

Please Close the Door

I am a man of rational good sense and of undeviating logic. I state these things: when I stop, I must have started; if I fall silent, I must have been speaking. I infer: having gone to sleep, from the fact of waking up. I deduce that when I lie, I must be capable of the truth. I think, and so I am. Secundo, ergo - incontrovertibly - primo.

When a man of such strong linearity of thought comes, therefore, upon a notice which implores him to "Please Close The Door", his first and only conclusion is this: this is a door which must be opened in order that he should close it. I accept "B", and so I am obliged to accede to "A". Excellent. There can be no flaw in this argument, for it is the inexorable flow of logic which drives it down the straight and narrow road to an unarguable conclusion.

Anything else which might distract me from drawing my conclusion is to be shut out and ignored. Any such diversions would lead me to false conclusions; that is - to conclusions which cannot be verified in the penetrating light of deductive reasoning.

Thus, I ignore the fact that the notice exhorting me to "close the door" - and thereby and demonstrably, to "open the door" - is not in a place that human experience and pragmatic consequences would normally indicate, to wit: on a door. I must not be misled by the fact that the placard is lying in the gutter, on top of a drain-cover, that which is termed by technical people, I believe, a gully-cover. In the strictest regime, the word "door" should be elided and replaced with the word "gully-cover". The message, however, remains the same: you say "close the gully-cover" and I say "therefore, open the gully-cover".

In pursuit of pure knowledge, I therefore remove my raincoat and some of my outer garments, for to have them sullied by the contents of an urban drain is both expensive and avoidable and - I posit - thereby undesirable. I roll such garments into a tight ball, open the gully-cover and descend below the streets of the town into a level populated quite coolly by rats and insect-life and filled with rushing sounds, strange to my ears, as of distant trains. Or drains. I apologise - the word "or" is not one I can allow to creep into my vocabulary, for it smacks of inexactitude and of matters being somehow open to another interpretation, of facts being transferrable. A train is not a drain. The sound I heard was of drains, nothing more. There are no trains under the ground in my town of birth.

No sooner have I closed above me the gully-cover, for I was ever mindful of the responsibility placed on me, than I am surrounded by a large number of small individuals. A man of less rigorous mental discipline than myself, one who might indulge in medieval religious fantasies, would probably describe these unwelcome attendants as demons, goblins, imps or devils, just from their outward appearance; which is uniformly one of horrible aspect - small horns on the forehead, a short spiky tail, hairy legs, teeth which should have been attended to by a good orthodontist. Each one cackles impolitely and offer me their hands in a demeaning obeisance. I can make no sense of this - it is evident that they are expecting someone of significance, and that they assume that I am that person. I try to explain to them in my calmest manner - for I am mindful that the young and the dispossessed, especially when gathered together in crowds, can sometimes turn nasty - that I am not the person they seek. But my arguments are to no avail.

Placing their filthy little hands upon my person, they drag me off down tunnels and up ladders, through caverns of which I am sure the town council is unaware.

As we thus proceed in haste, I hear their little voices talking of “the master” who has returned “from upstairs”. I am disconcerted to hear them speak also of “drains and trains and cranes and brains”, of “transferrable cats”, of “gullies and flurries” - words which, scarcely five minutes previously, had been passing involuntarily through my own mind.

We come at last to a large subterranean cave, where smoking torches give out a hot, flickering red light; by which I become aware of a large crowd of persons of small stature, perhaps two hundred, and I am - forgivably logically - struck with fear. I determine to extricate myself from this place as soon as I can. My plan is simple: these pitiful creatures expect me to be a person of some importance and potency; they therefore bend to my will; so I must assume this role that they thrust upon me; and take command.

I execute my scheme as soon as the noise dies to a level which permits me to be heard. I advise this curious nation that I must immediately return to the “upstairs” - I adopt this term, since all travellers state that it is wise to adopt the speech of natives in order to gain satisfaction when in foreign parts - in order to perform works of might and magic upon the simple folk that live there. As I suspect, this proposal fills them with a delight that knows no bounds.

They offer me drink and food, which - mindful of the dangers of food prepared in unhygienic environments - I refuse in as forceful a way as I can manage. This refusal causes consternation but none attempts to challenge my authority. Gaining courage from this, I command several of the creatures to lead the way to the “upstairs”, and several more to carry my coat and to follow me in procession. In order to forestall any petty thievery or malicious damage to my coat, I glare fiercely at these dragooned valets and advise them that the coat is full of thunder and lightning and will strike down anyone who damages it. I notice with satisfaction that they are then as careful as the most obsequious manservant.

At last, we come again to the gully-cover. I ascend, with the aid a dozen small hands, step out into the street, and “close the door”. I spend the rest of the hour in speculation: who was it that these creatures were expecting and is that person at loose in the world? But I remind myself that speculation of any philosophical nature is idle and brings no rewards, and cease forthwith.

On the day which succeeds upon the underground misadventure which I describe above, I proceed, as is my daily routine, along the road in which I had seen the sign. I take the same route each day, for to go from location “A” to location “B”, one need only once determine the most convenient pattern of straight lines, angles and diagonals which will bring one to one’s destination in (a) the quickest possible time and (b) without any inconvenience engendered by encountering canines, infants and neighbours. In this instance, my destination is the supermarket.

