

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

by

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I'd like to look, this evening, at some of the pleasures of imperfectionism—the sources of delight in ideas and systems of thought that are not logically perfect (like Aristotle's), books with parts that never got written (like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*), classification systems that miss getting everything in or that put the same thing in two or three different places (like the British railway system), eccentrics and oddballs, a whole world of quirkiness and unpredictability, a whole world of people who are different, who think differently and act differently, who march (as Thoreau put it) to a different drummer.

People who celebrate the imperfect are often seen as the goats of the moral world, in contrast to the perfect sheep. It's a good analogy. There are, I suppose, people who *enjoy* being sheep, traveling together in flocks, staying inside fences, maintaining regular dietary habits (grass), walking the paths of regularity and order, being herded to and fro by shepherds and dogs watching out for them. What happens to sheep in the end? They get clipped regularly; and when they get too old to produce good wool, they get served up for mutton stew or shepherd's pie. Goats, on the other hand, have fun. Fences won't hold them; they are as likely to butt each other as to flock companionably; they're fairly indiscriminating about their dietary habits. They drive farmers nuts. (My father, who grew up on a farm, and for the rest of his life hated anything agricultural, would have said that was perfectly appropriate.)

If sheep became the image of dutiful Christian charity and salvation, goats became the image of classical Greek revelry, the underside of the

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

marmoreal dignity of the Parthenon and the Erechtheum. Every Greek tragedy expresses the dilemma of human beings at their own limitations, caught both in their need to act and their inability to perceive the consequences of those acts—the glory of being human precisely because we are so limited. And after every trilogy of tragedies came the satyr play—whose characters were half-human, half-goat, and whose humor derived from the goatish (and human) fascination with food, sex, and—well, manure. The satyrs differed from humans only in degree; their cavortings on the stage were all too human. A favorite ending to satyr plays, as in Sophocles' *Ichneutae* ("The Pursuers"), is to drive the stuffed shirts off the stage by throwing goat dung at them, and then to sit down to a large, drunken feast.

The Greek gods, too, differed from humans and satyrs only in degree. They were as imperfect as we humans are; they had not created the universe and bore little responsibility for its destiny; they took refuge, like today's international jet set, in food, wine, and sexual shenanigans. They liked to play games with human lives as a respite from the infinite boredom of living for ever. And because they never had to pay a price of any kind for any of the games they played, they could be the sources of no moral code of any kind.

In the Greek world of Homer and the tragedians, perfection did not exist. It had, therefore, to be invented. The idea of perfection is Plato's great contribution to the history of human thought. There are of course those of us who cherish goats and wish he had refrained. His impulse is primarily religious, as we would now understand religion. Human life, for Plato, is valueless in itself, valuable only as a pilgrimage to a better place which will be characterized by permanence, absence of change, stability, clarity—perfection.

At the center of Plato's idea of perfection is changelessness, which alone can make possible true—i.e. perfect—knowledge. How, Plato asked, can we know something that changes daily, hourly? How can there *really* be something there to know? Furthermore, said Plato, even if things didn't change in the here and now, our own imperfections would prevent our perfect knowledge. We are easily led astray by optical illusions, passions (goatish food and sex again!), all the baggage of our bodies to which our once-perfect and still-immortal souls are uneasily linked.

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Plato did not originate the idea of perfection—that seems to be an import from the Middle East. But he certainly placed it, then and for centuries to come, at the center of the philosophical agenda; and he linked perfection tightly to another religious idea which, again, he did not originate—that of guilt. The Greek world around him was what the anthropologists call a shame culture. One's shortcomings were socially embarrassing; what was right and wrong was linked mostly to a sense of human dignity. For a Greek, pride went with being the best you could be, and falling short of that excellence was a source of embarrassment, not of guilt, right on down to the ultimate embarrassment of death. Trickery was perfectly legitimate; the only sin was getting caught. Homer's great heroes, Odysseus and Achilles, would be more than a match for Ivan Boesky and Otis Wilson.

For all this Plato substituted conscience and guilt—the internal knowledge that one had acted rightly or wrongly, despite the ways one's actions might be seen by the community. The individual thus became more important than the community, the one more significant than the many. Martyrdom became one of Plato's gifts to us; conscience and guilt bade us be perfect or die; and so imperfection became, for Plato and for his followers through the centuries, a source of guilt. And those who followed the paths of imperfection became patsies for perfectionists busily imputing guilt onto everyone else. The imperfect were, once again, the goats.

