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Illusive forms and human practices

Epimethean Imaginings: Philosophical and Other Meditations on Everyday Light

Raymond Tallis

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Early in *Epimethean Imaginings: Philosophical and Other Meditations on Everyday Light*, Raymond Tallis describes human consciousness as “a supersaturated solution of possibility”, a description that could just as easily refer to his own writing style. In this collection of philosophical essays, one idea always leads to another, and Tallis's sentences, like the world they describe, are dizzyingly varied and interconnected. From a philosophical analysis of sensory experience, to a biting critique of conceptual art, to the close examination of, literally, a can of beans, Tallis more than lives up to his reputation as a polymath, drawing upon knowledge of philosophy, medicine, literature, theoretical physics, and other disciplines until the very notion of separate fields of intellectual inquiry begins to dissolve, which is, of course, the point.

As Tallis explains to the reader early on in the book:

Epimethean Imaginings endeavours to listen into, and reveal, some of what it is that underlies (underpins, underwrites) the ordinary conscious moments of our human lives. It would be dishonest to try to pretend that the essays are other than random: a probe here, a drilling down there—nowise aiming at systematic coverage of the territory. The territory in question is the Atlantis of the subsumed, of the presupposed, of the incorporated, of the taken-for-granted in daily life.

Here are themes of awareness and imagination, history and mythology, vastness and minuteness, timelessness and transience. Tallis claims the essays are random, but his central concerns (obsessions, almost) knit them together. Tallis also concedes “systematic coverage” of his subject, yet one senses a struggle for almost scientific exhaustiveness in his myriad qualifications, parenthetical statements, and extended descriptions. Thankfully, amid the huge variety of information and opinion, a few familiar features appear again and again, often reorienting us right at the moment when we might begin to feel a bit, well, disoriented.

Tallis has had a long career in clinical medicine; and, as he reminds us at the outset, this book is framed as the inverse of “the suffering that, as so my years in medicine have endlessly reminded me, awaits us all”. It is a “work of hope...belief in the possibility of delight in a life”. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's words initiate for Tallis a quest to uncover the riches hidden in the “the quick deed”, the practices that matter in our daily lives, to find “the dim realm of form-combining possibilities” that lie

beneath. Nothing could better describe what the anthropologist's understanding of culture is meant to do: recreate the sources of collective ethos and subjective sensibility. And yet culture in this sense is a term that hardly appears in the essays. What makes Tallis's meditations at once so original and powerful, yet at times so confounding, is that he is to some extent uninterested in developments in, for example, ethnography, biography, psychotherapy, or film that aim to reveal deep understanding of the person in her or his social context—of how culture forms and reforms subjectivity. But in place of real human beings facing danger and uncertainty, Tallis gives us extraordinary accounts of “being” in the philosophy of consciousness; of how affect and moral experience irrupt through language; of how the magic of a moment disappears as soon as it is examined; of how waiting for a train, listening to the receding voices of friends who are at a distance, and conjuring up the sensibility of how ink from a writer's pen spreads on the whiteness of a page to enticing possibilities can be the basis for celebrations of language itself and the transcendent moments of everyday life that are part of a “world that exceeds sense experience”.

Two essays in Tallis's collection, one on modern conceptual art and the other on postmodernist theory, are especially resonant, taking elements of both fields to task for the kinds of selfishness and hypocrisy that are especially intolerable in disciplines that claim to stand for the advancement of knowledge and understanding. His genuine anger is not only understandable, it is refreshing, and, beneath it all, one senses an unyielding preoccupation with truth and sincerity. The essay on postmodernism is provocatively entitled “Colonic Material of a Taurine Provenance”, but, ultimately, the most devastating criticism Tallis directs against the perpetrators of intellectual fraud is the more subtle observation that their works simply “were never intended as acts of communication”.

Tallis is disturbed by disingenuousness or the substitution of dogma for thought. When he writes of “a world of possibility, in which we are capable of error...in which there is space for falsehood and hence for truth”, one recalls Samuel Johnson's statement that, “truth, such as is necessary to the regulation of life, is always to be found where it is honestly sought”. Although some of the chapters in the collection are more compelling than others, all of the essays in *Epimethean Imaginings* are carefully crafted acts of communication; amid all of their complexity and abstraction, Tallis constantly returns to the regulation of “daily life”, which, one senses, is what it's really all about.

Tallis's book is as much an elegy as celebration. A distinct sense of loss runs through the essays, be it in the space “between things described and their descriptions”, or words that disappear like “so many flakes into the great seas of silence”. His “Atlantis of the subsumed” cannot help but suggest more than just the promise of discovery. Or rather, the discovery is that the quest for communicating ordinary life is inevitably disappointing. There is much more in our worlds and lives than we can think, say, or, even in the hands of a polymath and wordsmith who ends on his own imagined end, conjure

and conclude. All in all, *Epimethean Imaginings* is a delightful and instructive read, even if the “quick deed” escapes a serious effort at describing “the form-combining possibilities” that are its cultural and subjective origins. The “form-combining” processes that shape perception of say, a can or, more to the medical point, a symptom, create the subjective and cultural basis for constructing reality as an authorised version: the way things are supposed to be viewed and acted upon. And this is how power—political, economic, institutional—works through forms (perceptual, interpretive, communicative) to regulate lives. That is, for example, how we perceive and experience illness is shaped by political and economic forces working through cultural and psychological processes. Tallis doesn't choose to explore this more entangled and troubled route, but his exemplary deep dives into the “form-combining” underside of other aspects of our daily lives offer a model of how we might go about the quest to document the personal and social sources of such a moral sensibility as one era's “calling” to be a caregiver or another's collective experience of “hysteria” or chronic pain.

Most physician essayists draw on sickness and caregiving for their subject matter. There are no troubled patients, anxious relatives, anguished caregivers in *Epimethean Imaginings*. However, Tallis demonstrates an alternative. Although medicine is rarely mentioned, Tallis's essays engage the themes of ordinary life that stand behind, condition, and are affected by the medical gaze and the tasks of the physician as a human being, whose habitus is the local world of daily life itself, but for whom “everyday light” can lead to extraordinary perceptions and experiences.

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