

Stefan Themerson

The Chair of Decency



## The Chair of Decency



© 1982, 2007 by Stefan Themerson Estate.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder, except for quotes in reviews.

Photographs of Stefan Themerson in Amsterdam, together with scans of a page from the “The Chair of Decency” manuscript and Stefan’s copy of *Een leerstoel in fatsoen*, were provided by Themerson Archive.

First Edition

OBSCURE PUBLICATIONS  
Paul Rosheim, Series Editor  
307 River Street, Apt. 18  
Black River Falls, Wisconsin 54615

“Watch Out for Obscure Publications”

# The Chair of Decency

Stefan Themerson

Obscure Publications • 2007



THE 2007

EMERSON FOUNDATION

1000 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139

Phone: 617.452.2200 Fax: 617.452.2201

www.emersonfoundation.org

© 2007 Emerson Foundation. All rights reserved.

## THE HUIZINGA LECTURE

At the end of February 1981, Stefan Themerson received a letter from A.S. Spoor, the editor-in chief of *NRC Handelsblad* in Rotterdam, as follows:

"Dear Mr. Themerson,

Since 1972, when we celebrated the centenary of Johan Huizinga's, the famous Dutch historian, birthday in Leiden, the University of Leiden organises, together with the Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Letterkunde and the Dutch Daily NRC Handelsblad, annual lectures, called "Huizinga-lectures", in honour of Johan Huizinga. Alternately, the lectures are given by a Dutch and a foreign lecturer.

The first Huizinga-lecture took place on December 8, 1972. The Dutch author and essayist Rudy Kousbroek spoke about ethology and cultural philosophy. In the years thereafter we had Mary McCarthy; the Dutch publicist Jan Pen; the French essayist and philosopher, Jean François Revel; the Dutch historian and biographer of Bakunin, Arthur Lehning; professor Noam Chomsky; the Dutch author Karel van het Reve; professor Golo Mann, and professor E.H. Kossman. We shall be proud to be able to add your name to this list as the lecturer for 1981."

Furthermore, Stefan learned that the lecture would be published in a brochure, and that after the lecture he will be invited to be the customary "Huizinga-buffet-supper" at Spoor's house. Other invitees were to include the previous speakers, friends from universities, writers, members of NRC Handelsblad staff, and perhaps a few politicians.

The lectures were always on a Friday in December, and Stefan's talk was to be on December 11th.

Stefan accepted, and called his talk 'The Chair of Decency'. He sent the text of his talk on 28th October 1981 so that it could be published in advance. When a lady from Leiden telephoned him to find out what the lecture was about, and how to describe it on the invitation, Stefan wrote that couldn't answer the question and could she ask Mr. Spoor, to enlighten her.

The lecture took place in a church and Stefan recalled that at one point the bells rang, unannounced, to celebrate the occasion.

The lecture appeared in Dutch translation in *NRC Handelsblad*, on 12 December 1981, and a small booklet published by Athenaeum — Polak & Van Gennep, Amsterdam in 1982. It was republished in an edition of the first fifteen Huizinga lectures, *Alle Cultuur is Streven*, Amsterdam, 1987.

Regrettably, A.S. Spoor's introduction to Stefan Themerson's lecture was mislaid in his office, Stefan never saw it, and has not been published.

The theme of *The Chair of Decency* — posing our innate biological goodness against the dangerous influence of culture and beliefs — is both a culmination and a précis of Themerson's thought and attitude. It runs through his lifetime of writing, in novels, essays and poems. After *The Chair of Decency*, the theme was crystallised in 'The Aim of Aims', sometimes presented as prose and sometimes as a poem.

Themerson concluded that Means are more important than Aims, that they should in fact BE the Aims. Aims are cultural, he said, but the proper Means are biological.

Jasia Reichardt

## The Chair of Decency



I am greatly honoured in being asked to address you and to give this Johan Huizinga Lecture, and I hope you will agree with me in thinking that he, who taught us that the subject of Cultural History is not History but Culture, would find congenial to him the two theses which I'm going to submit to you for your consideration.

Means rather  
than Aims

The first thesis, putting it simply, asserts that Means are of greater importance than Aims.

Gentleness—  
biological;  
Aggression—  
cultural

The second asserts, that, contrary to what clergymen and policemen want us to believe, Gentleness is biological and Aggression is cultural, not vice versa.

There are two ways we can take to arrive at such conclusions:

a scholarly way — by employing analysis, discussion, argumentation;

and a meandering way — by living a very long time and letting our experiences do the mental work for us.

As my age has become much more impressive than my scholarship, I have chosen to voyage with you along the latter, the meandering way.

\*

History  
&  
physics  
or  
*Faites tirer  
vos gens!*  
&  
the Leyden bottle

Let me begin by confessing that when I first heard the name of your noble university, as a young schoolboy, some 60 years ago and miles away Eastwards, it was not in connection with your great historian, but in association with the physicist (P. van Musschenbrock) who in 1745 invented the so called Leyden bottle.

