

Old books hold a certain allure: the physical nature of clothbound hard covers, musty pages, their typography. There is a certain weight, a certain *je ne sais quoi* to holding one in hand. The more one immerses oneself in the intellectual space of these books, the more an insidious phenomenon reveals itself. It is as if by slowly cleaning the windows of history, the path whence we came reveals itself. It has, for some time now, been slowly working its course; in the age of generative artificial intelligence, it has greatly accelerated its course.

This phenomenon, semantic ablation, is the grinding away of the sharp edges of human intellect and meaning. True intellectual discourse must challenge the mind, perhaps even offending one's sensibilities. Semantic ablation grinds this contentiousness down to something more palatable to a human resources department. It reshapes meaning and substance and weight into a sterile shadow of itself. This ablation has been occurring for sometime here; see, for example, the dumbing-down of America and the concomitant retooling of the educational system from a didactic purpose to a (arguably self-destructive) paraenetic purpose. Generative AI has accelerated this; namely the data they are trained are largely neutered with guard rails built in to avoid any wrong-think. Furthermore, their output and advice, often with a sycophantic flavor, is oft accepted uncritically. This last piece couples with the trend of losing the ability to think critically and to offload our thinking to the machine, producing a most baleful atrophy. A society has collectively decided, in large numbers, to put away the bicycles of the mind in favor of wheelchairs despite perfectly functioning legs.

Consider the ablation of meaning of contemplation: once the highest form of the intellectual life, now reduced to sitting quietly. With a social emphasis on meditation as the Buddhist form, contemplation now often doesn't even imply thinking. Or perhaps agency: once the capacity to act and the responsibility that came with it, now closer to self-assertion or maybe some sense of autonomy. Perhaps most consequentially, consider justice.

Justice, or *iustitia*, once carried the sense of *summum cuique*, of fairness in a righteous sense. Social justice had a rich history in the Catholic Church. Now it is rendered down such that now it is *invidia* having donned the vestments of *iustitia*, retaining the religious fervor with none of the wisdom or meaning. Criminal justice now conflates itself with *clementia* or *misericordia*, without the nuance of when they are applicable. Furthermore, the criminal is often treated not as a rational person with agency, but as doomed by fate (and thus must be shown clemency). We have forgotten the old aphorism: "Mercy to the guilty is cruelty."

to the innocent.

Thus we arrive at another affliction accelerated by our present way of using technology: mnemonic ablation. We increasingly need neither to store nor recall new memories. Why remember what the concert was like when you can just record it? Our experiences are mediated behind a few inches of glass and a pile of software. Why build your own vocabulary when the right-word-finder is in your pocket?

It has often remarked that we have forgotten how to be bored. Contemplation might turn into building a list of questions to ask the computer later. We are staring down the loss of the *Conversio ad phantasmata*, the turning inward towards memory - how can you think deeply about that which cannot be held in your mind because you've lost the ability to place it in your mind unaided? Apply this en masse and it becomes a civilizational-scale problem.

Thus lurks the true danger. What cannot be ~~rec~~ recognized as significant ~~cannot be remembered~~ <sup>remember</sup> as significant; what cannot be remembered as significant cannot be elaborated. Beneath the surface, the conscience of society is disquieted, the conscience of society is ~~de~~ traumatized. All the while, the wheels of society continue slowly ~~and~~ grinding away meaning and memory. The disassembly of our conscience is the disassembly of our identity - reshaping us into something less-than.

TB: I am not terribly happy with this. I tried too hard, stretched too far. That said, I think it has potential. Around the second paragraph I thought about cognitive ablation - something to consider when I rework it.