all.



The man's admission of his boyhood as a doormat didn't surprise me, for gullibility and cynicism are two sides of the same coin. They are both a function of naiveté, which can be defined as ignorance about reality. The gullible person proceeds as if everyone is good and trustworthy, whereas the cynic proceeds as if everyone is essentially bad and untrustworthy. But reality is quite different: There are, practically speaking, "good" people and "bad" people, the well-meaning and the self-serving. And possessing discernment enables one to distinguish between the two groups. Yet the gullible person trusts people even when he shouldn't and the cynic fails to trust them even when he should.

The transition from gullible babe in the woods to steadfast cynic is easy to understand. The budding cynic, lacking in what some today called "emotional I.Q.," is unable to draw the aforementioned distinctions among people; they all look the same to him. But being essentially good — and, as people will do, supposing that others operate as he does — he assumes that virtually everyone can be trusted. Then, of course, it isn't long before the wrong person betrays his trust — and it happens again and again and again (this is especially problematic since con artists, generally possessed of great feel for man's nature, will sense his gullibility and target him specifically). Not wanting to be burned again, the babe then switches modes and ceases to trust, but not just those unworthy of it. For he still can't distinguish between the good and bad; people still all look the same to him, so the untrustworthy who scarred him now just seem like a representative sample of man. Thus does he assume that all people are basically self-serving and often mercenary.

Of course, the babe no doubt also knew people who didn't betray him. Just as it's usually only bad news that makes headlines, however, it's his personal bad news that captures the headlines in his mind.



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Besides, cynicism becomes a survival tactic: Since he never knows who would plunge that knife into his back, he finds it safer to never turn it on anyone. And so just as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, the babe becomes the cynic, seemingly a very different creature but actually still the same one.

This won't be how the cynic sees it, though. He will fancy he has grown up when he has only grown soul-sick; he will assume he is worlds apart from his old self when that person is but a dime's width away. "I'm onto you now!" the cynic may think; "You can't fool me!" but he has fooled himself. He may stand around, with a knowing air, talking about the cynical motives of the government, the Church, environmentalists, pro-lifers and anything sentient that walks on two legs, and he may be right half the time — just as the babe was. But he is still painting everyone with the same brush; he just has changed his color choice from Angel White to Demon Night.

Cynicism is hard to recover from, too. This is not just because it's a survival tactic, but also because it's a simple way of comprehending the world (and people like simple explanations) and gives the cynic that sense of being a sophisticate immune to guile. Moreover, it seems to make sense. After all, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, if you look for the worst in people, you're sure to find it — even if you have to imagine it. Everyone has failings, "bad news" that easily will capture headlines in the cynic's mind and be used to characterize the individual. Just as significantly, much of what we do and say lends itself to interpretation, which is why misunderstanding always lurks just around the corner. What did Jim really mean by what he said? And while the cynic, never having been good at reading people, isn't the best candidate for rendering this interpretation, you know what it will be. Every innocent misstep will be insidious malevolence, every slip of the tongue a calculated, subtle slight. And every reading will further confirm what he already "knows" about people.

For this reason, the cynic is much like the woman who has been jilted romantically and hurt: Having had her heart broken by a man and never wanting to experience such pain again, she hardens her heart; she puts a wall around it, never letting another fellow get close. And for the same reasons why the cynic doesn't trust man, she doesn't trust men: She has found it safer to just paint all men with the same dark brush (this is, by the way, one of feminism's root causes), and anger makes this emotionally appealing. The cynic likewise feels safe behind his walls of misanthropy; this, along with the fact that he sees people as having confirmed his conception of man's nature for many years, and because he has an ego, make him so sure of his judgments that it's unlikely he will ever question his cynicism. This is why good religion counsels against "rash judgment."

This brings us to the tragedy of cynicism. What the cynic mistakes for the walls of his fortress are really the boundaries of his prison; what he thinks keeps the bad at bay actually shuts the good out. His world is a dark place, where he perceives the sinful but doesn't see the saintly — at least not most of it. To make matters worse, he magnifies the bad because he misreads much of his fellow man's light as darkness. He has created not only his own hell, but his own devils. They surround him, and should he lower his walls he will be devoured.

But to become cynical is to give the Devil his victory. There is a social phenomenon today whereby we will sacrifice great joy and freedom for a gram of safety; we will eliminate dodgeball, high diving boards at hotels, large sodas, and anything else that may imperil us as we ensconce our children in Beelzebub's bubble wrap. But you risk your life just by living, and you can't really live without accepting risk. This is true in the emotional realm as well. While we should mature beyond gullibility and not play the doormat, we can't fully imbibe the human experience without opening ourselves up to other humans and risking at least the possibility of being hurt. As our capacity to trust dies, so does our capacity to



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live.

The irony of cynicism is that while it is the belief that all people act out of selfish motives, it is motivated by a desire to protect the self. Thus, the best way to combat selfishness isn't to erect those walls. It is to tear them down.

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