

## THE TYRANNY OF SIGHT

By

CHARLES DE KONINCK, Ph.D., F.R.S.C.

"Sometimes I have wondered," a Chinaman said, "whether Western culture turned into Chimney-smoke because of a neglected sense of touch." And a well-known comedian has intimated recently that, thanks to television, man will soon reduce to a pair of huge eyeballs acting on a pin-point brain. These remarks are not devoid of depth and wisdom. For a neglected sense of touch and a reduction of all sensation to that of sight as the only relevant one would naturally entail a shift of perspective in reverse. Our attitude towards the sense of touch and towards the tangible things will have its counterpart in the quality of our religious thought and feeling; in our general outlook on the world, our philosophy, our interpretation of science; in our appreciation of the fine arts; and not least, in our politics. Indeed, they are reaching a point where our eyes would replace the palate—a *malencontre* hardly less than alarming.

When I say "touch", I refer primarily to something very concrete, such as the experience of the resisting chair you are sitting on, of the collar tight round your neck, of your temperature at this moment, of the position of your body, etc. Although the sense of touch attains many distinct groups of contrary objects, such as hard and soft, warm and cold, wet and dry, etc., it is extremely poor in representation. It has a certain coarseness, as is plain from the fact that our judgment of temperature will depend, say, upon the momentary temperature of our hand. Touch is not the sense of clarity, nor of distinction. These qualities attach primarily and mainly to sight, which is a far more perfect sense. If we had to choose, and if this choice were possible, should we not prefer sight to touch? Sight is the most objective of our senses, the most detached, the freest, not to mention its facility; and it is by sight that we perceive objects at a great distance. It is, *par excellence*, the sense of knowledge, and most of the terms in which we discuss knowledge in general are taken from sight. Words such as 'object', 'image', 'representation', 'manifest', mainly refer to the visual.

Yet, although from the standpoint of knowledge alone the sense of touch is far inferior to that of sight, it does have a quality owing to which it is to man the most important of his external senses. For, touch is, *par excellence*, the sense of certitude—indeed we have the expression "the touchstone of certitude." This ad-

vantage is strikingly brought home to us by the doubling Apostle St. Thomas: "Until I have seen the mark of the nails on His hands, until I have put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into His side, you will never make me believe." And St. John himself, who reports this instance, appeals to this last criterion in saying that his message concerns One who "met the touch of our hands." In this testimony we recognize a familiar experience; whenever we wish to be very certain about the reality of a thing, of the existence of a sensible object, we want to verify it by touch. And it is especially for this reason that touch is called the sense of certitude, while sight is the sense of distinction, of clarity, and of representation. Where the brute fact of physical existence is concerned, sight, notwithstanding its accuracy of discernment and its certitude of distinction, yields less assurance than touch. The words "phantom" or "ghost" usually stand for things visual yet unreal and intangible; we compare them to the kind of representations we have in our dreams. Even when not doubting the things we see but cannot touch, we somehow do feel more at home when they are brought within our reach, as you can see from the people who are so anxious to get their feet on the moon. Dr. Johnson's *argumentum lapideum* against Berkeley's idealism was perhaps not so crude after all. "I refute it thus", he said, and kicked a stone.

Touch, then, is in a way the most inferior of our senses, but this does not mean that it is the most negligible or, more absurd still, that we can prescind from it altogether. Notwithstanding its humility and obscurity, it is rightly called the sense of intellect. We may point out two reasons for this. The first is that there can be no truth without certitude. The second reason is that man differs from other animals by the perfection of his touch. Indeed, ancient wisdom held that amongst men some were more intelligent than others—and note that in this context intelligence is not the same as genius, for a genius in one domain may have no sense in others—not by reason of their sight or their hearing, but by reason of the quality of their touch.

