



Word of Mouth – 4

This issue's extract is taken from "The Summing Up" by W. Somerset Maugham. Maugham describes this book as an attempt "to try to sort out my thoughts on the subjects which have chiefly interested me during the course of my life." Maugham trained as a doctor at St Thomas's Hospital and qualified in 1897 aged 23. He found the first two years of the curriculum very dull (nothing new here!), but he was more stimulated by the clinical course: "in those three years I must have witnessed pretty well every emotion of which man is capable." He undertook his midwifery in the slums of Lambeth, and these experiences probably inspired his first novel *Lisa of Lambeth* (1897). One of Maugham's interests was philosophy. As part of his own philosophy, Maugham wrote about evil – which he considered to be an important practical problem. He writes:

But the plain man's interest in philosophy is practical. He wants to know what is the value of life, how he should live and what sense he can ascribe to the universe. When philosophers stand back and refuse to give even tentative answers to these questions they shirk their responsibilities. Now, the most urgent problem that confronts the plain man is the problem of evil.

It is curious to notice that when they speak of evil, philosophers so often use toothache as their example. They point out with justice that you cannot feel my toothache. In their sheltered, easy lives it looks as though this were the only pain that had much afflicted them and one might almost conclude that with the improvement of American dentistry the whole problem could be conveniently shelved. I have sometimes thought that it would be a very good thing if before philosophers were granted the degrees that will enable them to impart their wisdom to the young, they had to spend a year in social service in the slums of a great city or earn their living by manual labour. If they had ever seen a child die of meningitis they would face some of the problems that concern them with other eyes.

Comment:

Maugham considered toothache to be a poor example of the evil of pain. He suggests that contemporary advances in dental practice (not only in America) should make toothache a thing of the past. Toothache was (and is still) very common, but it can be extremely variable in its severity. Robert Burns (a sufferer himself) described toothache as "the hell o' a' diseases". But on the "Beaufort scale of pain", toothache is a merely strong wind when compared to the hurricanes of cancer pain and labour pain. As males (probably), the philosophers would be spared the latter; and perhaps they were too young to experience the former.

Like any sensation or emotion, pain is a private matter, which cannot be shared. Maugham has little time for the patronising attitude prevalent in Victorian times (and more recently), that because pain cannot be seen or touched by someone else (unlike say, an abscess), it did not exist ("It's all in the mind.")

Maugham based a lot of his writing on his experiences, which he believed made him a better person: "I do not know a better training for a writer than to spend some time in the medical profession." He felt that philosophers lacked these experiences and so were not really qualified to pass judgements on conditions they knew nothing about. "In one way and another I have used in my writings whatever has happened to me in the course of my life." In referring to a child's death from meningitis, he really turns the knife: "but *I* have seen a child die of meningitis". In the midst of all this suffering and death, toothache does seem rather trivial, doesn't it?

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