CUTTINGS

Version 1.0

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Cuttings

A Manuscript in Progress

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"In short, here I am trying to accomplish this man, not make a new one."
(*"Somme me voicy apres à achever cet homme, non à en refaire un autre."*)
– Montaigne, *Les Essais*, 3:10

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Sticks-in-a-drowse over sugary loam,
Their intricate stem-fur dries;
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
The small cells bulge;
One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn.
-- Theodore Roethke (1948)

Preface

1. On cutting and growing

"What is a quote? A quote (cognate with *quota*) is a cut, a section, a slice of someone else's orange. You suck the slice, toss the rind, skate away."
– Anne Carson "Foam" (Carson 2006)

A book of aphorisms is a collection of short passages without transitions or an explicit outline. The root of the word "aphorism" is the Greek verb for dividing, defining, or setting limits (ultimately from *horos*, boundary). In the Greek New Testament, the verb *aphorizo* is used for dividing the damned from the saved and for excommunicating sinners; it is judgmental. An aphorism is a snippet of text divided from the others, as good souls are sundered from the bad.

Another translation of the original word might be: "cuttings."

The Sanskrit word *sutra* means "string" or "thread." A *sutra* is a book of short passages strung together fairly loosely. *Sutras* look rather like collections of aphorisms, but the Greek word emphasizes the distinctions among the units, while the Sanskrit stresses their connectedness. I wouldn't necessarily attribute the difference to the East versus the West.

Some books of aphorisms are intended to be very serious and wise. The biblical books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the Greek collections of accumulated sayings attributed to

Pythagoras and the Delphic Oracle, the Buddhist and Hindu *sutras,* and Confucius' *Analects* are examples.

A philosophy professor colleague of mine once disclosed his profession to the person sitting next to him on an airplane. "Oh, you are a philosopher," the neighbor said. "What are your *sayings*?" He was thinking of philosophy as explicit wisdom, and wisdom as succinct and quotable. A book of aphorisms would be an appropriate format for philosophy, so understood.

Once collections of pithy sayings are treasured as wisdom, it becomes possible to write collections that look like proverbs but are more idiosyncratic, personal, and perhaps ironic or subversive. La Rochefoucauld exploits the subversive potential of the genre when he writes in the format of the biblical Book of Proverbs but gives advice like this: "If we had no faults we should not take so much pleasure in noting those of others." Erasmus collects real wisdom in some of his books *(Adagia, Apophthegmata*), but puts strings of quotable falsehoods in the mouth of the Fool in *The Praise of Folly*. It is never clear where these authors stand.

Francis Bacon and Friedrich Nietzsche epitomize a different tradition. They are highly critical observers of human behavior who write aphorisms to shake their readers' assumptions and to demand their readers' creative attention.

Bacon introduces his first aphorisms in his 1620 book *Novum Organum* ("or, true suggestions for the interpretation of nature"). Nietzsche starts to write aphorisms in *Human All Too Human* (1878) and then writes almost nothing else for the rest of his life.

At the beginning of each of these books, the author decries the kind of thinking that posits a grand, encompassing theory and tries to explain everything in its terms. Each writer is fascinated by human mental limitations and frailties and deeply doubtful of our "accustomed and seemingly undeniable principles" (Nietzsche 1878, #224). But both authors also hope to avoid the opposite problem, the "despair of skepticism" that leads to "complaints and indignation at the difficulty of inquiry" (Bacon 1620/1854, p. 343). For Bacon, the solution is to closely observe and experiment with nature, one piece at a time. Nietzsche is less optimistic that Bacon's method--the Scientific Method--will reveal reliable and useful truths about the world.

> In fact, I myself do not believe that anybody has ever seen the world with as much distrust as I have… And whoever can guess some of the consequences of such deep suspicion, who can guess something of the chills and fears of loneliness, to which such an unconditional difference of perspective condemns those afflicted with it, will also understand how often I have had to relax from myself, to seek temporary self-forgetfulness, to find shelter somewhere--in some reverence or enmity or scientific investigation or frivolity or stupidity; also, when I did not find what I needed, why I

> made it artificially, I faked it, and I had to write poetry (--and what else have poets ever done? and what other purpose has any of the art of the world?). But what I always needed most, for my own cure and self-restoration, was a faith in not being singular and not seeing in a singular way–in my eyes and my desires, an enchanting suspicion of relationships and equivalences, a restful trust in friendship, an inability to see any two-sidedness, without hunches or question marks, a pleasure in foregrounds, surfaces, the near, the nearby, in everything that has color, skin, and appearance (Nietzsche 1878, #1, my trans.).

Nietzsche thinks he is taking the next step beyond Baconian empirical science into his own "gay science." (And in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche insists, "We do not know half enough about Lord Bacon—the first realist in all the highest sense of the word—to know what he did, what he willed and what he experienced in his inmost soul" [Nietzsche 1888/1989]).

Both write aphorisms because they are suspicious of grand theories that organize everything neatly and prevent us from noticing what is actually happening. So they are suspicious of the logical connective tissue that would turn individual theses into larger arguments. They prefer to list specific observations and encourage the reader to consider each one on its merits and to put them together only tentatively. An aphoristic style is most appropriate for describing the moral world if–to quote Shakespeare's Isabella–humanity is an "unwedgeable and gnarled oak" (*Measure for Measure,* 2:2).

Another tradition consists of authors who have left collections of numbered and loosely connected passages--string-like *sutras*--because death or some other contingency prevented them from pulling these fragments into more coherent works. An inspiration for Bacon may have been Hippocrates, the ancient physician who called for close observation. Hippocrates' writings (other than the Hippocratic Oath) read like aphorisms for a contingent reason: he didn't write them. They are collections of fragmentary Greek texts about medicine wrongly attributed to him.

All of Wittgenstein's major works consist of short numbered passages without explicit connections. After he died, Elizabeth Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright published "a collection of fragments made by Wittgenstein himself and left by him in a box-file. They were for the most part cut from extensive typescripts of his. …. Often fragments on the same topic were clipped together; but there were also a large number lying loose in the box."

Anscombe and von Wright came to understand Wittgenstein's "method of composition": he wrote short thoughts, saved the ones that struck him as "particularly useful," and arranged and rearranged them to make his books (in Wittgenstein 1967/2007, p. 1).

They published the leftover pieces under the title *Zettel*, an unpretentious word for snippet or cutting--or aphorism, in its original sense. A clipped-together packet of snippings from typescript also bears a distant resemblance to a string of beads, a *sutra.*

The word “cutting” could have a more organic sense. Shoots and sticks are cuttings, and they can regrow. In the poem quoted above, Roethke emphasizes their generative power.

2. A Hegelian meditation

This is a breath: in and out.

That sentence is true; if the mind knows anything, it’s the reality of a breath.

By the time that thought has formed, it is false. This is not a breath—that thing is gone; it does not exist. Perhaps there is a new breath, and the sentence is true again, but it has a new object. It is true and false that “This is a breath.”

The mind turns to an abstraction: breath in general. Surely there are many breaths, all exemplifying one concept. In contemplating that concept, the mind can only think of a breath, and by the time it has that thought, that breath is gone. It is false that this is breath and that there is breath.

Nevertheless, a new breath comes. This one has a certain sound, familiar since the cradle. This breath has a certain feel, swelling the chest. The sound is not the feeling, yet the breath is one thing. Its aspects are distinct because of the nature of the one who perceives them.

The mind perceives the one that hears and feels the breath. It finds a subject that perceives and forms the sentence: “I perceive my breath.” That sentence is false. The ‘I’ is what perceives the breath, but that breath no longer exists. The ‘I’ that perceived the breath is no longer. The ‘I’ that perceived the ‘I’ is no longer. What no longer is, is nothing.

Surely there is a very general concept, thisness, of which this breath and this I are examples. In considering this concept, the mind can only think of this breath and this mind, and the concept that this mind forms of this breath is false by the time it forms it. That mind, too, is gone by then.

The mind conceives a mind in motion, a restless mind, a mind detached from the things it perceives and from itself, yet always compelled back to them. The mind had sought to calm itself by reflecting on its breath, but close inspection of its own experience has opened a whole box of things, none of which stays still when examined separately. Experience has revealed itself as something complicated, which the mind somehow already knew and which it cannot ever quite grasp. It strives to embrace and accept this manifold complexity, of which it is part.

These words are about a mind; a mind has been the subject of many of these sentences. Yet that mind is not the subject that reads these words. That subject is you, the reader. When you read the words "I perceive my breath," they are not about your breath but somehow about a writer's thoughts.

What you directly perceive is a string of words. I, the writer, had thoughts that I wanted to convey and had motives for writing them. You are entitled to question my motives. (Self-promotion? Self-indulgence?) But my motives are gone now, and so are your thoughts about my motives, like the words above the ones before your eyes right now.

You may have new thoughts, and they may happen to look identical to your previous thoughts; but they are not the same thoughts, because each thought occurs in time. You can form the idea of thought in general, but the only way you can think of that idea is to form a particular thought, which occurs in time and is then gone. You both have a thought about me and you do not have that thought about me.

I presume that I know who I am and what I think. Since this text is publicly accessible, I don't know who you are and may never have even heard your name. For your part, you know who you are, but not much about what I am thinking, except for whatever these words may mean to you. Yet in reality, I do not know what I think until I express it, trying to make meaningful sentences for a "you" that I envision in vague ways. And you do not know what I have written except insofar as you make your own sense of these sentences.

You may chafe at my control. I chose and arranged the words that might influence your mind. Yet I would not write at all if not in hopes of being read. The writer needs the reader as much as the reverse–as much as the mind needs its objects and the objects need the mind. You know that I need you. I know that you know that I need …

The topic of this text is meditation on the breadth, *anapanasati*. That practice is widely prescribed to address a restless, unsettled, unhappy mind. If we ask why it is recommended today, one kind of answer cites its effectiveness. Perhaps people teach and practice *anapanasati* because it works. In that case, the test is to try it, as we do here. The results will depend on what specific thoughts the specific mind generates.

Another kind of answer is a long story that could involve Californian beat poets who turned into Dharma Bums after encountering GIs home from Japan, and General Tojo meditating in Zen monasteries while conquering China and attacking Pearl Harbor, and Dosho bringing Chan to Japan as Zen, and Bodhidharma bringing Buddhism to China, and the Buddha teaching breath-mindfulness in the *Anapanasati Sutta*, and people teaching Siddhartha Gautama the words and ideas that he used as he became the Buddha, and people teaching those people. We know just

tiny fragments of this story, to which unsung thousands have contributed, both for good and for evil, yet it is inherent in the fashions of our moment.

Each mind recapitulates the work of countless minds, from which it derives all its words and ideas. A mind without history would be empty. For example, “This is a breath” is a sentence in English with thousands of years of thought embedded in it.

We can say that the Buddha already knew everything under the Bodhi tree, but to say what he knew requires explicating the various schools that have analyzed experience into its components, and then declared the components also to be illusions of the consciousness, and then declared the consciousness to be an illusion, and then analyzed negation, and so on, in a logical progression like the one accomplished by stoicism, skepticism, and their successors. To explicate the truth requires excavating this “conceptually grasped history” (*begriffne Geschichte*), these successive turnings of the Wheel that constitute the present.

Although my topic here is *anapanasati*, my method and structure come from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Why? Because I studied that text in a seminar at age 20. Rereading it 35 years later, I find that I had forgotten most of it, although certain familiar phrases signify that it has been there all along, even when I was reading Śantideva or focusing on my breath. Perhaps you know Hegel better than I. Perhaps you have never heard of him, but his mind has already influenced yours by way of Marx and Dewey and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the tangible structures that those three, and many others, have inspired.

Each mind, all minds, and nature are one.

That is a vacuous cliché and false, in just the same way that “This is a breath” is false. It is also true, in the same way. To know it requires unfolding what the mind already knew and can never fully know, one stage at a time, recapitulating the work of many minds with many objects, which are also one mind with one object.

[Sources: Hegel, 1807/2018, especially the Preface (sec. 72) and sections A.I, B.IV.A-B, and DD; and Śantideva 1998, especially chapters 8 (on meditation) and 9 (dialectics among the Buddhist schools)].

3. Cuttings (later)

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
Cut stems struggling to put down feet.
What saint strained so much,
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?
I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,

In my veins, in my bones I feel it, --
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.
When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.
-- Roethke (1948)

Rebirth and growth are painful. Here it is difficult to distinguish the verbs from the nouns. The words "urge," "wrestle," and "cut" are used as nouns. That first sentence has no verb at all. In line three, "strained" is a verb, but it first struck me as an adjective.

We think of action taking place in the animal kingdom, which is also the realm of suffering. But vegetable cuttings are acting when they begin to sprout--like animals, like people, they need verbs. Roethke's language represents the pain of moving into action, of nouns taking on verbs. The verse shifts from objective description (about the plants) to Roethke's own response.

The two poems are themselves cuttings, separated from each other in the original volume, removed from any lengthy narrative or argument, but straining to grow and to inspire growth.

First

4. Voices

Why does the owl, her nest turned into flames
By an errant fire balloon, shriek as she flees?
As the solo goose flaps his steady beat,
Sea-bound, whom does he think will hear his honk?
An eagle chick pecks to a slow death her
New-hatched twin so that the fitter one will last.
It's clear why the weaker chick pecks back, but
Why have a voice and to whom does he bleat?

5. The grammar of the Four Noble Truths

Here is how the First Truth is presented in the *sutra* (or *sutta*, in Pali) on "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma" (sometimes called the "Deer Park Sermon" or the "Sermon at Benares"). Traditionally, it was attributed to the Buddha himself:

> Now this is the noble truth of suffering. Rebirth is suffering; old age is suffering; illness is suffering; death is suffering; association with the disliked is suffering; separation from the liked is suffering; not getting what you wish for is suffering. In brief, the five grasping aggregates are suffering (Sujato trans. 2003).

I quote the text in English, because I don't know even a letter of the original Pali. Other translations differ. For instance, the great Thích Nhất Hạnh begins his: "The first [truth] is the existence of suffering" (Thích 1987, p. 147). However, it is common to begin with a phrase like "this is the truth of suffering"--not only in English, but in the French, Italian, German, and Spanish translations conveniently collected at suttacentral.net.

The remaining three Truths take similar forms. First comes a headline or name for the Truth (respectively: suffering, the origins of suffering, the destruction of suffering, and the way to the destruction of suffering). Then comes a short passage of explanation or elaboration, including factual claims like these: "association with the disliked is suffering; separation from the liked is suffering" or "the cessation of suffering … [is] giving [craving] away, letting it go, releasing it, and not adhering to it." Finally, each Truth is named again and praised:

> "'This is the noble truth of suffering.' Such was the vision, knowledge, wisdom, realization, and light that arose in me regarding teachings not learned before from another."

Presumably "this" does not refer simply to the preceding factual statements. The Truth is broader than that; the statements are illustrative or supportive. My instinct is to translate each Truth into a proposition, a statement or assertion that expresses a judgment or opinion. I don't think my instinct is uniquely "Western" (whatever that means) or philosophical. Buddhist thinkers have been debating the propositional content of the Truths for two millennia. This debate persists because it's not self-evident how to restate the Truths as propositions. Should we say: "All life is intrinsically suffering"? "All human (or sentient) life is intrinsically suffering?" "All life includes some suffering, even if there are also happy moments"? "All life begins and terminates in suffering"?

This choice seems worth debating; the resulting conversation is fruitful. But there is also a good reason for each summary sentence ("This is the noble truth of suffering") to take the form that it does. To assent to a proposition about suffering will not change your life. Your life may change if you internalize the significance of suffering. In that case, you will understand the "truth *of* suffering." You will hear, with Matthew Arnold, "the eternal note of sadness" flow back in, like pebbles rattling in every tide. More than that, you will empathize with those who suffer, thereby putting yourself on the path out of suffering.

It is like saying that social injustice is not just a list of injustices. It is an overall condition of the society that you can absorb until it influences your whole stance toward politics. Whether you should take that stance depends on all the separate propositions about particular injustices, so you should evaluate those propositions critically. The (ostensible) Truth of Social Injustice is debatable among reasonable Americans. But the question is whether you should–and whether you have–absorbed that truth.

Each Noble Truth preserves the previous ones in full. If you forgot the Truth of Suffering once you reached the Truth of the Destruction of Suffering, you could not destroy suffering. Intrinsic to the destruction of suffering is a full awareness of it.

The Buddha's way of thinking recalls Epicurus and the other founders of Hellenistic schools. Epicurus' "Letter to Menoeceus" includes a formal argument that we should not fear death. Death is a lack of sensation, so we will feel nothing bad once we're dead. To have a distressing feeling of fear now, when we are not yet dead, is irrational. The famous conclusion follows logically enough: "Death is nothing to us." (Note that this is a proposition.) But Epicurus knows that such conclusions will not alone counteract the ingrained mental habit of fearing death. So he ends his letter by advising Menoeceus "to practice the thought of this and similar things day and night, both alone and with someone who is like you" (Epicurus 10:134). The main verb is

meletao, translated into Latin as *meditatio*, which could be rendered in English as “exercise,” “practice,” or “meditate on.” You will be better off if you internalize the truth concerning death; but that takes practice, and it requires a community of people devoted to the same end.

6. A Husserlian meditation

This is a breath: in and out.

I experience it without noticing it. Then I decide to think about it. Given my cultural milieu, my first thoughts sound scientific: my lungs must be absorbing oxygen from the air. My nervous system responds positively to that sensation.

Then I realize that I am not sure whether these statements are well-founded or what their underlying concepts (such as causality and consciousness) mean. I resolve to focus on what I actually experience.

The phenomenon of my breath has certain features. It is a breath for me. I feel it and feel grateful for it. It belongs to the sequence of events that unfold in my inner time, occupying a short but not instantaneous period. It is located in my body, which occupies a specific place. It is an intentional act, yet it could have happened without my conscious attention. It has a purpose that I can know.

I can imagine a breath that lasts twice as long or sounds twice as loud, but a breath that is ceaseless is no longer a breath.

Soon that breath is gone. But another one comes; and even while I was experiencing the earlier breath, I implicitly knew that it was one in a series. Future breaths were phenomena that I could anticipate and even count on. Past breaths were phenomena that I could recollect if I chose to, or could imagine if I had forgotten them. All these breaths have a temporal rhythm that I can know in any one moment, meaning that they coexist in my present, albeit as different kinds of phenomena–memories, hopes, unnoticed experiences.

When I form a thought about my breathing, I know that I may return to that thought at will.I can envision my body breathing one of the breaths of my own past. I can experience myself as then and there instead of now and here. This is very much like envisioning you and your experience, for you are there just as I am here.

My experience of you is mine; it belongs to the flow of my inner life. But my experience of you is not like my experience of myself, or my breath, or my past, or a number. It has peculiar features, such as the possibility of empathy. Once I know you, I know that you are real rather than imaginary and that we inhabit a shared world, because these are features of my own experience, which is an experience of you by and for me.

In truth, I may not know you, the reader of these words, but I can know what it's like to breathe while one reads these words and imagines my experience.

My breath unfolds in the time of the world, which is jointly constituted by you and me and all other sentient beings. I cannot be a self that experiences this world without being in communion with others like me.

Each self is its own whole world. Everything that it experiences is its own experience. Yet every self is also a potential phenomenon for the other selves and needs the others to constitute and inhabit a world.

Each of my breaths reveals elaborate complexity when I examine it closely. One of the things I learn is that your breath is the same.

[I have benefitted from and recommend: Li 2016 and Li 2019. Most of my own recent and direct knowledge of Husserl comes from his *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1929)]

7. There are tears of things

One of the most famous–and notoriously ambiguous–phrases in all of Latin literature is Virgil's "s*unt lacrimae rerum*" (*Aeneid* 1, 462). In his response to the Covid pandemic, Pope Francis interprets the phrase in an environmentalist spirit:

> If everything is connected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality, our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists. I do not want to speak of divine retribution, nor would it be sufficient to say that the harm we do to nature is itself the punishment for our offences. The world is itself crying out in rebellion. We are reminded of the well-known verse of the poet Virgil that evokes the "tears of things", the misfortunes of life and history
>
> – (Pope Francis, 2020, 33)

Others have equated the phrase with the Japanese motto *mono no aware*, which Dennis Washburn defines as "an intuitive sensitivity toward the sublime, sad beauty that inheres in mutable nature and transitory human existence" (Washburn, 2016). In turn, *mono no aware* can express the First Noble Truth of Buddhism–the essential pervasiveness of suffering (Saito 1997)–or it can be an alternative to that view, a way of collecting and relishing representations of impermanence and loss.

Very literally, the three words mean "there are tears of things," but that statement makes little sense in English and requires expansion–using other meanings of the Latin nouns and/or additional connectives. English translators have proposed phrases as various as "The world is a

world of tears (Fagles) or “They weep here / For how the world goes” (Fitzgerald) or even “The universe has sympathy for us” (Stewart, 1971, p. 119; see also Wharton 2008).

Gawin Douglas was the first to translate *The Aeneid* into a relative of modern English (Renaissance Scots), producing a version that Ezra Pound particularly appreciated. Douglas wrote:

> Thir lamentabyll takynnys [condition] passit befor
> Our mortal myndis aucht to compassioun steir.

The context is important for understanding these words’ sense. *The Aeneid* begins in medias res with Aeneas, the sole important survivor of defeated Troy, trying to sail from there to Italy. The goddess Juno, who hates him and all Trojans, arranges for a terrible storm to scatter his ships and maroon him on the coast of Libya. Aeneas’ mother, Minerva, appears in the guise of a hunter and directs him to Carthage, which is under construction. He wanders into a temple of Juno, where the art illustrates the Trojan War, depicting Aeneas’ comrades, his enemies, and even himself in battle. Since this is Juno’s temple, we might guess that the paintings are supposed to celebrate Aeneas’ defeat. However, the sight gives him hope–the text says–and he blurts out:

> *“Sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi;*
> *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.*
> *Solve metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem.”*
>
> “Even here praiseworthy deeds have their rewards;
> There are tears of things, and mortal matters impress the mind.
> Let fear go; this fame will also bring you some benefit.”

Aeneas sees his own story as depicted by human artists, provoking thoughts of loss and sorrow but also pride. He utters a concise but mystifying phrase that pairs the words for “tears” and “things.” I imagine a companion following up with questions:

> Do you mean that things are intrinsically or fundamentally sad?
>
> – Yes, that is what I feel right now.
>
> Or that these paintings are objects that make people cry?
>
> – That too.
>
> Are you somehow happy to see these sad events depicted?
>
> – I suppose so.

