English sensible essayists: "Mr. Everyman with greater strength of character"?

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Abstract. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes the right-wing intellectual as "no more than your Mr. Everyman, but your Mr. Everyman with greater strength of character." It is tempting to apply the description to sensible English essayists, though they take up positions across the political spectrum. I shall raise two worries about this application, one of which is a puzzle for Lacan.

In the midst of his famous seminars, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan starts uttering English. He uses a classificatory scheme expressed by the terms "fool" and "knave." The left-wing intellectual is a type of fool, according to Lacan, and the right-wing intellectual a knave. Here is Lacan elaborating:

> At a certain level of its usage "knave" may be translated into French as *valet*, but "knave" goes further. He's not a cynic with the element of heroism implied by that attitude. He is, to be precise, what Stendhal called an "unmitigated scoundrel." That is to say, no more than your Mr. Everyman, but your Mr. Everyman with greater strength of character. Everyone knows that a certain way of presenting himself, which constitutes part of the ideology of the right-wing intellectual, is precisely to play the role of what he is in fact, namely, a "knave." (1992: 183)

I presume the right-wing intellectuals that Lacan has in mind include essayists, even English essayists, or at least essayists who write in English. They present themselves

as sensible people and write essays which many readers would nod along to, hence it seems apt to describe a male one as Mr. Everyman, or Mr. Everyman plus something else, Lacan's addition being greater strength of character.

But note that in the English language we have sensible essayists all over the political spectrum. Also we have lots and lots of them and I suspect they are not even especially concentrated on the right. Are they Mr. Everyman? Or is Kathleen Stock as public intellectual Miss. Everywoman or Mrs. Everywoman? Perhaps Lacan's reference to Mr. Everyman should be understood in some highly sophisticated way, but I shall not introduce another rationale for applying the description. My aim is to raise two worries about applying it to sensible English essayists.

Nature-culture theory. There is a lesson which it is "natural" for students of anthropology to take from the French intellectual system. It is probably Claude Lévi-Strauss watered down, but presumably Lacan accepts this point or this set of points, or else a minor variation on this set. "Cultural groups have ways of demarcating themselves from what they regard as a natural condition. The uninitiated group member is in a natural condition. To become a fully-fledged member of a group, to become a proper member of this culture, one has to adopt the peculiar ways of walking, dressing, eating, talking, and writing of this group. These things demarcate members of the group. Consequently, when you listen to a group member or read their writing, you cannot understand what they are saying. There are strings of words, but you don't know what is being asserted, not even roughly. Only if you go through the pains of initiation can you understand."

But the more one emphasizes this portrait of human beings, the more the sensible essayist appears abnormal rather than a Mr. Everyman. His essays are easy

enough to understand. They do not appear to be much motivated by these demarcatory impulses. Don't they constitute a puzzle for Lacan? Is the sensible essayist not just outside the human? To be human (supposedly) would be to immerse oneself in an eccentric cultural group and appear in public in uniform, metaphorically speaking, with that uniform creating a barrier for understanding what one is saying. Here then are the commitments of the puzzle:

(1) It is human nature to try to become a fully-fledged member of a cultural group: a person who has fully met the standards of that group.

(2) Fully-fledged members of a cultural group distinguish themselves from uninitiated members – individuals they regard as in or closer to a natural condition – by peculiar ways of eating, dressing, walking, communicating, and more.

(3) Regarding written communication, this makes it very difficult to follow their writings unless you are a group member.

(4) The sensible English essayists, or some of them, are accessible writers for people from a variety of backgrounds.

But I would not say that such essayists are outside the human, though my response here is brief. I remember school biology and it is going to take a lot more than some sensible essays to say, "Outside the human." Also, some of the propositions involved give rise to another puzzle for me. Are not (1) and (2) together against the British empiricist tradition, which does not conceive people like that? If (1) and (2) were true, it would be obvious and surely Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and others, who provided its foundations, would have noticed this. I doubt that they even accept (1). Problems with

this nature-culture anthropology begin at home! By the way, being in the state of nature means something different for them.

Problem-solving. Writing a sensible essay often involves solving various problems. For example, a sensible essayist wants to discuss the view that the cinema has rendered the realist novel obsolete. "Now let's not get carried away," the essayist plans to argue. And he has a quotation from someone which sort-of expresses the view to be discussed, but the quotation does not quite express that view or the expression is qualified in ways that are inconvenient for the essayist. What does he do?

I conceived this example, or discovered it, after reading a chapter by Raymond Tallis, a medic who writes on literary criticism and draws from analytic philosophy (1988: 32). Another problem that arises is that there is some information the essayist feels obliged to introduce but looking into it threatens to take over the whole essay. What to do about that? (I assume every craft has its subtler innovations.) If two essayists have roughly the same perspective on a question, from the way they solve problems, I might come to quite different conclusions. "This essayist is a better candidate for Mr. Everyman with greater strength of character. He registers an objection, an important one in my eyes, but rather quickly brushes it aside. Regarding this other essayist, the surface is deceptive. I'm not sure what this fellow is."

References

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