

On cars, advertising, walking and hares

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One of my greatest pleasures in life at present is going walking with my elder son. No, I'm not partaking in favouritism: the younger just doesn't see the point of walking when he's got a bike and so misses out on the conversations the elder and I have enjoyed of late.

The pattern of our conversations during these walks has become fairly consistent. He raises an issue of concern to him, asks my opinion on it, and we chew over the issue until the dog decides it's time to go home. Themes range from school, to the latest Percy Jackson film (which I enjoyed much more than I expected) to last night's subject of cars.

Now no boy is, I suspect, wholly unfamiliar with cars these days: that's the Clarkson effect. You can't be 12 and not watch Top Gear, as I now appreciate. But it wasn't cars per se we were discussing, it was what cars communicate about us that was the theme for our walk. It was partly fuelled by a day in North Norfolk. This is not called the Gold Coast for nothing: Chelse by Sea is another name. And it shows. Range Rovers and massive Audis that have clearly always stayed on the tarmacked side of a hedge abound - invariably without tow bars which are the native Norfolk justification for a car with more than 2 litres of engine. What was the point of them was our theme that developed as we walked.

So I introduced the ideas of Thjorsen Veblen on conspicuous consumption. And we noted that so far the Murphy family Citroen Berlingo has never yet failed to deliver us wherever we want to go, at speed limits if we wish, or go across any unmade road or field we have chosen to venture on (and sometimes we do). So why the 3 litre engines, the heated leather seats that are themselves motor driven in all directions, the aggressive Audi 'face' on its cars, and the giant, if pristine, wheels on so many of these cars?

We did, of course, discuss advertising. I explained my view, developed in The Courageous State, that there is no other industry solely dedicated to the creation of unhappiness, but that advertising is. And we considered happiness and unhappiness,

and why having the 2012 model of anything supposedly leaves you inferior to the owner of the 2013 version, and how this impacted on his own consumption choices.

In all this I hope I left room for him to make up his own mind, as he has to do. But the pleasure comes from simply seeing him look at ideas so far taken for granted in new ways that pose as many questions as answers, with those then being tested in debate. There's little more exciting than that.

And we saw some hares. That was good too. And the dog ignored them, completely.