

“A Discourse on Sweeteners”
by Mike Varley

Last night, Friday, March 30th 2007, I spent 8:30-10:30 PM covering a twelve-foot long boardroom table with 1500 Sweet ‘N Low packets. The packets were all face up and facing in the same direction, creating a symmetrical effect. Pictures were taken for posterity

I do not know what spurred on this desire exactly. I simply walked into the kitchen, saw the box of Sweet ‘N Low packets that had been sitting on the kitchen counter all day, thought to myself “I need to cover the dining room table with those,” and got to work. I will not pretend to understand this motivation, but at no point did my drive to finish taper. I simply worked and thought about the process as I went. I decided to record my meditations as I worked and will now share them with you:

The thought I couldn’t shake for the first 15 minutes or so was the concern that I was going to look crazy to anyone coming in the room. I wasn’t going to stop working because of it, but the fear was like static to my thought process. It was too immediate to reflect on it at the time, but about an hour later I looked back at those first few minutes. In retrospect, it seemed a very base and unattractive impulse. Had I caved to it, I would not have had all the other interesting thoughts that ensued as well as the accomplishment of covering the table with Sweet ‘N Low packets.

Fear is very much an animal impulse. As a type of animal, we cannot escape feeling fear and other base impulses. As humans, however, we have the ability to not be ruled by our impulses if we so choose. Animals do not have that option. Sure, they can act in ways we would perceive as ‘courageous’ to save a member of the pack (“Timmy’s trapped in the old mill!!”), but I would argue that’s just one impulse (protect the pack) overruling another. They can also have the fear trained out of them, but that requires a trainer. We have the power to be our own trainers, pushing

ourselves past our impulses in order to achieve a reward in the future.

I believe that to be a major separating point between animals and humans. Animals are slaves to their impulses, while we have the ability to fight through them with *effort* and *create* things. To create anything in this world, anything worthwhile anyway, you will inevitably encounter an animalistic impulse you’ll have to overcome. The one I face off against the most is slothfulness: the tendency to resist effort that doesn’t result in short-term carnal fulfillment¹. To overcome these impulses is to use our humanity. The regular overcoming of these impulses serves to strengthen our humanity.

I don’t believe every human has equal amounts of humanity. It’s like muscle mass: you’ll have more if you choose to develop it. I’d say our culture is rather puny in the humanity department. This is because we don’t need to have a developed humanity. In a society that can provide carnal fulfillment at every turn, why strive for more?

Carnal fulfillment comes with the territory when you’re the richest country in the world. However, capitalism does insure at least a minimum level of humanity through its use of money to receive the carnal rewards. Yes, money – the great driving force in our lives that is the real reason 90% of Americans go to work at all. We are exercising a degree of humanity when we go to work, as we are ignoring the short-term corporal pleasures of a life free of work in favor of a goal at the end of the week: payday. But in this system the development of our humanity only goes so far (and only needs to go so far) as a paycheck can only fulfill our corporal needs (food, shelter, etc) and longings (McDonalds, mansions, etc. [rather lovely how we’ve bastardized the basics, eh?]).

But what about humanity as a means to find fulfillment beyond the corporal? I mean, why have this ability to overcome

¹ Not carnal in a sexual way only. Carnal as in the satisfaction of corporal desires

animal impulses if we're just using it to satisfy animal impulses? Sure, there are those people who have fulfilling jobs in the intangible sense, where the paycheck is just an afterthought, but they are the minority. These are people making the most of their humanity. Everyone else is just "Working for the Weekend."²

In relation to my fear, I was thinking about how I was doing this on a Friday night and how that somehow makes Sweet 'N Low stacking more 'sad'. Why? Because everyone is out right now, having a good time, unwinding from the week and looking to indulge those corporal pleasures.³ What a tremendous importance we as a culture have instilled into this day. You can't waste a Friday. Friday even has a different feel when you get up. Yet the universe doesn't know it's Friday. Friday, and everything it's come to mean to us, is a complete fiction when you come down to it. While thinking about this, I got an intense desire to escape the calendar for a year or so. Just go off to the woods somewhere and lose all track of time, save the time I can judge by examining the sun and the seasons. I think it would be a very freeing experience. Then I started thinking up a story idea about a hermit artist who went to intense lengths to insure he never knew what the rest of the world considered 'today's date.' Steering clear of any news events, having someone black out the expiration dates on his canned goods, and so on. He'd probably go insane before he'd make anything good.

