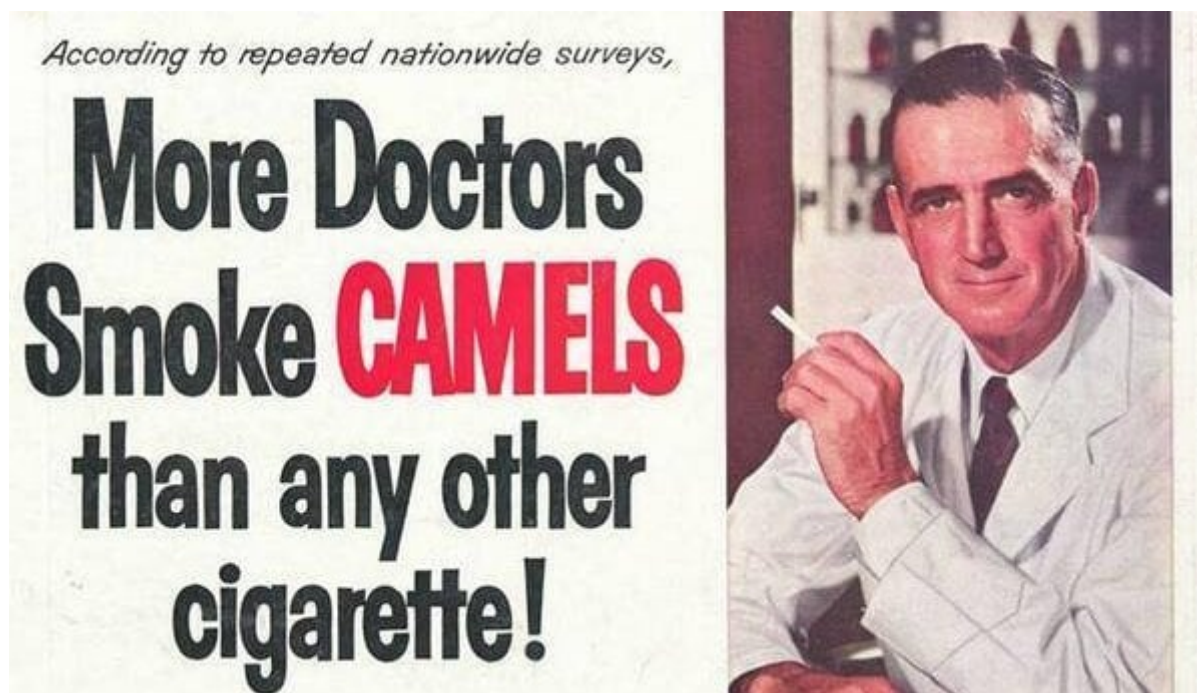


Nota Bene, Part II

by Theodore Dalrymple (October 2016)



Incompetence has probably always been a more important factor in human affairs than malice. We have all made many mistakes, but not many of us have done so through malice, unless self-destructiveness be construed as malice towards the self.

Often when somebody irritates or inconveniences us, we are unsure whether he acts from mere thoughtlessness or from ill-will. Since we like to feel abused and angry, at least some of the time, we have an inherent inclination to prefer the latter explanation. Of course, thoughtlessness can amount to a kind of malice, in so far as it implies a disregard of us, more hurtful sometimes than deliberate ill-will. Malice, then, is to thoughtlessness as full cream milk is to skimmed. The former has its dangers, but the latter has no pleasures.

The following instance taken from the notebook that I kept when I tried, admittedly not for long, to record the many little untruths, lies and evasions by which we are daily surrounded, is one in which it is not easy to distinguish thoughtlessness from malice.

I telephoned a periodical publication for which I have written some hundreds of

articles since 1983, and heard the following recorded message:

Thank you for calling. Our offices are now closed. Our normal working hours are nine till five, Monday to Friday. Please call back then.

There was a brief pause, and then the message continued:

For assistance please press one. I did so, and heard the following message:
Thank you for calling. Our offices are now closed. Our normal working hours... etc.

This, of course, turned the caller into a potential Sisyphus. I had called, incidentally, at eleven o'clock in the morning on a Wednesday which was not a public holiday.