Aristotle, Plato's student and colleague for more than twenty years, became his antagonist. A marine biologist at heart, he was fascinated above all by change and development—oak trees from acorns, butterflies from grubs, philosophers from embryos and squalling babies. He saw any form of changelessness or perfection as beyond the grasp of man; he saw the traditional Greek emphasis on the values of the community and on this world rather than the next as the centers of his ethical and political philosophy. Thus, in ethics, he stressed that virtuous action (by which he meant action that enabled you to fulfill what there was in you to be fulfilled) lay in a golden mean, in avoiding extremes, in doing what was right for you, the individual *and* citizen—who was also part of a community, a city-state.

Aristotle said that it was the hallmark of an educated man that he did not strive for more certainty than the facts afforded. For Plato, what

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

could not be known with complete certainty was not worth knowing at all. That's the difference between the two. And that difference—between a man who could accept imperfection in what he did and knew, and a man who could not—is at the heart of this evening's paper.

Coleridge observed—and I'm going to quote Jorge Luis Borges now:

that all men are born Aristotelians or Platonists. The latter feel that classes, orders, and genres are realities; the former, that they are generalizations. For the latter, language is nothing but an approximative set of symbols; for the former, it is the map of the universe. The Platonist knows that the universe is somehow a cosmos, an order; that order, for the Aristotelian, can be an error or a fiction of our partial knowledge. Across the latitudes and the epochs, the two immortal antagonists change their name and language: one is Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Bradley; the other, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, William James.

For the Platonist, in short, the soul discovers, to the extent that it is not hindered by the body, a pre-existent, divine, and perfect order to which it strives. For the Aristotelian, the mind invents analytical models which it attempts to fit to the universe at least hypothetically. The Aristotelian always knows that he is playing with fictions to try to discover the facts that, he hopes and believes, are there.

The trouble with being an Aristotelian, to keep up Coleridge's distinction for the moment, is that Platonism is so tempting. Perfectionism and ideal order have an insidious attraction. Aristotle himself is not always exempt—he postulated a universe beyond the moon made of perfect, fundamentally different stuff from that of this world, and a perfect unmoved mover whose perfection caused the motion of the rest of the universe. We all want, I suppose, to escape our limitations by finding somewhere that perfection that we've never experienced. Even goats must dream of heaven.

But imperfection also has its attractions, even for those who believe in another, more perfect world. There's a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-fall; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pierced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

For Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, all these “things counter, original, spare, strange” bespoke the God who had created them. He was British enough, and Catholic enough, to welcome a world of eccentric individuals, both in the natural world and among his fellow-humans, as evidence of God’s continuing brooding care for his creation. In other moods, it’s fair to say, the disparity between his faith in God and the imperfection of the world broke his heart:

Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause . . .

The same tensions beset Einstein and Tolstoy. Einstein’s discovery of relativity had opened the doors to the quantum mechanics and statistical mechanics of modern physics. Einstein himself always insisted that theories are free creations of the human mind, which are then fitted to the data, rather than some kind of specially-privileged insight into the nature of things. But at the same time he could not accept a universe without God, nor a universe in which God—in his terms—simply played dice with humanity. He therefore spent most of his life trying to find a way around statistical mechanics, a way to restore divine perfection. His quest becomes a chapter in almost every history of modern physics, and the tone of the chapter is almost invariably disapproving.

Another victim of the tension between human imperfection and divine perfection was Tolstoy. It was a tension, in his case, between what he *was* and what he *believed*. I’ll let Sir Isaiah Berlin tell a bit of the story, from the opening of his essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*:

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than that the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog's one defence. But, taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark out one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent and articulate, in terms of which they understand, think, and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle; these last lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision. The first kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes; and without insisting on a rigid classification, we may, without too much fear of contradiction, say that, in this sense, Dante belongs to the first category, Shakespeare to the second; Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Proust are, in varying degrees, hedgehogs; Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Moliere, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac, Joyce are foxes.

Berlin goes on to warn his readers that "like all over-simple classifications of this type, the dichotomy becomes, if pressed, artificial, scholastic, and ultimately absurd." But, he insists, it "offers a point of view from which to look and compare," and he proceeds to do so by arguing that Tolstoy "was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog; that his gifts and achievement are one thing, and his beliefs, and consequently his interpretation of his own achievement, another. . . ."

