

Cultural Osmosis

Written by Marco den Ouden.

You may have heard of osmosis in high school biology class. It is most commonly used to explain how plants get their nourishment. Plants, of course, do not eat like animals do. They absorb nutrients from the ground through osmosis.

The skin of the root is a semipermeable membrane that lets water and dissolved nutrients through. Semi-permeable means it lets some things through and not others. Whether something gets through usually depends on the size. So dissolved minerals get through, dirt and rocks do not.

A simple way to think of it is to imagine a jar with a screen down the middle. You pour a slurry of water mixed with sand and pebbles into one side. The water and the sand levels out between the two sides while the pebbles, which are too large to pass through the screen, stay on one side.

In a plant, the dissolved minerals are carried up through the xylem, which are like blood vessels for plants, to the different parts of the plant to nourish it.

Osmosis is also used in animals. In fact, any living thing with a cellular structure will transport minerals and water by osmosis. And semi-permeable membranes can be created artificially as well. When I was a stock market analyst I wrote about a company that creates sewage treatment plants and desalinization plants using semi-permeable membranes and reverse osmosis (which is similar to osmosis but too technical to get into here.)

There is only one problem with osmosis. Some things can get through that shouldn't. Some poisons dissolved in water through pollution or otherwise can invade the plant and kill it.

The idea of osmosis can be applied as a metaphor for the human mind. A new born baby has the mechanism for thinking but has not been exposed to much while in the womb. As the baby grows, she absorbs information from her environment – some of it natural, like colors, textures, tastes and so on. And some of it intellectual. She slowly learns that her parents make noises and that these noises refer to things she observes in the environment. She learns to speak. She learns language.

As she grows, she learns more than just relating words to external objects. She learns about human emotions – things like love and hate, fear, sorrow, happiness and joy. And she learns abstract thoughts.

Indeed, the metaphor of osmosis was used by early childhood educator Maria Montessori.

She wrote of the absorbent mind. Children's minds are like sponges – they see and hear and absorb the ideas surrounding them.

Now the filter, the semi-permeable membrane in the child's mind that distinguishes things is the faculty of reason. Reason and logic are the child's guide to making sense of the world. Such reasoning follows the simple acknowledgment of the law of identity. A is A. A child sits on a chair and learns that it supports her in a comfortable position. She sits on a pile of leaves and sinks into them. There is no support. She learns that a pile of leaves is not a chair. One is A and one is not A.

But just as a plant can be killed by dissolved poisons, so too can a child's mind be corrupted by bad ideas. The filter of reason must be rigorously and actively applied to shut out the poison of bad ideas.

As an example, I wrote **a review** not long ago of Amir Ahmad Nasr's incredible book, *My Isl@m*. In it I wrote how as a child "his was a love-hate relationship with Islam. Some aspects he loved and some he hated. But he 'believed without questioning'. He was a brilliant student, memorizing long passages of the Qur'an and winning recital competitions. 'I became wary of non-Muslims,' he writes. 'I hated Jews, hated secularism, and doubted democracy. I had a love-hate relationship with the West and its leader, the 'Big Satan', the United States of America.' At age eleven he hoped to die as a martyr for Islam."

Young Amir absorbed this attitude, not from his parents who were quite liberal, but from the religious school he attended. When the family moved to Malaysia, he was sent to a non-sectarian international school and learned that what he had been taught was wrong. And he became part of the dissident liberal Arab blogosphere with his blog, *The Sudanese Thinker*.

Amir's explanation of what is wrong with Islam is enlightening. Islam was at one time a progressive religion. Author Rose Wilder Lane in *The Discovery of Freedom* writes of it as the Second Attempt at establishing a society based on freedom. "How did Islamdom lose her virtue?" asks Nasr. "Simply, she forgot the importance of reason."

Reason! The filter of the mind that keeps out poisonous ideas. Indeed, when you think carefully of Amir's story, you realize that our beliefs are often shaped by our culture, by our family background, by our teachers and schools, by the entertainment we watch and so on.

And unlike the semi-permeable membranes in plants and animals, the filter of reason must be actively controlled. One must choose to think. One must make an effort, otherwise one just absorbs whatever the culture gives us and accepts it as gospel.

And this includes actual gospel or religion. Are you a Christian? A Jew? A Muslim? A Sikh? A Hindu? Have you ever thought why? What if you had been born into a family with a

different religion, would you still have adopted the same religion that you now profess? Why not? Would it be any less true because you were raised in a different faith?

Indeed, Thomas Jefferson once noted, "Question with boldness even the existence of a God, because, if there be one, he must approve of the homage of reason, than that of blind-folded fear."

The enemy of reason is authority. People either believe something because reason tells them it is a true belief, or they believe it because some authority figure, whether it be a teacher, a parent, a priest or a politician, tells them it is so and they choose not to actively engage their reason in questioning the truth of what they are taught.

This is an introduction to libertarianism. Libertarianism is a political philosophy based on the idea of freedom, on the idea of bowing to no authority, on the idea of the supremacy of reason.

But because most people submit to cultural osmosis, because they absorb ideas from the prevailing culture without carefully thinking things through, without questioning these ideas to see if they hold water, most people are not libertarians. Libertarianism begins with a questioning mind, with questioning authority, even the authority of your teachers priests, politicians and even parents.

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