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The Cheshire Cat

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The Cheshire Cat

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The office of Rickwell, Syngayte and Burnn always surprised any visitor who knew how long the young agency had been in existence. The unexpected plushness could be traced to Mark Rickwell, who would not allow his treasured family name to appear on an unseemly portal. He had lavished a long-term loan on his son's firm at the time that the original partnership papers had been signed. He did not feel that he had gambled with his money, however; he had, frankly, been very pleased at his son's good sense in selecting Ross Syngayte as a partner. Mark Rickwell prided himself on his ability to recognize in youth the qualities that pointed toward business genius. In his few dealings with young Syngayte he had formed a strong admiration for Ross that he insisted was on purely rational grounds. But his son realized that his father had been charmed by flashing eyes and a strong, irregularly handsome face just as he himself had been."

Cover Page Footnote

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THE CHESHIRE CAT

WILLIAM DONOVAN

This time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.—LEWIS CARROLL

The office of Rickwell, Syngayte and Burnn always surprised any visitor who knew how long the young agency had been in existence. The unexpected plushness could be traced to Mark Rickwell, who would not allow his treasured family name to appear on an unseemly portal. He had lavished a long-term loan on his son's firm at the time that the original partnership papers had been signed. He did not feel that he had gambled with his money, however; he had, frankly, been very pleased at his son's good sense in selecting Ross Syngayte as a partner. Mark Rickwell prided himself on his ability to recognize in youth the qualities that pointed toward business genius. In his few dealings with young Syngayte he had formed a strong admiration for Ross that he insisted was on purely rational grounds. But his son realized that his father had been charmed by flashing eyes and a strong, irregularly handsome face just as he himself had been.

"Look, Abby," Ross was saying one day to his partner, "we're losing business every minute that we argue about

this damn r-/ and we're no closer to agreement than we were three weeks ago." Abby looked at Deborah Burnn's back as she stared blankly out of the window. He had replaced her in this argument as the open-minded arbiter. Usually she acted as compromiser in any dispute, bringing the two argumentative male partners to a workable agreement. But in this instance she had resolutely condemned Ross's proposal from the start. Abby tended to follow Deborah's thinking on this issue, but he had enough respect for Ross's judgment to give some consideration to the proposal.

"Ross," he replied, "you haven't offered any rebuttal to Debbie's stand. Don't you think that there is a certain ethical pall over all this sub-liminal idea? It's a matter of respect for the privacy of a person's mind." Lighting a cigarette, he watched Deborah pass quietly out of the room. "You know she won't argue with you. Why don't you clear the air of this tension. She's not as firmly grounded in the theory of this thing as you are. For that matter, neither am I."

Deborah quietly reentered the office, and Ross walked over to the water cooler where she was drawing a drink. "Deb, you can never be sure whether something like this will work or not. You have to try it for a few years and measure your results. If these soft drink people are so anxious to use this method and take all the risks with public opinion, why not let them? Somebody has to do the groundwork. It's really their problem, not ours. They want to try some *r-I*, and they picked us to handle the account. If we do a good job, they might throw some of their fat regular account our way."

"It would be a welcome bit of business, Ross. . . ." Deborah paused, ". . ." but Abby and I don't want to touch it. The whole thing is insidious." Ross knew what she was driving at; it was insidious because people did not know that they were being influenced by an advertisement. The commercial message was flashed on the movie or television screen so fast that only their subconscious mind was aware of it, and flashed frequently enough to make the desired impression.

"It's a terrible feeling," she added, "not knowing whether you're seeing merely a movie, or some hidden persuader plotted in front of you to change your subconscious mind. What is more, in the wrong hands a thing like this could be a powerful propaganda weapon."

Ross interrupted her. "Debbie, turning down a juicy account like this isn't

going to make *r-I* lose any of its potency. Besides, the power of subliminal projection is greatly over-rated. It can't make you do anything you don't want to do, you know. Only something that you might have done anyway if you had thought of it." Ross wanted to carry on with his defense, but he wasn't sure that what he had to say would fall on fertile ground.

Meanwhile, Abby had been standing apart, looking from the sincere, inquisitive face of Deborah to the disconcerted and impassive face of the enigmatic Ross. "What are you driving at, Ross?" he queried. "Surely you don't believe that a man's mind should serve as a wastebasket for a slew of ideas that he doesn't anticipate and that are piped in by electronic gadgetry?"