Tolstoy was by nature, Berlin argues,

not a visionary; he saw the manifold objects and situations on earth in their full multiplicity; he grasped their individual essences, and what di-

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

vided them from what they were not, with a clarity to which there is no parallel . . . Nevertheless he longed for a universal explanatory principle; that is the perception of resemblances or common origins, or single purpose, or unity in the apparent variety of the mutually exclusive bits and pieces which composed the furniture of the world.

Finally, says Berlin, "the irritated awareness at the back of his mind that no final solution was ever, in principle, to be found, caused Tolstoy to attack the bogus solutions even more savagely for the false comfort they offered."

If we accept Berlin's interpretation, we are perhaps a little closer to understanding the issues of perfectionism. I think it is closely tied to relating everything to one single central vision, to rejecting multifariousness and contradiction, to having a single standard of value which is other-worldly rather than this-worldly.

By now it should be clear, I hope, that the kind of imperfection I'm here to praise is an intellectual one—one which cherishes the multiplicity and diversity of the world without wanting to reduce all of it to a single system. The imperfect ones, the world's goats, can still cherish, on the other hand, excellent meals, trains that run on time, and the other virtues that Homer praises in the *Odyssey*, including hot tubs:

... all our days we set great store by feasting,
harpers, and the grace of dancing choirs,
changes of dress, warm baths, and downy beds.

Often our ways of organizing and classifying the world are themselves ambiguous, redundant, or deficient. Borges reports on "a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*":

On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush; (l) others; (m) those that have just broken a flower vase; (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Most of us goats live in worlds organized along the lines of that Chinese encyclopedia. Part of Borges' point is that "there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason is very simple: we do not know what the universe is." That ignorance consistently gives pause to those who, like Borges, live surrounded by books and who, again like Borges, find in the image of a great library the most satisfying metaphor for the universe. Borges was himself for a time director of the national library of Argentina. Librarians and bibliophiles have all those hundreds or thousands or millions of books, each one different from all the others, each one (you might say) a unique individual.

But somehow all these uniquely individual books need to get put away somewhere, somehow. No matter how much we may struggle to avoid pigeonholing or categorizing the *people* we know, some way or another we have to put the *books* somewhere. My wife, like many wives, objects to having books just piled on the floor in the living room. They need, she says firmly from time to time, to be put away. And unfortunately there seem to be an awful lot of them—somewhere around nine or ten thousand. If there were only a few books, there'd be no problem. I could remember them in all their particularity, including where they live.

But books seem to multiply furtively in dark corners. At least they do for most librarians, and for me. The time comes when you want a book but cannot remember where you put it. And so, in one way or another, you start classifying your little corner of the bookish universe, and find that you're creating your own version of Borges' Chinese encyclopedia. Or anyway, I do. There's something both satisfying and maddening about figuring out where to put books. Cookbooks, for instance, belong in or near the kitchen—near, in our case, because the kitchen is too full of pots, pans, and gadgets. Logical enough; but then there's some more shelf space where the cookbooks are, and along with the cookbooks are the exercise-and-diet books, the books on repairing the electrical and plumbing systems, some *Consumer Reports* buying guides, and the catalogs from Sears, L. L. Bean, and Lands' End. For us, this is all perfectly—sorry—*imperfectly* sensible. One thing—cookbooks—leads to another—*The Cook's Catalog*—which leads in turn to mail-order catalogs. And it all has to do with "domestic science," now renamed human

ecology. Or so I tell people. I have at home my own Chinese encyclopedia of a classification system. What about others?

Fundamentally, the libraries of the world use only about a half dozen systems for sorting out, or messing up, the world's knowledge. The simplest system, used for lots of ancient libraries and still strong in many a private home, is just sorting by size, to fill the shelves up vertically as much as possible. That was how the Cotton and Royal collections, which became two-thirds of the nucleus of the British Library, were organized. The manuscript of *Beowulf*, for instance, is Cotton Vitellius A.xviii—which makes it part of the library formed by Sir Robert Cotton, in that one of its fourteen bookcases which had the bust of the Roman emperor Vitellius on top, on the top shelf, the eighteenth book over. The Royal collection skipped the busts and just numbered the bookcases instead, so Royal 12.C.xii was in bookcase 12, third shelf down, twelfth book over. Such a system, of course, made no pretense to sorting out the contents of the books—just their physical format. Essentially, the British Library does the same thing today. So, for that matter, does my home computer in storing the manuscript of this paper.