1745 was the year when the famous phrase '*Après vous, messieurs les Anglais*' originated, and the word 'pragmatic' referred to the army defeated at Fontenoy, not having yet become a philosophical term meaning that our doctrinarian assertions are to be judged by their consequences.

My schoolboyish notion of chivalry made me quite impressed by these phrases exchanged between Lord Hay and le Comte d'Auteroche: '*Faites tirer vos gens!*', '*Non, monsieur! à vous l'honneur!*' — but the Leyden bottle was infinitely more fascinating. Just imagine: an empty marmalade jar; you coat it with tin foil, within and without; you connect the inside with an electric friction machine, and then, later on, hey presto! you approach your finger — and a flash of lightning!

Who would have predicted at the time that the Road of Political History, on which the battle at Fontenoy was an episode, and the Road of the History of Nuclear Science, on which the Leyden bottle was also an episode, would become so

entangled with each other that we should again hear the familiar words: '*Faites jeter vos bombes, messieurs les Russes!*', '*Après vous, messieurs les Américains!*', '*Non, messieurs! à vous l'honneur!*'

\*

Analogies mislead

We yearn for metaphors, models, parables, that would help us to understand. We long for analogies, though we know that to argue by analogy is liable to produce false conclusions from true premises. Because analogies are misleading. Not only historical analogies.

Imagine two identical pieces of ice: one floating on the surface of the river Styx, the other on the river Scamander. The similarity of the situation may tempt us to draw one and the same conclusion. And yet, one piece of ice may be in the process of growing, because the temperature is falling, while the other piece of ice may be in the process of melting, because the temperature is rising. The example looks trivial, but it won't look so trivial if, instead of comparing two identical pieces of ice in two rivers, you compare, say, two identical numbers of prisoners, not necessarily political, in two countries of which one is moving up, and the other down, on the road of progress, or freedom, or reason, which is probably one and the same road.

As little history  
as possible

To know the direction of the movement, we must, of course, have history. But we need not as much of it as possible but as little of it as possible. It is

the momentum, the vectorial quantity of the present fraction of a second that tells us where the aircraft is going to. The history of its yesterday's meanderings confuses our judgment. Can History really explain how it happened that we find ourselves where we are today, with so much dirt on the heels of our shoes and so much blood on our hands?

*'Faites jeter vos bombes!', 'Non, messieurs! à vous l'honneur!'* It isn't even clear: do they calculate how many of their bombs to throw on each other, or on us, who are in between?

\*

Human size  
&  
Human  
understanding

Once upon a time, we used to help our understanding of the world by reducing (or enlarging) everything to Human Size. By human size I mean things bigger than a flea and smaller than an elephant; history longer than the duration of a single flap of the wings of a moth and shorter than a century; weights heavier than a petal falling down from a cherry tree and lighter than the burden Atlas held up on his shoulders.

There we are: the C.G.S. system of Classical Physics.

Egyptian Gods, and Greek Gods, and Roman Gods, were of human size. And Jesus also chose to be born of human size, so that it would be easier for us to understand His way of dealing with the enormity of the Tragic factor contained in the edifice built by His Father.

Today, things are the other way round. Today, all our poor human-size phenomena are being explained to us by reference to things very big, such as galactic dust, primordial soup, the Big Bang (which reduces our Cosmos from something necessary, fundamental, to a mere historical, contingent event), or else they are explained by reference to things very small: molecules, chains of DNA, atoms, quarks . . . all those things that are proved by experiment but unknown to experience — unless you'll say that proving something by experiment, even an imaginary experiment, *is* an experience.

\*

Experiments  
&  
experiences

A scientist counts some figures, he finds that the proportion of little white mice that have survived, or not survived the experiment, is significant, and he smiles as he goes to the canteen to have his cup of tea.

A writer finds the right word and the right place to put it in the right sentence, and a smile appears on his face.

A little peeing-boy lifts up his little penis, and when the liquid parabola hits the target, his eyes brighten with pleasure. Or else, he sulks because of some disappointment. Or cries because he has hurt his thumb.

These are simple experiments and experiences. But there are some others which don't produce

laughter, or sulking, or cries of pain:

The very small

The little boy holds in both hands a big box of chocolates. But he is not interested in the contents of the box. He is interested in its lid. Because on it, there is a picture of a pretty lady who is holding in her hands a box of chocolates on the lid of which there is a picture of a pretty lady holding in her hands a miniature box of chocolates on the lid of which . . . The boy's eyes cannot come any closer, his seeing processes cannot go any further, but his thinking processes *can*. Now, if he comes to the conclusion that there is no end to the series of pretty ladies holding boxes of chocolates, maybe, one day, he'll become an axiomatic mathematician, or a dogmatic politician . . . ? On the other hand, if he thinks there must necessarily be somewhere there the very tiniest, ultimate pretty lady whom you can't reduce any further, maybe he'll become a physicist, or a novelist . . . ?