Here I must confess that if I had a job that I considered beneath my elevated capacities that involved dealing with the public, I might take revenge on Fate by disobliging the public by such means as setting them Sisyphean telephonic tasks. And the very least that one could say about the periodical was that my call was not important to it, contrary to the message that one often hears from companies that make you hang on interminably.

According to my notebook, I took a flight to New York soon after this telephonic debacle. It was one of those airlines whose safety video made it seem as if it would be a positive pleasure to crash, a charming escapade in the middle of the Atlantic. The air hostess blew the whistle to attract attention more as if she were on a catwalk modelling a dress than as if she were about to be drowned: though I believe that death by exposure is quite swift and not unpleasant as deaths go. It was ten o'clock in the morning when the plane took off and lunch was served as soon as cruising altitude was reached.

No one flies for the cuisine, but the lunch was truly abominable. A bit of lettuce shrivelled in its old age was accompanied by a little plastic pot of salad dressing called 'Naturally Fresh.' I looked at its list of ingredients:

Water, soybean oil, tarragon vinegar, olive oil, multidextride, salt, dehydrated onion, sugar, mono- and diglycerides, spices, dehydrated garlic, dehydrated red and green bell pepper, nonfat dry milk, xantham, guar (food fiber), lemon juice powder.

To which, having copied it down, I appended the note:

This year's harvest of multidextride has been exceptionally good.

I doubt whether, in the whole history of human cuisine, any individual cook has made salad dressing in this way. I am also fully aware, of course, that of the ingredients I use in making a dressing – olive oil, vinegar and mustard – only the olive oil is completely without preservative. Nevertheless, while few things are pure, some things are simple.

What irritated me about the salad dressing was not that it was so artificial, or that it tasted ersatz, but that the manufacturers should have the effrontery to call their product *Naturally Fresh*. No doubt a sophisticated lawyer, in defending his client, would point out that, in a certain sense, xantham is as natural as, say, wild thyme, and that since everything in the universe is natural, nothing is more (or less) natural than anything else. But if that were the case, not only would the word *natural* mean nothing, but the word *artificial* would have no meaning either. To say that these words had no meaning would be to fly in the face of common sense, and entails a lie in as much as everyone, as a matter of plain fact, attaches *some* meaning to them, even if not everyone is agreed about where the natural ends and the artificial begins. To demand a precise demarcation between terms is to demand of language more than it can supply, and to reduce us to silence about almost everything.

I do not think one person in a hundred would read the list of ingredients and say, 'Ah, so naturally fresh!'

The reason that the manufacturers were able to give it this name was that they knew that not more than one in a hundred persons would look at the list of ingredients in the first place, and the one who did would be more concerned for his health than for truth. This is confirmed by the fact that, if you look up xantham and the other chemical-sounding ingredients of *Naturally Fresh* salad dressing, you will see that many, if not most, of the sites are concerned wholly with their health effects. 'Is xantham bad for me?' ask the anxious consumer; and if the answer is 'No,' well never mind the deception practised by the manufacturers of the salad dressing, for it matters not.

All the same, it argues a lack of scruple to call something as peculiar as this salad dressing *Naturally Fresh* merely because one is unlikely ever to call the

manufacturer to account for it, or because it is not actually illegal to give it such a name. I accept, of course, that it would be difficult to give such a product a name that was truthful and but not off-putting.

Next in my little list of untruths was a video-clip of a TV journalist interviewing the Reverend Terry Jones, a pastor in Florida who publicly burnt a copy of the Koran. Book-burning has a bad cultural connotation (it was Heinrich Heine who observed that when they burn books, people will soon come next), and I have nothing good to say for this savage gesture; it is no better policy to join them if you can't beat them than to treat the enemy of my enemy *ex officio* as my friend.

But this is not the point I want here to make. The interviewer of the Rev. Jones asked him a question; no sooner had the Rev. Jones started to answer than he said 'I don't mean to interrupt, but...,' and interrupted him with observations of his own.