We said a moment ago that the terms in which we discuss the general problem of knowledge refer mostly to sight. But this may become a trap when we overlook a fact which, apart from physiology, points to touch as the most basic of our senses. Considering those same terms according to their original meaning we find that they primarily refer to the tangible. The term "object", for instance, comes from the prefix "ob", meaning toward, against, in opposition to; and from the verb "jacere", that is, to throw. This original signification is more expressly retained in the word "objection", which might mean simply "throwing rocks." The adjective "manifest", from the latin *manus* and *fendere*, originally

meant "seized by the hand," hence, palpable. "Fur manifestus" was a thief caught in the act.

Now the repudiation of touch is felt in all the fields of our culture. Philosophy has for centuries been most explicit in this matter. Descartes, for instance, in his famous axiom: "Je pense, donc je suis: I think, therefore I am" seeks the fundamental certitude in the realm of pure thought. But the truth is that, instead of basing ourselves immediately upon the operation which is proper to the highest of our faculties, we rest first of all and with great assurance in the experience of touching, in which we have at the same time an experience of existing. To be sure, this consciousness is not without thought, but the thought implied here is one which depends upon touch and which does not as yet reveal itself as thought. It is the tangible qualities which are to us first principles of thought and action. If we had to venture an Aristotelian counterpart to Descartes' "Cogito, ergo sum", we would say without hesitation: "Sedeo, ergo sum"; I am sitting, therefore I am.

Our opinion is of course very much down to earth, and yet there is ample proof of the fact that a philosophy which pretends to seek its first principles in the realm of pure thought soon degenerates into an ethereal "philosophy of the spirit" and winds up in the most terrestrial crudeness and a nihilism that is only too tangible. We could not have Marx without Hegel, nor Hegel without Kant, nor Kant without Hume and Descartes. The beginning was apparently a very noble one, but it has led, quite logically, to a senseless liquidation of the human substance.

Touch is the sense of substance. I do not mean by this that substance is *per se* sensible, but if there is a sense by which we feel ourselves within ourselves and distinct from other things about us, surely it is the sense of touch. I begin down there and end up here. It is by virtue of touch that I feel my hand belongs to me. Of the parts of myself that I could merely see I cannot "feel" with equal certitude that they belong to me, though I am confident they may be quite essential.

Touch, again, is the sense of experience. Experience involves passivity, and this sense is the most passive of all. Physical pain is associated with touch. This makes it at the same time the sense of sympathy. A person with a lively sense of touch should be well disposed to "put himself in the other fellow's skin," as they say in French: "se mettre dans la peau d'autrui." If, to us, the other fellow merely has the existence of a purely visual object, we may be inclined to view him in a cold, detached, objective manner, and perhaps treat him accordingly. We might have no sympathy with his life. This kind of objectivity is surely a useful

quality in the Commissar.

Touch, we have said, is the sense of nature. This is due not only to its associated sense of pain, which warns us against what is contrary to our physical nature, but even more to the fact that by touch we have a first intimation of qualitative inwardness. As we have just mentioned, it is by the sense of touch that we feel "within ourselves." Now, this interiority is not to be confused with mere interiority according to place such as that of a suit in the closet, or a handkerchief in the pocket. When we say that nature is an intrinsic principle, we do not mean the kind of interiority that reveals itself to sight. Sight is the sense of surface. It cannot reach the inside of a body unless the outside is transparent, that is to say, invisible. It is not a mere accident that the Philosophers who denied the relevance of sensible qualities, and reduced everything to quantity and quantitative modes, should also have denied nature.

Descartes is a striking example. Confining himself to "clear and distinct ideas", he reduces the external world to extension and modes of extension: to figure and movement as a quantitative mode. He expressly denies the reality of sensible qualities; only what are called "primary qualities"—which actually reduce to the quantitative aspect of things—are real. In this view, there are no such things as animals in the usual sense of the word. They are automata, mechanisms; and even the human body is but a mechanical complex which our mind steers about like a buggy. Indeed the whole universe of what are called living bodies is no more than a machine, though comparatively involved. Quite logically Descartes expels final causality from nature and consequently also the good—the idea of which is first conveyed to us by touch and taste.

Modern philosophers have, on the whole, adopted Descartes' opinion concerning the proper sensibles and have called them secondary qualities, subjective and the fruits of "mind-spinning"—whatever that means.