Effort. Physical manifestations of effort are always impressive, be it the Pyramids or a table covered in Sweet 'N Low packets. The more effort put forth, the more impressive. We all

² Major Digression: It used to be Sunday (or Saturday, depending on religion) was a day to explore intangible fulfillment, to grow in humanity, but religion is so fubared these days it's an essay in itself.

³ Please understand, despite the picture I may be painting I don't think corporal pleasures are bad. I have no problems indulging them; they're just not the end all of humanity. Sensual pleasure is merely the smaller Russian Doll inside the larger.

know effort is essentially work, and we all somehow *know* effort when we see it. Let's examine the question of *what* constitutes more effort? The chosen material? If a football field were covered in Hershey bars, it wouldn't be so impressive when compared to a football field covered in Sweet 'N Low packets. Then again, if I knew Hershey Field were the work of one person versus thousands of people⁴ working on Sweet 'N Low Stadium I'd be more impressed. It seems there's no solid connection between effort and materials used. That is to say, a greater quantity of material isn't intrinsically more impressive than a lesser quantity of material, nor is heavier material intrinsically more impressive than lighter material, and so on. By saying this, I think we can also safely say physical exertion is not tied to effort, either.

Is thought what constitutes more effort? Again I'd say intrinsically no. To write a really great one paragraph synopsis of your favorite movie requires more thought than assembling thirty reviews of that same movie by searching Google, but the latter has more effort involved in it.⁵ Then again, writing a ten-page synopsis of that same movie has both more thought and more effort involved in it than accumulating fifty reviews of the same movie.

Note these examples for a moment. First, I tried to show tasks that were potentially doable by any human willing to dedicate the time, just like my laying the Sweet 'N Low's out on the table. Covering a football field in Hershey Bars or Sweet 'N Low packets doesn't require technical knowledge, just dedication. With

⁴ I'm ignoring the difficulties of thousands of people working together and focusing solely on the advantages having many hands can have versus the work of one.

⁵ There are exceptions to this with multiple revisions of the paragraph, we'll get to that.

the movie example, I made the assumption that writing is a basic skill for expressing thought, neutered of skill or talent.⁶

The second thing about these examples: Both are “functionless” activities – that is, there is knowingly no promise of corporal satisfaction or reward for completion of the task. My covering the table with Sweet ‘N Low packets served no benefit to my body. While this “functionless” effort took an unconventional form, it’s not the only example of it in our lives. We do plenty of “functionless” things: Climbing mountains just to stick flags at the peak, Stacking rocks so they balance six feet high, using your foot like a garden hoe to make a giant smiley face in the sand at the beach.⁷ None of these things make us feel full or get us laid. So what is it about these activities that appeal to us? Well, each activity requires you to think beyond an “animal impulse” state of mind. Perhaps these “functionless” tasks do serve a function: they are a declaration of the creator’s humanity.

So these monuments are everywhere and we see them all the time. Little “functionless” shrines any human could do given the dedication. And when you see them, you appreciate them for their physical display of humanity, even if it’s on a level that’s not easily verbalized. Now we mentioned before that effort is what makes these “functionless” shrines more impressive than others, but at this level of shrine creation, where the abilities used are available to every human in the world, what makes *more* effort? It’s not the type of material or displays of physical or mental exertion. It’s simply Time.

⁶ It becomes very difficult to quantify thought without turning a blind eye to skill or talent; I tried to find a mundane enough task. We will get to the concepts of skill and talent in another section.

⁷ I kept the examples reserved to solo, public displays to more easily draw the parallels to the Sweet ‘N Low project. Group efforts and “functionless” acts that no one will see are whole different conversations. Also, I kept it in nature, as it’s easier for motive –(i.e. function) – to taint accomplishments once we get more into civilization.