On coming level with the gully-cover of the previous day, I notice with some dissatisfaction that the notice no longer lies in the gutter. It goes without saying that I do not linger at the spot, for I can readily believe the evidence of my own eyes, without such play-acting as rubbing them, as looking up and down the street in disbelief, as peering under the parked cars. When an object is absent, it is not there: that is all that need be known. If it cannot be perceived, it cannot be determined.

It would be an exaggeration inherently alien to me to state that I am startled when I come abreast of a tree and find a notice pinned to it requesting that I “close the

door". Certainly, my mind takes a moment longer than usual to adjust to the absurd juxtaposition of tree and notice.

But it is no more than a momentary lapse of clinical judgement. I examine the notice. The wording is identical to that of the notice previously encountered. I am little accustomed to the practices of printers, but I believe that the size and form of the printed letters is the same. But I can not, manifestly, state with full confidence that this is the one self-same and identical notice. In the truest sense, it is another notice, for it - firstly - occupies a quite different point in the basic three dimensions and - secondly - presents itself to me in quite different circumstances. But - and here I must discipline myself - I indulge in wild fantasy with idle speculation. In brief: it looks like the same notice; it reveals itself to me in similar circumstances; it obliges me to a similar act: therefore, it is the same notice.

Having established this basic framework of operation, you can be assured that I do not delay. If "B" then "A". Taking the greatest care not to brush the fabric of my jacket against the green moss on the bark, I open the tree and step in; and, it is understood, close the door behind me.

A winding staircase, as in a lighthouse or an old castle-tower, winds up inside the trunk. I follow it upwards, until I step out into the spreading canopy of the tree, terrifyingly high above the street. I find myself above even the roofs of adjacent houses, and a sharp breeze is rocking the tree quite violently. I sit down for safety, fearing lest I be pitched irretrievably on to the cobbles below. A man of science needs to be keenly aware of the effects of gravity upon a body improperly balanced in a tree.

I sit down, as I state, and become aware of a horde of small shining things flying about my head. I think that my strenuous efforts to climb the tree have caused that phenomenon known in common parlance as "seeing stars". But then I realise, by verifiable experimentation, that these "stars" avoid my grasp; that they are therefore conscious of my hand as an obstacle. I soon determine that they are not insects of any sort. Again, I find it hard to explain this in rational terms, but I learn that these small shining things are indeed creatures of some previously-unknown species, even smaller than those underground. My mind is drawn against my will to the old debate among scholastics - "how many angels can sit upon a pin-head?" Were I now to join in this futile argument, I could state unequivocally - twenty. I call them "angels", for I am bereft of any other intellectual strength that might classify them. I see their tiny forms, tinier wings, and can hear them chattering in a language which, to my utmost frustration, is unknown to me. I find in their words not one single hint of a known tongue. And if I cannot understand their words, how can I draw any conclusions? The pre-requisite of philosophical reasoning is communication, a common language.

I reach this conclusion and soon afterwards I realise that, although these "angels" can detect the movement of my hands, they either choose to ignore, or are incapable of detecting, my presence. I am become, in fanciful terms, the Invisible Man.

In order not to waste the rest of my day in this fruitless endeavour, I ease myself gently to my feet and descend the spiral staircase. At the foot, I open the door, close it behind me, and make my way to the supermarket.

If we regard my first observation of the notice as the "first" day, then it is on the "third" day, counting in the same series, that I again return from the supermarket, bearing my daily provisions. I insist on fresh ingredients for my meals. I admit to

some disappointment, but also to some relief, in not coming across the notice of the previous days (that is: day “the first” and day “the second”). My mind puzzles over this seeming contradiction in my emotions, and at last returns a verdict that my digestion is disturbed. A man cannot logically be simultaneously disappointed and relieved, for these emotions are mutually exclusive, unless severely provoked by the intestinal functions.

Notwithstanding which, I admit to experiencing the same passions in equal measure when I am in the middle of the cemetery. The cemetery is an island of peace and security on my diurnal perambulation. Rarely do I encounter anyone here; for the large part, the occupants are dead and buried.

I come upon the monument of an old friend, Mrs Gassie of Morningside. You should know that, in the strictest application of meaning, Mrs Gassie is not, as implied, “my” old friend. “Old” she is without reservation, for she died in 1894, some 108 years ago, at the age of 73. I allow myself the extraordinary laxity to call her “my friend” for the simple reason that the location of her grave is of the most secluded, and therefore a place for occasional sober consideration. Since I am a man schooled in good manners, I cannot now consider Mrs Gassie’s final resting place as one of a total stranger.

I fear that I digress. As I come up to the familiar lair and surmounting monument, depicting - I suppose - a far younger Mrs Gassie as a slim and graceful angel of mercy, I immediately detect the notice, firmly placed against the stonework, which instructs me to “Please close the door”. The cardboard is somewhat battered and weather-worn, for the past night has been blustery and damp. This tattered appearance does nothing to detract from the simplicity of the message: “B” therefore “A”.

A man of lesser rectitude of spirit and of less clarity of thought than myself might hesitate to enter a door such as this. But I am not such a man. I have entered doors in recent times and have closed them behind me: I now composed myself and went to the grave.