The very big

But now he looks up and notices above the portal of the Cathedral a bronze semi-circular high-relief, in the middle of which sits the Holy Mother of God, holding in her hands a model of the whole Cathedral, above the portal of which . . . No, this time he doesn't try to look 'inwards'. This time his mind moves outwards and makes him imagine a huge, invisible Mother of God holding in her hands the *real* Cathedral, and then, a bigger still, bigger than the sky, Mother of God holding in her hands . . . There he stops. Either his intuition has told him that the whole thing is becoming ridiculous in the way only grown-ups

a Great Confusion

can appreciate, or else, perhaps . . . Who can know? Perhaps the very biggest, the ultimate Mother of God is, by some conjuring trick, a hocus-pocus which only grown-ups can explain, the same person as the tiniest pretty lady with the box of chocolates . . . ? He tries a piece of chocolate, and his mind has already dismissed the very big and the very small, and gone back to the human-size imaginary experiences: a comic strip, Nat Pinkerton detective stories, Pitigrilly's naughty phantasies? Things are again natural, intelligible, and simple. But then he meets some Great Masters who want to clarify his thoughts, and everything becomes a Great Confusion.

\*

The adventures of an imaginary schoolboy in his search for a philosopher-king

The first of the Great Masters whom our imaginary schoolboy met was a man called Plato who, over 2000 years ago, in a discussion with his intellectual friends, expressed the view that the troubles of mankind will not end till true philosophers are given political powers and become rulers of states. As our imaginary schoolboy was well aware of the troubles of mankind, and wished them to cease, he decided to undertake a search for a philosopher true enough to be a good replacement for Mrs Thatcher, Mr Reagan, and the like. It so happened that the first philosopher he met in his noble search, was one of the Natural Philosophers, nowadays called Scientists.

Scientists?

The world of the Scientist's mind was sandwiched between two worlds: the outside world, and the world of the blackboard on which

some mathematical white squiggles were chalked. The Scientist was very conscientiously trying to achieve a sort of aesthetic, pretty, one-to-one relationship between the patterns he chalked on the blackboard and the patterns he was able to discern in the world. Meanwhile, the Mathematician who stood at the Scientist's elbow, watched jealously that the pattern on the blackboard would form by itself an independent, consistent set, free of contradictions. This conscientious striving after some concordance between the FORMS produced on the blackboard and the REALITY of the world, pleased our imaginary schoolboy so much that he was already willing to suggest a Scientist-cum-Mathematician as the replacement for the political rulers . . . Alas, the very next day, he met in a tramcar his professor of chemistry, attired this time in the full regalia of the military uniform of Major-general, and learned that the subject of the professor's researches was poison gas.

Painters?

Disheartened by this discovery, he turned from the Scientist's laboratory to the Painter's studio. The world of the Painter's mind was also sandwiched between two worlds: the outside world and the world of the canvas covered with paint on which various shapes and colours began to appear. Some were referring to the outside world, some others to the inner world of the Painter, and some others still to the inner world of the canvas itself. All this pleased our imaginary schoolboy very much, but when, the very next morning, he learned that the very same Painter had gone to an art gallery and there assassinated

the very first President of a republic that had just achieved its independence, he, the imaginary schoolboy, decided that *that* method of replacing political rulers by members of the thinking classes was perhaps not what Plato would advocate.

Confused by his experiences, our imaginary schoolboy came to think that perhaps Confusion is a necessary, immanent part of all Human Understanding, and so he directed his steps to where the Confusion was the greatest, he went to see Philosophers. Great philosophers.

Philosophers?

The trouble with great philosophers is that each great philosopher tends to define things in his own idiosyncratic way. Because a really great philosopher would never accept another really great philosopher's definition of a philosophical term. It seems even that the very greatness of a really great philosopher consists in giving a different meaning to a term used by other mortals, philosophers or not.

There was, however, one among them who was not only a great philosopher but also a great man, who cared 'for what is noble, for what is beautiful, for what is gentle. Who saw in imagination the society that is to be created, where individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them.' And so, at last, our imaginary schoolboy thought that he had already arrived at the end of his search for the platonic philosopher-king, -president, or — at least — -prime minister, when — and it happened late in the year of our

Symbolic logic  
&  
ordinary lives

Lord 1948 — the Philosopher came to a *logical* conclusion that the United States should threaten an immediate nuclear war on Russia for the purpose of forcing nuclear disarmament upon her. This statement was so unexpected that the Philosopher himself soon forgot that he made it — so out of harmony with his past and future thoughts and deeds, for which he and his wife went to prison in the country that claims to have no political prisoners. And the schoolboy's affection for the man hadn't suffered, but he was dismayed by the logic that treated global issues as if they were arithmetical facts represented by signs in the system that could be manipulated as if they had no meaning, the logic in which there were no symbols representing ordinary lives of ordinary people who are neither dissidents nor war-mongers, and want to marry, or divorce, have children, or not, play the balalaika, drink a glass of vodka, listen to Yevtushenko, or go to a cinema, just like some other ordinary people, on the other side of the Ocean, want to marry, or divorce, have children, or not, play a guitar, drink coca cola, listen to Frank Sinatra, watch advertisements on television, or have the luxury of dying in one's bed.

Democracy (?)

