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Journal XI – To what extent are you a Romantic?

I do not consider myself a Romantic. I scored an 18 on the “Are you a Romantic?” quiz, which I believe was the second lowest score of anyone in the class. I have always regarded myself as a strong materialist. And yet, almost paradoxically, I do share some Romantic tendencies, if in slightly altered ways. This situation is able to exist because I do not see materialism as inconsistent with Romantic values; from my perspective, in fact, a belief that the universe consists entirely of matter can support and enhance such Romantic ideas as inner spirituality and respect for the wonders of the universe.

I have long held that everything in existence is merely a form of matter: our emotions are nothing more than chemical changes in our brains that are the intricate result of millions of years of evolutionary adaptation. However, I do not deride or dismiss those who believe in the metaphysical. Choice B of question 10 of the Romanticism self-quiz expresses exactly and perfectly my sentiments: “People who claim to have mystical experiences...are...experiencing the inner workings of their minds.” Consequently, spiritual beliefs are not silly or meaningless *because they have meaning for the person experiencing them.*

If artists believe that they are expressing divine inspiration in their paintings, if poets think they are instruments of the vibrations of nature, if mystics see themselves as connecting to God or a universal force that transcends reality, they are experiencing positive, salutary emotions. It is true that materialism would deny the scientific reality of these experiences (unless, of course, science were to confirm the veridicality of metaphysical forces, which is a possibility I don’t dismiss as entirely impossible), but materialism would also endorse their practice. It is the current understanding of science that joy and felicity produce salubrious chemicals that enhance health and longevity. Since it would be expected that spirituality elicits some degree of bliss, it would make logical sense—even, and perhaps, one might argue, especially—from a materialist perspective. The same is true of such traditional practices as yoga and meditation: notwithstanding the scientifically unreal perceptions of inner spirit, the accompanying release of stress—not to mention the physical exercise involved—is undoubtedly healthful.

However, even if an instance of deep inner emotion is largely unrelated to mental—and thereby, physical—wellness (which is probably a rare occurrence indeed), it is by no means nugatory. Although I firmly believe that moments of wonder are invaluable to a salutiferous sense of inner peace and the catharsis of stress, I will presently assume that they are unrelated, for the sake of argument. On page 150 of our Course Reader, Scott Russell Sanders writes:

If what I feel for my wife or her father and mother is only a byproduct of hormones, then what I feel for swift rivers or slow turtles, for the shivering call of a screech owl or the green thrust of bloodroot breaking ground, is equally foolish. If we and the creatures who share the earth with us are only bundles of quarks in motion, however intricate or clever the shapes, then our affection for one another, our concern for other species, our devotion to wildness, our longing for union with the Creation are all mere delusions.

While I obviously agree with the material truth of the author's "if" statements, I heartily object to his conclusions therefrom. Love, beauty, and wonder are not "foolish" for the simple reason that they contain meaning *to us* as human beings. It is true that they are the products of our material minds, but it is equally true that *that fact doesn't really matter!* Whence our feelings come is irrelevant beyond an abstract understanding; what really matters is that they exist. In the same way, we can know scientifically that the earth revolves around the sun and rotates on its axis, but when it comes to practical life, we pretend that the sun moves around a stationary earth in most cases. (It is more useful in our daily lives to speak of the sun rising in the east than it would be to explain in the morning that the earth is rotating in such a way as to cause our region to begin to face the light emitted by the sun.) Moreover, understanding that our emotions are purely the result of the functioning of cells in our body does not make those emotions disappear; a broken arm, for example, is no less agonizing for a person realizing that pain is a sensation produced by the nervous system. Thus, such emotions as love and nostalgia are not meaningless, for they are important in our own lives, irrespective of their origins, and our own lives are all that we experience. The same applies to wonder, a sensation that I value highly. (Incidentally, I disagree with the Romantic notion that Imagination, the contribution of the mind to a perception beyond bare materialism, is required to experience wonder because I believe that the plain material world is amazing and wonderful enough as it is.)

I do not consider myself a Romantic because I do not share Romanticism's emphasis on inspiration, Imagination, and inner spirituality, while I obviously don't accept its rejection of materialism. Nevertheless, materialism is not as contradictory as it seems, for it arrives at many of the same values as Romanticism—among them, respect for mystical experiences, emotions, and wonder—but by different routes.