



I: ON DUALITY

“This is a story of what a man learns in the process of losing it all, one of avarice and addiction, justice and punishment, duality and double-edged swords, and a lesson in how your greatest weakness is always your greatest strength taken too far.”

— *Blind Spots: A Riches to Rags Story*

“A harmless man is not a good man. A good man is a very, very dangerous man who has that under voluntary control.”

That quote came to me from a friend. It was spoken by Jordan Peterson — who, to be honest, isn’t someone I follow closely. I think it’s his voice that annoys me. Still, the quote perfectly captures the duality, both psychological and moral, between power and restraint.

He expands on this further in an interview:

Peterson: “It’s very helpful for people to hear that they should make themselves competent and dangerous and take their proper place in the world...because it’s the alternative to being weak, and weak is not good.”

Interviewer: “By dangerous, that implies I should be ready to threaten someone? To hurt somebody?”

Peterson: “No, you should be capable of it but that doesn't mean you should use it. Those who have swords and know how to use them but keep them sheathed will inherit the world... Otherwise, there's nothing to you. Like, if you're not a formidable force, there's no morality in your self-control. If you're incapable of violence, not being violent isn't a virtue. Capacity for danger and the capacity for control is what brings about the virtue. Otherwise, you confuse weakness with moral virtue — I'm harmless, therefore I'm good — and that isn't how it works at all. If you're harmless, you're just weak, and if you're weak, you're not going to be good. You can't be, because it takes strength to be good. It's very difficult to be good.”

Now, the concept is very well-stated there, but it's far from an original one. Both Jung and Nietzsche have explored this theme in depth, with Nietzsche writing that “...the greatest men may also perhaps have great virtues, but then they also have the opposites of these virtues. I believe that it is precisely out of the presence of these opposites that the great man arises — for the great man is the broad arch which spans two banks lying far apart.”

Even before Nietzsche, La Rochefoucauld expressed this same paradox with gorgeous brevity in his *Maximes* almost 400 years ago: “No one should be praised for his goodness if he has not strength enough to be wicked. All other goodness is but too often an idleness or powerlessness of will.”

Know Thyself

I spend an awful lot of time dwelling on life's dualities: the double-edged swords, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, persona and anima, reputation and character. This tension, the inherent duality within man, is a theme that you will see running all throughout this collection of essays.

When I wrote "Blind Spots," it felt like a story that had to be told. These essays, however, are for those of you who burn with dangerous intensity, who possess the rare capacity for greatness, who carry the weight of their own potential, and who have stumbled, sometimes spectacularly, in their pursuit of it... and who, in that process, came to know the truth...which is that all greatness, and all extraordinary deeds, are built on the foundation of severe self-discipline.

I may seem to be urging you, again and again, to *know thyself*. The reason is that men can be grouped using Nietzsche's "broad arch" framework. When you examine each person you've encountered over the years through this lens, one by one — and that includes the man in the mirror — you will see that the framework holds true.

Put another way, I've never met a man where the arch wasn't equidistant. The majority are tepid in will, incapable of either great deeds or great evil. The *small arch gang*, if you will.

On the other end, you have strong-willed natures that are incapable of doing anything small. How do you measure strength of will? Nietzsche wrote that he "...tests the power of a will...according to the amount of resistance it can offer, the amount of pain and torture it can endure and know how to turn to its own advantage."

Those strong of will already know that they only have one speed: all boats burnt, everything left on the field, no brakes, all gas, all the time. As the proverb goes, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in.

However, if you're unable to keep this dangerous side of your nature under voluntary control, I can tell you firsthand that the consequences are severe. A strong will left unchecked has only three possible outcomes: a hospital, a jail cell, or a graveyard.

As Pindar wrote: "Become who you are, having learned what that is." A strong-willed man must know himself, because that inherent tension within him, that inherent duality, is what can make him his own worst enemy.

Wasted Willpower

What tortures me the most is when you have men of this second nature, the broad arch, the ones who have the exceedingly rare capacity for greatness, and they've taken a life path that domesticated them at best and castrated them at worst.