So, perhaps, after all, Plato was not quite right when he said: 'If the democracy of Athens had consisted only of educated persons, no fatal harm would have been done.' Perhaps the very essence of Democracy stems from the fact that the proportion of wise to stupid, good to bad, rational to tempestuous, is the same, whether you search among philosophers or priests, poets or peasants,

politicians or generals, economists or dockers in the shipyards of Gdańsk.

I don't know.

Ways of seeing the world

There are two ways of seeing the ways of seeing the world. One is one way, and the other is another. And nobody knows: 'Is there, anywhere, one way of seeing the two?' This is neither a statement nor a question. It is an expression of a kind of feeling. Have you ever had that feeling? It made me put aside all my books and the newspapers, made me switch off the radio, made me go to a park and sit on a bench and reflect, made me walk through the streets and reflect, made me lie on my couch and reflect, and the reflection, both melancholy and *not* sad, was like the hand of a watch, moving round and round and round, always forward, and always coming back to its point of departure. Hence melancholy: because questioning the essence of progress.

The aims of aims

I wanted to grow a crystal, and bring it to you as a gift. I wanted to wrap it nicely in words, and give it to you tonight. Alas . . . and it is not that I'm not capable of putting forms in symmetries of rhymes and rhythms . . . but crystals grow from undisturbed tranquility, and this I couldn't find in myself.

Thus, I got up from my bench, stopped in the middle of the traffic, jumped out of my dream: What I shall bring you is a flaming torch, a loud-hailer, an *Allons, Citoyens!* Fortunately . . . and it is not that I'm not capable of putting rhymes and rhythms into a howling cry . . . but, having lived

through hairpin bends of History, and met and seen and heard some howling voices, both true and false (the former is more dangerous), I called my sense of humour to stop me, just in time.

Thus, I have come to you tonight empty-handed, having no offerings of Aims to give, because no Aim is so exalted that it be worth a heartbeat more than Decency of Means. Because, when all is said and done, Decency of Means *is* the Aim of aims.

\*

Some naïve lovers of semantics believe that if only our rulers, our saviours (of all sorts), could understand the meaning of their own pronouncements, they would amend their ways. What an illusion! They, the saviours, know the mechanism of Language much better than all the Semanticists, Linguistic philosophers, and Logical formalists put together. That's how they know how to use it to play upon the prejudices of the mob: you and me.

Poetry  
&  
Politics

And, when a Poet, or a Novelist, becomes a Demagogue, the same applies to him. Because POETRY, as well as POLITICS, may be morally *vicious*, and intellectually *dishonest*. In such cases, both poetry and oratory — political, religious, philosophical — are like crime. The greater a crime is, the more impressive it is, but the less excusable.

Thus, when all is said and done, one finds that no

poetic rhymes, no greatness, no philosophical systems, no reasons of state, no politic ends, and no utopian aims are more important than decency of means. Because, when all is said and done, decency of means is the aim of aims.

\*

‘formalism is the  
opium of the  
thinking classes’  
(*Allan Calder*)

And here, straight from the lopped and barked wood of bare trunks, come some classical formalists, who dream their dream about the world of distinct nouns and predicates, governed by the yes-or-no law of the excluded middle, the world in which things (including you and me and him and her) are what they are, and are not what they are not. And they dream their dreams to their logical conclusions, which are true in all possible worlds, except the world in which we live. Because in the world in which we live, no noun is timeless, no predicate makes sense without the rest of the universe, no fact is what it is and nothing else, and no man is an island. And when we feel not at our ease in their dream, they say: ‘You must believe us, because our assumptions are good, and our logic is true, and if you don’t see it working, it’s because our dreams have never been tried.’

The end  
&  
the means

Which is not so. All dreams have been tried. All have worked, partly. And all have *not* worked partly. And they *did not* work whenever their sires and seers, and the successors of the sires and seers, believed that if their assumptions are good, and their logic is true, then the conclusions become aims, and all methods can be used to

achieve them; that the end justifies the means.

In this, their faultless formal axiomatic logic omits two facts:

ONE: that in this changing world, the way from premises to conclusions is temporal and stormy, and you can't force your Yesterday upon your grandson's Tomorrow;

TWO: Oh dear . . . Well . . . Yes, it has been said in the Sermon on the Mount:

'But I say unto you, That you resist no evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.'

It is a saintly thing to turn and offer your other cheek to be slapped. You can do it once. You can do it again. You can do it thrice. Perhaps. But when the thing goes on, and your persecutor doesn't relent, and the thing becomes a method, left cheek, right cheek, left, right, left, right, left, right, all saintliness disappears, and what remains becomes either a low farce, not good enough for Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Max Linder, or Laurel and Hardy, or else it has to be stopped. Often by force. Which, invariably, becomes vicious itself. And hence a tragedy. Because we can't do anything about it. There do exist tragic situations when wicked means have to be used to suppress some other wicked means that are already with us, but to use wicked means to promote aims — defeats the aims. The Crucifixion defeated the aims of the chief priests

Socialism:  
continuation of  
Christianity by  
other means

and the scribes and the mob and the Establishment and the Empire; The Inquisition dehumanized the aims of Christianity; The Labour Camps degenerated the aims of Socialism. For millions of people, Socialism was the continuation of Christianity by other means. And it was the viciousness of the means that had poisoned the decency of its aims.

