

4.3 Intellectual Rubbish

■ ■ ■ Warming up! ■ ■ ■

1. How will you react in the following situations?

- (a) Your Science teacher tells you that plants exposed to the sunlight grow faster than those always in the shade.

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- (b) Your aunt tells you not to go for a job interview because it's a no moon day, that very same day.

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- (c) Your friend argues with you that Mount Everest is not the tallest peak in the world.

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- (d) A stranger at your door claims to be a magician and promises your mother to turn all her silver jewellery into gold.

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2. What do you notice about the following pairs of words?

- act naturally ● liquid gas ● open secret ● sound of silence ● sweet sorrow
● original copy ● only choice ● growing smaller

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Now try to add a contradictory word to the following :

- (a) What a mess you've got us into!
(b) It's a imitation of a diamond necklace.
(c) My trip to Matheran was a holiday.
(d) With such heavy make up, she looks ugly.
(e) A crowd gathered to see the magic show.

Note :- Contrasting words that go together are examples of the language device called **Oxymoron**.

Intellectual Rubbish

- ◆ What erroneous notion did Aristotle have? What does his example convey to you?
- ◆ How can you prevent developing a dogmatic attitude?
- ◆ What do you feel when –
 - (a) someone opposes your strong belief?
 - (b) someone insists that $2+2=5$?

To avoid the various foolish opinions to which mankind are prone, no superhuman genius is required. A few simple rules will keep you, not from *all* error, but from silly error.

If the matter is one that can be settled by observation, make the observation yourself. Aristotle could have avoided the mistake of thinking that women have fewer teeth than men, by the simple device of asking Mrs Aristotle to keep her mouth open while he counted. He did not do so because he thought he knew. Thinking that you know when in fact you don't is a fatal mistake, to which we are all prone. I believe myself that hedgehogs eat black beetles, because I have been told that they do; but if I were writing a book on the habits of hedgehogs, I should not commit myself until I had seen one enjoying this unappetizing diet. Aristotle, however, was less cautious....

Many matters, however, are less easily brought to the test of experience. If, like most of mankind, you have passionate convictions on many such matters, there are ways in which you can make yourself aware of your own bias. If an opinion contrary to your own makes you angry, that is a sign that you are subconsciously aware of having no good reason for thinking as you do. If someone maintains that two and two are five, or that Iceland is on the equator, you feel pity rather than anger, unless you know so little of arithmetic or geography that his opinion shakes your own contrary conviction. The most savage controversies are those about matters as to which there is no good evidence either way... so whenever you find yourself getting angry about a difference of opinion, be on your guard; you will probably find, on examination, that your belief is going beyond what the evidence warrants.

A good way of ridding yourself of certain kinds of dogmatism is to become aware of opinions held in social circles different from your own. When I was young, I lived much outside my own country – in France, Germany, Italy and the United States. I found

- dogmatism : insisting on the truth of one's opinion without evidence

this very profitable in diminishing the intensity of insular prejudice. If you cannot travel, seek out people with whom you disagree, and read a newspaper belonging to a party that is not yours. If the people and the newspaper seem mad, perverse and wicked, remind yourself that you seem so to them. In this opinion both parties may be right, but they cannot both be wrong. This reflection should generate a certain caution.

Becoming aware of foreign customs, however, does not always have a beneficial effect. In the seventeenth century, when the Manchus conquered China, it was the custom among the Chinese for the woman to have small feet, and among the Manchus for the men to wear pigtaails. Instead of each dropping their own foolish custom, they each adopted the foolish custom of the other, and the Chinese continued to wear pigtaails until they shook off the dominion of the Manchus in the revolution of 1911.

For those who have enough psychological imagination, it is a good plan to imagine an argument with a person having a different bias. This has one advantage, and only one, as compared with actual conversation with opponents; this one advantage is that the method is not subject to the same limitations of time and space. Mahatma Gandhi deplored railways and steamboats and machinery; he would have liked to undo the whole of the industrial revolution. You may never have an opportunity of actually meeting any one who holds this opinion, because in Western countries most people take the advantage of modern technique for granted. But if you want to make sure that you are right in agreeing with the prevailing opinion, you will find it a good plan to test the arguments that occur to you by considering what Gandhi might have said in refutation of them. I have sometimes been led actually to change my mind as a result of this kind of imaginary dialogue, and, short of this, I have frequently found myself growing less dogmatic and cocksure through realising the possible reasonableness of a hypothetical opponent.

- insular : disinterested in ideas from foreign countries
- perverse : stubbornly opposed to
- refutation : that which disproves
- hypothetical : based on an assumption

- ◆ What two examples does the writer give to those who have opinions that flatter their self-esteem?

Be very wary of opinions that flatter your self-esteem. Both men and women, nine times out of ten, are firmly convinced of the superior excellence of their own sex. There is abundant evidence on both sides. If you are a man, you can point out that most poets and men of science are male; if you are a woman, you can retort that so are most criminals. The question is inherently insoluble, but self-esteem conceals this from most people.

We are all, whatever part of the world we come from, persuaded that our own nation is superior to all others. Seeing that each nation has its characteristic merits and demerits, we adjust our standard of values so as to make out that the merits possessed by our nation are the really important ones, while its demerits are comparatively trivial.

- ◆ What is the only way to tackle such self-pride?

Here, again, the rational man will admit that the question is one to which there is no demonstrably right answer. It is more difficult to deal with the self-esteem of man as man, because we cannot argue out the matter with some non-human mind. The only way I know of dealing with this general human conceit is to remind ourselves that man is a brief episode in the life of a small planet in a little corner of the universe, and that for aught we know, other parts of the cosmos may contain beings as superior to ourselves as we are to jelly-fish.