A second strategy is just to shelve the books in the order in which they were acquired—as in the Harleian collection, the other third of the British Library's origins. So Harley 2252, a Chaucer manuscript, sits next to a manuscript a hundred years older, the great compilation of medieval lyrics and a remarkable miscellany of other goodies, including recipes and accounting notes, called Harley 2253. Again, this is the absence of a system.

A third way is the one borrowed by Umberto Eco in his description of the library/labyrinth in *The Name of the Rose*, in which books are shelved in rooms according to their place of origin—Greece, Rome, Gaul, Africa . . . To the extent that there are national traditions and national habits of thought, such a strategy could be called the beginning of a system.

All three of these strategies for sorting out books require a catalog, a librarian with an excellent memory, or both. In none can you simply browse profitably, looking to the center as well as to the fringes and edges of your field of fascination. The books are held at a distance; only if you can guess which book might contain what you want to know can you find out. Eco, in *The Name of the Rose*, carries the inherent elitism of

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

such systems a step further: only if the Librarian in his monastic library believes that it's appropriate for you to have the book will he fetch it for you. Indeed, the crux of Eco's book is the sterility of the library, in which texts are copied and compared but from which new knowledge is rigorously excluded. Such new knowledge includes the knowledge of old books which might cause us to think in new ways.

Classifying books on the shelf, so that one book lives with others on roughly the same subject, is an American invention, going back to the open-shelf public library as a place which could continue what the public school had begun. There used to be a lot of home-brew classifications—the University of California, Berkeley, still has some remnants of the old Rowell classification, Cornell has an even older one, and the ghosts of still other nineteenth-century classification schemes still lurk in the dark corners of our oldest libraries. I am not a Harvard man, thank goodness, and I could never afford to use its Widener Library, but I was always tempted just to see what remnants of the seventeenth century might still lurk therein.

Round about a hundred years ago, Melvil Dewey developed what is still, for most Americans, the most familiar classification system. The Dewey Decimal System is a thing of wonder, like the pyramids and Notre-Dame-de-Paris, like the Great Wall of China and the philosophy of Aristotle. Like them it is man-made, shaped by one or a very few designers who seem both mysterious and larger than life, and like them it is full of quirks. You have all encountered Dewey's system. Virtually all public libraries except a few of the very largest use it; so, with modifications, do Northwestern and the University of Illinois. The typical Dewey number consists of three digits followed by a decimal point and then, perhaps, from one to half-a-dozen *more* numbers. (On the next line there often follows a second number preceded by a letter, which is *not* a Dewey number, but a Cutter number; it identifies the book's author.) This typical Dewey number places a book securely in the middle of the world of knowledge—a world tightly complete, closed, linked together by incessant cross-references and mnemonic devices, ineffably orderly, unspeakably tidy.

Dewey was obsessed by order and efficiency. In the interest of order and efficiency, he clipped the last two letters off his first name (he was one of the early simplified-spelling addicts, like G. B. Shaw and Colonel

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

McCormick, both men of his generation.) In the interest of order and efficiency, he abbreviated dates, so that for him today would be 2Fe87. And in the interest of order and efficiency, he invented a classification system.

You all, I'm sure, remember how it works. Philosophy and psychology go in the 100's, religion in the 200's, economics in the 300's, language study in the 400's, pure science in the 500's, applied science in the 600's, the fine arts in the 700's, literature in the 800's, and biography, history, and geography in the 900's. The 000's, finally, contain that miscellany that even the mind of Melvil Dewey could not eliminate.

Then each of these ten categories is itself subdivided ten ways, and *that* in turn ten more ways; and so almost to infinity. Marvellously tidy, marvellously closed. I first encountered the Dewey Decimal System as a fourteen-year-old library page heavily sheltered from the world by deafness and protective parents. It wasn't so much the books themselves that fascinated me, at fourteen, as I put them on the book trucks, sorted them according to the precepts of Melvil Dewey, and put them away on their shelves. The books were the concrete cases, the instantiations, of this marvellous scheme by which everything in the world could be ordered and organized—this Eden of coherence in a world, as I so often felt, of the fuzzy-minded and the conventional. This wasn't to say that I didn't read the books, or at least some of them. I did, and I regret to say that at times I squandered public funds by reading them when I was supposed to be putting them away. I couldn't read *all* of them, and I didn't pretend to be interested in every book. But it was delicious to know that Melvil Dewey had created this Edenic order in which every book, and hence every idea, had its place.