\*

'Naturalistic  
fallacy'

Now, let us not get ourselves sidetracked by academic questions: How to define what is not definable by definition: how to define 'wicked' and how to define 'decent'. As if we didn't know what we mean when we use these words, however differently we use them. As if the reality of the emotive and commanding force that is in us was less real than the confused reality of things to which these unanalysable undefinabilities refer. Thus, whatever your notions of the wicked and of the decent are, whatever is the practical use you make of them, the wickedness of your means will destroy your aims, even if those aims are good only for some group, class, faith, race or nation, and to the detriment of all the rest of us, because all wickedness destroys all decency, and even for the wickedest logician the aim of aims is some sort of decency of means.

\*

On Decency

'Decency'! What an embarrassing word! You have to brace yourself to pronounce it. But I couldn't find a better one. If you want to refer to

‘Pretence of vice’

something wicked, vicious, offensive, aggressive, you have a hundred words to choose from, and people show confidence in you, they assume that you know what you are talking about. But if you brave it out and use the word ‘decent’, they think you are a sissy, a nincompoop. Johan Huizinga knew that characteristic of our age. He called it ‘Pretence of vice’. In his essay *The Task of Cultural History*, published in 1929, he regarded it as

(from: *Men & Ideas*  
translated by  
J.S. Holmes &  
Hans van Marle)

‘a modern repetition of the sentimentalism of the eighteenth century, but in a completely different form. The old sentimentalism’ he wrote, ‘felt itself to be intimately bound to the respect of virtue. It tended to balance passion and virtue in what was often a neck-breaking fashion. Nowadays this is no longer necessary. Passion alone, or what figures for it, is enough. In every depiction of reality in either word or image . . . the element of passion must be played up. Moral norms definitely may not be praised. Virtuous people assure themselves of their halo of the modern by means of a eulogy of immorality. Such a eulogy is as much a form of cultural hypocrisy as a sanctimonious display of virtue was ever able to be.’

And, we can add, it is still more acute today than it was when he wrote about it. That’s why, I must confess, I felt as if I were actually displaying some sort of courage when I decided to use the word ‘decency’ in a straightforward way.

What sort of courage?

## Dogcatchers

When I was a small boy, one early morning on my way to school, I met a gang of dog-catchers. A sordid big wooden box on wheels, pulled by a blind horse, at the back of the big box a little barred window through which you saw a pack of stray dogs, already caught and condemned to death, except for a bitch in heat who seduced them there. The dogcatchers were four in number. Three were for rounding up while the fourth was armed with a long stick at the end of which there was a short rope with a slipknot, like a lasso. He was just ready to lift it to catch a stray brown mongrel, when I, the little schoolboy, put my little foot deliberately into the centre of the loop, knowing perfectly well how the brutes, the ruffians, would curse, and jeer, and laugh, and make fun of it. Why is it so that today, as soon as I decided to use the word 'decency', I had the same feeling, the feeling of putting my foot deliberately into the loop of a lasso?

\*

## Flower Children

What the word 'decency' stands for is not only laughed at, it is also held up to scorn and derision. Do you remember the Flower Children? Young people, dressed with flowers and bells, proclaiming Flower Power, and carrying flowers as symbols of universal peace and love, not aware perhaps of how much hatred had been created in the world in the name of love! I feel as if I saw them yesterday, but it was nearly twenty years ago, in the sixties. One night, at about that time, I was sitting in a pub, on the corner of Randolph

Avenue and Warrington Crescent, slowing sipping my whisky, when a man of my age took the seat beside me and started a conversation by saying how awful the new generation is. 'Oh, yes . . .' I said. You see, in France you start by saying '*Mais, non!*', even if you agree with what has been said. In England you start by saying 'O yes . . .' even if you disagree. You say 'Oh yes but . . .' So I said: 'Oh yes, but do you know what happened to me yesterday? I was walking with my wife along the Edgware Road when we saw some young people, four boys and two girls, marching in a row in our direction. When they were a step or two in front of us, we stopped, not without some apprehension, and they stopped, and gave us a bunch of flowers. Upon which they quietly went their way.' As I said that, the man in the pub, the man of my age, put down his glass of beer, and said . . . Well, do you know what he said? He said: 'How disgusting!'

\*

Second thesis

I have been meandering for so long around that Cinderella word 'decency', because I need it. I need it for my Second thesis: that gentleness is biological and aggression is cultural, not vice versa. In other words, that, in general, people don't like to be murderers, unless it is for the sake of an idea.

