

The Other Man's Point of View

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My theme, “The Other Man’s Point of View,” is one which is especially pertinent to the conditions existing everywhere today, because they are troubled as they have never been before. We can see how much of the trouble, as between nation and nation, race and race, communal, social and personal, is due simply to our failure to meet the other man’s point of view fairly and squarely. Often when we do meet it, we treat it with little courtesy, even if we do not subject it to resentment and scorn. This is an age of rights and freedom, but we tend to establish in the very exercise of freedom an exclusive and personal right. We seem to think that a man is less entitled to his views than to his more tangible belongings. We do not realize that, poor man, he cannot shed them even if he would. Do these observations seem too wide? The spirit to which they refer is only too common.

The difference in its prevalence is only of degree. Tolerance is not a wide-spread virtue, because it is a virtue of maturity, and we have -not left the stage of our primitiveness so very far behind us. The veneer of our up-to- date civilization hardly hides the passions and instincts which in other days found vent in other and perhaps less sophisticated ways.

“The other man,” whose point of view I am discussing, may be a man of another race, nationality or community; he may be a rival, an employer or employee, a stranger who casually enters a railway compartment which you occupy, anybody who treads on your toes in the street, a noisy neighbour; or he may even be your brother or friend. He is everywhere and keeps pushing his point of view on you from every side. Life itself seems bent on forcing you to understand it. So it is a helpful practice for all of us to place ourselves in imagination in the other man's position and see what would be our standpoint in it. Many a little quarrel would be obviated thereby, and much disagreement quickly and peacefully settled. If we can manage a little graciousness in such

adjustment of differences, that will help greatly to ease the wheels of everyday life.

A point of view, because it is one's own, is not necessarily right. It may be rooted in prejudice. Our reason, which we are apt to assume is infallible, moves normally on the slippery surface of our likes and dislikes, even when it avoids the slope of headlong passion. When we have said, "It is *my* point of view," we have not said the last word in justification of it. We may be merely taking our stand on a pinnacle of conceit from which we do not wish to be dislodged. If there is no room for anyone else there, that enables us to enjoy the sense of lone superiority. From that eminence others seem dwarfed in stature. Even when it is not some form of self-magnification from which we look down, but a principle, this does not ensure our seeing things in right perspective or in their proper aspect; for we may be seeing them through a mist of prejudices, whether due to peculiarities of our temperament, our upbringing or circumstances.

Even when our principle is right, the application may be wrong. It is quite possible to name a principle to defend a wrong. How we apply a principle in a set of circumstances is as much a test of rightness as the principle itself in its cold aloofness. It is all too rare to find a man who is so clear of vision, so straight in his sight, that he sees each thing as it is, in its own God-given objectivity.

When we are hurt, feel incensed, or labor under the stress of some emotion still rippling or congealed, it is difficult for us to see any point of view other than our own. But presently, when normal conditions supervene, we can often see that we have been less than just to the man concerned, in our judgment if not also in action, because of our confused vision. Conversely, if we can train ourselves to look at every situation, as it arises, from the other man's point of view in addition to our own, we shall spare ourselves much unnecessary emotion and the griefs of an impulsive judgment. The golden rule, "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you," is an injunction to put yourself in his place for the time being and then determine your action. When we are in his situation there is every likelihood of our seeing as he sees, and wanting exactly what he wants.

A point of view may be attractive to us or repellent; but if it is sincerely held by the person with whom we have to deal, it is worth our consideration. Often it frightens, just because it is a stranger and we are unaccustomed to it. But if we come closer to it and subject it

to study, we shall find that there is behind it, as much as behind our own, that touch of Nature which makes the whole world kin.

It is foolish to quarrel with a point of view without examining it. Even if it casts a shadow upon us or upon our fellowmen, the only effective means of dispelling it is to bring to bear upon it the light of our close understanding.

To be entrenched in a point of view which we call our own is to be a prisoner. We are such prisoners in a point of view, mostly because of lack of imagination, not for lack of innate goodness. A man is a man in spite of all the stupidity and passion that he may exhibit. In him is a spot of indelible goodness, but as he makes his contacts in life the goodness remains often untouched. There is hope, for understanding is something which can be cultivated, and in its perfection it gives the power to tune in, with the most perfect exactness, to the call of the other man, his needs and circumstances.