One thousand people working on Hershey Field will finish faster than one thousand people working on Sweet ‘N Low Stadium, therefore Sweet ‘N Low Stadium reflects more effort. One thousand people working on Sweet ‘N Low Stadium will finish faster than 1 person working on Hershey Field, thus the chocolate field in this instance reflects more effort. The one paragraph synopsis took less time than the accumulation of thirty reviews, but the well-constructed, ten-page paper took more time than the accumulation of fifty reviews.

This is an interesting realization for a number of reasons. First, it shows off the human brain’s tremendous processing power. Think of all the ways we recognize the expenditure of time – AKA effort - without us even realizing we are doing it. Again we’ll take the Sweet N’ Low project. Fifteen hundred Sweet N’ Low’s dumped from their box out onto the table are, for all practical purposes, the same thing as 1500 Sweet N’ Low’s carefully arranged: the packaging is the same, the contents are the same, etc. Yet the difference is *order*, the fundamental indicator of human effort. From there, there’s a big difference in appeal between Sweet N’ Low’s randomly placed side by side and Sweet N’ Low’s all placed face up, pointing in one direction. The idea of *symmetry* is another subconscious indicator of effort, taking a higher level of time investment. We can take the idea further still, to an area I neglected when I was aligning the packets. You’ll notice from the pictures that a few of the Sweet N’ Low packets are not completely flush with each other, and provide small glimpses of the table. Had I invested the extra effort to make each packet line up precisely with the other, it would have been a crude example of *craftsmanship*, a third indicator of time.

These are just the barometers of time I would apply to the Sweet N’ Low project. All sorts of terms and concepts exist to describe that feeling we get when we see – or hear, or smell, or touch, or taste – something that has effort invested in it.

So on one hand, I marvel the brain’s ability to effortlessly take the input given to it by the senses (in the case of the Sweet N’ Low project, the sense of sight) and use that data to give us a

“feeling” for the time invested. But on the other hand, breaking it down to this level makes me painfully aware of the limitations of our senses. We’ll keep it simple and recycle our previous examples. Take the one-paragraph synopsis. While generally it would take less time to write that one paragraph than to compile thirty reviews, some people just like to get things precisely right – they value good craftsmanship. They spend hours and hours honing down that one paragraph until it’s a flawless, fluid description of that movie. And while clearly they’ve expended more effort than it would take to compile thirty movie reviews, what if I weren’t there to eyewitness this effort? Without the knowledge of the time spent, my senses are too hung up on the concept of quantity – thirty vs. one – to give the paragraph any more due than recognizing it as a well-done paragraph.

Similarly, take Hershey Field. A field of Hershey Bars will always look comparatively inferior to a field of Sweet ‘N Low’s unless the viewer is aware of the circumstances that required extra time – one thousand builders vs. one, in our example. Unless the viewer physically witnessed the building process or is made aware of the building process by an outside source, all that effort is lost on the viewer. Yet that doesn’t mean the effort didn’t happen. We can’t sense it, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t occur. It just goes to show how amazing yet limited we really are. It also reveals the tremendous power *context* has on the human mind. It reminds me now of Duchamp’s *Fountain*, the king of context.

And now, the final realization of this section. We’ve theorized that at this level of creation – devoid of “function,” skill, or talent – effort equals time. Earlier, we also theorized that this type of effort is an example of humanity, due to our need to “jump the tracks” of our animal impulse mindset to create them. So, if humanity equals effort and effort equals time, I believe we can say that *humanity equals time*.

This is intriguing for a terrible number of reasons, but for the purposes of brevity I’ll confine my thoughts to Sweet ‘N Low. Just think about this: when we see creations like the Sweet ‘N Low project, something inside us is impressed. We can verbalize it by

saying “Wow, that’s a lot of effort.” We can go further and talk about the symmetry and craftsmanship, those earmarks of time consumption. Or, we could say nothing at all, accept that we’ll never know why these things impress us, and simply absorb the humanity radiating off the Saccharin-laden table.

Following this train of thought, about a third of the way through the project I asked myself the question “What is it that makes this effort less valuable than a poem, sculpture or short story?” At the time, I didn’t know I was going to write all this; I didn’t think much of anything past completing the project. The question loses some power in the face of these writings, as all this context I’m creating elevates the status of the project to that of a typical poem, sculpture or short story. Still, I wish to consider the question as though these notes didn’t exist and the project was left to stand on its own.