Let me at once make it clear that I am not going to talk about Ethics. I'm not going to talk about Ethics because I'm not interested in Ethics. And I'm not interested in Ethics because I'm interested

Ethics  
&  
ethical phenomena;  
discovered  
&  
invented

in what Ethics is about. You see, this is not a paradox. I am interested in what Ethics is about, but She is not. She, the academic Goddess of Ethics, is interested only in herself. I am interested in ethical behaviour, but she is interested only in ethical terminology. For the last eighty years she's been sharpening her linguistic tools, but she thinks it would be unladylike to use them. So let me leave her and her tools to her academic Robinson Crusoe insularity, and go back to what one would expect to be, but isn't her subject matter, namely ethical phenomena.

The trouble with ethical phenomena is that some of them are discovered and some of them are invented. Those we have invented didn't exist before, and we may call them Cultural Ethical Phenomena. It's easy to point out some of them: The Ten Commandments, Code Napoléon, Principles of Literary Criticism, or Police Regulations. But what about those which *did* exist before, and which we may call Biological Ethical Phenomena? Have there really been any? Do we have any proofs of their existence? Well . . . My very presence here, in front of you, is the proof.

I am the proof

The fact that your  
mothers haven't  
eaten you is  
remarkable; don't  
take it as a matter  
of course

Now, I beseech you, do please take what I'm saying in the literal sense of the words, without allegory or metaphor. I repeat, my very presence here in front of you is the proof. The proof that when I was small and defenceless, my mother didn't eat me, even when she was very hungry. And your very presence here is the proof that your mothers haven't eaten you. And you will agree with me that they didn't eat us *not* because

Gentleness is both  
biological  
&  
ethical

of some clergyman or policeman who might or might not have exhorted them not to. And the lioness also wasn't in the habit of eating her cubs millions of years before she devoured a Christian who could have taught her the Lesson. She not only wouldn't eat them, she would lick them with all the gentleness of her red, rough, stinking tongue. That's why I said in the first half of my thesis that gentleness is biological. It is biological in the strict genetic sense. It is both genetic and ethical. What a pity that philosophers put Nature and Ethics in two different compartments. There is no reason why we should call 'ethical' only that normative kind of behaviour of our brain structure which answers to *do! don't! must! ought! good! bad!* given by a divine or civic authority, and not to that triggered by hormones or pheromones. The latter, the genetic demeanour, is much stronger and of greater significance. It is this that makes the survival of the species possible.

Hormones &  
pheromones are  
also emotive &  
commanding

The survival of  
the gentlest

Young boys and girls are taught that unfortunate Darwinian expression 'the survival of the fittest', and they imagine a strong muscular male, a Muhammad Ali, or a Tarzan, Grrrh! But the prodigious strength of Cassius Clay was preceded by the gentleness of his mother, and the chivalresque strength of Tarzan by the gentleness of the female African Ape who brought him up. So perhaps *The survival of the gentlest* is more to the point. Because when the gentleness disappears through mutations, as might have been the case with the dinosaurs, or through some cultural factors, as might still happen to men, the extinction of the species is inevitable.

Tragic Necessity  
is in Nature, Evil  
is in Culture  
(for more about  
'Tragic Necessity'  
see: *factor T*, by  
S.T., London  
1956)

It is a pity that the truth about Original Virtue, the virtue of biological gentleness, has been engulfed in our lore by the cultural invention of Original Sin, the sin of natural evil. There is Tragic Necessity, but no natural-evil, in the man who kills for food. And there is no natural evil in the lioness who kills her Christians. All the evil is in the culture of the Emperor who has sent them on to the sands of the arena. Maybe that's how their faith survived that of the Emperor. Because it was he who used vicious means. They, so far as I know, were still innocent plebeian crusaders, not taking other people's lives, not sending letter-bombs by post, not planting time-bombs in the tabernae, shooting at a quadriga, or hijacking a sea-going triemis. It's curious that I understand those simple lovers of God better than I understand that sophisticated lover of Art, the art of happenings, the Roman Emperor Nero. Though I am not a believer.

On the contrary, I am too-oo religious, if you see what I mean, to believe in anything, if you see what I mean; not even in the Linguistics, if you see what I mean, of the anti-mystic mystics, if you see what I mean; because I'm too religious, to believe in anything, if you see what I mean.

\*

Original Sin  
&  
Original Virtue

Original Virtue excuses no man. Original Sin does. Original Sin is a pretext for pessimism; Original Virtue is not. We have studied Original Sin for ages and preached it as the deprivation of

The Chair of  
Decency

Grace involving Guilt, and as the source of all ordinary sins and miseries. But the study of the Original Virtue of gentleness and of the consequent ordinary virtues of common decencies has been most neglected. And yet, the phenomenon itself exists, and has enough virility and reality to claim as a right its place in philosophy, science, and public life. Should we not study it as we do other demonstrable though invisible things? Should we not create a Chair of Decency at our Universities? A Chair of the Physics of Decency and of the Molecular Chemistry of Gentleness? A Department of Altruism? A Faculty of Kindness? A Kinsey Report on unselfish behaviour in human male and female? A Research Institute for the studies of structural difficulties in the mechanics of inter-governmental good manners?