Incidentally, this attitude may have been encouraged by the incontestable fact that a science such as mathematical physics prescind, and indeed must prescind, from sensible qualities and confine itself to the quantitative aspect of things, which is most appropriately perceived by sight. But precisely, we should not claim for this science the whole of even material reality.

We are faced with a similar situation in the fine arts. Ever since the Renaissance, sculpture, more and more separated from architecture, becomes too purely visual. The sense of stone is gradually lost. In architecture stone yields to plaster—brittle and repugnant to touch. The huge bodies of Rubens offend the tactile sense of

gravitation—they are as it were visual masses, they float. [All appearances to the contrary, this is not true of the Greco.] Modern painting, with Chagall and Dali, has gone very far in that direction. The figures become abstract, the sense of substance—remember what we said of touch in this connection—is lost; and so is the sense of nature, of interiority and motion from within; figure is no longer, here, the proximate sign of the nature of a thing. Music, too, has become predominantly visual. In a recent book the French composer Arthur Honegger observes that even the "people no longer listen to 'music', they go to watch the performance of a famous conductor or pianist." Poetry too follows this trend, as the Literary Supplement of the *London Times* pointed out last year. A contemporary English poet has called this a "monstrous state of the art."

Nor should we overstress the importance of sight in our schools. Visual education, and more of it, is imperative, but we should not overlook the importance of teaching the young how to do things with their hands—if only to prevent them from becoming more rootless intellectuals. Touch has its own kind of subtlety and flair, which is reflected in the saying: "I can't say just why, but I feel it in my bones." And by the way, I would hesitate to subject myself to a surgeon of the extreme visual type.

The culinary arts are no exception. They are now called upon to produce "glamour dishes," and the American Meat Institute has advertised its beef as "beautiful proteins." All this refers to sight, not to taste—which is the sense of wisdom, the sense of "sapientia" (from "sapere," to savour). Taste is the sense of an intimately experienced order and distinction ("Sapientis est ordinare et judicare"); an order quite invisible yet marvellously displayed by the discriminating action of salt—"sal sapientiae." We demand this order even in the taste of a boiled potato. The trouble with most modern philosophers is that they do not—or, worse, cannot—enjoy their food, eating as they do mere molecules, vitamins, fibres and tissues. We should, without condoning excess, prefer Rabelais and Falstaff to the awkward bird-like intellectual, to whom the tangible is irrelevant, and who, after all, has only a pecking acquaintance with reality. When we say "That was a wonderful dinner" we hardly mean—unless, of course, we have become ultra-progressive—that it was so because of a well-balanced proportion of proteins, carbohydrates, and what-not. A purely scientific meal is likely to satisfy only the cerebrotonic ectomorph of Dr. W. Sheldon's classification. There is a real danger that the visual type may take over the kitchen and desecrate the chef's bonnet—though I feel he already may have cast an evil eye on this accoutrement as unhygienic.

This pernicious unbalance is no less felt in our vastly organized political society. For we now consider the community almost exclusively in terms of structure—something prevalently visual. Formerly, society was defined in terms of the good. Now it is mainly correlations and functions. To be "out of touch" with the people appears to be of the essence of bureaucracy. Government becomes abstract and remote; it becomes a system. We need, of course, a certain amount of organization or planning. But let us not forget that the "successful" organizer is a visual type. We must become aware of our need for men who have the right touch, lest we be lost in a terrible nightmare—in the dreamworld of unspeakable violence, where the ruthless organizer is king, where the honest man is in prison, and the criminal both judge and executor.

We are accustomed to admire and encourage the visualizing intellectual unreservedly: we must not be too surprised if we shall find him, one of these days, moving in upon us with his undiscerning but at the same time all too tangible bulldozer.

Let me end this talk with a quotation from the last chapter of Aristotle's *Treatise On the souls*: "Without touch there can be no other sense . . . It is evident, therefore, that the loss of this one sense alone must bring about the death of an animal." To neglect this relative primacy of touch in our general outlook on life is to hasten the death of both civilization and culture.