My initial response to the question was that it was invalid. My Sweet N’ Low sorting wasn’t less valuable at all; it was simply an unconventional way of expressing effort. It didn’t take more than a minute or so to realize this was incorrect. As mentioned above, the Sweet N’ Low project uses a skill set available to every human. Since there’s nothing exceptional about the basic human skill set, the effort involved in the Sweet N’ Low project is what takes prominence. And while projects like this can whisper or scream “HUMANITY!!” based on how much effort is put into them, humanity is not intended to be a showpiece. It’s certainly *capable* of being a showpiece due to its immense power and depthless mystery, but humanity is not a showpiece – it is a tool.

The term “mysterious tool” is three things to me. First, it is giggle-inducing double entendre. Second, it is the band name for some hard rock, Clear Channel, super group. Finally, it is the most frustrating term I’ve ever come up against, as it is impossible to analogize. I shouldn’t expect anything less, however, considering the term is an inherent contradiction. “Tool” implies human mastery, yet a mystery by its nature is not mastered. So how’s about this: making humanity a showpiece is like holding the paintbrush

in higher esteem than the painting. The flaw in this is that if I had paintbrush imbued with the wondrous power and mystery of humanity, I'd have to stop painting and look at my hand from time to time.

To take it further, if you were painting, which would you prefer? To paint with the palette that comes with a Crayola watercolor coloring book or to paint with the palate of an 75-year old painter: a rolling steel cabinet stocked with fifty years worth of paint tubes; tubes saved for just the right occasion; tubes from exotic locations with unusual blends; stockpiles of discontinued paints from when a favorite paint company went under, worth saving for their softness with flesh tones.

Such can be said about limiting your⁸ acts of creation to basic skills. While great things can be done with simple materials, using more advanced and unique materials generally produces a more stunning, complex result. So what are the advanced and unique equivalents within humans? I believe them to be the concepts "skill" and "talent."

People often treat "skill" and "talent" as synonyms, but the terms are not interchangeable. Let's tackle skill first. A skill is a task the body has done so many times that it has become mechanical. In other terms, it's taking something that requires effort and making it effortless. To do this, one must raise the base abilities of the corpus to the point where they match the requirements of the given skill. By using the phrase "base abilities of the corpus," I want to make it clear that skill is purely *a matter of the flesh*; that is, there's nothing intangible or unexplainable going on here, we're simply programming the body. This includes the brain. Though the term "skill" automatically lends itself to

⁸ I believe we can add "you" to the equation: you = humanity = effort = time. After all, if asked the question "define yourself," would you list functions like sleeping that are common to the animal known as man or would you list activities, accomplishments, and interests that took effort/time/humanity for you to achieve. We *are* the tool. We *are* effort. We *are* time.

thoughts of strength or dexterity, there are many skills that employ nothing but the brain. Think long division. Our society holds the brain in very high regard, but make no mistake: it is simply another muscle. I can't stress this enough, so I'll say it once more: "skill" is a product of the body.

Let's take a rudimentary example of skill: tying your shoes. Your first experience with tying your shoes is spent fumbling with the laces and trying to remember what your mother showed you. Soon you learn to piece together some horribly lopsided knot with regularity – though not without the aide of some sing song rhyme involving bunnies or tree holes. As your finger agility increases and the pathways in your brain set, you get to the point where you don't have to look or even think about your shoes as you're tying them. At this point, devoid of conscious thought, you have mastered the skill of shoe tying to the level of mechanical process. Effortlessness.

Two stray things about skill before we move on. One, I believe anyone is capable of acquiring any skill so long as they put the effort/humanity/time into it. Desire and effort will always overcome deficiency. Put your cynicism aside for a moment. I know what I just said is the premise of every feel good sports movie you've ever seen; I know it's been bastardized, turned into a product, and loaded with so much saccharine that it's near impossible to associate with anything we call reality. And while all this does a damn good job of obscuring the truth, it has no power to eliminate it.