On clergymen  
&  
policemen

Some people who refuse to take notice of the Original Virtue of Gentleness and prefer to believe in the Original Sin of Evil, are of the opinion that we would all be committing all the actual sins, all the time, on all occasions, were it not for two reasons: The first is voiced by the clergyman who tells us that there is a system of rewards after death; the second by the policeman who reminds us that there is a system of punishments on earth. It is regrettable that no serious academic research has been done on the practicality of these two systems. Or, if it has, that it hasn't become common knowledge.

The only piece of research I saw on the first subject, was a badly documented report saying

(see:  
*Cardinal Pölätiö*,  
London 1961, but  
see also a report  
by Clifford Longley,  
Religious Affairs  
Correspondent of  
*The Times*,  
15.9.1981)

that a certain time at a certain place there was a proportionally greater number of Roman Catholics than of Unbelievers among those who had been convicted in the criminal courts. To which Msgr Gavarni said: 'All statistics lie'. Msgr Zorge said: 'Frogs commit still less crimes than Unbelievers, so what?' Msgr Liutprand said: 'To commit a crime, you've got to have guts, and catholics have guts.' And a little Franciscan brother hanged himself in his cell. As scientific research, surely not enough to generalise upon.

Nor have we anything like a Kinsey Report on the second subject. The Police. All we have is opinions and exclamations, silences and screams. Even from their own professionals.

(*The Times*,  
27.8.1981)

'I don't give a damn for the bleeding hearts, the so-called liberals and marxist agitators who can do nothing but complain about police brutality', says Mr James Jardine, Chairman of the Police Federation. 'Police *are* political in any society,' says Ms Irene Wilson, a Staff Tutor at the Police Staff College, 'both as individuals and as an occupational group.' 'The police attracts conservative and authoritarian personalities,' explains Detective Chief Inspector Gorman.

(*The Times*,  
5.10.1981)

But hark! Here is Chief Inspector Butler. He doesn't think opinions are enough. He advocates ACADEMIC RESEARCH INTO POLICEMEN'S ATTITUDES OF MIND. 'There is an unfortunate lack of academic research on the police,' he says, 'such research should be encouraged.' Thus, as I am a *practical man*, it occurred to me that,

Whom to elect  
to the Chair of  
Decency?

perhaps, it might be a good and practical idea to elect to our academic Chair of Decency not an Oxford Moral Philosopher, preoccupied with such problems as . . . I quote literally: Whether from *This is good* you can always infer *Therefore choose it*, for instance *This is a good chocolate* therefore *Take it*, which, in ethical context, becomes *Let everyone take it*, but, rather, the Chief Inspector who is familiar with what's going on behind the Closed Doors of a police station, and has personal knowledge of cruelties committed in the name of Justice, cruelties committed in the name of Charity, and cruelties committed for their own sake.

'Wouldn't you  
defend your  
sister . . . ?'

Well, I don't know . . . Our attitude towards the police is most ambiguous, equivocal, confused . . . . Once upon a time, before the atomic age, a sergeant in the army would give a lesson of patriotism to a conscript by putting to him this standard rhetorical question: 'Wouldn't you defend your sister if a man was trying to rape her?' This psychological trick didn't work with only one man who was a pimp and whose sister was a well known whore, but otherwise it must have been effective because it was used in the armies of many countries. In peace time, the question will rather be: 'Wouldn't you call a policeman?'

We all avoid the policeman when we are breaking the law, but we expect him to be within call when the law-breaker attacks us. And yet, when we see a policeman marching a handcuffed man, green with fear, not into a cage in the zoo, where we

## Behind Closed Doors

could observe what was happening, but behind the Closed Doors of the police station, our feelings are confused, to say the least. We don't like the closed doors behind which one person is in the power of another, whether it's a police station, a prison, or a mental home. Our thoughts vacillate. Though I once met a young man whose thoughts didn't vacillate at all. He knew exactly what to do, and did it in his own unusual way.

He was neither a criminal, nor a victim of persecution, nor a victim of his own thirst for power, but it just so happened that he had had a few pints of beer and, late one night, when walking in the streets of London, he felt a sudden urge to empty his bladder. As everything was closed, he turned into a narrow side-street, stood in a niche in front of a padlocked door, and unzipped, or unbuttoned, when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. Two policemen were standing behind him. The shock was such that his vesical sphincter contracted and he was unable to demonstrate his reasons for being where he was, upon which he was accused of trying to 'break and enter'. After spending the night in the police station, he was taken to the court, where, as no tools had been found on him, that charge was changed to that of vagrancy, for which he was duly fined. All this enraged our hero so that he . . . well, can you guess what he did? He joined the Force and became a policeman. 'For great ideas let fools contest,' he said. 'If you can't love them, and want to do something about it, join them. All able-bodied, honest young dreamers should join the police, or become prison warders, or mental

hospital nurses.'

Open the doors I would have loved to be able to end this story by telling you that he has become a great reformer who has helped to open some hermetically closed doors. Alas, this is a true story, not a parable, and it ends with an anticlimax. He didn't last long in the police force. After a year or so, he resigned and is now a moderately successful businessman, buying and selling houses.