Yet they make you sad?

– That is what I am happy about.

Do you want people who hear about your suffering to be sad?

– Yes, but I want them to relish that sadness.

In the end, I don't think the original poem really provides a basis for interpreting the phrase as a statement of existential wisdom, comparable to *mono no aware* or the eternal note of sadness. I suspect Aeneas is mostly interested in being depicted heroically in art. "This fame will bring you benefit" is his main point. However, the words *"sunt lacrimae rerum*" jump out of their context and can translate ideas from remote traditions.

8. Empathy, sympathy, compassion, justice

I'd posit the following definitions:

- Empathy: Feeling a similar emotion in response to someone else's emotional state. Your friend is angry at her boss because he treated her unfairly. That makes *you* mad at her boss. Your anger is probably different in texture and intensity from hers, but it's the same in kind, an imperfect reproduction of her mental state.
- Sympathy: Feeling a supportive emotion in response to someone else's emotional state that is not the same as that person's original emotion. She is mad at her boss, so you become sorry for her, or committed to fairness, or sad about the state of the world, or nostalgic for better times–but not angry at her boss. Then you are sympathetic. (NB You can be both sympathetic and empathetic if you feel several emotions.)
- Compassion: A species of the genus *sympathy*. Another person's negative emotion causes you to have a specific supportive feeling that is not the same as her emotion: you sincerely wish that her distress would end without blaming her for it.
- Justice: A situation or decision characterized by fairness, goodness, rightness, etc. (These are contestable ideas and may be in tension with each other.) The English word "just"–like *dikaios* in classical Greek–can be applied either to a situation or to a person who cares and aims for justice.

There is an old and rich debate about which character traits and subjective states are best suited to pursuing justice. One answer is that you should be a just person, one who tries to decide what is fair or best for all (all things considered), who desires that outcome, and who works to pursue it. John Rawls (1971) famously modeled justice as the decisions that self-

interested parties would make if they were rendered perfectly equal by a Veil of Ignorance that blocked them from knowing their own situations. In the real world, we can approximate the Veil of Ignorance by ensuring that everyone actually has equal rights and powers.

A different response is that we are not well suited to defining and pursuing justice directly. It's better to cultivate other emotions, such as empathy, sympathy, compassion–or loyalty, aversion to harm, or commitment to specific *rules*–in order to deliver more just outcomes, all things considered.

But empathy is an unreliable guide to justice, able to mislead instead of inform. Donald Trump made people feel empathy for a small number of individuals whose families were allegedly victimized by undocumented aliens, and then used that emotion to build support for deporting millions of people who had harmed no one. A more famous example is Edmund Burke's outrage at the mistreatment of Marie Antoinette, which obscured any concern for the countless people tortured, executed, or "disappeared" by the *ancien regime* that she represented.

Empathy can also substitute for justice. You congratulate yourself for feeling some version of a suffering person's emotion and excuse yourself from fixing the problem.

Compassion may be better than empathy. Instead of feeling the *same* emotion as the other person, you feel a combination of beneficence and equanimity that may be a more reliable guide to acting well. But it's possible that compassion only clears the deck for reasoning about what you should actually do.

For its part, justice can be emotional. You can feel a powerful urge to make the world more just. That is helpful insofar as the feeling motivates you and insofar as people obtain genuine insights from our emotions; but it is dangerous because the emotion of desiring justice can be misplaced. You can feel great about improving the world when you are actually harming it.

Justice is also necessarily discursive. You must put into words–at least inside your own head–what is good or fair, and why, and make yourself accountable for that position. Therefore, much hinges on whether we human beings *can* reason explicitly about justice in ways that improve upon our strictly affective reactions to particular situations.

9. Compassion, not empathy

This is a passage from Seneca's *On Clemency* (written in 55–56 CE):

> *Pity [1] is a sickness of the soul due to the sight of others' suffering, or a sadness caused by someone else's misfortunes which one believes to be undeserved; but no sickness can affect a wise man [2], for his mind is serene and nothing can get through to it that he guards against. Besides, nothing is as becoming to a man as a great soul, but it is impossible to be both great and sad. Sadness breaks the mind into pieces, throws it*

down, and collects the parts, but this cannot happen to a wise one [3] even in a disaster. Instead, he will repulse any outrage of fortune and shatter it to pieces before him, always maintaining the same appearance–quiet, firm–which he couldn't do if he were overcome with sadness.

Also to be considered: a wise person discerns the future and makes decisions without interference, yet nothing clear and lucid [4] can flow from turbulence. Sadness is unfitted for discerning circumstances, planning useful tasks, evading dangers, weighing equities. Therefore, the [wise person] will not feel pity, because there cannot be pity without suffering of the soul. [5]

Whatever others who feel pity want to do, he will do freely and with a lofty spirit. He will help those who weep, but not weep with them [6]. He will reach a hand to the drowning, welcome the exile, donate to the poor, not in the abusive way of most people who want to be seen as pitying–they toss something and flinch in disgust at those whom they aid, as if they feared to touch them–but as a man gives to a man from the common pool. He will return the child to the weeping mother, unfasten chains, save people from [gladiatorial] games, and even bury the stinking body, but he will do these things with a tranquil mind, of his own will. Thus the wise person will not pity but will assist and be of use, having been born to help all and for the public good, from which he will distribute shares to all. He will even give from his store to those sufferers who deserve a portion of blame and correction, but he will be even more pleased to assist those who are genuinely unfortunate. Whenever he can, he will counter fortune, for what better use of his powers than to restore what fortune has overturned? He will certainly not cast down his eyes or his soul toward someone who is shriveled or ragged and meagre and leaning on a staff; instead he will do good to all and kindly regard all who suffer, like a god.

Pity is close to suffering [7]; it even has something in common with it and derives from it. You know eyes to be weak if they water at the sight of someone else's bleariness, just as, by Hercules, it is a disorder and not a case of merriment when people laugh just because others laugh or yawn whenever someone's mouth opens. Pity is a flaw in the soul of one who feels suffering too much, and he who expects it from a wise person is not so different from someone who expects lamentations at a stranger's funeral.

– *Seneca's De Clementia (2.5.4-2.6.4), my trans.* Notes: [1] *misericordia*; [2] gendered in the original (*vir*); [3] not necessarily gendered; [4] *socerumque*, which doesn't make sense to me unless it should read *serenumque*; [5] *ergo non miseretur, quia id sine miseria animi non fit*; [6] *non accedet* = not come near them; [7] *Misericordia vicina est miseriae.*

The topic of Seneca's book is clemency (*clementia*) which in modern English means a virtue or prerogative of governors and other rulers. Seneca addresses the young Emperor Nero and urges him to exhibit clemency (I:v). Emperors were sometimes addressed with the honorific "*clemens*" (similar to "your grace"), presumably to play to their good side.

However, a different meaning of *clementia* was calmness or mildness. The weather could be clement, and so could a human mind. Anyone could direct this kind of *clementia* toward anyone else. A better translation than "clemency" might be "compassion." Seneca contrasts it with *misericordia*, which I have translated as "pity" to capture its negative connotations. (After all, nobody wants to be pitied.) But *misericordia* is close to the modern word "sympathy." So let us consider the differences between *clementia* as compassion and *misericordia* as sympathy.

"Sympathy" means feeling a strong emotion in support of another person's emotion. Your friend is sad, so you feel pity or anger or frustration. Although I am sympathetic to the emotion of sympathy, Seneca suggests several reasons to avoid it. Supportive feelings do not necessarily help the afflicted person. Sympathy often comes with at least a tinge of condescension, since the person who is sympathetic does not actually experience the same circumstances as the one who suffers. By trying to answer the sufferer's emotions with your own, you may undermine your ability to help. And by tying your emotions to another person's state of mind, you expose yourself to fortune. This is not a reliable way to achieve your own happiness.

Instead, those who suffer deserve to be assisted effectively by people who genuinely respect them. The helper should not try to mirror their emotions but should display a different emotion: clear-headed and equitable good-will. To name that emotion "compassion" is a bit confusing, since it has precisely the same root meaning as "sympathy," which is a suggested translation of *misericordia*. (Com = sym = with. Passio = pathos = feeling). Nevertheless, compassion seems to be the word we would use for Seneca's idea of disinterested benign sentiments (2.6.3) that we exercise freely and with a tranquil mind (2.6.2). It can translate the Sanskrit word *karuna*, which is fundamental in Buddhism.

Seneca also relates this virtue–let's call it compassion–to a political idea: equal standing and a common claim on the public good. Even though Seneca addresses *De clementia* to Nero, I think that in this passage, he describes a republican virtue, appropriate for relations among equals who co-own the commonwealth. (It is interesting that he doesn't actually use "*clementia*" in these chapters of the book.)

A compassionate person is not exposed to chance. If we feel worse as another person worsens, and better as he improves, then we demonstrate sympathy, which subjects us to fate. But compassion remains unchanged regardless of the state of the sufferer. Compassion can even fill the mind's attention, thus displacing emotions that are the cause of discomfort.

One question for me: is sympathy a path to compassion or is it a diversion or a dead end? There is a long tradition in Buddhism of cultivating an imaginative identification with another sentient being, feeling its pain, and "exchanging self and other" (e.g., Śantideva, *Bodhicaryavatara*, 7:16). The goal is to shake one's attachment to oneself and begin a journey from selfishness to concrete sympathy for specific others, and from there to generalized good-will for all, or *karuna*. I can't criticize this path without having been taught it properly or seriously tried to practice it, but Seneca makes me wonder whether intense involvement in another's suffering might detract from the cultivation of compassion rather than setting us on the right track.

10. Empathy from stories

For a very long time, writers have argued that sad stories generate empathy and improve the character. From his dismal exile on the shore of the Black Sea, the poet Ovid addresses a soldier friend in these lines:

> *Is it true? When you heard of my misfortune*
> *From a distant land, was your heart sad?*
> *You can hide and shrink to say it, Graecinus,*
> *But if I know you well, it was sad.*
> *Revolting cruelty does not fit your type,*
> *And even less your avocation. For*
> *The liberal arts, your highest concern,*
> *Soften the chest so that harshness escapes.*
>
> — *Ex Ponto,* 1.6 (my trans.)

Ovid presumes that his story will soften the gruff Roman's heart, especially because it comes in the form of a poem and the soldier is a devotee of the *artes ingenuae:* the liberal arts, or literally, the freeborn arts. The poem will work because the reader has been habituated by many previous poems to dislike cruelty. Apparently, "*ingenuae*" has aristocratic connotations, and so Ovid's phrase for the "liberal arts" implies a higher class of people who have been civilized or humanized by the arts.

Here is another classic source for the idea that writing generates empathy:

> And early in the morning, he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.
>
> And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,
>
> They say [sic] unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

> Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?
>
> This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote [or drew] on the ground.
>
> So when they continued asking him, he lifted himself up, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.
>
> And again he stooped down, and wrote [not drew] on the ground.
>
> And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.
>
> When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?
>
> She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more (John, 8:2-11)

What was Jesus writing? One answer: something concrete about the specific Woman, which made the scribes and Pharisees think about *her* (and about themselves) instead of applying the abstract law.

For centuries in the English-speaking world, to enter the ranks of the civilized and humane meant reading Shakespeare. One possible reason: Shakespeare's special capacity for empathy, which is related to his refusal to push arguments of his own. Keats found in Shakespeare the quality that he called (Keats 1817) "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Other critics have noted Shakespeare's remarkable ability *not* to speak on his own behalf, from his own perspective, or in support of his own positions. Coleridge called this skill "myriad-mindedness," and Matthew Arnold said that Shakespeare was "free from our questions." Hazlitt said that the "striking peculiarity of [Shakespeare's] mind was its generic quality, its power of communication with all other minds–so that it contained a universe of feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another. He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other men."

So we have a model of the humane and sensitive educated person as one who has been habituated by the reading of moving stories to be empathetic and thus to show mercy or otherwise depart from harsh decisions.

This model conflicts with the idea that a just person knows the truth and obeys the consequences. St. Augustine recalls his sinful younger self enjoying the theater, where he was "forced to learn I don't know what wanderings of Aeneas, oblivious to my own, and to lament the dead Dido, because she killed herself for love, while meanwhile with dry eyes I endured my miserable self dying among these things before you, God, my life. … In the theaters I took pleasure along with the lovers when they used each other for vice, even though their behavior was just the imaginary sport of a play, and when they parted I was sad along with them, as if I were really compassionate; yet I enjoyed both parts." At the moment of his conversion, Augustine hears a voice saying, "take up and read, take up and read." He understands this as a command to open the Bible at random. The first words he finds are those of Paul: "But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" [Rom. 13:13-14]. Augustine recalls: "I wanted to read no further, nor was there need" (*Conf*., 1.13.20; *Conf.* 3.2.3.; *Conf.*, 8.12.29; my trans.).

This is a model of the just person as one who is unmoved by inappropriate empathy and who avoids reading texts that might make him sympathize with sin. Although he is a very different kind of person from Augustine, Judge Richard A. Posner (1997) writes that "empathy is amoral."

> Imaginative literature can engender in its readers emotional responses to experiences that they have not had. We read King Lear and feel how–or some approximation to how–a failing king feels, the wicked bastard feels, the evil daughters, the good daughter, the blinded earl, the faithful retainer, the corrupt retainer, the fool, all feel. We experience simulacra of the agony of madness and the pang of early death in Hamlet, the depths of mutual misunderstanding in *The Secret Agent*, the loneliness of command in *Billy Budd*, the triumph of the will in Yeats's late poetry. This is the empathy-inducing role of literature of which [Hilary] Putnam and [Martha] Nussbaum speak. But empathy is amoral. The mind that you work your way into, learning to see the world from its perspective, may be the mind of a Meursault [from The Stranger], an Edmund [from Lear], a Lafcadio [the lion?], a Macbeth, a Tamerlane, a torturer, a sadist, even a Hitler (Richard Hughes's *The Fox in the Attic*).

11. The limits of putting yourself in their shoes and looking with their eyes

Empathy can undermine justice. It can make empathetic people feel more virtuous without doing anything, and it can even strengthen their position in a conflict by making them look better to third parties.

On a visit to Israel and the West Bank in 2012, I heard senior members of the Israeli establishment–diplomats, politicians, and military officers (up to a lieutenant general)--relate what they explicitly called "the Palestinian narrative." They explained that Israelis and Palestinians are two "wounded peoples," with the Holocaust on one side and *al-Nakba* (the

Palestinian Catastrophe of 1948) on the other. I heard that view expressed alongside the wall that divides Jerusalem–by a colonel who had chosen its location.

I think this kind of recognition has grown over time. Mrs. Netanyahu summarized the old popular view when she claimed, “When the Jews came to this area, there were no Arabs here. They came to find work when we built cities. There was nothing here before that” (Elon 2003). That is not politically correct any more; now the kinds of Israelis I talked to know all about the Palestinians under Turkish and British rule and what they lost in 1948.

Note the applause in this speech by Barack Obama to an Israel audience in Jerusalem (Obama 2013):

> I — I’m going off script here for a second, but before I — before I came here, I — I met with a — a group of young Palestinians from the age of 15 to 22. And talking to them, they weren’t that different from my daughters. They weren’t that different from your daughters or sons.
>
> I honestly believe that if — if any Israeli parent sat down with those kids, they’d say, I want these kids to succeed. (Applause.) I want them to prosper. I want them to have opportunities just like my kids do. (Applause.) I believe that’s what Israeli parents would want for these kids if they had a chance to listen to them and talk to them. (Cheers, applause.) I believe that. (Cheers, applause.)

Meanwhile, in Ramallah, when I asked a senior Palestinian official whether Israelis sincerely believe that they have returned to their ancestral homeland, he wouldn’t acknowledge it. He seemed to be offering less empathy than his Israeli counterparts, and that made me (in the moment) critical of him.

Yet the power lies on the Israeli side. It is much easier to express empathy if you are making the decisions. Even if it is sincere, empathetic talk can improve your reputation with a third party without costing you anything.

In Jerusalem, Obama said: “Peace begins, not just in the plans of leaders, but in the hearts of people; not just in some carefully designed process, but in the daily connections, that sense of empathy that takes place among those who live together.” He called on his Israel audience to “put yourself in their shoes. Look at the world through their eyes.” But empathy will not suffice. It must be connected somehow with justice and with actually taking just action.

If you favor systematic moral theories, then you may recommend using one or more general moral premises that distinguish good empathy from bad empathy. A feeling of empathy will not be a reliable guide to right action, only an urge that you must critically assess in other terms.

If, like me, you are skeptical about organized moral theories and believe that empathetic responses can convey truths about the world, then you will view an empathetic response as a valid source of guidance. But not as the only kind of valid input: relatively abstract and impersonal considerations must also apply.

12. Arachne

I scuttle up the line on slender legs.
One limb pulls silk smoothly from my belly
While another glues it at the right point.
Repeat, no thoughts needed; the design is
Encoded in my nerves, automated.

But Athena has left me memories,
As punishment. While the other spiders
(Disgusting creatures, close up) just spin and weave,
I spin, weave, regret, repeat, and weave
Regret right into the pattern of my web.

She didn't win, you know. She saw she'd lost
When she caught the looks on people's faces.
Her tapestry was very well woven,
Bright colors, nice detail, professional work.
No one liked it, though, because it said: "I rule."
It was a propaganda poster in wool:
"Athena," by Athena, with peons.

Mine was the opposite. I showed poor girls
Seized by man-gods: how they fought in terror.
I left the gods out, so my art was pure
Sympathy. I was on the side of us.

People had always loved to watch me work.
People, and nymphs, too: they came down from Tmolus
With their perfect bodies and empty heads
To see someone actually making things.

Their praise pleased, but it wasn't quite enough.
They couldn't understand the objects they liked.
They guessed Athena must have instructed me,
Because they had never struggled to learn.

I wanted Athena's attention--and got it
With my boasts, which floated up to the sky.
When an old hag came to refresh my manners,
I half-knew who that woman was. (Not quite.)
My curses and slurs surprised even me.
I think I was asking Athena to fight.

I was half pleased, then, to see the rags drop
Off her and her virginal, marmoreal
Perfection irradiate my poor room,
Making the mortals and nymphs turn away.
Time to get weaving, then; let's see who's better.

She didn't have to weave well. She is divine.
She could do whatever she wanted with me,
Just like Idmon, my father, once Mother died
(My mother, whose name no one's recorded).

My famous weaving is what saved me from him.
My famous art, not Athena's. When she saw
It was better than hers--more popular, too--
She reasserted her authority.
She ripped my fabric to bits, grabbed my distaff
And started to beat me with it. My ear,
My kidney got a blow, my knees, my crown.

I grabbed some yarn I'd spun, thinking first to throw
It round the goddess' long white neck and pull.
Since hers was shockproof chryselephantine,
My own neck offered a better way out.

I made a noose and dropped it from a rafter.

Athena must have granted me respite
From my beating to prepare my suicide.
As for me, I wished to steal her victory.
My death would be my own doing, not hers.
I would make my story end as I chose.

They say the sight of me choking on my yarn
Stirred some pity deep in Pallas' breast
And she chose to spare me a rightful death,
Graciously granting me more time to weave.
But I say she made my body her art.

Sprinkling belladonna and henbane
On me made my hair fall out; strange words
Elongated my fingers into legs.
My thumbs, arms, and real legs shrank away.
My teeth consolidated into fangs.

Athena was loving her work. She hummed,
Chuckled, paused to admire the results,
Muttered encouraging words to herself,
Calling herself "Athena" and "Clever girl."

She shrank me by pure will and watched me hurry
Up my own noose to a crack in the roof
Where I again began to spin and weave.
Now my pattern is hers. I watch it emerge.
I see what it is once my limbs have made it
Exactly the same as they've made it before.

13. Velazquez, *The Spinners*

One story:

Minerva, goddess of weavers,
Had heard too much of Arachne.
She had heard
That the weaving of Arachne
Equalled her own, or surpassed it.
Arachne was just a poor girl, but her artistry had brought her fame.

The nymphs came down from the vines on Tmolus
As butterflies to a garden, to flock stunned
Around what flowered out of the warp and the weft
Under her fingers.
– (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book VI, 1-145, as retold by Ted Hughes: Ovid 1997)

They did not merely admire Arachne's creations but also loved to watch her working. The process moved them as much as the outcome.

A grace like Minerva's, unearthly,
Moved her hands whether she bundled the fleeces
Or teased out the wool, like cirrus,
Or spun the yarn, or finally
Conjured her images into their places …
– ibid

Surely Minerva (a.k.a. Athena) had taught or inspired her. Arachne scoffed at this idea, claiming that she deserved sole credit for her own art. She openly challenged Minerva to a weaving competition. Minerva duly arrived, disguised as an old mortal woman, and lectured Arachne about giving proper credit to the gods. This speech threw Arachne into a rage.

As she spat at her: "Your brain totters
Like your decrepit body.
You have lived too long.
If you possess daughters or granddaughters
Waste your babble on them.
I am not such a fool
To be frightened by an owl-face and a few screeches.
I make up my own mind,
And I think as I always did.
If the goddess dare practise what she preaches

Why doesn't she take up my challenge?
Why doesn't she come for a contest?"
– ibid

Hearing these words, Minerva abandoned her costume and seemed to grow twice as tall. Everyone was terrified except Arachne, who set about weaving. The competitors worked intently, each hardly aware of the other. Minerva wove an illustration of her own authority, depicting herself as the founder of the city of Athens and the just punisher of various mortals. Arachne vividly and sympathetically depicted a series of women raped by male gods–examples of domination rather than authority.

Arachne's tapestry was perfect. Minerva could find no fault in it, which enraged her. The goddess tore it to shreds and began beating Arachne with her spindle. Unable to stand the pain, Arachne tried to hang herself. "Pity touched Minerva" and she chose to spare Arachne from her rightful fate. Minerva transformed the girl into a spider, working this magic of transformation skillfully, one stage at a time. From then on, Arachne spun and wove perpetually and (I assume) compulsively, "her touches / Deft and swift and light as when they were human."