'Excuse me if I interrupt you' would not have been a lie at least, though it might have been not altogether polite in the circumstances; but the interviewer, having said 'I don't want to interrupt you...,' could hardly have claimed to interrupt his interlocutor by inadvertence or by some spontaneous irruption of his sub-conscious. By 'I don't want to interrupt you...' he actually meant 'I am going to interrupt you come what may,' to which might be appended, 'and thereby demonstrate my superior virtue to my viewers.'

Well, you might say, we are none of us so wedded to the unvarnished truth that we do not on occasion, or often, behave similarly, for example by enquiring after the health and well-being of people for whom we care not a jot. (It seldom occurs to us that they care not a jot for *us* when they make similar enquiries after *our* health and well-being.) But an interview destined for the public is not a situation in which you should be so uninterested in what the person replies to your questions that you cut him off before he can answer. This is public bullying in the name of virtue.

Untruths are not, of course, confined to the English-speaking world. In my notebook I recorded the following incident: before the main film in a Paris cinema there were a succession of advertisements (I am so out of touch with the modern world – voluntarily so, I hasten to add – that often at the end of modern

cinema advertisements I am unsure exactly what has been advertised, there evidently being a code to which I am not privy). I did understand one of the advertisements, however; it was public health propaganda against smoking.

On the question of tobacco I readily confess to being somewhat Janus-faced; on the one hand (or should I say face?) I detest smoking aesthetically; on the other I am irritated that abstinence from tobacco has replaced cleanliness, which we now able to take for granted, as the nearest neighbour to godliness. A doctor, I am of course in favour of people living a healthy life; but doing so comes low on the scale of moral virtues. Am I altogether mistaken when I observe on the faces of joggers an expression of moral self-satisfaction, as if pounding their hip joints into arthrosis on city sidewalks were to do the world a great favor?

But, as the French say, let us return to our sheep (I am not referring to the cinema audience, but to my subject). In the brief propaganda film, a man gripped people by the shoulder and threw down a packet of cigarettes on the table in front of them. Then he said, 'Don't let tobacco decide.'

How could tobacco decide anything? Cigarettes do not smoke people, people smoke cigarettes. Moreover, by now it is almost inconceivable that people who take up smoking do not know that it is bad for their health. And here I cannot refrain from quoting an essay by the brilliant (and sublime) Belgian writer, Simon Leys, titled *Cigarettes Are Sublime*:

Mozart confided in a letter that he thought of death every day, and that this thought was the deep source of his musical creation. It certainly explains the inexhaustible joy of his art.

I do not mean to say that the inspiration that one can derive from the funereal warnings issued by various health organisations or from correct thought is going to transform all smokers into Mozarts, but certainly these strident reminders come paradoxically to confer a new seductiveness on the use of tobacco – if not metaphysical meaning. Every time I see one of those threatening messages on a packet of cigarettes, I feel seriously tempted to take up smoking again.

I can't take up smoking again because I never took it up in the first place; I was always repelled by the habit because of my father's pipe. Still, the

implicit lie in the propaganda film seems to me a serious one, for behind it is the suggestion that addiction, once entered into, is a condition from which it is impossible to escape. If this were so no one would ever have escaped from it, but millions have escaped from it; therefore it is not so.

However, the belief that it is inescapable confirms people in their habit, which in any case they want, even if guiltily, to continue. The fact is, as Pascal says, that Man is only a weak reed; but he is a thinking reed, and his thoughts (and beliefs) determine a large part of his conduct. If a man is told that something is impossible, he is less likely to try it, especially when he does not really want to do so.

If cigarettes decided, their decision would be final; there would be no appeal against it. I need hardly provide the evidence against this view, it is so obvious. But this nevertheless was precisely the message in the propaganda cinema advertisement. Am I paranoid, or do I really see behind this lie the sectional interest of an entire bureaucracy and pharmaceutical industry dedicated to assisting the poor helpless smokers to give up their frightful habit? I should calm down. Perhaps smoking would help.

Here I should confess to a little lie of my own. The notebook I have described is not the first in which I tried to record the little lies by which we are daily surrounded. The first begins with these words:

I will record all the little lies in this book by which we are daily surrounded.

This was a lie, because I knew I would never manage it: an odd way to start a little book decrying lies.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [here](#).

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