The experience of each one of us must have taught us that our growth has always been accompanied by change; that as we have ascended the mountain-side, our views have shifted and altered. So there is no reason to suppose that we must cling to our present points of view with a loyalty that might be dedicated to a better cause. After all, to most questions there are two sides or more· we live in a many-dimensional world, though we see but little at a time. Before we can attain to the fullness of comprehension, it seems to me that we must have experienced the truth in conflicting principles. Socialism and individualism, godliness and humanity, freedom and discipline, and all such opposites, by which people devoutly swear, must find their reconciliation in a truth which transcends but expresses them.

The other man's point of view may unveil to us riches of knowledge which we cannot command from our own. It is the point from which he reacts to life, and his reaction may have qualities which we do not possess. Shakespeare was great because he understood life at so many points, though not all his characters were great.

The point of view of a genius may be the concentration-point of a whole philosophic scheme, the peak, as it were, of a whole system of thought, commanding its outstretched range—looked at in one way the consummation of that system, and in another its origin. There would be truth in many such points of view, for each gives a certain

cross-section of the totality which is true, right enough so far as it goes. The whole essence or seed of a philosophy lies often not so much in an idea which is concrete and limited as in a point of view which commands a vista of widening thought. Sometimes even a simple man – unlearned in books – may give us a value missed in our elaborate sophistications.

A point of view may be based on an attitude or an opinion. The attitude matters far more than the opinion. I venture to think that most of our opinions matter comparatively little, because there is little permanence in them; in any case the truth prevails comparatively quickly over our opinions. But the attitude of mind with which we live our life makes all the difference to the happiness of society and ourselves. Given an attitude of openness, we can help others and ourselves. Such helpfulness demands understanding; for without understanding our best efforts to help will only hinder; and it cannot be achieved except with a sympathetic reception of the other man's point of view.

The understanding of other minds need not render us less capable of making up our own. Nor does an admission of the truth in the other man's point of view weaken the validity in ours. Tolerance should never mean indifference to wrong, but rather the understanding of its cause. What is needed is that we should feel with the man behind the point of view; if we do that, we shall be able to live largely yet lightly, pardoning others their disagreements and differences, not minding them because they are different. We lighten the pressure on ourselves when we let live.

The present age has been variously described according to the standpoint from which its developments have been viewed. Politically its biggest feature has been thought to be the evolution of democracy. Though this principle has been subjected in certain parts to very serious challenge, yet it has had an appeal wide enough to color the outlook of people everywhere in all parts of the world. But democracy, in order to be successful, needs the fulfilment of certain essentials. One is that each individual, who fulfils the duties of his citizenship, should be guaranteed the fullest freedom compatible with public welfare, to live his life according to his own ideas, and make his own contribution to the State. He should not only be vouchsafed respect for his person and personality, but afforded opportunities to

develop this personality both in early life and thereafter; there must be recognition of both the value of and need for his original approach and point of view.

Our quest must be for an order where the point of view of each, representing his experience, has its place in the sum total of social and national life. Each man's point of view is largely the product of his experience, and life is so rich in experience that no one gets exactly the same portion as his fellow in quality or quantity. If the human world were not a world of life, and the problem of social harmony were a mechanical problem, it would be an impossible puzzle to fit the various pieces exactly together. But life is an agent which builds up a million cells of diverse sorts into one perfect whole. Our sociology can be as sound as biology, if we begin with an admission of the facts and found it on natural axioms. I would lay clown, as among those axioms, that success in collective living must depend on the measure of the fullness of the individual life.

Temperament, profession, relationships, circumstances, all have a bearing on the point of view from which a man looks out at any time. All these condition his mentality. If we had the gift of entering the other man's mind and looking through it, we should be able to look upon many aspects of life sealed to us at present, thus in reality raising ourselves to that pinnacle whence those aspects are perceived. Unfortunately most of us know ourselves so little, neither our limitations nor our capacities.

Religion and nationality are specializing influences, which create distinctiveness but also separation. By these and other factors, human life is specialized, and the results of this specialization are enrichment and diversity. The time must come, indeed has come with the breaking down of the world's material barriers, for the welding of these diversities into a unity.

In these days, when all parts of the world have been linked together, and communications hastened by science and its inventions, the other man's point of view calls for more attention and respect than we would have given it in the less urgent days of yore. The peace of the world in every one of its aspects, physical, mental and moral, and our progress depends on our giving it the place it deserves.