Second, a return to the Sweet N' Low project and works of creation in general. What is it about an exhibition of skill that's more impressive than the Sweet N' Low project, an exhibition of effort devoid of skill? I think this is another example of the brain's powers of perception. Whenever we see skills exhibited, there's an implicit understanding that it takes *repeated sessions of effort* to accrue skill. So when we see skill displayed, we're not just seeing a one-time exertion of effort, we're seeing hundreds or thousands of effort exertions in one convenient package – concentrated humanity.

Now we move on to talent. If humanity is the paintbrush and skill is the painting, then talent is surely the *art*. A dictionary might define talent as natural aptitude, but that's about as helpful as saying the Pacific is a body of water. The fact is talent is about as slippery as our definition of "humanity." That's because, like humanity, talent originates in the soul. Or, if you don't like the idea of a soul, you must at least concede to their intangible, mysterious qualities. There is no gland in the body that produces the human compulsion to effort; there is no way to synthesize talent in a test tube. But make no mistake: the two are not the same. "Humanity" is what distinguishes us from the animals; "talent" is what distinguishes us from other humans. Both are components of the soul.

In speaking about talent, it's necessary to talk about the concept of "good" as well. "Good" – and its antonym, "bad" – in this instance refer to applying qualitative judgment on someone's effort. The more "good" or "better" someone's effort is, the closer it comes to recreating the soul's vision for the effort. Conversely, the more "bad" or "worse" someone's effort is, the farther away it is from any soulful intent. I'm going to look elsewhere for examples now, from Sweet and Low to Sports.⁹ What makes one 6'6" shooting guard with a vertical leap of 42" a mediocre basketball player and another shooting guard with the "skill set" Michael Jordan? There's no logical reason Harold Miner – nicknamed "Baby Jordan" coming out of college in 1992 – shouldn't have had the same career as Jordan. He simply just wasn't as "good".

"Desire," "intangibles," "heart." These are all terms used in sports to describe the very best players, yet they have no basis in points per game, steals, blocked shots, or any logical measurement. How about this one: "will your team to win." A player who is

⁹ It's easier to show "good" in sports because we are a sports culture so there's a larger sampling. Also, the way talent emerges in the art world is often an issue of politics as much as it is an issue of quality.

"willing" a team to anything must first be fully attuned to their will's desire – or to word it differently, their soul's vision.

So where does talent come into this? "Talents" are the areas in life where we do best describing and communicating the indescribable and incommunicable feelings, desires, and visions of the soul. Most of the world can't accurately describe the sense of beauty that comes from seeing a sunset, but there are certain talented people in this world that can actually recreate that beauty on canvas. Many people can feel compassion for a sick person in need, but only certain people have the talent to express that compassion in a way that's actually healing to the sick. All athletes have a desire to win at sports, but only a handful are so in touch with that desire that they can describe it to packed stadiums through physical displays. Painting, medicine, and jump shots are the skills. A display of inner-self is the talent.

Talent cannot be created; it cannot be developed. Rather, think of talent as a pool of ability waiting to be channeled. Skill can give you the tools to express talent, but ultimately humanity is what determines how much talent is expressed. It takes effort to be in touch with the soul's feelings/desires/visions (remember, effort is a display of humanity). The closer you are to your soul's feeling, the more talent will flow, the "better" your expression becomes. If you are divorced from your soul's feeling, only skill will come through when the time comes to express yourself through action. Ever met a doctor with bad bedside manner?

It is early on in life that we discover what talents we have. Talent guides us to the skills we would be best served to develop. To use skill and talent in combination is the ultimate expression of humanity.

You know, I noticed some of the Sweet and Low packets have blue marks on the lower right corner and some don't. I wonder why that is.

I've been talking so much about the soul, perhaps it's time to briefly consider it in relation to its counterpart, the body. It

seems to me that the soul, if it exists, and the body are often at odds. After all, as it says in the book of Matthew, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." I'll take this a step further and conjecture that all the contradictions of humanity stem from this relationship of body and soul¹⁰.