Another story: In 1560-62, Titian painted *The Rape of Europa,* which now hangs in the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum in Boston. Like the first scene in the tapestry that Arachne wove to defeat Minerva,

It showed Europa crying from out at sea
stride the bull that had deceived her.
The high god Jupiter, in his bull form,
Carrying her off—
And glistening with effort.
You could see her feet recoiling
From the swipe of the waves through which he heaved.
– ibid

Titian added plump winged babies and an Adriatic coast in the background. By the 17th century, this work was in the royal collection in Madrid, where Peter Paul Rubens copied it while Diego Velazquez watched him.

Perhaps Velazquez thought: I am better than Titian and I don't have to copy his works like Rubens does. My genius is my own. Perhaps that thought struck him with irony or even self-mockery, because he knew what he owed to his predecessors.

Velazquez owned translations of Ovid's text in which the stories of Arachne and Europa were told. Perhaps he sympathized with Arachne, the artist who had sympathetically portrayed Europa. Or perhaps he recognized her arrogance in himself.

The painting: *Las Hilanderas* (The Spinners) by Velazquez (1655-1660, Museo Nacional del Prado) shows five women in contemporary clothes, plus a cat. They are weaving, spinning, collecting textile fragments, or watching others at these activities. As A.S. Byatt (1999) notes, the painting depicts light playing on many kinds of fabric, including fine filaments that behave like spiderwebs.

Behind these women, and two steps above them, is what first appears to be a single scene populated by noblewomen or mythological figures, including two flying putti and one woman in a resplendent helmet. Closer inspection distinguishes the background, which is a portion of Titian's *Rape of Europa* (mainly the sky, with Europa herself hardly visible to the right), from a stage-like area that supports five women in fancy clothes who are boldly illuminated by sunlight from the left.

Like *Las Menina*s (painted at about the same time and now shown in a neighboring room), this is an enigmatic picture that may have been contrived to support several literal interpretations. One possibility is that the scene on the stage is the story of Arachne, with Athena in the helmet and Arachne standing before her own tapestry, which looks just like Titian's *Rape of Europa*. Paintings were sometimes reproduced as tapestries by artisans who had less prestige and were seen as less creative than the original painters. In this case, Velazquez would have pretended to copy an imaginary woven copy of a real painting that he had watched Rubens actually copy in oil. (Today, that copy is displayed in the same room as *The Spinners*.)

The women in the foreground could just be ordinary workers, shown for contrast. Or they, too, could be figures from the Arachne story. Minerva could be the older lady on the left, shown before she sheds her costume. The steps might separate two episodes from the same story.

The working spinners are arranged in a way that resembles the goddesses and nymphs in Titian's *Diana and Callisto*, another painting that Velazquez had watched Rubens copy in Spain (Alpers 2005). One possibility is that Velazquez' depiction of the spinners is sexually suggestive (Bird 2007), alluding to Titian's naked nymphs. Or perhaps the main suggestion is that one character is a goddess in disguise.

Evidently, this is a painting about art, coming after the apex of straightforward narrative painting represented by Titian. It is about whether artists are original or derivative–an explicit question in Ovid's presentation of the Arachne myth. It is about sympathy or empathy for women confronted by unlimited power: male gods who commit rape and a goddess who tortures her victims. It may also be a demonstration of Velazquez' superiority–as a male court

painter–over female artisans. It is about the ability to represent the current physical world, imaginary pasts, and previous representations. It is about the relationship between written stories that unfold in time and three-dimensional space as captured on a flat plane. It is about comparison, assessment, and competition. It is about Velazquez–in a way that would be hard to imagine happening a century earlier.

14. "Empathy" is a new word. Do we need it?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "empathy" entered the English language in 1895 to mean "a physiological brain-function"–specifically, "a form of psychophysical energy" in the nervous system–that correlated with a feeling.

This meaning is now obsolete, because the underlying theory is. A somewhat more familiar meaning appeared in 1909: "Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride … but I feel or act them in the mind's muscles. This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of Einfühlung." E. B. Titchener Lect. Exper. Psychol. Thought-processes i. 21 (1909).

But this meaning is now also "rare," says the OED. The word "empathy" gained its mainstream current meaning only in 1946 (in a professional psychology journal):

> *[Meaning 2b] orig. Psychology. The ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc.*
>
> *1946 Jrnl. Clin. Psychol.2 61/1 A 'man-to-man' regard for the client, characterized (ideally) by the understanding of empathy without the erratic quality of identification or the supportiveness of sympathy.*

You might think it's a Greek word, and it parses in Greek: en- ("of the state or condition of") plus pathos ("an incident, accident; suffering") = "the state of someone's [else's] suffering." But no such word is listed in my Liddell & Scott Greek-English Lexicon. It is a modern English word built of ancient Greek components. If anything, the origin is the German word *Einfühlung* (coined in 1873), which needed an English equivalent.

While noting the recent origins of the English word, Emily McRae also argues that it has no direct translation in Sanskrit or other languages that have been used to express the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Key words from that tradition are better translated as "compassion" and "sympathetic joy." McRae derives a theory of empathy from Buddhist texts, but she interprets phrases like "exchanging self and other" rather than any single word that corresponds to "empathy" (McRae 2017).

Since the word "empathy" is recent, and many wise thinkers have done without it, we might ask whether adding it to our vocabulary has done us good. It would be possible to carve up the

conceptual space so that “empathy” vanished and we used only “compassion,” “beneficence,” “good will,” “forgiveness,” “responsiveness,” “mirroring,” and other related words.

I am a little worried that “empathy” confuses matters by combining an empirical concept–empathy exists when person A feels an emotion, which causes person B to feel some of that same emotion–with a positive moral valence (it is good to be empathetic). Yet it is not always good to feel the same emotion as someone else in response to that person.

15. Humility and curiosity

I recently heard about a conversation in which someone invoked the idea of a “voodoo doll,” and another in which someone said that the Chinese character for crisis also means “opportunity.”

These phrases rest on falsehoods. Sticking needles into effigies to harm real enemies derives from Western European folklore. A widow was “accused, tried and drowned at London Bridge, England, for piercing a puppet, made in the victim’s likeness, with nails, towards the end of the 10th century” (Armitage 2015, p. 88). In white popular culture in the early 1900s, such practices were attributed to Haitian religion as part of a fearful, contemptuous, and hateful depiction of Haiti–the only country with a successful slave revolt–and of Black people in general.

John F. Kennedy popularized the idea that the Chinese character for crisis also means opportunity. This is false and may perpetuate stereotypes of Asian “wisdom” as paradoxical, antique, and unscientific. A similar example is the remark attributed to Zhou Enlai that it was too early to tell whether the French Revolution was a good thing. That sounds sagacious and mysterious until you find out that he was referring to the French uprisings of 1968, less than a decade before he spoke. It actually was too early to tell.

We shouldn’t say these things, because they are wrong and they reinforce harmful stereotypes. In fact, if anything is racist, it is to depict a religion constructed by enslaved and self-liberated people under immense duress as a malevolent form of magic, characterized by enchanted dolls and walking undead that are familiar tropes in European folklore.

Yet I do not think that the best outcome is to erect warning signs around such topics. We don’t want someone to use these phrases, get corrected, and resolve never to talk about Haiti or about Chinese characters again.

Instead, we should strive for a combination of humility (knowing what we don’t know) and curiosity (striving to learn more).

For instance, the family of syncretic religions that includes Vodou, Santeria, Candomble Jeje, and others is an important topic of study. These religions are components of our social world, interesting in their own right and significant in the history of the African diaspora. To

understand a phenomenon like the astounding growth of Pentecostalism in Brazil, it might be important to have some awareness of Brazilian syncretism, which Pentecostals depict as their main enemy. Fear of Haiti and its successful revolution has been important in American politics–and that, too, is valuable to understand.

To study syncretism raises general issues that might have existential significance for people from other religious backgrounds. For instance, the question "What is a religion?" is pressing for all human beings. One answer is: a system of belief defined by certain abstract tenets that are matters of faith rather than reason and that are incompatible with other systems. That definition does not apply to Vodou or explain how someone can be both Catholic and syncretic, as many people are. So maybe we should rethink what a religion is, in general.

Likewise, it is worthwhile to understand more about Chinese writing. In addition to its intrinsic significance, this topic also raises questions that generalize to other contexts. For example, the word ji, misleadingly translated as "opportunity," is polysemous: it has a whole family of loosely related meanings. Many English words are polysemous, too. What should we make of polysemy in general?

Also, the claim that the Chinese character for crisis means opportunity is an example–in this case, a spurious example–of arguing from etymology. People make etymological arguments all the time. I, for example, have noted that the roots of "citizen" and "political" are Latin and Greek words related to the city (civitas and polis). They share a history with the words "urbane" and "civilized," which also distinguish cities from the inferior countryside. But do we get any guidance for today by understanding what ancient Greeks and Romans meant by these words? How, in general, should we think about original meanings, given that languages and societies change?

In short, let us turn mistakes into quests for more and better knowledge. That means encouraging further forays into fraught topics instead of warning people away from them. When we err, as we all do, we should respond by learning, not by apologizing and turning away. Incidentally, this means keeping the focus on the original topic of conversation (e.g., Haitian religion), not on our feelings about being corrected. I take the main problem with "white fragility" to be a tendency to distort conversations by directing attention to the question of how the white person feels.

My thesis is that cultural diversity requires humility plus curiosity. I would acknowledge two challenges to this thesis–not to discourage curiosity but to remind us what to be careful of.

First, by digging more deeply into fraught topics, we may make additional mistakes. I wrote above that the Haitian Revolution was the only successful revolt of enslaved people. Arguably, that is a false statement. In an earlier draft, I wrote that white people depicted Vodou as "black

magic," thereby repeating a racist trope in my own voice. It can be safer to erect warning signs around such issues than to compound our initial mistakes with more. I think we should take this risk but be appropriately careful about it. Humility should not diminish with added knowledge.

Second, knowledge confers power. To understand more about other peoples and cultures can allow you to profit from them or even dominate them. Often in durable cases of imperialism, the conquerors learned about, and even admired, the people whom they controlled.

For instance, I am not sure that Britain would have been motivated to dominate India, or capable of doing so, if some British people had not become learned and appreciative about India. A classic case is Rudyard Kipling. His first language was Hindi, he knew a lot about India, he disparaged racist stereotypes about Indians, and he believed that Britain should rule India just because it was a magnificent civilization. In stark contrast, Donald Trump displays ignorance and contempt for almost the whole world. One result is a reluctance to use US military power overseas. Trump has arguably been less imperialistic than his predecessors because he is more ignorant. This is a warning about curiosity.

Leaving aside literal imperialism, we might also worry about profiting from knowledge about other cultures. One could imagine a privileged American who starts with an idea about voodoo dolls, is corrected, learns more about Haitian syncretism, and makes money by writing about it or by importing and selling real Haitian art. Although I would defend cultural appropriation in many circumstances (and I disagree that profit is a mark of sin), one should at least be mindful about monetizing other people's experiences.

These are caveats, but I don't think they rebut the basic presumption that we should address ignorance by learning more–with curiosity born of humility and guided by ethics.

16. Notes on religion and cultural appropriation: the case of US Buddhism

In 1998, in a generally enthusiastic overview of Buddhism in the USA, Charles S. Prebish noted the "bifurcation" between Buddhism as the "native religion of a significant number of Asian immigrants" and "an ever-increasing group of (mostly) Euro-Americans who [have] embraced Buddhism primarily out of intellectual attraction and interest in spiritual practice." He described the latter group as urban, highly educated, and "even elite in its lifestyle orientation"–and growing very rapidly (Prebish 1998).

More than 20 years later, the tensions seem more evident. Rev. Cristina Moon critically assesses "the erasure of Asian cultures, and of Asian and Asian American people, in mainstream Western Buddhism." She writes (Moon 2020):

> *Over the fifteen years before coming to Chozen-ji [a temple and monastery founded by Asian Americans], I sat with more than a dozen different Buddhist communities where I*

was often the only Asian and sometimes one of the only non-white people in attendance. When non-Asian Buddhists (particularly at American Zen centers) wore Japanese clothes, bowed to me theatrically, referred to me as "Cristina-san", responded to requests in English with "Hai!", and expressed rigid attachment to the technical accuracy of certain Japanese and Buddhist forms, it looked more like cosplay [dressing as a character from a movie] than a means to enter Zen.

I find this situation troubling, but it's also a provocative case for thinking about culture, religion, and racial identity: how to define them in general, how they relate to each other, and what we should do as a result.

Before suggesting some general ideas about these issues, I should recommend Moon's specific guidance related to Buddhism in the USA. She identifies a set of practices that are common across Asian and Asian-American communities, such as bringing food to share and helping people who are more experienced or older do menial tasks. She writes that "Asians do not own these behaviors," but they are notable in Asian communities and are consistent with Buddhist ethics as described abstractly. Thus they are "ways to bring the dharma alive."

For similar reasons, there is value in practices like "maintaining a shrine, prayer, prostrations and pilgrimage, engaging in the arts, [and] offering alms" that some converts to Buddhism might dismiss as "merely cultural." More generally, we might identify virtues of respectful curiosity, fallibilism (i.e., any of my ideas can always be wrong) and mild self-abnegation. I think it is fruitful to understand these virtues in a specifically Buddhist way, but also to endorse and use them in other contexts–for instance, when one encounters an Abrahamic tradition.

I would propose some general propositions that extend beyond this case:

- A religion is not best understood as a coherent set of abstract beliefs that are necessary and sufficient for membership and that contradict some of the beliefs of other religions. That is not a complete description even of the Abrahamic faiths; it is even less accurate for other religions. Instead, any religion is a whole body of accumulated beliefs, stories, values, practices, and institutions. It always encompasses a great deal of diversity and has porous and indefinite borders. In that sense, religion is very much like culture, or is even a category used–often by outsiders–to name certain aspects of culture.
- A culture is not something to which individuals belong, and it does not affect individuals. A culture is a name for a large set of beliefs, values, skills, habits, etc. that individuals have and can use. Everyone has a unique set at any given moment. However, we sometimes gain insight by categorizing people within a culture when we notice that they share a lot of the same repertoire and differ from others whom they encounter. Often, what is salient about a culture is its tension with other cultures that it interacts with.

- A race is a social construct that arbitrarily makes some extremely superficial attributes, such as skin color, falsely seem important. It originated in a desire to dominate and exploit. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored, because centuries of racial oppression have taught people to see in terms of race and have created injustices that require remedies. One result is that the loose categories that we name as "cultures" very often have racial overtones as well. In situations like the ones that Cristina Moon describes, people should be mindful of race.

- Specific ideas can be good or bad, right or wrong. For instance, I would defend Moon's guidance for behavior in an Asian-American temple as *good* advice, not merely as an expression of a specific group's values. Because we think–and sometimes correctly–that some of our own ideas are important and good, we are motivated to spread them, including to people who come from very different backgrounds. We are also motivated to absorb and adopt new ideas from diverse sources when we find them persuasive. Evangelism is not limited to Christianity and Islam and should not be equated with cultural imperialism. The traditions that originated in Asia, like those from the Mediterranean and elsewhere, have been deliberately propagated to outsiders and sometimes willingly received. In fact, we might say that all people have a human right to all sources of wisdom, regardless of where the ideas originated.

- Whether the spread of a given idea is good depends on whether that idea is good. This is a question that each of us must consider with the resources we happen to have: the other ideas, values, skills, etc. that we have already absorbed. We should not be biased in favor of ideas that cohere well with what we already believe; that is "motivated reasoning." On the contrary, we should try to be open to ideas that trouble our existing beliefs.

- All cultures are hybrid. Nothing human is pure, and the desire to keep national cultures distinct, coherent, and homogeneous is pathological. It is the root of much cruelty and exclusion.

- East and West are not useful categories. Although sometimes we gain insight by categorizing people, these particular classifications are far too vague to shed any light, and they have problematic histories and motivations. Besides, specific traditions that seem classically European or Asian have long been intertwined. For example, one of the most influential seedbeds of Buddhism was Greek-ruled Northern India after Alexander, when coins literally had Greek imprinted on one side and Buddhist phrases in Brahmic characters on the other. Two concepts that can be more useful than East and West are imperialism and modernization. But these are not simply "Western" phenomena. Japan was imperialist, and all Asian countries have experienced modernization.

In the US, there is a certain tendency–I don't know how widespread–to see Buddhist thought as ahistorical. The Buddha is treated as a contemporary; the meditating mind lives only in the immediate present. There is also a tendency to acknowledge Buddhism's roots in Asia but to depict Asian or Eastern "culture" as monolithic, apart from superficial aesthetic differences that people can browse like consumers.

Thus it's possible that the white/European-American Buddhists whom Rev. Moon has encountered differentiate between the transcendent truths of the Buddha and optional traditions and behaviors that they label "culture." They then pick and choose from the traditions without recognizing that they (highly educated, mostly White Americans) are every bit as immersed in their own stream of inherited behaviors, aesthetics, beliefs, and values, which influence their choices about what to borrow from Asian contexts. Linda Heuman writes:

> The French philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour famously described it this way: "A Modern is someone who believes that others believe." A modern Buddhist, in Latour's sense, is someone who believes that Asian forms of Buddhism carry the "baggage" of their host cultures but who remains unreflective about the assumptions that shape his or her own modern adaptation (Heuman 2015).

Any mind is ineluctably historical. As we develop from speechless infants into adults, we absorb a vast array of classifications, assumptions, and values that other people invented before us. We can never escape this historical contingency. You might think that you can have an unmediated experience of nature, but your tastes in nature, your words and concepts for nature, and even your physical location in front of a specific patch of nature are all historically conditioned.

History is highly complex, diverse, and often cruel, whether we happen to know the details or not. Evils are widespread–consider, for example, the use of Buddhist ideas in imperial Japan or in Myanmar today. Human beings widely and blatantly violate principles that they expressly teach, such as nonviolence and compassion. On the other hand, people all over the world also create practices and institutions that reflect wise goals and choices. What we think we know is a result of this complex, globally interconnected, and fraught past.

An ahistorical approach may actually contradict important Buddhist ideas. For one thing, the assumption that you can have an authentic, personal experience of nature or of your own body contradicts the idea of no-self, whereas to acknowledge that all your ideas originated with other people and will outlast you seems consistent with rebirth.

Besides, Mahayana Buddhists have presented the development of Buddhism as a series of "turnings of the Dharma wheel." This story–rather like Hegel's idealist history–understands the truth as we know it today as a historical achievement that reflects logical development over

time. Idealist histories can offer insight by explaining the development of ideas as deliberate mental work. But it's usually worth bringing materialist considerations into view as well. What we believe today may be a result of other people's good thinking, or the outcome of power and self-interest, or both.

Unfortunately, analyzing the mind as historically conditioned–and history as rife with power and injustice–requires a lot of knowledge. My understanding of Mahayana Buddhist historiography could fit on an index card, and I would be hard pressed to learn a lot more, if only because I don't know the relevant languages. I am supposed to know more about German idealist philosophy and historiography, but there too, I am woefully ignorant. And there are so many other traditions to learn.

Cristina Moon's description of cringy behavior at Zen centers is a portrait of people who want to pick and choose ideas and practices that they find comfortable without taking seriously the historical development and interconnection of those ideas, without being genuinely open to practices that might challenge them, without being careful about their own status and impact, and without wrestling with the connections among racial hierarchy and exclusion, everyday culture, and the abstract beliefs that we might classify as Buddhist philosophy or theology. Yet the solution is not to declare these beliefs off limits (nor does Moon suggest we do that), because everyone should always be looking for *good* beliefs to adopt. We just have to do it with a lot of care–not only about the ideas and their effect on our inner lives, but also about the other people we touch.

17. Was Montaigne a relativist?

The most interestingly radical form of cultural relativism has three elements:

1) People's norms, habits, values, and ways of thinking are pervasively diverse.
2) The variation is not so much among individuals as among large groups; or (to put it another way) beliefs and values cluster into composites that we call "cultures."
3) Since our perceptions and assessments of any culture are shaped by our own, we cannot know or judge objectively.

I do not necessarily share these premises but believe they are essential to the history of thought. Modernism and postmodernism (in all their varieties) are basically responses to these three ideas. I am open to the possibility that cultural relativism was discovered/invented several times in human history–e.g., in India in the 15th century–yet I have long believed that the rise of cultural relativism in Europe around 1800 was epochal; it prompted entirely new ways of thinking that spread with European power around the world.

But what about Montaigne (1533-92)? A case can be made that he was already a thoroughgoing cultural relativist during the Renaissance. Unlike the later figure of Giambattista

Vico (1668-1744), who has also been called a relativist, Montaigne was hardly obscure in his own time. He had a profound and direct influence on thinkers as important as Shakespeare, Bacon, Pascal, and Descartes. Thus I can see three possible theses:

1) Montaigne was a cultural relativist, and these other figures understood that. They were exposed to cultural relativism far before the modern era and either endorsed it privately or deliberately rejected it–but in either case, it was in their worldview.
2) The major thinkers whom Montaigne influenced did not understand the idea of cultural relativism. They read the relevant passages in his *Essais* without seeing their radical implications, as we do.
3) Montaigne did not conceive of cultural relativism. Neither he nor his early readers understood his writing as relativistic, in the modern sense. Nor should we.

Key passages to consider come from the essays "On Habit" and "On the Cannibals" (translated here by M. A. Screech: Montaigne 1580/1987). In "On Habit," Montaigne first catalogs many of the bizarre ways in which behaviors and norms vary across history and geography. He lists nations where sons are supposed to beat their fathers, where people grow hair only on the left sides of their bodies, where women are the only warriors, where it is honorable to have as many lovers as possible, and where, over 700 years, no woman ever had sex outside of wedlock because it was unthinkable.

Apparently, Montaigne believes the first premise of cultural relativism that I summarized above–that manners are "infinite in matter and infinite in diversity":

> To sum up, then, the impression I have is that there is nothing that custom may not do and cannot do. … The laws of conscience which we say are born of Nature are born of custom; since many inwardly venerates the opinions of the manners approved and received about him, he cannot without remorse free himself from them nor apply himself to them without self-approbation.

Further, Montaigne seems to endorse the second principle of cultural relativism, that beliefs and values come together in whole structures that we might (today) call "cultures":

> It is greatly to be doubted whether any obvious good can come from changing any traditional law, whatever it may be, compared with the evil of changing it; for a polity is like a building made of diverse pieces interlocked together, joined in such a way that it is impossible to move one without the whole structure feeling it [emphasis added].

