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Considerations on the Touchstone of Certitude

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“Sedeo, ergo sum”*

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE TOUCHSTONE OF CERTITUDE

Mr. Tomlinson, in *Gallions Reach*, reports the following words of a wise Chinaman: “Sometimes I have wondered whether Western culture turned into chimney-smoke because of a neglected sense of touch.” I believe this reflection is very much to the point. It applies to our civilization as well as to our culture. An American comedian has said — I cannot remember the exact words but it was something to the effect — that thanks to television, man will soon be two huge eyeballs and a pinpoint brain. Perhaps I should add that he does not think well of this. In other words, our culture seems to be altogether too visual. Why is it that an overemphasis on sight could possibly throw light on the character of our thought and indeed of our action? A neglected sense of touch and a reduction of all sensation to that of sight as the only relevant one would surely entail extraordinary consequences from an Aristotelian point of view, which is, I believe, also that of common experience. Sight is indubitably the most objective sense in the order of representation — it reveals the greatest number and variety of objects; it is the sense of clarity and distinction —, but on the other hand, touch is the most basic of our senses, and it is, besides, *par excellence* the sense of certitude. It is the sense of existence, of reality, of substance, of nature, of experience and of sympathy. It is because of this that our attitude towards touch, towards the tangible, will have its counterpart in the quality of our religious thought and sentiment, in our philosophy, in science, in the fine arts, and indeed in our whole life of action, especially in politics. This is of course a rather sweeping statement. But before we try to show its truth by way of induction, let us consider first of all the divisions of the sensible objects and of our senses.

The main division of what is *per se* sensible is that of proper and common sensibles.¹ By a proper sensible, we mean an object which is proper to one sense and cannot be perceived by another: colour is perceived by the eye, not heard or touched; warmth and hardness are felt by the sense of touch, they are neither seen nor heard. By common sensibles, we mean the objects which can be perceived by at least more than one sense, though not necessarily so well by the one as by the other. Movement is an instance of common sensible: it can be seen and it can be felt. Other instances are number, magnitude, figure or shape, etc. Note that all common sensibles are either quantity or quantitative modes. Note, again, that the sensible objects which we have called common are nevertheless most clearly perceived by sight.²

* The present text is the substance of a talk to a gathering, at Assumption College, Worcester, Mass., presided by his Excellency Msgr John Wright, and the Governor of the State of Massachusetts, in June, 1950.

1. ST. THOMAS, *In II de Anima*, lect.13.

2. ST. THOMAS, *In de Sensu et Sensato*, lect.2, (ed. PIROTTA) n.29; *In I Metaph.*, lect.1, (ed. CATHALA) n.8.

When I say "touch," I refer 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 it 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 terms refer primarily and mainly to sight, a far more perfect sense. Here are the opening sentences of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:

All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves: and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.¹

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, 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. Indeed, as St. Augustine points out, the attributes of sight are often applied to the other sensations, but the reverse is not true.

It is the eyes' business to see. But we also use this word with reference to the other senses, inasmuch as we refer to them as conveying knowledge ('cum eos ad cognoscendum intendimus'). We do not then say 'Listen how it glitters,' 'Smell how it shines,' 'Taste how luminous it is,' or 'Feel its resplendency'; in all these cases we use the word 'see.' On the other hand, we say not only, 'See how it shines' (which the eyes alone can perceive); we also say, 'See how it sounds,' 'See how it smells,' 'See how it tastes,' 'See how hard it feels.'²

Yet, although from the viewpoint of knowledge alone our sense of touch is far inferior to that of sight, it does have a quality in virtue of which it is to man the most important of his external senses. This quality is distinctly pointed out to us in the following passage from St. Luke:

While they were speaking of this, he himself stood in the midst of them, and said, Peace be upon you: it is myself, do not be afraid. They cowered down, full of terror, thinking that they were seeing an apparition. What, he said to them, are you dismayed? Whence come these surmises in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, to be assured that it is myself: touch me, and look; a spirit has not flesh and bones, as you see that I have. And as he spoke thus, he shewed them his hands and his feet. Then, while they were still doubtful, and bewildered with joy, he asked them, Have you anything here to eat? So they put before him a piece of roast fish, and a honeycomb; and he took these and ate in their presence.³

1. Ross transl.

2. *Confessions*, X, chap.35.