Here's what I was thinking: actions of the body are completely focused on self-satisfaction while actions of the soul are infinitely selfless. Should it really surprise us that in a society where advertisements tell us to indulge ourselves, where politics has ditched the common good in favor of appealing to "my" interests, where using other people for personal pleasure is fine so long as everyone is being equally used, is it really a surprise that the concept of a soul is ridiculed and marginalized?

In this line, let me talk about something my housemate Chris mentioned in passing on the day I was working on the Sweet N' Low project. We were talking about the act of doing a favor for someone and Chris brought up a philosophy professor he had in college. This professor, very well regarded in his field, felt that performing a selfless act for someone is not a nice thing but rather the ultimate act of aggression. His reasoning was that the act creates a sort of goodwill ledger between the two parties. The initial beneficiary now feels indebted to the favor giver, and must repay the favor giver in order to relieve that sense of debt.

In my opinion, this mindset could only come from a society completely out of touch with the art of the selfless act. We are so used to thinking in terms of how our actions can satisfy our own needs and wants that when someone does something selfless to our benefit, we grow suspicious rather than thankful. *It must be part of some greater plan to get something from us later. We must return the favor as quickly as possible so they can't hit us up for favors later.*

Anyone who would question the motive of a kind act is living in a world where a "me first" attitude has not only run

¹⁰ I'd say body and mind, but mind has somehow come to mean body in modern vernacular and is much too comfortable a term.

rampant, but has become a completely sustainable way of life. A person could go his or her entire life in America without helping someone. As a result, of course all acts of charity are going to seem hostile, as there's no other motivation than that of self-satisfaction – fulfilling the desires of the body.

This worldview completely neglects the fact that doing something nice for someone actually feels *good*. The idea that a good deed is its own reward is lost on many, many people. For those that have felt the pleasure of a good deed, have you noticed that it is a very different experience from a sensual pleasure? What is that all about? It's a welling in the chest. A feeling of pride, of a job well done, of simple "goodness." It's self-satisfaction without doing anything that would logically self-satisfy.

Do you think that sensation is the soul classically conditioning the body, giving it a treat so it will be compelled to do more good works? To do more of the soul's desires? Or maybe the body's not involved at all. Perhaps the brain response and body secretions we so carefully track in labs are effects of pleasure and not causes. Like I said before, it doesn't really feel like your typical sensual pleasure. Maybe what we experience when we do a good deed is actually the soul pumping its fist and scratching a tick on the chalkboard – another victory for the soul over the body.

More than halfway through the project, I got up to put a CD in the kitchen CD player. When I returned, I found Parker working on the exposed part of the table, laying down packets for his own design. He was making an anarchy symbol: the circled "A" with the legs and the cross of the "A" escaping the circle. Though I didn't express it, my first reaction to this sight was anger. The reaction immediately following was the recognition of irony. Here was the antithesis of what I was doing in all ways, both in the dictionary definition of anarchy and the political ideals of anarchy. I am bringing an end to the anarchy of the Sweet N' Low box by ordering them on the table and I am completely autocratic in my decisions for how they should be ordered. Parker's anarchy symbol was haphazardly arranged, with no consideration for

symmetry or craftsmanship and only the faintest consideration of order necessary to produce the symbol. It was irrational to be angry, but I was concerned he might think that his contribution should stay on the table, thus ruining my vision for the project. Of course when he was finished he said I could move it, which I did when the time came. Perhaps all anger stems from interrupting someone else's idea of symmetry.

Symmetry. This was the last thing I thought about as I stared at the table covered in Sweet and Low's. Well almost covered. I ended up six short of completely covering the table. Near symmetry – also known as imperfection.

There's something about symmetry that suggests consciousness to us. It goes back to the idea of order suggesting effort. Yet there are plenty of examples of symmetry in nature that do not reflect consciousness at all. A beehive is well designed, not intelligent design. New Hampshire's Old Man of the Mountain is peculiar, not pre-planned. Yet we respond to these displays with a wonder we reserve for planned works of symmetry. It's another failure of the senses – to feel a consciousness that isn't there.

And yet, staring at the exposed section of boardroom table one Sweet N' Low packet in width and six Sweet N' Low packets in length, I didn't mind the lack of symmetry. I guess there's just something about six missing Sweet N' Low packets that says more about humanity than any show of symmetry ever could.