Hearing this, Ross realized for the first time that the ideas his partners had on the subject had been picked up at random from the popular press. He realized that he would have to lay a psychological groundwork for them before they could accept, as he had accepted, the presence in a complex world of another facet of stimulation, another attempt at the modification of the individual through the perception of the environment.

"Abby," he began, "when you sit in a crowded room, with people talking on all sides of you, you don't pay any attention to most of what you hear. I mean, there's a lot being said, but it all goes over your head. You miss it

completely."

Abby ground out his cigarette. "I'll go along with that, but so what?" He seriously doubted that Ross was leading up to anything in particular.

"Just this, Abby. Even though those things going on all around you seem to wash past you because you're not paying any attention, they really do affect you. And change your opinions! A man's mind is less private than he usually likes to think."

Deborah broke into the exchange. "Even if that's true, Ross, it doesn't lead to a position that some men should sneak foreign thoughts into other men's minds. Would you condone some Communist telling everyone to . . ."

"To overthrow the government? No. But many men do come into contact with the reality of Communism. That's inevitable. We hope that people can judge for themselves whether they should embrace Communism, however."

Disturbed, Abby asked, "but why allow people's minds to be seeded with such ideas?"

"Such seeding is a reality of everyday life. All day long people see posters, billboards, and, I hope, some of our ads. Every time you turn a corner, some new impression is staring you in the face. Your mind is constantly being filled with other people's ideas."

Deborah looked out of the window and saw a giant flashing billboard. Parked in front of this stood a truck

boldly covered with a company name. "Ross, you've got a point, in a way. But *that* is different. I can't figure the fine points of the psychology, but I think I can speak about ethics. If we handle this soft drink proposition, we'll be going beyond our rights in the field of communication. It isn't even persuasion— it's a form of hypnotism. I don't want to sound like a missionary, but people in our position have a special responsibility, and we would be setting a precedent. . . . Give me a cigarette, Abby."

Ross was lighting a cigarette; he handed it to the woman and took the one that Abby produced. He walked over to his desk and picked up his lucent paper weight and seemed to contemplate its transparency. "Do you think there is something objectionable in coaxing someone to take a drink of soda?" He smiled, then quickly frowned. "No, excuse me; I know you're serious, Deb. I guess I can't justify the thing in your terms. But I don't think it's as base and obnoxious as you seem to feel."

Abby had been flipping through *Neurotica*. He addressed Ross. "Why does the sub-liminal ad have to be an imperative?" He faced two blank faces. "Look, all the ads they have used in tests were imperatives: "*Drink this.*" "*Eat that.*" "*Buy this.*" We all agree that it's offensive to us to be piping strange commands into the sub-conscious. But with the consumption goods that we're dealing with, a sim-

ple reminder ad carries a lot of weight. Just mentioning the product has an effect in most cases. I don't think we'd be overstepping any rules of ethics by leading people to think about one thing or another. They could still judge for themselves. You can't call that hypnosis, Deb."

Ross was beaming. "I'm glad *you* said that, Abby. I thought maybe it was too fine a point to bring up. Could you go along with *it* on those terms, Deb?"

"Maybe."

"Good, then we're in agreement. But I have my doubts about the effectiveness of the method without an imperative. It's on shaky enough grounds as it is. . . ."

The phone rang. "It's for you, Ross," said Deborah. "It's Jackson." Jackson was the representative of the soft-drink firm which was considering the use of subliminal projection in its advertising.

"You cut him off rather short, didn't you, Ross?" Abby asked. Ross set down the plastic ellipsoid. "Being mysterious again," Abby thought.

"Come on, Ross, what's the kick?"

"Yes— what's got into you? What did Jackson want?" Deborah echoed.

"Seems that some committee broke the back of the whole proposal. Public opinion and all that. They'll have to wait a few months before they move at all. Jackson didn't have half the support he thought he did." He paused, then smiled. "Let's go get a drink."

Deborah told Miss Thomas that Messrs. Rickwell and Syngate and herself would be unavailable for the rest of the day. Outside the building Abby tactfully remembered that his mother had asked him to lunch, and left his partners to their resources.