But for every Eden there is a Fall. The Fall was probably fortunate. It came in two ways: first, the manifest inadequacy of the system to accommodate new knowledge or even changes in the development of history. Dewey, I came to learn, had been born in 1851 and had died in the year of my own birth, 1931. His system, already substantially complete by the 1880's, assumed a closed and tidily ordered universe in which nothing new ever happened, rather like the Library in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. There was no place in Dewey for the transformations of American society resulting from the automobile, the atomic bomb and the consequent Cold War, or the other restructurings of the world following the Second World War. The emergence of Africa and the Middle

East to independence, a China no longer controlled by the West, the disappearance of the British, French, and German empires—Dewey's system could cope gracefully with none of these.

For Melvil Dewey, the world of a hundred years ago was the paradigm of the world that was always to be. It was a world—this was my second discovery—in which WASP males were important and no one else was. Thus the United States got nine-tenths of the 970's, with the rest of North America and the Caribbean relegated to the other one-tenth. Women's issues were stuffed down into one corner of the 300's. And so it went—Dewey's system was the paradigm of the world around the man. He himself, by the way, lived in a country club, the Lake Placid Club, to which Jews and nonwhites were not admitted. In all this, of course, he was fully in harmony with the ethnocentrism, racism, and sexism of the rest of the American educational system.

And so I learned, at fourteen and fifteen, that beauty was not always truth, or truth beauty, as Keats had said they were. He was talking of the permanent beauty of Grecian urns, not of classification systems. But he was on our side.

Weren't there—aren't there—any alternatives to Dewey? Yes—just one, the Library of Congress system. Libraries don't, in general, switch over to that system because, first, it would cost a lot, and because, second, LC has its faults too—faults the opposite of Dewey's, but ultimately just as disabling. The Library of Congress system, still incomplete, uses the 26 letters of the alphabet as its first elements. Thus A is general works, encyclopedias, non-specialist magazines and journals, and the like. B is philosophy and psychology—linked in LC just as much as in Dewey—plus theology, which Dewey had relegated to a wholly separate set of numbers. P is language and literature. Q is science, T technology, Z librarianship and bibliography.

Within these main categories are subdivisions: PR is British literature, for instance, and PS American lit. There's no particularly logical sequence to the alphabetic arrangement; there are no mnemonics at all; the system was developed specifically for the Library of Congress and hence is skewed toward *American* history, social sciences, and literature. The LC system is deliberately quite open, very untidy, capable of considerable expansion, because the various catalogers who made it up were conscious of the shortcomings of the Dewey straitjacket.

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

That's a kind view. A more hostile view would be that the LC system is like its contemporary, Los Angeles, in sprawling all over the landscape and making things nearly impossible for the would-be intellectual navigator. It doesn't have a center, intellectual or otherwise. You can get to know your own suburbs, but whenever you venture out into alien turf you take a road map along. There aren't any good summaries to aid the browser, the more-or-less casual tourist among books.

Perhaps, then, the Dewey and LC systems do mirror something significant about American life—the tightly closed, nationalistic ethnocentrism of the nineteenth century, the open-ended intellectual sprawl of the twentieth.

These two systems, LC and Dewey, between them dominate the library world. The library in the Pompidou Center in Paris—the first open-stack, public-access library in France—uses a simplified Dewey. So does the British National Bibliography. The British Library doesn't use either Dewey or LC to catalog its own books, but it does use both systems for British Library Cataloging in Publication. Anyone who uses libraries a lot has to develop at least a practical working familiarity with each system, and that implies at least some awareness of the design—or absence of design—in the system.

But for a mind hoping to find in libraries and the internal relationships of books to each other some image of an orderly external universe, the worlds of Dewey and the Library of Congress are finally disappointing. Does their imperfection actually mirror an imperfect world? Is the quest for order merely a sort of Quixotic search which brings aches and misery both to the searcher and to those around him? To put it another way—is there any reality to the order, or partial order, that we think we find around us? Or is it all just a figment of our imaginations, our hopes and fears, or—like Tolstoy—our temperaments?

Two groups of scholars have lately been trying to answer that question in fairly oblique ways. One group is the theoretical linguists, people like Noam Chomsky and William Labov. A second, somewhat confused, cluster, includes people like Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz, Kenneth Dover and Moses Finley.

