

Friends of the Mummies

By Theodore Dalrymple

In his autobiography, John Stuart Mill describes an important moment in his life, a kind of intellectual and moral epiphany. Until that moment, Mill had devoted himself to various schemes of political, economic, and social reform, but suddenly he asked himself whether, if all the reforms that he advocated were to come to fruition, he would have found complete satisfaction in life: to which the resounding answer was “No.”



In an instant, he had come to the realization that such reform was not the key to a perfect existence, that something else was needed in human life other than the perfection of political, economic, and social arrangements, even if such perfection were attainable. This realization had a devastating effect on him, for it suggested that he, who prided himself on his rationality, had been living until then in a kind of dreamworld.

Mill was an exceptionally clever and upright man, though perhaps not one overendowed with humor. If you look at G.F. Watts' moving portrait of him (good portrait painting conveys something of the inner man), you will at once see that he was a man of granite integrity, and that if he made mistakes, it could not have been through dishonesty. It is not surprising, then, that he of all people had had his intellectual and moral epiphany.

The great majority of mankind is not capable of this, however, and there is probably a larger number of people than ever before who believe that in reform is to be found human perfection and the whole purpose of existence—because not to believe it would upset their worldview. When their reforms fail to bring about the promised land, when life fails to respond positively to their nostrums, they simply dream up further nostrums to bring the world nearer to perfection. They are like people in the desert who crawl toward their mirages without ever realizing that they are mirages. Failure does not discourage them; rather it spurs them on. It would be admirable if it were not so often destructive.

If anyone thought that if the transsexual movement obtained all its goals there would be a moratorium on demand for changes to sexual morality, he or she would be sadly mistaken. What will be the next thing after transsexualism? For that there will be a next thing once everyone has been bored into submission on this subject is certain. I think incest is a distinct possibility, now that all the “rational” arguments against it have been overcome or made redundant by technical developments such as intrauterine DNA testing. But it might just as well be something else.

The dismantlement of art galleries and museums is another field for those who find in reform the meaning of their lives. Quite recently there has grown up something of a movement, as yet small, to forbid the display of ancient Egyptian mummies in museums on the grounds that the persons interred in this

way, or their close relatives or descendants, never gave their consent to be so displayed. The human rights of the ancient Egyptians are therefore not being respected.

Now, it is certainly true that human remains are to be respected, and it is shocking, at least to me, when they are not treated with a kind of reverence. I was once in friendly correspondence with an American doctor, much older than I, about many subjects. I had known him—by correspondence, never in person—for a few years when he was diagnosed with an inevitably fatal illness. He was a highly intelligent, well-read, and cultivated man, and it shocked me when he told me that he would not mind if his body after his death was rendered for fertilizer or for some other useful purpose, even that of being fed to the pigs. After all, once dead, what would it matter to him? He said it was not rational to worry about the disposal of one's own body, or for that matter the disposal of anyone else. Perhaps so: But if so, then so much the worse for rationality. It might not have been rational of Shah Jahan to have built the Taj Mahal as the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, but I can't help being glad that he did so.

Displaying Egyptian mummies is not disrespectful and tends rather to inspire awe in visitors to museums than, say, derision or contempt. And I cannot help feeling that no one can truly feel concern for the human rights of people who lived 4,000 years ago, and therefore that it is not such concern that motivates them. It is, rather, the desire to eviscerate museums as such that drives them forward, museums having previously been all but untouchable.

In fact, or perhaps more modestly I should say that I surmise that, it is their desire to reform their society to death, until no institution is left, that motivates the friends of the mummies.

Let us suppose that they have their wish, and that mummies are removed from all museums throughout the world in the name of

some kind of human right, or removed in that part of the world that is constantly discovering new human rights. The militants would simply switch their attention to something else, let us say to portrait paintings or even photographs. The subjects of portraits or photographs, after all, never gave their permission for thousands of unknown people to look at them: They ordered their portraits and photographs for far other purposes. To expose portraits, therefore, to the gawping multitudes in the Uffizi, say, or the Prado, is morally illegitimate and demeaning. The subjects of them never gave their permission to be looked at in this way, and until such permission is found (which it never will be), the portraits or photographs should be hidden from public view. The fact that the portraits may be only 400 years old rather than 4,000 does not alter the principle. Let us never forget that the only person who can give permission for a portrait to be displayed is the person portrayed.

And what of the poor dinosaurs, whose skeletons excite children in museums round the world? Wasn't it bad enough for them to go extinct without being exposed to the oohs and aahs of idly curious children, and this without the dinosaurs' permission having even been sought?

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