But I am not so sure that Montaigne believes the third premise of true relativism: that our understanding and assessment of cultures are determined by our own cultures. I think he rather argues that proper understanding and evaluation are more difficult than we assume because we are biased in favor of the familiar.

> …. But the principal activity of custom is so to seize us and grip us in her claws that it is hardly in our power to struggle free and come back into ourselves, and reason and argue about her ordinances [emphasis added.]

"Hardly in our power" does not mean impossible or undesirable; on the contrary, our main duty is to "struggle free" from custom so that we can "reason and argue" better.

For instance, when Montaigne was disgusted by a French nobleman who blew his nose with his bare hands, he forgot to ask whether that might not actually be a good idea. "I considered that what he said [in his own defense] was not totally unreasonable, but habit had prevented me from noticing just that strangeness [about our own habits, such a blowing our noses into cloths] which we find hideous in similar customs in another country."

In "On the cannibals" the main point is that we recoil at eating human flesh because it is not our custom, but we ignore the closer-to-hand horrors of torturing people on account of their religious faith. If we paid more attention to the strangeness and indefensibility of our own nation's norms, we would discover the greatest (and most objective or universal) virtues, which include gentleness and tolerance. As Montaigne writes in "On Habit":

> The Barbarians are in no wise more of a wonder to us than we are to them, nor with better reason–as anyone would admit if, after running through examples from the New World, he concentrated on his own and then with good sense compared them. Human reason is a dye spread more or less equally through all the opinions and all the manners of us humans, which are infinite in matter and infinite in diversity [emphasis added].

Thus Montaigne is not skeptical about our duty–or our ultimate ability–to understand and judge the diverse ideals of human beings. He just thinks that this is harder than we assume. He is trying to shake our naivety in order to improve our reasoning, much like the Hellenistic philosophers when they taught paradoxes of logic and perception in order to strengthen our intellectual discipline and dissuade us from arrogance.

If this is not only what Montaigne meant, but also how his first readers understood him, then they did not derive cultural relativism from his texts. Instead, they drew conclusions reminiscent of Epicurean philosophy: it is hard to know what is right, foolish to set oneself above other people, and wise to focus on the inner life.

One more problem arises. If we detach ourselves as much as possible from our own local customs in order to attain objectivity, won't we become critical of "traditional law" and then damage society by striving to undermine its norms? The solution to that problem is to live a contemplative and not an active life, to withdraw to one's chateau and write introspective *essais* instead of trying to influence the world. For …

> it is his soul that the wise man should withdraw from the crowd, maintaining its power and freedom to freely to make judgements, whilst externally accepting all received forms and fashions.

I conclude that Montaigne was not quite a relativist, nor was anyone for another century after him. Because he shunned politics, he was not the most helpful guide to the design of societies; but he was an excellent theorist of moderation, modesty, and introspection.

18. Conservatism as humility

Yuval Levin offers this definition:

> To my mind, conservatism is gratitude. Conservatives tend to begin from gratitude for what is good and what works in our society and then strive to build on it, while liberals tend to begin from outrage at what is bad and broken and seek to uproot it (Levin 2015).

You need both, because some of what is good about our world is irreplaceable and has to be guarded, while some of what is bad is unacceptable and has to be changed.

This is a thoughtful effort to describe left and right evenhandedly, but I don't think it is the best way to define or defend conservatism.

The problem is that people differ greatly in the degree to which they can reasonably be grateful to any particular polity. Consider, as one of several extreme examples, Native Americans. They can adopt any view of the USA that they want, but they have much less objective reason to be grateful to this republic than I have. They may well feel deep gratitude to their own communities. That gratitude is particularistic. Conservatism would then imply a particularistic ideal: a commitment to the specific communities that deserve each person's gratitude. Some versions of conservatism have in fact been particularistic–but not Levin's. He wants Americans (all Americans, I presume) to feel grateful to the nation-state:

> But we can also never forget what moves us to gratitude, and so what we stand for and defend: the extraordinary cultural inheritance we have; the amazing country built for us by others and defended by our best and bravest; America's unmatched potential for lifting the poor and the weak; the legacy of freedom—of ordered liberty—built up over centuries of hard work.

In the same essay, Levin suggests a more secure and persuasive core principle for conservatism—humility:

> Conservatives often begin from gratitude because we start from modest expectations of human affairs—we know that people are imperfect, and fallen, and weak; that human

> knowledge and power are not all they're cracked up to be; and we're enormously impressed by the institutions that have managed to make something great of this imperfect raw material. So we want to build on them because we don't imagine we could do better starting from scratch.

This reminder of "modest expectations" is what conservatism valuably contributes to public debates. Because people are "imperfect, and fallen, and weak"–or, we could say, cognitively and motivationally limited and biased–we should always be somewhat skeptical of ambitious reform proposals, of original designs for complex things (cities, welfare programs, markets), and of the likelihood that any person can dramatically improve things for any other person.

Humility, in this sense, is the common thread that unites libertarians (skeptical of central planning), religious conservatives (skeptical of human reason and motivation), and communitarians (skeptical of formal institutions). It also encourages all three types of conservatives to admire complex phenomena that have emerged and that seem to function well enough–"that have managed to make something great of this imperfect raw material."

Levin argues that humility implies gratitude, but that connection is contingent. It depends on whether what has emerged so far is good enough for you and the people you care most about. Answers to that question will reasonably differ. Humility is the premise; gratitude is a consequent that depends on the circumstances. Humility is something that everyone has a reason to endorse, although everyone should also be open to the possibility of change.

19. The politics of negative capability

> "At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." -- Keats (1817)

Keats aspired to have the same "poetical Character" as Shakespeare. He said that his own type of poetic imagination "has no self–it is every thing and nothing–It has no character. … It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er, delights the camelion poet." When we read philosophical prose, we encounter explicit opinions that reflect the author's thinking. But, said Keats, although "it is a wretched thing to express … it is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature [i.e., my identity]."

In Shakespeare's case, it helps, of course, that he left no recorded statements about anything other than his own business arrangements: no letters like Keats' beautiful ones, no Nobel Prize speech to explain his views, no interviews with Charlie Rose. All we have is his representation of the speech of thousands of other people.

Stephen Greenblat attributes Shakespeare's negative capability to his childhood during the wrenching English Reformation (Greenblatt 2005). Under Queen Mary, you could be burned for Protestantism. Under her sister Queen Elizabeth, you could have your viscera cut out and burned before your living eyes for Catholicism. It is likely that Shakespeare's father was both: he helped whitewash Catholic frescoes and yet kept Catholic texts hidden in his attic. This could have been simple subterfuge, but it's equally likely that he was torn and unsure. His "identical nature" was mixed. Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare learned to avoid taking any positions himself and instead created fictional worlds full of Iagos and Imogens and Falstaffs and Prince Harrys.

Zadie Smith uses Keats and Shakespeare to interpret Barack Obama. As far as I know, he is the first American president who can write convincing dialog (in Dreams from My Father). He understands and expresses other perspectives as well as his own. And he has wrestled all his life with a mixed identity.

Smith is a very acute reader of Obama:

> We now know that Obama spoke of Main Street in Iowa and of sweet potato pie in Northwest Philly, and it could be argued that he succeeded because he so rarely misspoke, carefully tailoring his intonations to suit the sensibility of his listeners. Sometimes he did this within one speech, within one line: 'We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states.' Awesome God comes to you straight from the pews of a Georgia church; poking around feels more at home at a kitchen table in South Bend, Indiana. The balance was perfect, cunningly counterpoised and never accidental (Smith 2009).

The challenge for Obama is that he doesn't write fiction (although Smith remarks that he "displays an enviable facility for dialogue"), but instead held political office. Generally, we want our politicians to say exactly what they think. To write lines for someone else to say, with which you do not agree, is an important example of "irony." We tend not to like ironic leaders. Socrates' "famous irony" was held against him at his trial. Achilles exclaims, "I hate like the gates of hell the man who says one thing with his tongue and another in his heart" (my trans.). That is a good description of any novelist–and also of Odysseus, Achilles' wily opposite, who dons costumes and feigns love. Generally, people with the personality of Odysseus, when they run for office, at least pretend to resemble the straightforward Achilles.

But what if you are not too sure that you are right (to paraphrase Learned Hand's definition of a liberal)? What if you see things from several perspectives, and–more importantly–love the fact that these many perspectives exist and interact? What if your fundamental cause is not the attainment of any single outcome but the vibrant juxtaposition of many voices, voices that also sound in your own mind?

In that case, you can be a citizen or a political leader whose fundamental commitments include freedom of expression, diversity, and dialogue or deliberation. Of course, these commitments won't tell you what to do about failing banks or Afghanistan. Negative capability isn't sufficient for politics. (Even Shakespeare must have made decisions and expressed strong personal opinions when he successfully managed his theatrical company). But in our time, when the major ideologies are hollow, problems are complex, cultural conflict is omnipresent and dangerous, and relationships have fractured, a strong dose of non-cynical irony is just what we need.

20. Sacred restrictions

In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey writes:

> Nevertheless, the current has set steadily in one direction: toward democratic forms. That government exists to serve its community, and that this purpose cannot be achieved unless the community itself shares in selecting its governors and determining their policies, are a deposit of fact left, as far as we can see, permanently in the wake of doctrines and forms, however transitory the latter. They are not the whole of the democratic idea, but they express it in its political phase. Belief in this political aspect … marks a well-attested conclusion from historic facts. (Dewey 1927, p. 146)

Dewey's idea is that we can't justify processes like electing leaders *a priori.* There is no natural right to vote; it doesn't depend on a social contract. Rather, it's a "deposit of fact" left from human learning over many centuries. Voting exists because we have learned to vote. Fortunately, that process is progressive and beneficial: the current has steadily flowed toward democracy. It is crucial not to fetishize any given process or right, because we will come up with better ones later. When we think of documents like the Constitution, Dewey says, "the words 'sacred' and sanctity' come readily to our lips" (pp. 169-70), interfering with our critical reasoning and our ability to learn from experience.

These words were published in 1927. About 14 million people were sentenced to the Gulag from 1929 to 1953. Auschwitz opened in 1940. The current was not exactly steady in the direction of democracy. Robert Zaretsky (2016) writes that not being occupied during World War II made Americans–probably white Americans more than others–"stupid." Precisely this kind of foolishness is suggested by the first sentence in Dewey's quotation above.

What if we said the following instead? Human beings torture each other, enslave each other, carpet-bomb each other, and intentionally wipe out whole communities. This happens often. Enough: it has to stop. Translated into constitutional terms, "thou shalt not torture people" turns into a right to due process and rule of law. We must do our best to make such rights sacred and nonnegotiable. They are not literally sacred, in the sense that God or nature

decreed them. But they are bulwarks against cruelty, which is the worst of us, to paraphrase Judith Shklar's "Liberalism of Fear" (Shlar 1964) When everything is left open to experimentation and learning, people may spend hundreds of years "learning" that they can own other people or that Jews are blood-sucking parasites. We should rather treat as sacred and unamendable such passages as Article One of the German Constitution:

> (1) Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority. (2) The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world.

I think that there are pragmatist replies to this kind of liberalism, but I can't be satisfied with them unless they explicitly invoke and address the problem of evil. I'm worried about this kind of theme in Dewey (ably summarized by John M. Savage, 2002):

> Dewey warned Americans concerned about protecting democracy from its foes to concentrate their battle on its most dangerous enemies--attitudes that encourage master/slave relationships in the social and political realms: "The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions similar to those which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity, and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accordingly here--within ourselves and our institutions." The only way to cultivate democratic attitudes is to habituate them.

Democratic habits are valuable but not the only bulwarks against tyranny. It's also helpful to ban tyranny and to make that prohibition permanent.

21. On Hedgehogs and Foxes

> "A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one important thing"
> — Archilochus

In 1953, Isaiah Berlin argued that Tolstoy was psychologically a fox but believed–for theological/ideological reasons–that we should all be hedgehogs. Our one big idea should be the Imitation of Christ. This tension was at the heart of Tolstoy's books and life (Berlin 1953). I also endorse Peter Hacker's view that Wittgenstein was temperamentally a hedgehog who forced himself self-consciously to become foxlike in his late work.

If you take the proverb literally, it seems more impressive to be a fox. The fox uses its brain to hunt and escape, whereas the hedgehog just instinctively rolls up to take advantage of its best physical asset, its spines. But the metaphor is loose. Human hedgehogs are among our deepest,

most original thinkers. They are the ones with the discipline to construct whole, coherent worldviews. They don't merely employ a strategy but create it.

In contrast–and I write this as very much a fox–foxes can be ad hoc and derivative, eclectic in a bad way. A fox can employ the available ideas that seem to fit the situation without generating any new frameworks for others to use. A fox can be a jack of all trades, master of none. We foxes need hedgehogs to develop new ways of thinking, from which we borrow superficially and pragmatically.

But it is interesting that the hedgehogs are so consistently wrong about what will happen next. They are more likely to suffer from confirmation bias. They can make any data fit their theory. And they are worse than foxes at recognizing exceptions, tradeoffs, and zones of uncertainty. They lack phronesis, practical wisdom.

I therefore think it's a problem that hedgehogs have an advantage in the competition for attention. If you are associated with one big idea and you keep hammering away at it, you have a "brand." People turn to you to say that one thing, even if they don't agree with it, and so your fame rises. You must compete with the other people who say the same thing, but if you're first or more effective at communicating it, you can own the space.

So as not to offend anyone alive, I'll use the case of my late colleague Ben Barber, who was early to revive the idea of "strong democracy." (More democratic engagement is always better; the good life is lived in public; liberalism is too individualistic; etc.) He wrote several best-sellers, and I attribute his success in part to his capturing a particular brand. For courses, debates, conferences, etc., you may need someone to say, "More democracy!" Barber cornered that market.

Temperamentally, I am with the foxes. As soon as I write an argument for anything, I immediately become fascinated by the arguments against it. I have a limited attention span and jack-of-all-trades tendencies. I frequently disappoint practitioners and advocates, who know that I have written in favor of campaign finance reform, public deliberation, service, or civic education and want me to say it again to a new audience with more conviction. In fact, I am almost always on the verge of apostasy and retraction.

I really do admire the hedgehogs. But I'll say a few things in favor of foxes.

First, the moral world is immensely complex, because it emerges from myriad human interactions and takes the form of communities, cultures, and institutions that overlap, interrelate, and become loaded with historical resonances. Thus an adequate moral theory is almost certainly partial, inconsistent, and ad hoc.

Second, acting like a fox keeps you mentally alive. It may be a self-indulgent concern, but I fear ceasing to think. Even the greatest hedgehogs, it seems to me, have stopped their quest for knowledge. They already know, and know that they know, and are done.

I'll also say one thing against foxes. At least in folkore, a fox is a solitary hunter. What if you also like people and feel loyalty to groups of peers who share goals and missions? Then you cannot simply act like a fox.

Keats' Negative Capability is a virtue of the poet, not the ally. Negative Capability is good for writing fiction that explores many different perspectives; it is not so helpful for co-writing a mission statement for an organization and then following through.

So I would like to be a fox who is helpful in a pack. The question is to what degree that's possible.

22. Philosophy as a way of life

–"I should have given that man some change. He looked hungry."

–"He would have used it for drugs or alcohol."

–"Maybe he has that right—it's his life!"

–"If you're going to try to help the homeless, you should donate to the Downtown Shelter. They spend the money on real needs. Plus, it's tax-deductible."

–"That's not realistic advice. While I am talking to a homeless person, I have homelessness on my mind. Once I get back home, the thought is gone. I'd never remember to mail off a check."

–"Perhaps we should set aside some time every day to practice compassion and remember people who are suffering."

–"Yes, I guess I'm for compassion—but handing someone money seems to create the wrong kind of relationship. What did Emerson write? 'Though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold'" (Emerson 1841).

–"Maybe we should think about why some people are homeless in the first place and what policies would end that situation."

This little dialog shows a pair of human beings doing several valuable things. They display emotions, some expressed with enthusiasm and some with regret. They exchange reasons. But

they know that their reasons may not actually influence them deeply because they have habits that they would have to counteract by altering their regular routines. They cite rules—such as the tax deduction for charity and the shelter's ban on alcohol—that are meant to improve and regulate people's behavior. Finally, one speaker (perhaps showing off) cites an influential thinker from the past whose argument seems relevant.

Each of these modes of thought can be practiced at a high level. Instead of quickly asserting moral beliefs, we can develop whole arguments: chains of reasons that carry from a premise to a conclusion. If the argument persuades, it joins the list of things you believe, and you have been changed. Anyone who is serious about being a good person must struggle to get the reasons right and then act according to the conclusions.

But because our wills are weak, we also need enforced rules that guide or constrain us. And just as we can reason about our own choices ("Should I give a dollar to this homeless person?"), so we can reason about laws, regulations, social norms, and institutions. We can ask whether the rules that are in place are acceptable and, if not, how they should change. As Alexander Hamilton wrote on the first page of the *Federalist Papers*, laws are meant to arise from "reflection and choice" rather than "accident and force" (Hamilton 1787). Political thinkers have often offered elaborate arguments about how institutions should be designed to improve people's behavior.

Meanwhile, we can learn reflective practices such as confession, memorization, visualization, meditation, autobiographical reflection, and prayer. These methods are more personal than arguments, for they work directly on an individual's beliefs, emotions, and habits. They are less coercive but more individualized than rules and laws, for we enforce these practices on ourselves. They tend to require practice and repetition to achieve their goals. You can read an argument once in order to evaluate it, but you must repeat a mental exercise for it to affect your psychology. In the 1500s, Montaigne observed, "Even when we apply our minds willingly to reason and instruction, they are rarely powerful enough to carry us all the way to action, unless we also exercise and train the soul by experience for the path on which we would send it" (Montaigne 1580, II.6 my trans.). But self-discipline without reason is blind, potentially turning us into worse rather than better people. Think of terrorists who have overcome their habits of peacefulness and tolerance to make themselves into killers; their fault is not a lack of discipline but a poor choice of means and (often) ends.

Finally, we can take the interpretation of other people's thoughts to high levels of sophistication and rigor. Instead of just quoting a snippet of Emerson, we can make a full study of his ideas in their context. Cultural critique and intellectual history help us understand where we come from and what influences us. After all, we believe what we do in large measure because other people have formed and shaped our thoughts. No one invents her whole

worldview from scratch. Since we begin with the traditions that have developed so far, it is important to understand them. Reasoning or self-discipline requires a critical understanding of the materials with which we construct our thoughts, which are ideas that our predecessors have invented.

It makes sense to put these modes together because we are reasonable creatures (capable of offering and sharing reasons for what we do), but we are also emotional and habitual creatures (requiring either external rules or mental discipline and practice to improve ourselves), political creatures (living in communities structured by laws and norms that people make and change), and historical creatures (shaped by the heritage of past thought).

In some periods, it has been common to combine argumentation about personal choices and social institutions, mental exercises, and the critical study of past thinkers. In other times–including our own–these elements have come apart. Here I will offer a very short and suggestive review of that history to support the thesis that now is a time to put the pieces back together.

Plato and Aristotle, the preeminent philosophers of the Greek classical era, each offered a whole system of thought. Think of an argument as a persuasive connection among two or more ideas. Plato and Aristotle offered arguments, but not just a few disconnected ones. They tried to build whole structures of arguments that would cover most of the important topics for human beings and lead the reader from self-evident premises to sometimes unexpected conclusions. The most ambitious goal for that kind of systematic thought is that it can really settle matters of importance and change people's lives by giving them whole integrated worldviews that are genuinely persuasive. One source of persuasiveness is coherence; the whole system impresses us by hanging together so well.

Platonism and Aristotelianism are "designed" systems in the sense that the authors try to build complete and self-reliant structures with as few assumptions as possible. A systematic philosopher is like an engineer or architect responsible for the blueprints of a whole structure, not like a gardener who prunes and tends the plants that have already grown on a plot of land–nor like a traveler, observing and assessing the ways of diverse people. To endorse a systematic philosophy is to adopt the whole blueprint as the structure of one's own thought. Of course, systematic philosophers do not view themselves as creating ideas but rather as discovering truths: their models are meant to represent the way the world actually is. They see themselves less as engineers than as physicists, creating models of truth. And one of them could be right–but only one, for the rest would have to be in error. If you doubt that a given philosophy is an accurate representation of truth, then it seems rather to be a carefully and intentionally designed structure, a human product.

The followers of Plato and Aristotle organized "schools," known respectively as the Lyceum and the Academy, that maintained their founders' traditions of systematic philosophy. But after Aristotle's death, philosophy in the Mediterranean region tended to retreat from those ambitions. New schools arose called Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Epicurianism that had a different character. Sextus Empiricus was a member of the Skeptical school who lived in the Roman period. He explained that Skeptics did not offer a whole set of beliefs that were consistent with each other, consistent with what we observe about the world, and leading to counterintuitive conclusions. (He didn't name Plato or Aristotle in this passage but must have had them in mind.) However, Sextus continued, a Skeptic did offer a method that helped people to live rightly. (Sextus, 1.8.16). The main practice of the Skeptical school consisted of going over examples that would shake a person's confidence in general truths. For instance, recognizing that people from different nations believed different things would prevent a Skeptic from fruitlessly searching for truths beyond human ken. "Consideration of our differences leads to suspension of judgment," Sextus wrote; and suspending judgment was a path to inner peace and good treatment of others.

Sextus believed he was offering a persuasive argument: if human beings believe radically different things, none is likely correct. But this was not part of an elaborate system of arguments linking many ideas together. Instead, it was a fairly simple thought meant to change our mental habits so that we would live better. Such thoughts had to be repeated as a daily practice to change people's psychologies. For instance, you could gain mental peace or equanimity by reflecting daily on the impossibility of attaining certain knowledge of a wide range of topics.

The French historian Pierre Hadot argued that members of the Hellenistic schools were most interested in these reflective practices. Hadot called their style "Philosophy as a Way of Life" (Hadot 1995). Hadot claimed that we misread a work like Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* if we assume that it is a set of conclusions backed by reasons. Instead, we should find there a record of the Stoic emperor's mental exercises, beginning with his daily thanks to each of his moral teachers. Marcus Aurelius listed these exemplary men by name because he would actually visualize each one every day. The Meditations shows us how a Stoic went about meditating.

