

Commentary on My Commonplace

It is absurd—treasonous—to commentate on an aphorism. If you wish to write in this genre, if, like me, you venerate those masters of insight as old as Ali (son-in-law of the Prophet),¹ as biting as Chamfort,² as grim as Adorno,³ you will learn you must proceed with great confidence and unshaken humility. By being *pithy*, you speak universally; but in being *poignant*, you exaggerate. This is the tension in any aphorism: put simply, an aphorism is an overbearing truth caged in a statement. Such truth does not behave like a wild animal when freed from its cage, however. It's closer to a slow starvation. The great Spanish mystic San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross) composed treatises on his own poetry to guide the spiritual direction of his readers. He rarely finished them. Of those that *were* completed, he concludes them swiftly, perhaps relieved that the dark night of prose is over.

But no poetry will be found here. A few, little commonplaces of mine are reproduced without revision but accompanied by short commentary. If it is so perfidious to do this, as I intimated above, then *why*? Perhaps an answer can be found further on.

Only the dullest teaching is about knowledge. Many philosophers of education explain teaching as a device for imparting knowledge of diverse kinds. Some dress their theories as “virtue epistemology,” as if “virtue,” whatever it be, were *merely* about knowledge. Something Confucius⁴ understood well: humane excellence is a difficult, messy, and taxing thing.

It's embarrassing to attach aphorisms to a name. Perhaps doubly so here, but why so? Recall the tension I described above. In our exuberance to capture an insight, a brief ecstasy becomes an emotional inrush. Such a thing cannot be mediated, so what departs us is not something clean but hopelessly contaminated by our blood. There is a reason it is rare for an aphorism—a good one—to contain a personal *I*. That gives the game away. Hence, it's best for an aphorism to not have an “author,” both to secure its impersonal grip on the reader and to protect the writer from their own vanity.

No wall survives abandonment. This one borders on a truism, which is an aphorism gone stale. It becomes more human, I think, with *abandonment*. Perhaps there *is* poetry here: you can abandon by leaving something alone or abandon yourself to enthusiasm. Either way, borders fall.

This last statement I protect in quotes because I do not know if its destiny is to be italicized as an aphorism. “I believe we can all—all—unite in lavender.” There's nothing intuitive about uniting in a shade of purple. What animal is *caged* here? It also reeks of being a *slogan*. Hideous!

Yet, I still think about it. I must be transfixed by *something*. Aphorisms do not lend themselves to positivity and joyful affirmation. You must have a certain temperament for them to grace you. I realize, though, it *resists* me—and all aphorisms depict *resistance*.

“I believe we can all—all—unite in lavender.” That statement stands alone, cheerful in being mysterious, spiteful against the gloom it was born from.

So, “why?” No “answer” *resists* me.

¹ *“Rejection of worldliness is best done in secret.”*

² *“Society is made up of two great classes: those who have more dinners than appetite, and those who have more appetite than dinners.”*

³ *“If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty ‘to consider the evanescent itself as essential.’ They insist, in opposition to Hegel’s practice and yet in accordance with his thought, on negativity.”*

⁴ *“To fail to cultivate virtue, to fail to practice what I learn, to understand what is appropriate and yet fail again, and to be unable to reform conduct that is not productive—these things I worry over.”*