\*

CODA As you see, my Logic is not axiomatic. She doesn't march forward, goose-step by goose-step, from indubitable truths to indisputable consequences, from arbitrary principles to conclusions unchecked by results, deaf to the feedback of reality. It is empirical evidence rather than theoretical prejudice that shaped her body and guided her syllogisms.

Facts are beyond controversy, 'truths' are not Looking backwards over her shoulder, from the results towards the reasons, which were the results of previous reasons, she may never arrive at first principles, but, somewhere half-way along the chain of events, half-way between Man and the first nucleic acid molecules replicating themselves, she comes across a fact; not across a truth, but across a fact. A very simple fact. The fact that of all possible species of carnivora, those only survived whose everhungry members did *not* devour their own children before the children grew up and produced the next and next and next carnivorous generation.

Ethics  
*is*  
physics

This illogical behaviour, which allowed the species to continue, you may call 'a biological fact', or you may call it 'altruism', or — why not? — 'love'. If you call it 'a biological fact', then it's physics. If you call it 'love', then it's ethics. And, in the cruel world, in which the beast had to attack to feed not only himself but also his litter, this biological fact, this logical absurdity, this unselfish quirk of DNA, this love, must have preceded aggression (which, paradoxically, it caused) and thus decency must have preceded wickedness.

Progress

As time marches on, this logical absurdity of caring not only for himself makes the beast enlarge the field of decency from the litter to the pack, the tribe, race, class, nation, the whole species? Anyway, such a sequence of events is what I would like to call 'Progress'. And I would like to think that it is carried forward not by beliefs in fetishes, not by Great Illusions, not by aggression (WHICH, FROM BEING AGGRESSION FOR THE SAKE OF FOOD, DEGENERATED INTO AGGRESSION FOR THE SAKE OF IDEAS), but by its own evolutionary momentum. In spite of our cultural push-pulls, exercised by Grand Aims, noble or wicked.

\*

When my Logic looks backwards over her shoulder, she sees that the absence of wicked means *is* more important than the presence of Grand Aims.

And when she turns around and glances forward into the future, what she sees is the urgent need for the food of common decencies, which will grow not from the aggressive nightmares of bygones, nor from the glorious blue-prints for the morrow, but from the common decencies of now.

\* \* \*

(3)

The Great Confusion, was both  
terminological & operational.  
He noticed that Great Philosophy  
behaved just the other way round than  
the scientists. When the scientists  
banned a word from the language of facts  
they tried to give it a more specific  
meaning. For Ned's house...

- and this all applied to gothic sci. fiction books.  
It was not so with Great Phil.

They used to invent new meanings  
for the old words, which was still  
more confusing because each

Gr. Phil. who gave his own meaning  
which differed from that given to it  
by other Phil. - in which consisted  
of Greatness.

scientists - the world

philosophy - impossible worlds

## THE CHAIR OF DECENCY

### **bibliography**

'Johan Huizinga-lezing 1981 door Stefan Themerson — Een leerstoel voor het fatsoen', *NRC Handelsblad*, Rotterdam, 12 December 1981

*The Chair of Decency* (Een Leerstoel in Fatsoen) (English and Dutch texts of the Johan Huizinga Lecture, University of Leiden, December 1981), Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genneep, 1982 (Dutch translation by Nicolaas Matsier)

also in:

'En Lärostol i Anständighet', *Janus*, vol.6, no.25, Kristianstad, 1983, pp.31-48. (Swedish translation by Magnus Hedlund)

'Katedra Przyzwoitości'. Łódź. Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych, 1985. (Polish translation by Anna and Piotr Bikont)

### **reprinted in:**

*Katedra Przyzwoitości*. published by Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych, Łódź, 1985

*Nawa sw. Krzysztofa*, no.2, Łódź, 1985, pp.9-12.

*Mandragora*, no.1, Wrocław, May 1986, pp.91-105.

*Literatura na Świecie*, no.7, Warsaw, July 1987, pp.342-66;

*Twórczość*, vol.XLIV, no.12, Warsaw, 1988, pp.80-91.

'Een Leerstoel in Fatsoen', in H.L. Wesseling (ed.), *Alle Cultuur is Streven* collected Huizinga Lectures 1972-86: reprint of original Dutch translation). Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 1987, pp.233-44

Katedra Przyzwoitości, with drawings by Franciszka Themerson.  
Book Art Museum, Łódź, to coincide with the exhibition of Stefan &  
Franciszka Themerson. Graphic design by Małgorzata Misiowiec,  
limited edition 500 copies, 6 May 1994

**extracts also in:**

Senare omtryk i Segla i ett sall. Stockholm, AWE-Gebers, 1987

*Een leerstoel in fatsoen. Woëff Woëff en ander proza.* Eds: Ronald  
Jonkers, Nicolaas Matsier, Hans Kloos. De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam,  
2003. pp. 309 - 338

This edition is limited to 60 copies.

This is number 6.

Stefan Themerson

The Chair of Decency

Een leerstoel in fatsoen

*The Chair of Decency*  
*The Chair of*  
*Decency*



Huizinga-lezing 1981



OBSCURE  
PUBLICATIONS