Although Hadot emphasized the reflective practices of the Hellenistic schools, Stoics, Epicureans, Skeptics and and others also took formal reasoning very seriously (Nussbaum 1994, p. 353) and they rigorously studied older works, including those of Plato and Aristotle, from which they borrowed specific ideas, if not the overall structures. In short, they combined at least three of the four modes of thought that seem essential to moral improvement. Their weakest contribution was in the area of political and legal critique. They did contribute some political ideas, but on the whole, they were alienated from politics and pessimistic about

improving institutions. For many of them, the only truly satisfactory regime had been the self-governing city-state of classical Greece, which was now obsolete.

The same Greek word that we translate as "school" was also used for the Jewish sects of the same time, the Pharisees and Sadducees. And the Greco-Roman schools of this time were roughly similar to Asian traditions, which also produced organized bodies of living teachers and students who studied their own communities' foundational texts. One could join the Skeptics or Stoics almost as one could join a Hindu philosophical tradition or a Buddhist sangha. In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says:

> Simpletons separate philosophy [sankhya, or organized theoretical inquiry]
> from discipline [yoga], but the learned do not;
> applying one correctly, a man finds the fruit of both.
>
> (Fifth Teaching, 4-5, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller and slightly edited)

The man whom we call the Buddha also mixed philosophical argument with reflective practices. Our evidence of his own thought is so indirect that many interpretations are plausible. One view is that the Buddha was educated in a culture that had developed elaborate, systematic moral philosophies in the form of the Vedic texts. But the Buddha was not convinced that these systems were helpful for the sole purpose that mattered to him: improving human life. His apparent skepticism is captured in anecdotes like the one in which he is asked whether gods cause suffering, and he says that that's like asking who shot a poisoned arrow during a battle: the point is to get the arrow out of the victim. In lieu of a systematic philosophy, the Buddha proposed Noble Truths that were not meant to be comprehensive, nor would assenting to them at a theoretical level improve one's life; to accomplish that would require repeated mental practices.

The Buddha's world was not unlike the milieu of Plato and Aristotle, but the two intellectual traditions were still fairly remote while these men lived. That situation changed when Aristotle's pupil, Alexander the Great, conquered northern India and left an empire to Greek successors. For instance, Strato I ruled territories around Punjab; his coins showed Athena (the goddess of wisdom) with Greek text on one side, and "King Strato, Savior and of the Dharma" in an Indian script on the reverse. It was in this Greco-Indian context that the early Buddhists developed their ideas, not only offering mental exercises–such as yoga–but also practicing formal argumentation and textual criticism. As this example illustrates, any distinction between Western (or European) and Eastern (or Asian) philosophy is largely confusing; both traditions have encompassed enormous diversity, and the two have often overlapped, as in the centuries after the deaths of Aristotle and Buddha.

Hadot claimed, however, that medieval Christianity ruptured the combination of argument and mental exercise that had been common in both the Mediterranean and in Northern India

before the Christian Era. Medieval Christians adopted all the major ideas of the classical moral thinkers but parceled them out. Abstract reasoning and the interpretation of ancient texts went to the university, where knowledge became the end. Meanwhile, reflective practices were taught to monks and laypeople to be used without elaborate argumentation. A typical monk fasted, sang, and recited prayers but was not expected to reason about theological or moral principles. Hadot argued that this split was fateful and still predominates today, "In modern university philosophy, philosophy is obviously no longer a way of life or form of life unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy" (Hadot 1995).

The best illustration of Hadot's thesis is the High Middle Ages of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Western Europe. That period generated Scholastic theology, an impressive effort to explain everything in terms of organized and coherent principles that derived from scripture and Aristotle's philosophy. The mode of Scholastic philosophy was abstract argumentation illustrated with examples and authoritative quotes. Its origin was in universities, and its leading lights were university teachers. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, taught at the University of Paris. At the very beginning of his multi-volume book aimed at non-Christians, Aquinas defined the "wise person" as "one whose consideration is directed at the end [or ultimate purpose] of the universe, which is identical to the origin of the universe; that is why, according to The Philosopher [Aristotle], it is the job of the wise one to consider the highest causes" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.i, my trans.). From that start, Aquinas developed a whole theory of everything important. He assumed that if we could only answer the most general and abstract questions correctly, we could derive every important truth and law from those answers, and thereby persuade even heretics and atheists by force of reason alone. This project had relatively little to do with prayer, confession, meditation, pilgrimage, and penance, although those activities were also raised to high arts in the same era.

Although "philosophy as a way of life" was marginal in the high middle ages, the Renaissance thinkers whom we call humanists rediscovered the Hellenistic schools and their approach to improving concrete human thought and behavior. Montaigne, a great representative of Renaissance humanism and a man deeply immersed in the Hellenistic schools, relished listing the enormous diversity of human customs and beliefs–just as the Skeptic Sextus Empiricus had recommended. This diversity led Montaigne to doubt all elaborately designed theories about good and evil. He wrote that "the laws of conscience" (which tell us what is right and wrong) are not actually natural and universal, as we assume. They are rather born of "custom." We "inwardly venerate" the manners and opinions approved by the people immediately around us, thinking they are true even though they merely reflect our community's customs (Montaigne, 1580, 1.23, my trans.). The same must be true of abstract philosophical reasons; they are not universal or certain but rather derive from local mores. We believe what we happen to believe because of where we were born and who educated us.

Montaigne's "essays" were not arguments about what is right and good for all people, but records of his struggle to understand and improve himself. The aspect of his work that I want to bring out here is not so much its inward turn as its particularity. Montaigne tried to improve a specific person (who happened to be himself), and he assumed that this effort would require concentrated inspection and reflection. He did not propose a unified theory of the self, comparable to theories that explain all of human psychology in terms of self-interest, or reason struggling to master passion, or some other small set of principles. He rather saw his own personality as a somewhat miscellaneous assemblage of beliefs and mental habits that he had accumulated over a lifetime. He turned to one belief or emotion at a time, identifying and describing it and sometimes seeking to change it. He doubted that large abstract principles would be much help in this ongoing effort. He was less like an engineer or architect than a gardener working on an old and somewhat untidy plot of land.

Montaigne was relatively secular, but a similar shift can also be found in deeply religious authors of the same period, such as St. Francis Xavier and St. Teresa of Ávila, each of whom reunited reasoning and argumentation with continuous introspection and techniques of mental discipline. Thus–to be clear–the split between abstract reasoning and mental self-discipline is not intrinsic to Christianity; it is just one trend in Christian history that has waxed and waned over two millennia.

Systematic philosophy was rekindled when Immanuel Kant awoke from what he called his "slumbers" to produce an impressively organized worldview that influenced and inspired efforts by Schiller, Hegel, and Marx, among others. Despite their vast differences, the great German philosophers of 1750-1850 all hoped to construct coherent theories that would yield guidance for all human beings. They were intensely concerned with politics, law, and institutions as well as personal choices. In these respects, at least, they were comparable to Plato and Aristotle. But once that moment of confidence ended, intellectual leadership again passed to essayists who were most interested in individual characters (their own or other people's) and who tried idiosyncratic "experiments in living"–people like Nietzsche, Thoreau, and Emerson. All three of these writers admired the ancient Stoics and classical Indian thinkers, and like them, tended to withdraw from politics, pessimistic that they could change it for the better.

Somewhat later, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) exemplified a new combination of argumentation, self-discipline, and cultural critique–and she added a strong dimension of political activism. When she was a young woman, Arendt had studied with the most distinguished representative of academic German philosophy then alive, Martin Heidegger. Many years later, she recalled:

> The rumor about Heidegger put it quite simply: Thinking has come to life again. … People followed the rumor about Heidegger in order to learn thinking. What was

> experienced was that thinking as pure activity–and this means impelled neither by the thirst for knowledge, nor the drive for cognition–can become a passion which not so much rules and oppresses all other capacities and gifts, as it orders them and prevails through them. We are so accustomed to the old opposition of reason versus passion, spirit versus life, that the idea of passionate thinking, in which thinking and aliveness become one, takes us somewhat aback.

What did her phrase "Thinking has come to life again" mean? Because Heidegger wrote a book (*Being and Time*) that seems comparable to the grand systematic, theoretical works of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, one might assume that Arendt was merely acknowledging her former teacher's importance. Perhaps she meant that Heidegger was famous and impressive, and it was exciting to be able to study with him.

But I think she meant something different. Reading classical works in Heidegger's seminar (or in a reading group, called a *Graecae*) was a creative and spiritual exercise. The point was not only to construct arguments but to live a new kind of life in a community of fellow seekers. Once Arendt broke off her intellectual (and romantic) relationship with Heidegger, she moved to the seminar of Karl Jaspers. Jaspers had been a brilliant psychiatrist, and he saw philosophy as a different kind of therapy, better than psychiatry because it aimed at moral improvement instead of mere mental health. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl cites this sentence of Jaspers' as exemplary: "Philosophizing is real as it pervades an individual life at a given moment." Young-Bruehl adds: "For Hannah Arendt, this concrete approach was a revelation; and Jaspers living his philosophy was an example to her: 'I perceived his Reason in praxis, so to speak,' she remembered."(Young-Bruehl 1982, pp. 63-4.)

At the very beginning of her career, Arendt was not particularly interested in politics–but politics was interested in her, a Jewish woman from a leftist family who lived a bohemian life. Already subject to discrimination, she became an enemy of the state with the Nazi takeover of 1933. By then she had decided that pure introspection was self-indulgent and that Heidegger's philosophy was selfishly egoistic. She found deep satisfaction in what she called "action," assisting enemies of the regime to escape and then escaping herself. From then on, she sought to combine "thinking" (disciplined inquiry) with political action in ways that were meant to pervade her whole life. But like the other skeptical authors I have cited so far, she offered no system; rather a set of practices that would improve the women and men of her own time.

By the time of Arendt's death in 1975, systematic moral philosophy was being revived in the English-speaking world. The Harvard philosopher John Rawls proposed an ambitious new theory of justice that triggered valuable responses from libertarians and others. Kant and Aristotle were among Rawls' explicit influences and models. But skepticism about such grand

theories seems to have returned since the 1990s; indeed, Rawls' own late work was more modest than his *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971).

I have suggested a rough pattern of oscillation between periods when leading thinkers are confident about philosophy as systematic reasoning–and times when influential writers turn instead to concrete exercises of reflection. During moments of maximum confidence about pure and self-sufficient reasoning, the two classical Greek theorists, Plato and Aristotle, typically become inspirations, even for philosophers who disagree with their actual views. In the periods of greater skepticism, authors frequently turn back to the Hellenistic Schools of the Mediterranean, to their analogues in India, or to the subsequent movements that they have inspired.

In these skeptical moments, authors begin by identifying what specific individuals happen to believe and reflect on these emotions and ideas, one at a time. The results are often admirable. However, when mental exercises come unmoored from reasoning and from political engagement, the risk of self-indulgence arises. Thus I am not proposing that we renounce argumentation in favor of introspection and mental hygiene, but rather than we combine them again–and add a strong element of cultural and political critique. This combination seems essential if are to avoid giving up altogether on improving ourselves and the world around us.

The situation is not immediately promising. The academic discipline of moral philosophy is again dominated by an argumentative mode that doesn't take mental exercises and practices seriously. Academic philosophers analyze and sometimes develop reasons; they do not offer or even study practices. Thoreau's exclamation in *Walden* (1854) rings true today:

> There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers." He explained, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates. … It is to solve some of the problems of live, not only theoretically, but practically.

Outside the academy, mental exercises are common, given the continued importance of prayer and the rising popularity of meditation in the West. The self-help section of a bookstore is full of works on these topics and memoirs of individuals who have tried radical experiments in living, from renouncing all their worldly goods to moving to Tuscany. But for many people, meditation and other forms of mental discipline are separate from formal argumentation and moral justification, not to mention social critique. In fact, we are sometimes told that meditation is an opportunity to leave moral judgment behind for a time.

Meanwhile, "therapy"—the Greek word for what Hellenistic philosophers offered–has been taken over by clinical psychology. That discipline does good but misses the ancient objectives of philosophy. Modern therapy defines its goals in terms of health, normality, or happiness (as

reported by the patient). Therapy is successful if the patient lacks any identifiable pathologies, such as depression or anxiety; behaves and thinks in ways that are statistically typical for people of her age and situation; and feels OK. Gone is a restless quest for truth and rightness that can upset one's equilibrium, make one behave unusually, and even bring about mental anguish.

23. Does focusing philosophy on how to live broaden or narrow it?

Pierre Hadot suggested a choice. "Philosophy" can mean argumentation united with mental discipline to produce communities devoted to moral improvement; or it can mean the dispassionate and often individual pursuit of truth. One can see these alternatives oscillate over time. The grand theoretical edifices of Plato and Aristotle give way to the Hellenistic Schools and their focus on self-improvement. Medieval scholasticism yields to humanistic writers like Montaigne and Erasmus, who are more concerned with particular inner lives. German idealism fades in favor of Nietzsche, Emerson, and other practitioners of philosophy as a way of life.

That is a provocative framework, but not the only available one. In *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Peter Brown describes how a generation of great converts to Christianity–Jerome, Augustine, and their contemporaries–debated the relevance of classical thought and "often took up extreme poses against the pagan classics." But:

> such a narrowing down of culture (drastic as it was) [was not] an altogether unique event in the long history of the ancient world. It did not necessarily betray a moment of irreparable breakdown. Rather, the history of Greek and Roman civilization had always been marked by a characteristic pendulum swing. Moments of exuberant creativity were repeatedly followed by long periods of retrenchment. And this pendulum swing was marked by constant alternation between periods of creativity in literature and in speculative philosophy followed by long periods of single-minded preoccupation with ethical problems. How educated persons should groom themselves; how they should conquer their weaknesses; how they should overcome pain and console themselves in moments of grief; how they should stand in relation to their fellows and to the gods: these were issues pursued by ancient philosophers, for centuries on end, with remarkable singlemindedness. [Brown, 2012; a footnote to Hadot follows a paragraph later.]

In Brown's framework, moments when abstract thinkers predominate–like 5th century Athens and perhaps Vedic India, 12th century Paris, or 18th century Germany–are exuberantly creative and expansive, but they are followed "by long periods of retrenchment" in which the focus narrows to how to live, including such trivial matters as "how educated persons should groom themselves." In Hadot's framework, periods of disconnected, abstract, "academic" thought

alternate with times when rigorous argument unites with spiritual practices to produce people who can live “in the service of the human community.”

They could both be right, because intellectual history is vast and complicated. I am left with a sense that there are two risks for any kind of thinking that we call “philosophy.” It can degenerate into mental hygiene, focused on how to live everyday life to the exclusion of challenging questions about nature and reality. Or it can turn strictly theoretical, disconnected from questions about how to live (or–worse–influenced by unexamined assumptions about the good life).

24. For Irina

Little Irina Antonovna, six,
Took it upon herself to write to her aunt,
Laboriously addressing it to:
"Region of Petrograd, Max Heltz factory."

Why did she write this letter? Well, her father:
Ten years in the camps for being a scholar,
Dead by now. Her mother: dead. Neighborhood:
Wall fragments, smoke, equipment shards, Nazi bombs.
Grandfather: died of rickets while walking
Irina to safety. Grandmother: same.

The letter worked; Irina lived. Married
Dmitri, who never asked her opinions,
But did write Number Nine for her and maybe
Heard her when he wrote the gentle cello drone
That supports the opening. Or the polka--
Why couldn't that frenzied part be Irina?
Why assume she was always soft, helpful?

A young, diverse American quartet
Exhumes Dmitri and Irina for us,
His black notes crisp on their iPads, their bows
Vibrating like cicadas, their eyes flashing
Recognition, assent: one to the other.

They are pillowed in layers of safety.
A clean, bright stage, a tidy concert hall,
An audience that has heard it before
And knows just when to leap up for applause:
White-haired burghers of this college and town.

Irina's professor father would have fit
Right in, if he hadn't been starved or shot.
Little Irina would have liked to hide
Beneath that concert grand, so solidly framed.
A campus cop waits, unworried, outside.

This place is not real. What's real is in the notes.
They know starvation, midnight knocks on doors,
Cities murdered from the sky, orphans' fears,
They know, too, the terrors of the audience,
Shrunken in their seats, nervous to drive home.

Phones still ring with sad news; death sentences
Come in biopsy results. And beyond this room
A billion new Irinas plead to be spared.

Second

25. Nostalgia for Now

Even in Kyoto
hearing a cuckoo
Basho missed Kyoto

Basho missed Kyoto
which is just a word to me
but I hear Basho

I hear Basho when
the rain beats the windshield
and I miss the rain

In driving rain, the
Starving orphan screamed
And Basho left, alone

And Basho left alone
Everything he caught
In wry, nostalgic lines

In wry, nostalgic lines
I read of Kyoto, which is just
a word to me

A word, to me, is
A row of letters that miss

Basho's silky thought

Basho's silky thought
comes to me as I watch the rain,
missing the rain

26. Consolations

All this typing about politics, ideas, policy, the American people–thousands of blog posts, plus articles, emails, graphs–and what I really care about, of course, is *me*: my own passage through time. For instance, how long ago did we visit Lancaster County with two children, one young enough to have her nursery school's stuffed bear with her for the weekend, and the winter came suddenly as we drove homeward, and the radio told us we were at war in Afghanistan?

On my last visit to DC, on a clammy night, unpremeditated, I walked down our dark old block, feeling that I was walking into the past. You only know a street intimately if you have explored it with small children. The tree roots of Cortland Place, for example: we fed the tiny ants who swarmed there by dripping apple juice from a sippy cup. I know shortcuts for trikes, slopes for rolling. Amid the murk, I half expected to find us hunting fireflies.

Consolation: only by moving forward can we make room for the new ones whose entry into the world is the basis of freedom.

Consolation: I am a wisp, but *we* are something significant, and that is why politics, ideas, policy, and the people matter after all.

27. On the moral risks of cliché

In the days of movable type, printers cast common phrases as single units of type to save laying them out one letter at a time. In France, typesetters called those units *clichés*. When we assign a phrase to a word processor's keyboard command because we use it frequently, that is a modern version of the original printer's cliché.

There is nothing wrong with repeating functional phrases: "To whom it may concern"; "On the other hand." We skim over these formulas without cost. But the word "cliché" now has a pejorative sense, implying a fault in writing.

That is an aesthetic issue. From a moral perspective, the beliefs and precepts that should guide us are unoriginal. Billions of people have already thought about the most important matters; it's improbable that any of us will hit upon a new theme that has merit. For instance, not one of the entries in this book is really original, and many of my claims are deeply familiar.

To shun moral ideas that are clichés would mean putting oneself above duty and justice for aesthetic reasons. That is a form of aesthetic immoralism common in modernism and postmodernism. In fact, we may be wise to attend more deeply to well-worn ideas.

Yet clichés also have moral drawbacks. Because they are well-known, they lose their psychological force; we can ignore them. (Think of a phrase like "war is hell," and how little it influences us.) Because they sound right and are easily portable, we can apply them where they do not belong, committing Whitehead's "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness" (Whitehead 1925, pp. 58-9). We are especially likely to misuse them to excuse and justify ourselves, because we are fierce advocates for own cause. As George Eliot's narrator remarks in *Middlemarch*, "the use of wide phrases for narrow motives" is a common human frailty. Eliot adds, "There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men" (Eliot 1874, p. 428).

28. Examples of the moral dangers of cliche

Here are six brief studies of people who made heavy use of clichés: Francesca da Rimini, Madame Bovary, Lieutenant Trotta from Joseph Roth's *The Radetsky March*, Adolf Eichmann, W.H. Auden, and Don Gately from David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest.* I offer these portraits to explore the moral pitfalls of cliché and to investigate how our postmodern situation differs from the medieval, Romantic, and high-modern contexts of the first five examples. I end with the suggestion that in our time, the desire to shun cliché can be hazardous.

Francesca da Rimini

Francesca is a favorite character from Dante's Inferno, represented countless times in Romantic and modern literature and art. A famous example is Rodin's sculpture of "The Kiss," which shows Francesca embracing her lover Paolo. In Romantic versions, she is depicted as a heroine who suffers because her authentic and natural impulse to love outside of her marriage is forbidden by artificial and conventional rules. As a character in his own book, Dante is so moved by her plight that he faints.

But Dante (the author) put her in hell. A careful reading of her two short speeches reveals, first, that she talks entirely in quotations or summaries of previous writing about love, and, second, that all of her references contain errors. Indeed, Barbara Vinken (1988) has claimed that every quote by a damned soul in the whole *Inferno* is in error.

For example, Francesca says (in my translation)

> When we read that 'the desired
> Smile then was kissed by the ardent lover,'
> he who 'can never be torn away' kissed

me, all atremble. A Gallehaut was the author
of that book, and seductive was his fancy.
On that day, we read no farther.
– *Inf*., v, 130-136

Francesca is quoting here from the French prose romance *Lancelot*. But in the known versions of the roman, Lancelot never initiates the kiss. He is bashful and passive to the point of foolishness, and Queen Guinevere makes all the advances. Yet the ardent lover in Francesca's quotation is male. She has confused this text with other episodes from the courtly love tradition, such as the one in which Tristan kisses Iseult while they play chess together. The details of the Lancelot story fade in her mind, to be replaced with a generic formula: damsel taken by ardent knight. Perhaps this is because she wants to shift the blame from Guinevere (the woman) to Lancelot (the man). Or perhaps it is because she reads literature as a set of clichés.

The works that Francesca cites in virtually every line were so popular in the high Middle Ages that she is like a modern person who speaks entirely in phrases from top-forty songs. Even the air in the Circle of the Lustful (where she is condemned for eternity) is filled with quotations:

And as cranes will move, chanting lays in the air,
ordering themselves into one long file,
so I saw coming with a woeful clamor
shades that were borne by the stress of the squall.
– Inf. v, 46-49

The word *lai* means any complaint, and also a particular form of Provençal poetry about lost love. The "lays" that are endlessly chanted in Hell must be repetitive to the point of meaninglessness, which makes them perfect symbols of cliché.

One topic that Francesca does not talk about is Paolo. She says nothing specific about him, not even his name. She only says that he has a gentle heart (a commonplace from the poetry of the *dolce stil nuovo)* and that he is attracted to her "*bella figura*." When Francesca notices that Paolo is attracted to her, she immediately recalls scenes from old Romances. In her mind, Paolo becomes Sir Lancelot in the arbor with Guinivere—or Tristan at his chessboard with Iseult, or Floire looking at a book with Blancheflor, or Floris reading romances with Lyriopé. She thinks she's in love with a real human being, but she really loves the idea of a courtly suitor, which has been put into her head by books.