- inherently : by nature
- aught : anything
- elixir of life :
a divine substance
that made somebody
immortal

Other passions besides self-esteem are common sources of error. Of these perhaps the most important is fear. Fear sometimes operates directly, by inventing rumours of disaster in war-time, or by imagining objects of terror, such as ghosts; sometimes it operates indirectly, by creating belief in something comforting, such as the elixir of life, or heaven for ourselves and hell for our enemies. Fear has many forms – fear of death, fear of the dark, fear of the unknown, and that vague generalised fear that comes to those who conceal from themselves their more specific terrors. Until you have admitted your own fears to yourself, and have guarded yourself by a difficult effort of will against their myth-making power, you cannot hope to think

truly about many matters of great importance, especially those with which religious beliefs are concerned. Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom, in the pursuit of truth as in the endeavour after a worthy manner of life.

There are two ways of avoiding fear : one is by persuading ourselves that we are immune from disaster, and the other is by the practice of sheer courage. The latter is difficult, and to everybody becomes impossible at a certain point. The former has, therefore, always been more popular. Primitive magic has the purpose of securing safety, either by injuring enemies or by protecting oneself by talismans, spells, or incantations. Without any essential change, belief in such ways of avoiding danger survived throughout the many centuries of civilisation....Science has now lessened the belief in magic, but many people place more faith in mascots than they are willing to avow... Neither a man nor a crowd nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear. And for this reason poltroons are more prone to cruelty than brave men, and are also more prone to superstition...

But we have been getting too solemn. Superstitions are not always dark and cruel; often they add to the gaiety of life. I received once a communication from the god Osiris, giving me his telephone number; he lived, at that time, in a suburb of Boston. Although I did not enroll myself among his worshippers, his letter gave me pleasure. I have frequently received letters from men announcing themselves as the Messiah, and urging me not to omit to mention this important fact in my lectures.

I admire especially a certain prophetess who lived beside a lake in Northern New York State about the year 1820. She announced to her numerous followers that she possessed the power of walking on water, and that she proposed to do so at 11 o'clock on a certain morning. At the stated time, the faithful assembled in their thousands beside the lake. She spoke to them saying : 'Are you all entirely persuaded that I can walk

◆ What two evils does fear lead to? How can one overcome fear?

◆ What is the aim of primitive magic?

- talisman : a small object used to fetch good luck
- incantation : magical words recited in the same tone
- poltroons : cowards

- ◆ How did the prophetess befool her believers?

on water?’ with one voice they replied : ‘We are’. ‘In that case’, she announced, ‘there is no need for me to do so.’ And they all went home much edified.

Perhaps the world would lose some of its interest and variety if such beliefs were wholly replaced by cold science...

A wise man will enjoy the goods of which there is a plentiful supply, and of intellectual rubbish he will find an abundant diet, in our own age as in every other.

- *Bertrand Russell*

■ ■ ■ ENGLISH WORKSHOP ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

1. The following expressions are a combination of a noun preceded by a describing word.

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| (a) fatal <u>mistake</u> | (e) simple <u>device</u> |
| (b) foreign <u>customs</u> | (f) savage <u>controversy</u> |
| (c) unappetizing <u>diet</u> | (g) modern <u>technique</u> |
| (d) plentiful <u>supply</u> | (h) foolish <u>custom</u> |

Replace the describing words with as many others as you can, that go with the underlined nouns.

eg. (a) silly mistake, grave mistake, careless mistake, obvious mistake etc.

2. Use the following idioms/expressions in sentences of your own.

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| (a) to be prone to | |
| (b) to have a difference of opinion | |
| (c) to go beyond | |
| (d) to have a beneficial effect | |
| (e) to have a bias | |
| (f) to undo | |
| (g) to be wary of | |
| (h) under the influence | |

3. Say 'WHY'?
 - (a) One should avoid getting angry about a difference of opinion.
 - (b) The writer found his stay abroad very profitable.
 - (c) The writer grew less dogmatic and more open-minded.
 - (d) Men declaring that they are Saints write letters to the writer.
 - (e) The writer claims that all false beliefs need not be replaced by cold science.
4. Make sentences of your own to show the difference of usage of the following Homophones.
 - (a) • device
• devise
 - (b) • advice
• advise
 - (c) • practice
• practise
5. When a family member is very ill for long, the grandmother of the family urges everyone to send for a person who claims he can cure victims of black magic. Compose a dialogue with her, in which her granddaughter politely convinces her that she should not believe in such things.
6. List the various ways of avoiding error mentioned in the passage.
7. Answer the following questions :
 - (a) If an opinion contrary to your own makes you angry, what does it indicate?
 - (b) What are the most savage controversies about?
 - (c) What are the benefits of travel?
 - (d) Is the influence of foreign customs always beneficial?
 - (e) What are the advantages of an imaginary argument with a person having a different bias?
 - (f) Why should one be wary of opinions that flatter one's self-esteem?
 - (g) How does fear lead us to error?
 - (h) What are the two ways of avoiding fear?
8. What is the meaning of 'intellectual rubbish'?
9. Find the opposites of the following :
cautious, dogmatic, contrary, savage, beneficial, reasonable, hypothetical, cruelty, immune
10. Write an imaginary dialogue contesting opposite views on a topic of your choice, e.g., 'Girls should learn to do all the housework and not boys.'

