BOOK REVIEW

Talking to Strangers:
What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know

by Malcolm Gladwell

New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019, 400 pages

The title of Malcom Gladwell's recent book, *Talking to Strangers*, has within it an interesting and useful pun. An initial reading suggests that the book would be about talking to people that one has never met or does not know very well. However, beginning the book, we very quickly realize that Gladwell also suggests that the people we do think we know are also at times very strange to us. Gladwell argues that we may not in fact know people as well as we think we do, and that even after we have known someone for a very long time, or think we know how a person will behave, how they think, and how they live their life, we are often easily deceived.

Gladwell asks how it is that two people, upon meeting each other, can so quickly draw conclusions, and from those conclusions develop responses as if those conclusions – based on stereotypes – only require standardized and scripted responses. These scripts are repeatedly employed even when the outcomes are consistently unsatisfactory. The easiest answer to this problem is to claim that we often use stereotypes to judge other people, and that these stereotypes produce a kind of blindness promoting prejudice towards people about whom we know very little. Gladwell shows that this prejudice is much deeper than those more common stereotypes discussed in contemporary American society such as racial superiority, chauvinism, or simple tribalism. Gladwell argues that we simply assume that what we observe in people's actions and the way they communicate gives us direct knowledge of who they are, their motives, and what they intend to do. Gladwell labels this error the "myth of transparency" (147). Our impressions of people, based on both what they look like and how they present themselves in speech, are falsely interpreted as a direct avenue to that person's genuine thoughts and motives. Each of the examples in the book demonstrate that this myth leads us to deceive ourselves about our capacity to interpret other peoples' words and actions.

Behavioral science or even economics as a lens often try to offer simple explanations for why people act in certain ways in a variety of situations. On one hand, we can accept that humans often act in certain patterns and these patterns can be aggregated and then associated with certain points of view shared by a population. On the other hand, Gladwell shows that even when a pattern has been recognized, the motives for why someone follows a particular

pattern of action are often unique, not simply a canned response to a previously existing social condition.

Gladwell's argument echoes a claim made by sociologist Phillip Rieff (2007) in his posthumously published work *Charisma: The Gift of Grace, and How It Has Been Taken Away from Us*. Rieff reflects on the contemporary characterization of charisma, a view that imagines charisma as an ascribed quality rather than a divine gift. Rieff critiques Max Weber's sociological theory, which Rieff credits with undermining the idea of a genuine human potential for spirited action. In Rieff's view, spirited action differs from a simple reaction resisting a relational or sociological context. Rieff describes Weber's perspective on charisma as evolutionary, suggesting that Weber's view supports the idea that charisma must emerge, rather than being a trait that one receives. A genuine charisma, Rieff argues, believes that the human person, filled with spirit, follows or commits to a way of acting and speaking regardless of context or conditions. That commitment cannot be explained or dissolved into a particular social situation or historical moment. Rieff's primary examples are the minor prophets of Israel, by which he argues that a faithful prophetic voice does not simply *react* to a sociological or economic situation, but rather gracefully opposes it to reveal an injustice. This view of charisma stands in opposition to Rieff's reading of Weberian charisma, which replaces credal commitments and an "inward obedience" with compliance to an external force of martial discipline (2007:139). Gladwell draws a similar conclusion in his book, choosing examples which indicate that simply using social, historical, or contextual explanations for why people act the way they do encourages poor judgement. People may in fact have personal commitments, or allegiance to a particular creed, that better represent their reasons for speaking and acting the way they do.

As is often the case with books for a wider audience, Gladwell refrains from making this point too sharply. He warns against adopting an attitude of suspicion to prevent being deceived, while at the same time suggesting that ordinary trust and what he calls our "default to truth" are important for preserving our social fabric (73). Gladwell walks a thin line between snap judgements and always offering others the benefit of the doubt. While it appears that Gladwell argues against behavioristic interpretations of people's particular words and actions, the conclusion he draws from his primary example points to a systemic change in policing as the cause of our current problems with citizens' suspicion towards police and police departments' overuse of force. In one sense, we're left to believe that the larger social problem we currently have with policing could be solved simply by employing a different system of training officers. However, we know that the attitudes that we hold toward strangers or people whom we view with suspicion often have little to do with experiences and more to do with our default personally held prejudices. As readers, we might ask, can a problem of the heart be solved with a systemic change, or is there another reason why we ought to extend trust toward

others, when we know that it is very likely we may be deceived? If we are deceived, what sociological principle suggests that we ought to forgive that person and trust them again?

Gladwell's ending indicates a systemic problem that may be deeper than policing protocols, even if those protocols reveal that, socially, we have moved from a position of commitment and action to simple reactions based upon data driven defaults. Following up on his stunning opener, in which a young black woman is unnecessarily detained by a police officer and then commits suicide in her cell, Gladwell suggests we need to adopt a measure of restraint, a stance of humility, and pay closer attention to prevent such tragic misunderstandings. Gladwell's suggestions pair nicely with Hannah Arendt's observation that the two more important political principles invented by Jesus Christ were the acts of making a promise and offering forgiveness (1958:243). For we know that we may never abandon all our petty prejudices and in critical moments we may react poorly. What keeps us from simply responding to a situation that cues up our worst fears and our least charitable response? Arendt proposes that we remember our promises, an inward obedience to laws we know we must not break, and when we commit wrongs or suffer wrong, that we preserve forgiveness as that act which may indeed urge us to keep talking, even to strangers.

References

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Rieff, Philip. 2007. *Charisma: The Gift of Grace and How it Has Been Taken from Us.* New York: Pantheon Books.

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