

I am reading *The Challenge of Things*, subtitled “Thinking through Troubled Times”, by A.C. Grayling. He is a professor of philosophy at the New College of Humanities in London. Since it is a book of essays, one can read “in” the book, picking and choosing and going back and forth as one wishes. I am sure I will read all of the text before I take the book back to the library, though some pieces interest me more than others. Sometimes, I don’t agree with the author, but most essays bring forth cogent arguments.

I had only two classes in philosophy when I was in college, and both became favorite courses. The first was a “survey course” that gave the students a look at the major philosophers of the past as well as thinkers of the twentieth century. That class also delved into some of the thorny problems all of us face in our lives and explored ways in which we deal with them.

The introduction to the textbook that we used in the course began this way: “Every man is a philosopher. Every man has his own philosophy of life and his special view of the universe. Moreover, his philosophy is important, more important perhaps than he himself knows. It determines his treatment of friends and enemies, his conduct when alone and in society, his attitude towards his home, his work, and his country, his religious beliefs, his ethical standards, his social adjustment, and his personal happiness.” Of course, one must assume—given the decade in which this was written, that “man” refers to both men and women.

So, it was with pleasure that I read many of Grayling’s essays, because his view of what is right and proper coincides so often with what I already believed. The very last composition in his book, “Making the World a Better Place,” illustrates this in a very clear manner. His suggestion that if we really want to improve life on this planet, one way would be to get serious about the place of women in almost all societies. The injustice of present day women’s place in the world is shown in some of his figures from UN sources: In 1999, 70 per cent of the world’s women lived in poverty; in 2002 only one per cent of all land was owned by women; in 2001 African women produced 80 per cent of the food for their families and in Asia are the source of 90 per cent of the labor in the growing of rice.

In the supposedly more enlightened western countries, women still receive less money than men for the same jobs, and they have more difficulty in reaching the highest levels in science, government, and education. We saw just recently in our own

country how a highly qualified woman was defeated for the highest office in the land by a male whose skills and knowledge can only be assessed by truly scraping the bottom of the barrel.

What has failed? Is it our educational system, our embrace of technology that lends credibility to “fake news,” our lack of understanding that we need our brightest and best people in positions of power, or , does part of the problem lie even more deeply hidden, in something so basic and important to us as the food we eat? Has our nation’s fast food diet, highly sweet, salty, and fat, based on crops grown on chemical input instead of on healthy soil—has that resulted in a “dumbing down” of the people of our country?

This, too, is a philosophical question. It seems one that is worth exploring.