Francesca speaks in clichés; she overlooks the specific details of stories in order to turn them into stereotypes; and she repeatedly uses euphemisms ("*Amor*," instead of sex) and

circumlocutions ("That day, we read no further …"). As a result, she never has to say that she cheated on her husband or that he killed her.

In one of the Old French texts that Francesca has read, Iseult says of Tristan:

> He loves me not, nor I him,
> except because of a potion I drank,
> and he too; that was our sin.
> – *Le Livre de Lancelot del lac* (my trans. from the text in Sommer 1910)

In his classic book *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont comments: "Tristan and Iseult do not love one another. They say they don't, and everything goes to prove it. What they love is love and being in love" (de Rougement 1940/1983, p. 41). This is the kind of literature that Francesca most enjoyed.

Madame Bovary

The first clichés that Emma Bovary learns as a child are religious: "The similes of fiancé, spouse, heavenly lover and eternal marriage that recur in sermons aroused unforeseen sweetness in the depths of her soul." But Emma loses interest in religion once an old maid smuggles novels into the convent where she lives. "They were about love, lovers, the beloved, persecuted ladies swooning away in solitary pavilions, postilions killed at every inn, horses ridden to death on every page, somber forests, troubles of the heart, oaths, sobs, tears and kisses, little boats by moonlight, nightingales in the copse, *gentlemen* brave as lions, sweet like lambs, as virtuous as no one is, always well appointed, and weeping like urns." She has been reading the nineteenth-century equivalents of the *Roman de Lancelot* (Flaubert 1856, my trans.).

The narrator tells us that before Emma was married, "she thought that she had love; but since the happiness that should have resulted from this love didn't come, she must have been deceived, she reflected. And Emma sought to know exactly what was meant in life by the words *felicity*, *passion*, and *ecstasy*, which has seemed so beautiful to her in books."

Once she marries, she learns little about her husband's interior life, doesn't appreciate his tenderness, but realizes that he has nothing in common with the romantic heroes of fiction.

What is striking about Madame Bovary is Flaubert's fresh, perceptive, sometimes sympathetic, and always precise way of depicting his characters' hackneyed, vague, and self-serving thoughts (many of which he italicizes, to show that they are *idées reçues*). Likewise, Dante depicts Francesca as a person who thinks in clichés, but she is hardly a conventional character herself. On the contrary, she is a highly original creation.

Lieutenant Trotta

In Joseph Roth's finely wrought novel *The Redetsky March* (1932), a simple and good-hearted peasant orderly tries to make a huge financial sacrifice to help his boss, Lieutenant Trotta. The feckless Trotta is badly in debt, and the orderly, Onufrij, has buried some savings under a willow tree. Onufrij has already appeared in the novel many times by this point, but always as a cipher. Now suddenly we see things from his perspective as he walks home (fearfully and yet excitedly), tries to remember which one is his left hand so that he can identify the location where he buried his money, digs it up, and uses it as collateral to obtain a loan from the local Jewish lender.

Apparently, cheap novels that were popular among Austro-Hungarian officers in Trotta's day "teamed with poignant orderlies, peasant boys with hearts of gold." Because his actual servant is acting like a literary cliché, Trotta disbelieves and callously rejects the help. He tells Onufrij that it is forbidden to accept a loan from a subordinate and dismisses him curtly. Trotta "had no literary taste, and whenever he heard the word literature he could think of nothing but Theodor Körner's drama *Zriny* and that was all, but he had always felt a dull resentment toward the melancholy gentleness of those booklets and their golden characters." Thus he understands the offer from Onufrij as a fake episode from an unbelievable book. Trotta "wasn't experienced enough to know that uncouth peasant boys with noble hearts exist in real life and that a lot of truths about the living world are recorded in bad books; they are just badly written."

Trotta is in some ways the opposite of Francesca da Remini and Madame de Bovary and in some ways similar. He despises "literature" but knows some clichés that popular books contain and uses them to avoid reality. His method of avoidance is to doubt anything that is a literary cliché, whereas Emma Bovary and Francesca da Rimini believe them all.

Adolf Eichmann

Clichés are a mark of poor writing—an aesthetic failing—but Flaubert indicates that they are also morally dangerous. Emma Bovary is cruel to Charles because she sees the world in cliché terms. Pushing the argument much further, Hannah Arendt has described the power of clichés to excuse (or even to generate) true evil.

On trial in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann remarked that the Holocaust was "one of the greatest crimes in the history of humanity." He also said that he wanted "to make peace with his former enemies," and that he "would gladly hang [himself] in public as a warning example for all anti Semites on this earth" (Arendt 1963b).

Arendt writes that these remarks were "self fabricated stock phrases" popular among Germans after 1945. They were as "devoid of reality as those [official Nazi] clichés by which the people had lived for twelve years; and you could almost see what an 'extraordinary sense of elation' it gave to the speaker the moment [each one] popped out of his mouth. His mind was filled to the

brim with such sentences." In fact, she writes, "he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché."

Arendt stresses Eichmann's "inability to think." Although he wasn't a very good student, he was an excellent organizer and negotiator, who had set up efficient, factory-like operations for processing Jews. So presumably he was capable of thinking as well or better than most people. Nevertheless, when he told a "hard luck story" of slow advancement within the SS, he apparently expected his Israeli police interrogator to show "normal, human" sympathy for him. Similarly, when he visited a Jewish acquaintance named Storfer in Auschwitz, he recalled: "We had a normal, human encounter. He told me of his grief and sorrow: I said: 'Well, my dear old friend, we [!] certainly got it! What rotten luck!'" He arranged relatively easy work for Storfer—sweeping gravel paths—and then asked: "'Will that be all right, Mr. Storfer? Will that suit you?' Whereupon he was very pleased, and we shook hands, and then he was given the broom and sat down on his bench. It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak with one another." Six weeks after this normal, human encounter, Storfer was dead—not gassed, apparently, but shot." If Arendt is to be believed, Eichmann's total reliance on clichés permitted him to ignore the smoke from the Auschwitz ovens and to believe that Storfer was "very pleased." Eichmann's inability to think, she writes, was an "inability to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view."

Eichmann couldn't see things much more clearly from his own perspective. Facing the gallows, he rejected the hood and spoke with complete self possession: "He began by stating emphatically that he was a Gottgläubiger, to express in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death. He then proceeded: 'After a short while, gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them.' In the fact of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, … he was 'elated' and he forgot that this was his own funeral."

In addition to relying heavily on clichés, Eichmann and his Nazi colleagues used euphemisms to describe crimes from which they might have recoiled if they had called them by other names. So "killing" was known as "evacuation," "special treatment," or the "final solution." Deportation to Theresienstadt was called "change of residence," whereas Jews were "resettled" to the other, more brutal, concentration camps. These phrases were not called "euphemisms," of course, but rather "language-rules"—and even that term was (as Arendt notes) "a code name; it meant what in ordinary language would be called a lie."

It is standard for a single act to have several potential names, each with a different moral implication. The dictionary will not tell us which name to use. For instance, it is not an incorrect

use of language or logic to call mass murder “special treatment.” Nevertheless, some words are much more morally appropriate than others under particular circumstances. The Nazis’ euphemisms were extreme and telling examples of immoral language, for the crimes of the Holocaust had obvious names that the perpetrators studiously avoided using. By using euphemisms and circumlocutions, they avoided having to admit what they were doing—even privately.

Among Eichmann’s favorite clichés were lines from moral philosophy. In Jerusalem, he “suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty,” which he could paraphrase accurately. Clearly, Kant’s demanding principle had become an empty formula in Eichmann’s mind.

Arendt argues that Eichmann was no monster, that his evil was banal. The circumstances, however, were extraordinary, so we shouldn’t immediately conclude from his example that clichés and euphemisms are a widespread danger. It’s one thing to rely on stock phrases when you’re in love, and quite another thing when you’re the logistical mastermind of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, there is always a risk that clichés will prevent us from exercising judgment and seeing the details of the world around us.

W.H. Auden

“September 1, 1939” is a poetic and presumably fictional representation of the narrator’s thoughts on the night that World War II began (Auden 1939). The poem contains several very famous lines:

> Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return.
>
> [We are] Children afraid of the night/ Who have never been happy or good
>
> There is no such thing as the State
>
> We must love one another or die.
>
> Ironic points of light / Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages

These are not precisely clichés, because Auden invented them for the poem. But he quickly decided that they resembled clichés, presumably because they were sentimental, tempting to memorize and quote, and false to his experience. For instance, it simply is not true that we must love one another or die–plenty of people live without loving, and those who love nevertheless die.

It might not have surprised Auden that Lyndon Johnson's campaign borrowed "we must love one another or die" for his "Daisy" TV commercial in 1964, that George H.W. Bush quoted "points of light" in his 1988 Republican Convention speech, or that at least six newspapers printed the whole poem right after Sept. 11, 2001.

In any case, Auden repudiated "September 1, 1939" along with four other political poems, requiring that a note be added whenever they were anthologized: "Mr. W. H. Auden considers these five poems to be trash which he is ashamed to have written."

I suppose my own opinion is that the quotable remarks from this poem are excellent within the overall network that the poem creates. They are problematic when extracted from the work. Whether Auden should have blamed himself for writing epigrams that could be misused in that way is a tough question.

Don Gately

In *Infinite Jest* (Wallace 1996), Gately uses the jargon of Alcoholics Anonymous, which a sophisticated, postmodern author like Wallace cannot believe literally. To say, for example, that we have "made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him" (step 3 of AA) is surely to repeat a cliché. And yet it takes courage and character in a postmodern world to insist on repeating just such phrases:

> Gately's found it's got to be the truth, is the thing. … The thing is it has to be the truth to really go over, here. It can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle.
>
> This doesn't mean you can't pay empty or hypocritical lip-service, however. Paradoxically enough. The desperate, newly sober White Flaggers are always encouraged to invoke and pay lip-service to slogans they don't yet understand or believe–e.g., "Easy Does It!" and "Turn It Over!" and "One Day at a Time!" It's called "Fake It Until You Make It," itself an often-invoked slogan. Everybody on a Commitment who gets up publicly to speak starts out saying he's an alcoholic, says it whether he believes it yet or not; then everybody up there says how Grateful he is to be sober today and how great it is to be Active and out on a Commitment with his Group, even if he's not grateful or pleased about it at all. You're encouraged to keep saying stuff like this until you start to believe it …

Note some echoes here: Flaubert italicizes received ideas; Wallace capitalizes them. Arendt writes that "language-rules" was "a code name; it meant what in ordinary language would be called a lie." Gately says that "Fake It Until You Make It" is "itself an often-invoked slogan." But Gately is the hero of the book just because he has the courage and compassion to resort to cliché.

In a pre-modern culture like Dante's, the main role of the artist is to present known truths, thereby serving a patron, buttressing the true religion, and decorating and entertaining. No points are awarded for originality or sincerity: truths come ultimately from God, and the only question is whether a fictional work captures those truths in its allegory. Cliché is not problematic, because there is nothing intrinsically wrong with repeating a well-known truth.

However, authors of Dante's own time were discovering that using a rote phrase or image could interfere with an audience's emotional engagement. A striking image of the Crucifixion would be more emotionally compelling than a highly conventional one, as Dante's contemporary Giotto showed. Dante was also part of a literary milieu in which clichés about romantic, secular love were beginning to spread. He was alert to the moral pitfalls of that love culture (in general) and to the specific perils of its clichés. Meanwhile, he was such an astoundingly forceful and original author that, despite his commitment to the traditional truths of his faith, he created indelible characters like Francesca–sinners who have been admired most of all by atheists and freethinkers. The tension between Dante's poetic originality and his theological doctrines account for some of the power of his work.

By Flaubert's time, authors were much less confident that there were truths to be conveyed or that repeating them would have value. Flaubert, for example, decided after his sojourn in Egypt that all the conventional mores of Catholic and bourgeois France were arbitrary conventions. But he couldn't simply tell people to become Egyptians, because that was also a conventional culture and not objectively better than the French one. To copy it would have been false. He sought authenticity and autonomy from all norms. Originality became a mark of excellence and freedom; and cliché, a fundamental fault. In *Madame Bovary*, the narrator does not express his own values, because those would have to be conventional, but he achieves autonomy by ridiculing his bourgeois characters for their clichés. The author vanishes, leaving a work that is meant to be perfectly original and free.

Auden and Arendt (who were friends in New York) were modernists and post-Romantics. They no longer believed that a work of genius could break free of conventions. Any description of reality–such as a 19th century novel–would have to be a product of some kind of conventional culture. Moreover, they no longer sought autonomy and authenticity alone. They were both serious moralists, looking for answers to the evils of totalitarianism and capitalist imperialism. Yet, like Flaubert, they still sought critical distance from mass culture, wanting to break "the

strength of Collective Man." Auden's "points of light" are exchanged by "the Just"–individuals who say and do the right things. These people "show an affirming flame," quite unlike Flaubert's caustic fire that merely burns the society he describes. Yet the points of light are "ironic," because the wise cannot just state moral truths. Those would be, or quickly become, clichés.

Postmodernists then arrive to say that cliché is unavoidable. No one can invent language from scratch; it is intrinsically conventional. Postmodernists no longer pretend to avoid cliché, but they try to battle it indirectly by means of irony and parody. David Foster Wallace came from that background but spoke powerfully to his generation (which is also mine) because he recognized that the escape from cliché is pretentious and arrogant. In a culture saturated with advertising slogans (Wallace's "ceaseless neon bottle"), we need the courage to say–and mean–things that are good but not original and not wholly true.

In sum: I would not try to delete statements from my list of moral beliefs because they have been made many times before or have been expressed in a simple and unoriginal fashion. I would even be inclined to consider our culture's store of moral clichés as a likely trove of wisdom. Roth was right: "a lot of truths about the living world are … just badly written." Situations repeat, and what needs to be said has often been said many times before.

But the risk is that a stock phrase can prevent a person from grasping the concrete reality of the situation at hand. I'd propose two remedies for that problem.

First, it is worth recognizing which of our moral commitments, even if they are fully persuasive and valid, are also clichés in the sense that they are standardized and prefabricated phrases. Those commitments deserve special scrutiny.

Second, it is worth attending to the ways that all of our various moral commitments fit together. One's moral worldview is not a mere list of precepts (each of which will be a cliché) but an intricate network of ideas and implications, some general and some concrete, many in tension with each other. Only the most concrete and particular elements will be original–coming directly from your own experience. The general ones will be, for the most part, clichés. But the overall structure will be unique to you and should demand your attention. Each cliché may be true, but when it is juxtaposed with other general statements, it always turns out to be only partly true. Life is full of tradeoffs and tensions. Even if the components of my overall worldview are mostly clichés, the whole structure of moral ideas that emerges from my best thinking about my own circumstances is original–just because I am my own person.

Clichés can be Roethke's "sticks-in-a-drowse over sugary loam," "cut stems struggling to put down feet."

29. "The body of us all"

Anne Carson's long poem entitled "The Glass Essay" (Carson 1994) relates how the narrator, having been dumped by her romantic partner, goes home to Canada to visit her mother (a difficult-sounding person–prone to rehashing old criticisms) and her father, now suffering from Alzheimer's. Being a scholar, this narrator takes with her

> … lot of books—
>
> some for my mother, some for me
> including *The Collected Works Of Emily Bron*të.
> This is my favourite author.

She thinks about Emily and Charlotte Brontë, about herself, about her father and her mother. She feels strong emotions. For example:

> Anger travels through me, pushes aside everything else in my heart,
> pouring up the vents.
> Every night I wake to this anger,
>
> the soaked bed,
> the hot pain box slamming me each way I move.
> I want justice. Slam.
>
> I want an explanation. Slam.
> I want to curse the false friend who said I love you forever. Slam.
> I reach up and switch on the bedside lamp.

But the poem moves toward something that I can only call transcendence. The narrator concludes with a perspective and a moral concern that goes infinitely beyond herself and her own circumstances.

But how can you transcend your circumstances if you are a modernist writer who favors concrete images and objective correlatives? How can you transcend earthly pain if you cannot invoke God? ("I am uneasy with the compensatory model of female religious experience and yet ….") How can you transcend the injustices you have faced if you believe that your identity as a woman matters–that not everyone has the same problems, that differences are important?

One answer, Anne Carson suggests, is time. "Days passed, months passed and I saw nothing." She finally attains insight, but only after a long wait. Another answer is hard thinking. The narrator probes herself, nature, and other people. She asks the hard questions and debunks her own answers.

Most importantly, you need the courage to believe and say things that are un-ironic, explicitly ethical, and close to cliché:

> I saw a high hill and on it a form shaped against hard air.
>
> It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
> but as I came closer
> I saw it was a human body
>
> trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing off the bones.
> And there was no pain.
> The wind
>
> was cleansing the bones.
> They stood forth silver and necessary.
> It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.
> It walked out of the light.

This is moving because it is so hard-won.

30. Is hope a virtue?

Ta-Nehisi Coates writes that the "black political tradition is essentially hopeful," yet the historical record gives many indications that injustice is tenacious and unlikely to yield. That means that a historian or a political analyst deeply cognizant of history should not be committed to hope:

> A writer wedded to "hope" is ultimately divorced from "truth." Two creeds can't occupy the same place at the same time. If your writing must be hopeful, then there's only room for the kind of evidence which verifies your premise. The practice of history can't help there. Thus writers who commit themselves to only writing hopeful things, are committing themselves to the ahistorical, to the mythical, to the hagiography of humanity itself. I can't write that way—because I can't study that way. I have to be open to things falling apart. Indeed, much of our history is the story of things just not working out (Coates 2015).

Coates is critical of "only writing hopeful things" and of assuming that "your writing must be hopeful." He is not saying: abandon all hope, you who enter into historical thought. But he is distinguishing the cultivation of hope from the pursuit of truth. If hope emerges from truth, that is a matter of sheer chance and not to be counted on.

Truth, justice toward others, and inner psychological wellbeing are distinct goods. It would be wonderful if they could fit together neatly, and even better if each caused the others. That would be the case in a universe constructed by an omnipotent and just creator, which is why

the Bible says things like “the truth will make you free.” But I see no particular reason to believe that truth will make you happy or just, that justice will make you happy or truthful, or that happiness will make you truthful or just. In many situations, knowing the full truth just causes sorrow and paralysis; committing fully to justice requires sorrow and untruth. In my view, all three goals are estimable, but they conflict, and that is one reason it is so hard to live well. This position is consistent with Coates’ admiration for both the truth-telling historian and the hope-instilling tradition of Black politics in the US.

In the previous paragraph, I wrote about happiness in contrast to justice and truth, dropping the word “hope.” For some, hope is a form or close relative of happiness. But one can debate whether hope is a good at all. Neither the classical Greeks nor the ancient Indian thinkers thought that it was. Hannah Arendt observed that “Greek antiquity ignored [faith and hope] altogether, discounting the keeping of faith as a very uncommon and not too important virtue and counting hope among the evils of illusion in Pandora’s box” (Arendt 1958, p. 247.).

Indeed, a Stoic or a Buddhist can endorse a strong argument against hope. First, hope is a thought about the future, but wisdom lies in fully experiencing the present, which alone is real. Like nostalgia and regret, hope is a source of irrational disquiet.

Second, hope is about matters beyond our control. For instance, it makes no sense for me to “hope” that I will answer a question honestly. If I am an honest person, I will just answer it honestly. To hope about our own actions is to renounce responsibility. By the same token, we ought to spend no energy hoping that others will be honest–or otherwise ethical–because that is beyond our control. They will do what they will do, and we should respond in the best possible way.

Third, we should not make hope the precondition of acting right, for that is moral weakness. We must do right regardless of the odds of things turning out well.

Most pre-Christian thinkers of the Mediterranean and Northern India ignored or opposed hope. Christians then turned hope into one of the three greatest virtues. That made sense because of their theistic commitments. Indeed, hope is closely connected to faith and charity because it is faith in the Creator’s charity or grace that (alone) substantiates hope in a world of evident suffering.

Arendt was a non-Christian author who thought that the Christian concept of hope had been a positive contribution, related to her own core virtue of amor mundi–love of the world. Notwithstanding the Stoic and Buddhist arguments against hope, and notwithstanding the real tensions between hope and truth that Coates explores–hope could be a virtue. It could be a virtue if it is a resource that human beings need in order to act well. Then instilling hope increases the odds of good action, just as giving people courage does.

In both Stoicism and at least some classical Indian thought, quietism is a common theme. The wise person accepts what is–in which case, hope is irrelevant and distracting. But activists must think about more than the present. They must form plans, which requires estimating the probability of success. When the probability approaches zero, it is time to form a new plan. That means that hope is a rational precondition of action.

And possibly hope is an intrinsic virtue. By Act IV, Scene 1 of King Lear, Edgar has already suffered much, having been cast out of his family and society and onto the wild heath. He convinces himself that he can still be happy because he can still have hope ("esperance"):

> *Yet better thus, and known to be contemn'd,*
> *Than still contemn'd and flatter'd. To be worst,*
> *The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,*
> *Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.*
> *The lamentable change is from the best;*
> *The worst returns to laughter. Welcome then,*
> *Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace!*
> *The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst*
> *Owes nothing to thy blasts.*

Immediately following these lines–in a perfect illustration of tragic irony–Edgar's father stumbles into view. We have watched his eyes being deliberately thumb-wrenched out of their sockets, and now we see him "Enter …, led by an Old Man." Edgar cries:

> *But who comes here?*
> *My father, poorly led? World, world, O world!*
> *But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,*
> *Life would not yield to age.*

It was not true that Edgar had seen the worst or that the subsequent changes would be for the better. Things were about to get much worse. And things ultimately get worse for all of us. Yet it was better for Edgar to have those moments on the heath than not to have had them. It was to his credit that he could forgive and "embrace" life. He chose to describe his state as hope, and that seems praiseworthy. Hope wasn't an accurate prediction of the future but rather a choice and a disposition.

To return to the beginning: I agree with Coates that history is not hope-instilling and that the rigorous empirical historian should not go looking for hope in the record of the past. At the same time, a human being who manages to be hopeful seems to be praiseworthy and a gift to others. The historian is a human being, and like all of us, must navigate these two inconsistent values.