Thirty years ago, Chomsky revolutionized linguistics by insisting that the reality of language lay in the ability of the mind to construct infinite numbers of grammatical sentences, to recognize them as grammatical,

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

and to recognize also the much larger infinity of *un*grammatical sentences. Such an ability, Chomsky insisted, could not be merely a learned behavior; it had to accord with the abilities inherent in the mind itself to organize and construct a language like English. These mental abilities were, for Chomsky, the final realities of language, parallel—though he himself has never so far as I know drawn the analogy—to Plato's Forms. Like the Forms, they are accessible only to the reasoning powers of the mind; they are formidably abstract; and they, rather than the ephemera of speech and even writing, are the finally real data of language. He is aggressively not interested in the ordinary, everyday uses of language, with its shifts in tone, its slips and hesitations and false starts, its movements between folksy and prestigious ways of talking. None of this means much to Chomsky.

But the ordinary casual variations in language mean everything to Labov. He's fascinated by the relations between speech and social stratification, most of all by the way we shift our speech according to the social situations we think we're in. Just think of the differences between "We would have done that," "We'd have done that," "We'd've done that," and "We'da done that." All of us can move back and forth among these four handlings of the same phrase; it just depends on where we are. Labov has developed "variable rules" to cope with such situations—and these variable rules appall Chomsky, for a perfect world and a perfect system don't allow for variation.

Maybe it's relevant that Chomsky, a rabbi's son, lost his religious faith and majored in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. Labov, on the other hand, was an industrial chemist before turning to linguistics in his early thirties. Both men have played a considerable role in politics—but Chomsky's New Left anarchism is far from Labov's liberal concerns with the quality of Black education and the increasing gulf between Black inner-city speech and nearly any brand of White English. Chomsky takes refuge, it seems to me, in a world above politics as he documents the consequences of American imperialism in the Third World but provides no workable solutions. Labov seeks a middle way which offers at least some hope of pulling together our riven *polis* in city-states like Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit. It seems to me, as it has to others, that the immortal adversaries, Plato and Aristotle, are almost reincarnated in Chomsky and Labov. And with that reincarnation

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

there follows the problem, once again, of whether a coherent external order can be found—whether perfection really exists anywhere.

One final group of scholars raises other problems. These are the people interested principally in systems of thought—usually anthropologists, but increasingly historians and literary analysts.

We are learning more and more, for instance, how much *unlike* us the Greeks were. What we value in Homer or Sophocles, often, we are valuing for the wrong reasons. I suggested some of this change earlier when I mentioned the satyr plays. But the differences go far deeper; a Homeric Greek, for instance, had no word for his body as a whole, nor any particular concept of national loyalty, and certainly none of any reward after death. The more we learn from Sir Kenneth Dover of everyday conduct and attitudes in Athens—toward lawsuits, for instance, or homosexuality, or the nature of civic duty—the more exotic it all sounds, and the less comfortably we can say that the Greeks provided the foundations of our world. This is often shocking. My students are regularly horrified to learn that the Parthenon friezes were painted in garish primary reds and blues and yellows—color schemes we might associate with the Caribbean and not with the marble whiteness which is merely the consequence of sun and rain.

As with the Parthenon, so with much else. We have seen behavior in Bali or Morocco through Western eyes, and hence misunderstood it, according to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz asks again and again the question, "What does the native think he's doing?" And again and again the answers are disconcerting, in Bali or Morocco or classical Greece—or even in the classical France of the Enlightenment.

Sir Moses Finley has shown, for instance, that the notions of modern economics, whether those of Keynes, Galbraith, Friedman, or Beryl Sprinkel, have no bearing at all on the economics of classical Greece or classical Rome. Investment, interest, cash flow, economic development, saving—these terms are completely inapplicable to the world of Pericles or Augustus. They are just as inapplicable, Michel Foucault has shown, to the world of eighteenth-century France and even to the *laissez-faire* economics of John Locke and Adam Smith. If we try to understand the economic world of the past in terms of the present, we find nothing but chaos and irrationality. But if we try to reconstruct it from within, to ask what people thought they were doing, then things begin

SHEEP, GOATS, AND CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

to make sense. For the Platonist, however, for whom all men are finally the same man and all times the same time, such ideas become disturbing and irrelevant.

Thus the ancient quarrel between Plato and Aristotle continues right through the fabric of modern learning. We are, almost without knowing or willing it, hedgehogs or foxes, sheep or goats, saved in the knowledge of some great central principle which makes sense of everything else, or lost among the labyrinthine ways of our own minds. For us goats with our sensual passions, our hot tubs and downy beds, our noses for smells and our Chinese-encyclopedia mode of organizing the universe, Platonic certainty often looks lovely as a place of rest. But it is not for us.

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