I think about some guys I knew from high school and college who were straight-up lions, conquerors, warrior spirits, where their ceiling was limited only by their passion and their drive. Men who were blessed to be born with the capacity to change the world. "We're here to make a dent in the universe," said Steve Jobs. "Otherwise, why even be here?"

The issue is that this trait is rare, perhaps exceedingly rare. Very few are born with the quantum of sheer willpower required to make a real dent. And while another man's

choices are absolutely none of my concern, it almost feels like a slight against God when someone is blessed with genius-level intellect, or with the charisma to lead nations, only for these gifts to collect dust in the attic.

That's why it makes me sad to see men like this living in dreary suburbs, overweight, lazy, beaten-down, working dull desk jobs that they hate to support a family that they don't seem all that jazzed about. A prison without bars.

I just hate seeing someone's fire go out, *mailing it in* on life, accepting the fact that their game is over, and providing living, breathing testimony to what Ben Franklin once wrote: "Some people die at 25 and we don't bury them until 75."

Great Natures Produce Nothing Little

A good man is a dangerous man who has that under voluntary control.

If you are someone who feels they are dangerous, yet struggle to keep it under voluntary control, fret not.

History shows that these traits are not static over time. A man's vices can be removed or whittled down with age, chinks in the armor can be buffed out, weaknesses can be mitigated, strengths accentuated, and what appears to be a major vice is often just a function of youth and immaturity.

In Plutarch's *Moralia*, one of the best sections is his discussion on why it seems that the gods are always slow to punish. He explores both sides of the argument, recognizing that punishment is most effective when it is administered immediately after the crime as a *check* to the offender.

However, he also recognizes that the gods have their reasons that men cannot understand. If they rarely punish

immediately, there is logic behind it, writes Plutarch: “But it is likely that the deity would look at the state of any guilty soul that he intended to punish, if haply it might turn and repent, and would give time for reformation to all whose vice was not absolute and incurable.”

Plutarch discusses various heroes of antiquity, Miltiades, Themistocles, and Alcibiades, all of whom appeared wicked in their younger days, yet went on to become some of Greece’s greatest war heroes. If the gods had punished them early rather than looking into their souls, examining their character and giving them time to change their ways, none of these historic victories would have taken place.

Plutarch goes on to discuss the *duality of great natures*: “For great natures produce nothing little, nor can their energy and activity rust owing to their keen intellect, but they toss to and fro as at sea till they come to a settled and durable character. Great natures break out into many strange excesses, which exasperate us at first beyond bearing, so that we think it right to cut off such offenders and stop their career at once, whereas a better judge, seeing the good and noble even in these, waits for age and the season which nature appoints for gathering fruit to bring sense and virtue.”

Plutarch’s belief is that it takes time for great natures to reach maturity — tossing “to and fro as at sea till they come to a settled and durable character.” This all gives credence to the old maxim: *the greater the sinner, the greater the saint*.

Courage Can’t Be Taught

During the Crusades, the common sentiment was that it was always better to have an overly eager, ambitious, and

aggressive knight than a cautious and timid one. The rationale was that restraint and self-control can be taught — but courage and aggression cannot.

A cautious and timid man is not a good man. There is no virtue, no true merit in refraining from something when there is no desire for it in the first place. As La Rochefoucauld puts it, “Moderation was made a virtue to limit the ambition of the great, and to console the mediocre for their want of merit.”

For a man to be good, the path to virtue is when a given desire expresses itself, yet is withstood and resisted through discipline and self-possession. *To understand duality in all its forms is to understand this tension.*

We see this same internal conflict throughout psychology and history, in the Jungian *shadow*, in the id versus the superego, in the lives of the great philosopher-kings who balanced strength with restraint and power with discipline.

Without that inner turmoil, there is no virtue. Remember, *a harmless man is not a good man. A good man is a very, very dangerous man who has that under voluntary control.*

That conflict within — the battle a strong-willed man fights against his own nature — forms a central dilemma we’ll encounter again and again throughout these essays:

Would you rather be at peace with the world and at war with yourself?

Or at war with the world and at peace with yourself?

Gnothi seauton, dear reader — know thyself.