31. Echoes

In home movies and fading Polaroids,
They look funny, their lapels wide and garish,
Their facial hair risible, movements jerky.
They look naive–fools, ignorant of what came next.
But I report: the grass felt just the same
When you raked your fingers though its crisp stems.
On a suddenly warm January day,
Wafting over sodden drifts, the air smelled
The same, and laughter sounded the same
Filtered through traffic thrum and cicadas.

32. The recurrent turn inward

Francis Bacon had a wonderfully pungent way of making points that have become commonplace in the era of scientific modernity. In the following passage, he denounces the previously dominant academic movement, Scholasticism, for speculating fruitlessly about empty questions instead of studying nature with empirical rigor and practical objectives:

> Surely, like as many substances in nature which are solid do putrefy and corrupt into worms;—so it is the property of good and sound knowledge to putrefy and dissolve into a number of subtle, idle, unwholesome, and (as I may term them) vermiculate [like intestinal worms] questions, which have indeed a kind of quickness and life of spirit, but no soundness of matter or goodness of quality. This kind of degenerate learning did chiefly reign amongst the schoolmen [Scholastics], who having sharp and strong wits, and abundance of leisure, and small variety of reading, but their wits being shut up in the cells of a few authors (chiefly Aristotle their dictator) as their persons were shut up in the cells of monasteries and colleges, and knowing little history, either of nature or time, did out of no great quantity of matter and infinite agitation of wit spin out unto us those laborious webs of learning which are extant in their books. For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit (Bacon 1605, I (iv) 5).

Many since Bacon have shared his impatience with philosophy as an idle and bootless pursuit. A common insult is "navel-gazing," but Bacon heightens that critique by imagining philosophers looking beneath their navels at the disgusting worms within. As an alternative, he advocates "the contemplation of nature" and "the observations of experience" (I.V(1)6), which will yield secure and profitable knowledge.

One rejoinder is that natural science cannot address such crucial questions as "What is justice?" and "What is a good life?" A second response is that natural science makes fundamental but often unexamined assumptions about metaphysics and epistemology. Bacon and his successors would consider such issues fruitless, but Kant argues in the original preface to his Critique of Pure Reason that "it is in reality vain to profess indifference in regard to such inquiries, the object of which cannot be indifferent to humanity. Besides, these pretended indifferentists, however much they may try to disguise themselves by the assumption of a popular style and by changes on the language of the schools, unavoidably fall into metaphysical declarations and propositions, which they profess to regard with so much contempt" (Meiklejohn trans.)

Picking up a similar theme, Edmund Husserl wrote in 1929, "Daily practical living is naive. It is immersion in the already-given world, whether it be experiencing, or thinking, or valuing, or acting. … Nor is it otherwise in the positive sciences. They are naivetes of a higher level. They are the products of an ingenious theoretical technique; but the intentional performances from which everything ultimately originates remain unexplicated" (Husserl 1929)

Assuming we do want to ask philosophical questions, how can we avoid mere opinions and speculations? A recurrent suggestion is to turn back to the ones who form such opinions–ourselves–and to critically assess how we think and what we have a right to claim. Kant is the most famous proponent of this turn. He calls for a "critical inquiry into the faculty of reason," which is "not so much occupied with objects as with the mode of our cognition of these objects." However, my point here is that the same move has been made many times, and it is interesting to list and compare the approaches that have been attempted.

Instead of making direct claims about metaphysics, epistemology, or value, one could:

- Critically assess the experts who make or imply such claims and see whether they know what they are talking about. This is Socrates' main business, as he describes it. He tests the poets, orators, politicians and others to see if they possess knowledge. For the most part, he is interested in the thoughts and methods of individuals who belong to social categories, such as poets, but a roughly similar approach is to critically investigate institutions that purport to generate knowledge, such as labs and clinics. This approach is common in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and the sociology of knowledge today.

- Investigate and clarify the rules of logic, on the premise that useful thoughts should be logical and that only some claims about the world will pass that test. Aristotle inaugurated this approach in Europe, although it had precedents, and it has also been influential in Asia.
- Critically investigate "reason," understood as a faculty. This is Kant's explicit approach, but Descartes and many others have begun in a similar way.
- Critically investigate language, on the theory that all complex, declarative thoughts take linguistic form. The "linguistic turn" was one of the main developments of the 20th century.
- Very closely attend to how we experience things, including the self that does the experiencing. This is the phenomenological approach, which Husserl called a "radical new beginning of philosophy" (op cit.) but which had obvious antecedents, including–as Husserl acknowledged–the Pali Cannon Canon in Buddhism.
- Study thinking as a natural activity of the brain and nervous system of homo sapiens–although it is tricky to do that without making the kinds of epistemological assumptions that people like Kant and Husserl attribute to empirical science.

33. Nature includes our inner lives

> *For natural philosophy everything perceived is in nature. We may not pick up and choose. For us the red glow of the sunset should be as much part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon.* (Whitehead, 1920, pp. 28-9)

Here are three widely-held presumptions:

1) All truth is scientific truth. Any claim that isn't scientific is an opinion.
2) Nature is everything that science investigates, including the human or social world.
3) Science means a suite of methods that strive to represent nature without influence from the observer. A scientific truth is one that would obtain even if there were no scientist. This is an aspiration; any given scientific claim is actually subject to bias. But the goal is to remove subjectivity to understand nature.

Whitehead disputes these assumptions (as have many since him). I came across the quoted sentence in an article by Bruno Latour entitled, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (Latour 2004) Latour's provocative article sent me to

Whitehead's original text, which elaborates his argument. A little later in *The Concept of Nature* (1920, chapter 2), Whitehead writes:

> *What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which is there for knowledge; although on this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the byplay of the mind. Thus there would be two natures, one is the conjecture and the other is the dream.*
>
> *Another way of phrasing this theory which I am arguing against is to bifurcate nature into two divisions, namely into the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness. The nature which is the fact apprehended in awareness holds within it the greenness of the trees, the song of the birds, the warmth of the sun, the hardness of the chairs, and the feel of the velvet. The nature which is the cause of awareness is the conjectured system of molecules and electrons which so affects the mind as to produce the awareness of apparent nature. The meeting point of these two natures is the mind, the causal nature being influent and the apparent nature being effluent.*

I acknowledge that we have often made progress in understanding specific phenomena (in the social world as well as what we call "nature") by employing techniques that isolate the object from the perceiving human subject. An astronomer wants to know how the universe works regardless of how people perceive it, uncovering truths that would apply even if there were no sentient observers at all. Many methods that we label scientific aim for that kind of understanding. Quantification and blind experiments are two rather different examples.

Meanwhile, we have learned about human beings' subjectivity. We have studied people's experiences, their causes, and how they differ. Sometimes we treat subjectivity as another phenomenon that we can study objectively. And sometimes we express or convey our own subjectivity in first-person terms.

The problem that Whitehead decries is the bifurcation. When the earth rotates so that the line of sight between a human observer and the sun becomes partially obscured, molecules and waves are involved in the process. But you, the human observer, also truly see something that you call a "red sunset." It has formal qualities and significance, even symbolism, for you as a human observer. It is not true that only the molecules and waves are "nature," hence that only they can be understood using science. Your reaction to the sun's setting is also part of reality, even if you phrase it as idiosyncratically as Edith Wharton did:

> Leaguered in fire

The wild black promontories of the coast extend
Their savage silhouettes;
The sun in universal carnage sets …
-- Wharton (1894), "An Autumn Sunset"

34. My self

Thesis: I have a vocabulary for describing my own behavior that's full of words about motives, goals, and principles. "Why did I raise my hand? Because I wanted to answer your question. Why did I give that answer? Because I knew it was the truth and I was obliged to say it." This is a valid way of thinking, because each claim is subject to being tested and can be refuted. (Maybe I raised my hand to show off, or because I misheard you, or to reach for a light switch.) It's morally important that I think this way about myself, because it reminds me that I am responsible for my actions and must strive to apply the best principles. It's also morally important that I envision *you* in the same terms. That is necessary for recognizing your dignity and equality, and it reminds me that I should help you to make your own choices wisely. I should strive to remove obstacles and enhance your freedom.

Antithesis: We have a vocabulary for describing any action in nature that's all about causes and effects. "Why did he raise his hand? Because an electrical signal traveled along a nerve to a muscle. Why did that signal happen? Because a synapse fired in his brain." This is the only scientific way to think about life, because science is defined as a third-person account of nature that sets aside the subjective perspective. It's morally valuable to think this way about other people because then we realize that they are caught in a web of causality and cannot escape suffering; it makes us compassionate. And it's important that I apply this way of thinking to my own case, viewing my own first-person talk of goals and principles as a kind of myth. Then I can escape an overweening attachment to myself that makes me selfish, self-important, and fearful.

Synthesis: There are two ways of thinking about sentient action, the first-person and the third-person mode, and each has its own norms of validity and tests of truth. We are nowhere near being able to make these two perspectives cohere, if we ever will. But we must treat one another right. We're in this together, and we're all we've got. That requires holding several ideas in our minds at once. 1) I am responsible for what I do and should strive to do right by you. But 2) The condition of my self is of no great consequence to the world and is fundamentally a matter of luck. 3) You face choices and can strive to do right, and I ought to help you. But 4) The condition of your self is a matter of luck; often you will be in a state of unease or even suffering; and I have compassion for you.

35. Re-enchant the inner life

Many centuries ago, the world seemed thoroughly enchanted. There were spirits, angels, or demons in the air, the forest, the water, and everywhere else. It seemed natural that there should also be a spirit inside each of us that was similarly invisible, unpredictable, powerful, and precious.

Natural science has not demonstrated that the only real things are visible and predictable. On the contrary, natural science has discovered quarks and bosons, forces and dimensions. It had yielded a world full of strange and heterogeneous objects. But natural science does presume (rather than discover) that every true statement is about something that one can demonstrate experimentally. As natural science has progressed, the enchanted world has shrunk: we now know that hot and cold fronts rather than demons cause storms, and bacteria and viruses rather than witches cause disease.

An object inside us that we might call a soul, a self, or a will seems likely to disappear for the same reasons. After all, a soul can never be observed or experimentally verified. And science is building an alternative story about networks of neurons that fire (because of forces acting on them) and cause mental states such as desire and will. In turn, these networks of neurons evolved over many millions of years to make species like ours more fit to survive. The implication is that human beings are ultimately just complicated machines and an experience like freedom of the will is an illusion. Our thinking belongs to the same network of cause-and-effect that explains why a computer opens an application when you push a button or a tree sprouts a leaf when the sun shines on it.

The premises seem correct, but the conclusion does not follow. Natural science may explain why mental states occur. It cannot not explain what those states are. By analogy: biology explains why most leaves look green, but it wouldn't convey to a truly color-blind person what green looks like. Likewise, a conscious person actually experiences will, choice, and a host of other complex mental states. To say what will is, one must describe it closely and insightfully from the perspective of the person who wills something. Under close inspection, a simple thing like "will" refracts into many related emotions and beliefs. One must address questions like these: What does it feel like to want something? Can you want it and not want it at the same time? Does wanting an object feel the same as wanting a person? How does will relate to love? To happiness? What thoughts and mental practices enhance and constrain will? What forms of willing are good and which are bad?

Such introspective questions are appropriate even in a world in which natural science works just as well as advertised. If you want to know why human beings think, it's appropriate to turn to neuroscience and evolutionary biology. But if you want to know what thought is, you must attend to thinking. Even more so, if you want to decide which thoughts are good, you must evaluate the complex, subtle, mysterious world of your own consciousness.

Both the *Mishna* (Sanhedrin, 4) and *The Quran* (5:32) advise that to kill one person is like killing all human beings, and to save a life is to save a whole world. Perhaps those passages reflect a recognition that each human consciousness is an immense accumulation of experience. The whole universe of which I am aware (from distant galaxies to microscopic organisms swimming in a drop of water) is all in my head. My mind contains not one thing but many things connected by a whole network of relations. And each of these things carries value. Consciousness thus requires and rewards exploration. Montaigne wrote:

> For, as Pliny says, each person is a very good lesson to himself, provided he has the audacity to look from up close. This [the book of *Essays*] is not my teaching, it is my studying; it is not a lesson for anyone else, but for myself. What helps me just might help another. … It is a tricky business, and harder than it seems, to follow such a wandering quarry as our own spirit, to penetrate its deep darknesses and inner folds. …This is a new and extraordinary pastime that withdraws us from the typical occupations of the world, indeed, even from the most commendable activities. For many years now, my thoughts have had no object but myself; I investigate and study nothing but me, and if I study something else, I immediately apply it to myself–or (better put) within myself. … My vocation and my art is to live (Montaigne 1580, ii.6, my translation).

36. The unwedgeable and gnarled oak

> Duke: Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
> Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
> Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
> As if we had them not. … (Act. 1 Sc. 1)
>
> Lucio: Our doubts are traitors
> And make us lose the good we oft might win
> By fearing to attempt. (Act 1, c. 4)
>
> Angelo: … 'Tis very pregnant [natural],
> The jewel that we find, we stoop and take't
> Because we see it; but what we do not see
> We tread upon, and never think of it.
> (*Measure for Measure*, Act 2, Sc. 1)

These are statements in the form of generalizations about human beings. They come from the first two acts of *Measure for Measure*. The form–a maxim about us–is not unusual in Shakespeare. (Cf. Kent in Lear, "Striving to better, oft we mar what's well," and many other examples.) But the frequency seems notably high near the beginning of this play.

In *Measure for Measure*, the main pair of lovers is guilty of "fornication," which is a capital offense in the fictionalized setting of Vienna. No one in the play doubts that premarital sex is wrong. The question is whether it is inevitable because of human nature. Lucio claims that fornication is "impossible to extirp … till eating and drinking be put down." He argues that laws against fornication would prevent the species from reproducing. Speaking of the Puritanical tyrant Angelo, Lucio says: "this ungenitured agent will unpeople the province with continency; sparrows must not build in his house-eaves, because they are lecherous." (Again cf. Lear: "The wren goes to 't, and the small gilded fly / Does lecher in my sight.")

Since Lucio is himself a lecher and a hypocrite, his view is hardly authoritative. But the holy and chaste Isabella has a more persuasive argument against inflexible rules. A person, she says, is an "unwedgeable and gnarled oak" (Act 2, sc. 2). She sounds like Kant: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." This is an argument against inflexible laws.

In short, the explicit question facing the characters in *Measure for Measure* is about human nature; hence the drumbeat of maxims near the beginning. In addressing that question, the characters must remain within the bounds of Christian thought. Their community has friars and nuns, and Isabella is a source of orthodox theological wisdom. Christians may argue about freedom and original sin, but they cannot claim that all laws and moral strictures are arbitrary human conventions.

That is why *Lear* makes an interesting comparison. Its setting is explicitly pagan. Major characters are cast out of society onto the natural heath, where a person is just a "poor, bare, forked animal." The King (albeit, when mad) comes to see all laws as oppressive conventions. The possibility opens up that life is meaningless: "Ripeness is all."

Following Stanley Cavell (2015), I think *Lear* demonstrates that one should not ask general questions about human nature and the purposes of human life. Those questions will yield nihilistic conclusions that are really excuses for avoiding emotional connections and responsibilities for other people. That is a view derived from Montaigne and ancient skeptics. It's not really acceptable in Christian Vienna, where institutions are derived from providence, and souls are destined for salvation.

37. October Villanelle

Is autumn the one true season of life?
(Or must a long cold winter follow fall?)
October paints with fragile colors rife

the early twilights, and with black, the nights of strife,
when a suffering wind repeats the call:
"Is autumn the one true season of life?"

Sweet roots and crisp apples under the knife
yield scented juices that summer sun recall.
October paints with fragile colors rife.

With thoughts of fledgling days the small
birds huddle tight as husband clings to wife.
Is autumn the one true season of life?

It is the soft wind whistling like a fife
that spins the dancing leaves, holds them in thrall.
October paints with fragile colors rife.

The vein to the past was cut with a knife.
The days drop like leaves, and ripeness is all.
October paints with fragile colors rife.
Is autumn the one true season of life?

38. Some thoughts on natural law

Those RULES of old discover'd, not devis'd,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodis'd;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrain'd
By the same laws which first herself ordain'd.
– Pope 1711 (writing here of aesthetic laws)

… the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God …
— The Declaration of Independence

> *How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.*
>
> — *Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail* (King 1963)

A substantial part of any concept of natural law is a set of rights. Rights impose obligations. If I have a right to life, you have an obligation not to kill me. If I have a right to an education, someone has an obligation to pay for my schooling. These obligations fall on both individuals and institutions. For instance, my right to life implies not only that you may not kill me but that some kind of state must protect me.

To honor and protect others' rights is obligatory. It is a moral and not merely a legal duty.

Governments do not create rights and obligations, because we can and must assess any given government by asking whether it protects the rights that people deserve.

Other animals have rights because people have obligations to treat them ethically. But non-human animals do not have rights in relation to each other. In that sense, rights are human, although they extend to humans' treatment of other species.

Rights are linked to the organism's characteristics as a natural species. For instance, we human beings are born helpless, remain interdependent, yet develop unique goals and desires that are rooted in our private mental lives. Our rights would be different if we had no need for each other, or no private lives at all–or if we differed in other fundamental ways from actual *homo sapiens*.

Rights are connected to happiness, which means–not the balance of pleasure over pain–but some deeper form of flourishing or self-realization. Flourishing for human beings is natural in the same way that a mouse or an apple tree has certain natural ways of flourishing.

At the same time, one of the unusual and fundamental features of human beings is our ability to flourish in many *different* ways, and so we have a right to choose our own paths or be the authors of our own lives. This right to choose is based on our ability and desire to choose, which is a natural characteristic.

I have suggested that fundamental interests, needs, and goods are rooted in nature. However, it is not a natural principle that anyone has an obligation to protect or provide for the needs of anyone else. An individual rabbit has a profound interest in not being eaten, yet a fox does not have an obligation to refrain from eating rabbits. Nature is red in tooth and claw.

We *are* obligated to honor everyone else's rights, which are based in their natural interests, but this obligation is not natural. It comes from somewhere else. If you think it comes from God, that is fine, but the obligation is then divine and supra-natural, not (merely) natural.

Perhaps we have an instinct to universal beneficence that emerges from our everyday sympathy for other people and animals. That instinct could be seen as the natural (not divine) basis for our commitment to universal rights. Mengzi puts it very well:

> *Humans all have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: everyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among their neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sounds of the child's cries. [F]?rom this we can see that if one is without the heart of compassion, one is not a human. If one is without the heart of deference, one is not a human. The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The heart of disdain (shame/disgust) is the sprout of righteousness. The heart of deference is the sprout of propriety. The heart of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom." (2A6; see also 6A6, quoted in Flanagan 2016)*

However, we have *many* instincts, including warlike, competitive, and cruel ones. Universal beneficence seems a subtle and rare sprout in the wild garden of our instincts. To select and cultivate that particular sprout may be wise and right, but it is a choice that's not itself directed by nature.

Nature can be understood as everything that science can explain (and science is any valid explanation of nature). So defined, "nature" offers no basis for obligations. A purely empirical study of nature would suggest that members of any species, including *homo sapiens*, are unequal in capacity, frequently selfish, and fully determined by physical processes rather than choice. We can broaden our understanding of nature to encompass things like obligations, purposes, and goods–for instance, happiness as the purpose of human beings, and non-domination is a good required for happiness. But then nature is not exhausted by positivist science.

Partly because positivist science does not comprehend things like rights, it is very hard for people to *know* the ideal list of rights and their correlative obligations. All of our ancestors were

wrong about some rights–according to us–which means that we ought to be humble about our own ability to know the ideal list.

The best we can do is to decide, in reasonably fair and reflective forums, which rights and obligations ought to apply to whom. That means that although governments do not create rights, people must identify and determine rights through politics and in institutions such as governments. We should expect their outcomes to vary over time and space, not because rights are mere matters of opinion, but because the only way we can know real rights is to exchange and test our opinions.

In conclusion, I feel comfortable speaking of law that is importantly connected to nature, and especially to the nature of human beings. Understanding it requires reflection on our natural circumstances. But I wouldn't call it "natural law" if that implies that it is part of, or determined by, nature, because it has sources other than nature itself.

39. The moral significance of instinct

When dogs and their human owners look into each other's eyes, oxytocin, a hormone involved in the maternal bond, rises in both creatures. When dogs are given oxytocin via a nasal spray, they want to look in their humans' eyes (Nagasawa et al 2015). I find this result interesting, but equally interesting is my reaction to it. Why is this scientific finding heart-warming? Is it evidence of something good?

As members of an evolved natural species, we human beings have instincts. Maternal bonding is an example. Domesticating dogs may be one as well.

Instincts are not universal, nor are they necessarily desirable. For example, we presumably developed an instinct for violence against people outside our own kin groups. Yet many individuals never exhibit that instinct, it is generally bad, and we can create contexts in which it becomes marginal. To say that humans have an instinct for violence is a little like saying that bees sting. It's true even though most bees never actually sting. It's not a statistical generalization but a claim about the way we were designed through the process of natural selection. It's about what's "built in" to us, for better *or* worse.

One pitfall is to replace moral evaluation with such talk of instincts. To say that anything we are hard-wired to do is right to do is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. It excuses, for example, violence, exploitation, and dominance.

Another error is to romanticize the human species by defining only the good drives as our authentic instincts. An example would be claiming that we are naturally peaceful and made violent only by civilization. This seems implausible if it's a testable claim; and if it's meant to be true by definition, it's an instance of the "No True Scotsman" fallacy.

A third error is to ignore the natural characteristics of the species entirely when making moral judgments. Perhaps ethics is species-independent, and we can first define the good (in general) and then use it to assess the actual behavior of human beings. What is right for us would also be right for angels, elves, Klingons, God.

One problem with this approach is that it's unrealistic. A deeper problem is that it fails to demonstrate love for the species. To love an oak tree is to appreciate it for what it naturally does. And to love humankind is to appreciate *us* as the evolved natural species that we happen to be. To wonder whether we would be better without sex would be like wondering whether oak trees would be better off without acorns. (But then we shouldn't wish that we had no proclivity for violence, because violence, too, is part of being human.)