3. ST. LUKE, XXIV, 37. (Knox transl.)

Our sensation of touch is here referred to as an ultimate criterion of reality, of physical existence. The *demonstratio ad sensum* which we find in this text is complete: for touch is at the same time the "sense of food." We are all familiar with the case of St. Thomas the Apostle: "... And when the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord, he said to them, 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."¹ St. John, towards the beginning of his First Epistle, reassures us of the indubitable truth of his testimony by the following words: "Our message concerns that Word, who is life; what he was from the first, what we have heard about him, what our own eyes have seen of him; what it was that met our gaze, and the touch of our hands."²

The attitude of St. Thomas the Apostle is not an example to be imitated, yet in it 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, intangible, and we compare them to the kind of representations we have in our dreams.

We can now see the basis for an analogy between the sense of touch and divine faith. The sense of touch reveals little in the order of representation and leaves us in thick darkness. But this obscurity does not remove the certitude. Likewise, faith does not imply evidence to us of the truths we believe — it is about "non apparentia," the Apostle says —, it remains obscure, yet its certitude is properly divine. Indeed the words from the Canticle of Canticles: "nigra sum sed formosa," have been applied to our faith. It is dark because of the obscurity in which it leaves us, yet it is beautiful because of the truth it holds so firmly. And without Faith there is no Hope, nor Charity, nor any knowledge of things properly divine. If we demanded this certitude as the result of the object's evidence to us, we could never reach it; we would be lost in a dream-world of sheer representation.

Touch, then, is in a way the most inferior of our senses, but this does not mean that it is the most negligible or, what would be even more absurd, 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, and truth is the good of the intellect. The second reason is that man differs from other animals by the perfection of his touch; and that amongst men, some are more intelligent than others,

1. ST. JOHN, XX, 25.

2. ST. JOHN, I, 1-2.

not by reason of their sight or their hearing, but because of the quality of their touch. As Aristotle says:

... While in respect of all the other senses we fall below many species of animals, in respect of touch we far excel all other species in exactness of discrimination. That is why man is the most intelligent of all animals. This is confirmed by the fact that it is to differences in the organ of touch and to nothing else that the differences between man and man in respect of natural endowment are due; men whose flesh is hard are ill-endowed by nature, men whose flesh is soft, well-endowed.¹

Of touch we have said that it is the sense of existence and of our presence in place and time. We do not say with Descartes: "Cogito, ergo sum," "Je pense, donc je suis"; on the contrary, 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 it is a thought 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 a 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 because 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.

1. ARISTOTLE, *De Anima*, II, cap.9. (SMITH transl.)

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 innerness. 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 have denied the relevance of the proper sensibles, who have 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. He expressly denies the reality of the proper sensibles; only what are called "primary qualities" — which we term "common sensibles" — are real. In his view, there are no such things as animals in the usual sense of the word. They are automatons, 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. But there is perhaps a more deep-seated source of this attitude. I refer to a revolt against the concrete — to the minds of some, disconcertingly concrete — things we are taught by Divine Faith, such as the Incarnation, in which God, by reason of the human nature of Christ, becomes sensible to us, telling the Apostles not only to look at Him, — for He Who is Light became visible even by candle-light —, but to touch Him with their hands. In so doing, He inspires us with a divine confidence in what, from the natural point of view, is the main source of our certitude. There are some who believe that it would be so much more becoming if God had taken the Sacraments more seriously, instead of making them "res et verba" — that is, sensible things and audible words. They should have been abstract symbols, instead of strikingly tangible things which create situations such as "Fetch me that water, that this man's soul may be saved!"

The repudiation of touch is felt in all the fields of our culture. 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 common sensibles, i.e. the quantitative aspect of things. But precisely, we should

not claim for this science the whole of even material reality. Remember, now, what we said of sight as the chief sense of common sensibles. If we surrender all of material reality to physics, we unduly extol the visual.

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. Modern painting, with Chagall and Dali, has gone very far in this 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, and poetry as well. The Literary Supplement of the *London Times* voiced this criticism in one of its last issues. A contemporary English poet has called this a “monstrous state of the art.”

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 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.

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 prevaillingly visual. Formerly, society was defined in terms of the good. Now it is mainly correlations and functions. This state of affairs is not inevitable, difficult as it may be to overcome. The leaders are too often “out of touch” with and far too distant from the people; nor do the latter feel the need for closer touch. 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 dream-world 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.

CHARLES DE KONINCK.