Again, this doesn't mean that there is a list of characteristics that are innate because of natural selection, and everyone should (or does) demonstrate those characteristics. Sex, for example, is an instinct that admits of great variation: some people want it and some don't; various people want different kinds of it; and it can be good or bad for the people affected. Still, sex is not just a desire that some people happen to have, and it is not merely good if the net benefit happens to be positive. Sex is intrinsic to the species and is something we should encompass when we value human beings.

Back to dogs and people: It appears that these two species co-evolved very early, each taking its modern form under the influence of the other. I've even wondered whether guard dogs allowed our distant ancestors to sleep deeply; and deep sleep permitted cognitive development. Dogs certainly allowed us to spread into vast regions that had been dominated by big mammals with teeth. It's not clear that we could have become who we are without dogs–or vice versa.

To say "Because having a dog is natural, it must be good" would be an example of the naturalistic fallacy. We *can* live without dogs. Some people much prefer to. Some communities bar them. And maybe those are the right decisions. Whether or not to have a dog is an ethical question. The rights and welfare of all affected people–and the dog–should be considered.

But it would also be a mistake to interpret (some) people's bond with dogs as just another preference, a choice that happens to have hedonic value for them and that should be weighed against other desires and interests. Loving a dog is an instinct that influences human perceptions (we are good at interpreting dogs' behavior) and even our hormones. That means that if you happen to love a dog, I think you are justified in believing that you are acting *naturally*. And if you happen not to like dogs, you should still recognize the impulse in others as a human capability. Like other capabilities, it is something that people should be able to choose to exercise so long as that is compatible with other important goods.

40. Those who will and those who reason

Christine Korsgaard has developed this argument (Korsgaard 2018):

1) There are two kinds of beings, those that have wants and those that don't.
2) There are two kinds of beings, those that can "reason" and those that cannot (where to reason is to have reflexive thoughts, or the ability to assess wants, desires, etc. critically).

Inert objects like rocks and stars neither have wants nor can they reason. It follows that nothing is good or bad for them. All members of the animal kingdom, including human beings, have wants. That implies that some things are good and bad for each of them. Perhaps we alone are rational, in the Kantian sense. In that case, we and not animals have moral duties. But our moral duties are not only to those who are rational, but to those who have wants, which includes animals.

(According to Spinoza, God would occupy the space for "can reason" and "has no wants." It's also theologically plausible that if there's a God, God has wants. In that case, God would be in the same zone with us.)

Kant wrote:

> If a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men (Kant, 1784-5).

Korsgaard is a major Kantian, but in her Tanner Lectures on "Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals" (2004) and subsequent work, she disagrees with Kant's reasoning here. What is wrong with shooting the dog is not that the man somehow neglects his duties to other humans. He has done wrong by mistreating the dog. Just like the man, the dog has desires, and there are things that are good for the dog. The man has negated the dog's good in his own interest:

> It is likely that dogs do not have the capacity to reflect on or change what they want. Therefore a dog does not have the right or obligation to participate in creating moral norms that are binding on itself or the man. It "cannot judge" in the way that a person can. We don't blame it (or genuinely esteem it) for acting like a dog; that is simply its nature. But the man's duty to reflect on his own desires is precisely the duty to take others' desires into account. It doesn't matter whether the others can judge; it matters

whether they have desires and goods. Likewise, our duties to other human beings are not contingent on their acting like Kantian rational subjects.

41. A Poem Should

A poem should compel respect and pity
As a siren stops the city,

Cry
To see the stricken hobble by.

A poem should mutely display
What would hush a room to say:
A handful of dust, a rapist swan,
Bodies scythed into ditches of clay.

A poem should see
What the fry-cook sees, the whale,
The refugee.

It should lay its wrinkled fingers
Gently on and squeeze.

It should release in the back of the nose
Scents of salt water, sex, new rain on soot,
Grandfather's undiscarded clothes.

A poem is built from parts
And then left on the curb.
You take a piece home, plug it in.
It restarts.

A poem's every line
Can split and recombine,
Lie unexpressed until it arrests
An ethical decline.

A poem is equal to:
Me plus you.

42. Don't confuse bias and judgment

"Even good and, at bottom, worthy people have, in our time, the most extraordinary fear about making judgments. The confusion about judgment can go hand in hand with

fine and strong intelligence, just as good judgment can be found in those not remarkable for their intelligence."

— Arendt 1963

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

–W. B. Yeats 1919

A bias is a manifestation of cognitive limitations or weaknesses. It reveals that a person has failed to see the whole picture, to weigh evidence appropriately, to revise prior assumptions, to counter the influence of self-interest, or to grasp other perspectives. We are all subject to bias, constantly. It is wise to scrutinize our own and other people's positions and opinions for signs of it. Certain professionals–reporters, researchers, teachers–are taught to acknowledge bias and to counter it. They are held accountable for any bias they appear to show. Anyone who writes in a public forum and purports to be a scholar or a teacher will sooner or later see the comment: "You're biased!" (Or, just as likely, "Your bias!", since grammar is not always the strong suit of the affronted.)

At the same time, each of us must make good judgments. Faced with almost any situation of any consequence, we can judge wisely and well, or judge badly, or fail to judge at all and thereby display negligence. Even journalists, scholars, and educators who advertise themselves as minimally biased must make constant judgments: what to cover, study, and teach, how to present information, whom to address, whom to take seriously, what counts as a legitimate position in a debate, and so on.

It's essential to separate the language of bias from the language of judgment. They have different grammars: for instance, we say "good judgment" but not "good bias." We accuse people of bias but not of judgment. A person can make the right judgment despite being biased; in fact, her bias may alert her to what really is the right conclusion. Or a person can somehow counter his own biases and yet make poor judgments. A typical example of the latter is a person who decides that taking a position would evidence bias and therefore fails to act–e.g., in response to a presidential candidate who is violating fundamental norms. Bias is empirically demonstrable, but demonstrating it does not prove that the speaker has reached the wrong conclusion. Judgment is wise or poor, but the difference is not empirically demonstrable in a straightforward way.

I think confusion between bias and judgment is one of the reasons that "even good and, at bottom, worthy people have, in our time, the most extraordinary fear about making judgments." And that leaves the worst of us to display the most passionate intensity.

43. The Laughter of the Gods

The laughter of the gods is *asbestos*:
Unquenchable. It's genuine, hearty,
Unselfconscious. Wet eyes shut to slits; lungs
Heave the mountain air. A shaky finger points
To the god who started it off: Nice one.
He'd mentioned some mortals' pratfall end:
Sinkhole swallowed family car, gas main blew,
Drunken, laid-off father shot wife, kids, dog, self.
Mirth subsiding to satisfied chuckles,
They take sweet foamy sips from the nectar'd bowl.
Then someone starts it up again. What about
Heart attacks, yes, or slow wasting sicknesses?
The joke is contagious; they're all chiming in.
Plagues, famines, lonely singles quietly
Ending it. Civil wars! Firing squads!
They keep it going to maintain the mirth,
Each relishing the others' pleasure:
No pretense, no competition, no critique,
Just a nice way to pass the endless time.

Third

44. When the Lotus Bloomed

I was so distracted, tense, and busy
That I missed the lotus bloom.
Though preoccupied and hasty
I sensed something in the room—
Caught that subtle scent of longing,
That mute yearning to be still—
But I hadn't yet an inkling
That the flower was my will.

(Answering Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* #20 (1912), "On the Day When the Lotus Bloomed," which begins—in Tagore's own English translation—"On the day when the lotus bloomed, alas, my mind was straying, and I knew it not. My basket was empty and the flower remained unheeded.")

45. Questions about happiness

Do we have a right to pay much attention to our own happiness? (Twenty-one children under the age of five die every minute because of preventable causes. Why may you spend an hour reading this text while 1,260 kids die?) Do we have a duty to pay attention to our own happiness?

To what extent can we affect others' happiness? Which others? How?

Does happiness require autonomy, or community, or both? (Can you be happy alone?)

Is it best to aim for a high state of well-being (bliss, satisfaction, etc.) or rather strive to avoid bad mental states (suffering, despair)?

Are there other outcomes for ourselves that we should seek instead of, or as well as, happiness? E.g., excellence, authenticity, dignity? (I leave aside justice to others as a whole topic unto itself.)

Do we know whether we are happy? What kind of knowledge is that? Can we be wrong about it?

Can you tell whether someone else is happy? What evidence is relevant? Could you be right and they be wrong?

Is it possible to compare two people's happiness on one scale?

Should someone else's happiness affect my happiness? Under what circumstances?

For an individual, is there one scale from suffering to bliss, or are there many different continua?

What are the behavioral consequences of happiness? Does happiness necessarily produce observable outcomes at all? Is happiness that does not produce any good outcomes nevertheless desirable?

Are there beliefs about the world that promote happiness? (E.g., only the present is real; or everything happens for a reason.) Are these beliefs true? Does that matter?

To answer, "What is happiness?" must we answer metaphysical and epistemological questions? (E.g., your view of happiness might be very different if a benign creator has created your immortal soul, as opposed to living in a universe in which life is suffering.) The answer might also be different if I can–or cannot–know whether I am happy.

What is the relationship between truth and happiness? Let's disaggregate the virtue of truth into sincerity, integrity (truth to who one is), and responsible inquiry (cf. Williams 2002). Let's break down happiness into pleasure, peace, satisfaction, etc. What are the relationships among these things?

Could being good (or just) to others be a path to happiness for ourselves? Is that a reason to be good? Is that the only reason to be good?

46. Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Orwell

Tolstoy hated Shakespeare and thought that other people's admiration for him was "a great evil, as is every untruth." Orwell's response, "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool," is a rich and wise essay that probably expresses more of what I believe than almost any other 10 pages in English (Orwell 1947). It includes many interesting asides, for instance, about the relationship between aesthetic and moral judgment, Tolstoy's personal resemblance to Lear, and–quite timely for us–a warning not to equate libertarianism/anarchism with real love of freedom:

> There are people who are convinced of the wickedness both of armies and of police forces, but who are nevertheless much more intolerant and inquisitorial in outlook than the normal person who believes that it is necessary to use violence in certain circumstances. They will not say to somebody else, 'Do this, that and the other or you will go to prison', but they will, if they can, get inside his brain and dictate his thoughts

> for him in the minutest particulars. Creeds like pacifism and anarchism, which seem on the surface to imply a complete renunciation of power, rather encourage this habit of mind. For if you have embraced a creed which appears to be free from the ordinary dirtiness of politics — a creed from which you yourself cannot expect to draw any material advantage — surely that proves that you are in the right? And the more you are in the right, the more natural that everyone else should be bullied into thinking likewise.

Orwell is not in the least pious about Shakespeare. His essay is full of high-handed complaints like this one: "Tolstoy is right in saying that Lear is not a very good play, as a play. It is too drawn-out and has too many characters and sub-plots. One wicked daughter would have been quite enough, and Edgar is a superfluous character: indeed it would probably be a better play if Gloucester and both his sons were eliminated." (I don't agree in the slightest, but we have to acknowledge Orwell's independence.)

In any case, the main theme of the essay is a defense of Shakespeare as a "humanist," and one might summarize the debate as follows. The elderly Tolstoy hated the world because people suffered in it. But he thought (along with Schopenhauer, Gandhi, and Christian ascetics) that the world was so organized that one could achieve happiness and redemption by renouncing the everyday temptations and evils of it. As a person, Tolstoy tried to renounce his title, estate, money, and copyrights–although, like Lear, he found that abdication is not easy. As an author, he also increasingly favored renunciation. As Orwell notes:

> He never said that art, as such, is wicked or meaningless, nor did he even say that technical virtuosity is unimportant. But his main aim, in his later years, was to narrow the range of human consciousness. One's interests, one's points of attachment to the physical world and the day-to-day struggle, must be as few and not as many as possible. Literature must consist of parables, stripped of detail and almost independent of language. The parables–this is where Tolstoy differs from the average vulgar puritan–must themselves be works of art, but pleasure and curiosity must be excluded from them.

Shakespeare, in sharp contrast, was a man of the world–to a fault. ("He liked to stand well with the rich and powerful, and was capable of flattering them in the most servile way.") His love of the world was the essence of his art. It led him away from simplifications, generalizations, theories, and moralistic endings. It made him want to depict every kind of thing and character and to keep his own judgments off the stage. It made him love speech to the extent that he could write complete nonsense for the sheer music of it. "Shakespeare was not a philosopher or a scientist, but he did have curiosity, he loved the surface of the earth and the process of life."

In War and Peace, whether to embrace or renounce "life" is an explicit question for Andrei, Pierre, and Marya, among other characters in War and Peace. When Prince Andrei is gravely wounded at Borodino, he is filled with a love for life that makes him embrace and forgive the odious Anatole Kuragin, whom he had once wanted to kill in a duel. The "life" that Andrei loves is highly abstract; its "best and happiest moments" are exemplified by times when, "in his most distant childhood, … burying his head in the pillows, he had felt happy in the mere consciousness of life." With your head buried in pillows, you are not aware of anyone in particular. Andrei could be one of those who love humanity but can't stand people. Shakespeare, I think, was just the opposite–he liked each one of his characters without thinking that the whole business meant anything. "Ripeness is all," as Edgar puts it (having just seen Lear, Tolstoy-like, defeated).

47. Seascape

Tethered sailboats hunched in a row.
A gull sails the diagonal, taut and low.
Wind and sinking sun scribble the bay
With fleeting streaks of blue, green, gray.

No Atlantic lobstermen in my line
(Grim faces leathered from the frozen brine),
Nor any yachtsmen forebears in blue and gold.
I stand uneasy in the twilit cold.

We turn past the point and leave the bay.
The waves foam up and throw the wind their spray,
Soaking the windshields in the ferry's hold.
I stand alone in the whipping cold.

The harbor was not for me; nor was it theirs.
The whole is no one's, saved for no one's heirs.
It's of no account who I may be.
A life is a wave; it is not the sea.

48. Living in the Moment

In *Midlife* (2017) Kieran Setiya offers a helpful way to think about "living in the moment." His argument rests on a distinction between telic activities, which we conduct in order to accomplish them, and atelic activities, which we do for their own sake. "Cook[ing] dinner for your kids, help[ing] them finish their homework, and put[ting] them to bed" are "telic activities

through and through": aimed at their accomplishment. On the other hand, "parenting is complete at every instant; it is a process not a project." You can be doing both at once.

Some people recommend spending more time on purely atelic activities. Retire as soon as you can and play golf. Until then, take time for meditation or a weekly walk in the woods. Such advice is not necessarily practical—or valuable, if it encourages you to lead a life that's less valuable to the world.

Other texts recommend viewing every activity as purely atelic. Notably, that is what Krishna teaches in the *Baghavad Gita*: "Motive should never be in the fruits of action, / nor should you cling to inaction. … / Let go of clinging, and let fulfillment / and frustration be the same" (n.d., Patton trans.) The problem with that advice is that we should aim for good outcomes. It matters what we do, not only our stance toward it.

Setiya's advice is to combine the telic with the atelic. Strive to get the kids to bed (and do that as well as you can), but also think of yourself as parenting. Attend meetings, write emails, and perform calculations all day, but also see yourself as leading a worthy life. This is an example of a meditative practice that incorporates argument, because it requires redescribing what we are doing in new terms. It may, to quote Wordsworth, have "the power to make / Our noisy years seem moments in the being / Of the eternal Silence" (Wordsworth 1804).

Setiya disagrees that "midlife" is a stage that we encounter between the ages of (say) 40 and 60—probably most frequently in affluent societies, where some people have the luxury of dreaming of sports cars. Rather, "midlife" is any moment on the journey of our lives when we have already made consequential and irreversible choices, but when we also face a substantial stretch ahead. In that condition, we encounter specific temptations and troubles, such as regretting paths not taken or fearing that the future will basically be more of the same for a long time to come. These could be the thoughts of people who are 12 or 90, living anywhere in the world, at any level of wealth and freedom. They just tend to be more prominent for people in the middle decades of life who have ascended some way up Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Midlife is a universal circumstance, but its special discontents may not be the most salient for some people at some times.

Setiya argues that midlife's challenges have been underplayed in the history of philosophy, because the main questions have been "What should I do?" (as in Kant) or "What constitutes a good whole human life?" (as in Aristotle). "Neither the prospective question of what to do nor the external, retrospective question of the good human life captures the predicament of midlife" when you must confront a "meaningful past and a meaningful future," when "the question is not simply what to do, but what you have done and what you have not done, what to feel and how to think of yourself."

49. The problem of midlife in Joyce's "The Dead"

It would take a longer argument and more evidence to make this point, but I believe that James Joyce's story "The Dead" (1914) is a reflection on midlife in just the form that Setiya describes. It is about a character in midlife and also about an art form—the written fictional narrative—that faces a midlife crisis of its own. It's safe to say "The Dead" is a greater work than Setiya's *Midlife*. But there are ways in which I prefer the latter.

Starting with Joyce's own brother, Stanislaus, many readers have remarked that "The Dead" reads like a ghost story, conveying an uncanny sense that the characters are literally dead already. When the protagonist, Gabriel, first speaks, it's to note that his wife "takes three mortal hours to dress herself," and his aunts reply that "she must be perished alive." He's already lightly coated with the snow that will bury everything. Language of death or living death echoes throughout.

An exception might be the vivacious nationalist teacher Molly Ivors, who leaves the Christmas party without any explanation and seems to have an unpredictable life still ahead of her. She could be fleeing a party of the undead.

Instead of reading "The Dead" as a ghost story, I'd suggest that its characters have come to see their lives as complete. That is a frame of mind that any adult can adopt while entirely alive, but it is a deathly one. Right at the beginning of *Midlife*, Setiya quotes the article that coined that word, Elliott Jaques' "Death and the Mid-Life Crisis" (1965): "Now suddenly I have reached the crest of the hill, and there stretching ahead is the downward slope with the end of the road in sight—far enough away it's true—but there is death observably present at the end."

In "The Dead," the monks of Mount Melleray sleep in their coffins, Aunt Mary Jane explains, "to remind them of their last end." All the other characters, too, have lives that can be summarized and declared complete. Aunt Julia had a great voice three decades before but no great career, in part because of gender discrimination in the church. Gabriel reflects, "Poor Aunt Julia! She, too, would soon be a shade. … He had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing *Arrayed for the Bridal.* [She never took the path of marriage herself—surely a regret.] Soon, perhaps, he would be sitting in that same drawing-room, dressed in black, his silk hat on his knees. The blinds would be drawn down and Aunt Kate would be sitting beside him, crying and blowing her nose and telling him how Julia had died."

Gabriel is called a "young man," but midlife can happen at any age. In fact, Joyce was also young when he wrote "The Dead." Richard Ellman writes, "That Joyce at the age of twenty-five and -six should have written this story should not seem odd. Young writers reach their greatest eloquence in dwelling upon the horrors of middle age and what follows it" (Ellman 1959/1981, p. 253).

Certainly, Gabriel is dissatisfied with who he is, regretful of certain paths not taken (particularly paths involving Molly), yet skeptical that he can become anything different. These are pitfalls of midlife.

Gabriel does look a little way forward: specifically, to a night in a hotel room with his wife after the party, free from their children. He explicitly and lustfully imagines that immediate future. But his foresight is flawed. Gretta is simultaneously lamenting the story that her life might have taken, had not her youthful suitor Michael Furey tragically died before she met and settled for Gabriel. In this combination of a man who thinks his life is all but done and a woman who mourns for a different existence—neither one understanding the other—we have a dark picture of midlife in just the form that Setiya analyzes it.

"The Dead" is a fitting coda to the collection of *Dubliners*, whose stories are arranged in a rough sequence from childhood to the end of life. The story is also an apt conclusion to a whole tradition of English literature, which Joyce sees as complete and without a future–except that it is possible to reflect beautifully on what literature has been, which is a task of *Ulysses*. In short, "The Dead" is a story about lives seen from the perspective of their ends, and it's also a story about the end of stories.

One might certainly disagree that literature ended around 1900—haven't some good books been written since then?—but Modernists thought it was dying, and several Modernists (in addition to Joyce) tried to make art about its conclusion.

For instance, Walter Benjamin wrote in "The Storyteller" (Benjamin 1936), "The art of storytelling is reaching its end." Developments of the modern era, Benjamin thought, have "quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time [made] it possible to see new beauty in what is vanishing" [iv]. "The Dead" finds a new kind of beauty in the passing world that it describes and in the literary tradition that it culminates.

Benjamin distinguishes between a traditional "story" and a "novel." A story is succinct, vivid, subject to many interpretations, meant to be remembered in full and retold to others. It is a communal object, recited orally to a group of people who enjoy each other's company as they listen and speak in turn.

In contrast, a novel is profoundly individual, a silent communication from one author to one reader at a time. It provides so much detail and interpretation that the reader's creativity is constrained by the author's intentions; and it's too long and carefully constructed to be paraphrased, let alone memorized and retold. Although novels have diverse subjects, the classic topic is one person's inner life as he or she progresses toward a conclusion; and the clearest conclusion is death. Don Quixote is the "first great book of the genre."

A story invites the listeners to continue it, to invent a sequel or to reply with another episode, as we might by imagining what happens to Ms. Ivors. In that sense, she is a character in what Benjamin would call a "story" (and she must leave the novelistic space of "The Dead.") A novel, in contrast, is closed because it depends entirely on the author's imagination. The novelist is the master of the whole text.

Benjamin writes, "there is no story for which the question how it continued would not be legitimate. The novelist, on the other hand, cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing 'Finis'" (xiv). Joyce doesn't literally write "The End" on the last page of Dubliners, but the last sentence couldn't be much more conclusive: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

Gabriel has left instructions to be awakened at eight, so his story will continue. Once the porter knocks, he will have to face a new day with Gretta and then many more days as a teacher, writer, and parent, probably extending well into the twentieth century. But Joyce's story ends where it should; to resume after this crisis would be an aesthetic mistake. As a fictional character, Gabriel is done.

Gabriel envies Michael Furey, whose life ended neatly, if sadly, with his early death. "Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age." Gabriel will have to wither, but we have no interest in following that process. In contrast, it might be interesting to learn how Ms. Ivors fares as Ireland becomes free and women gain opportunity.

Although Benjamin never mentions Joyce or "The Dead" in this essay, he offers a way of reading the story. "Not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of–first assumes transmissible form at the moment of death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story." (x).

Gabriel doesn't die—he doesn't receive that mercy—but he does experience a "sequence of images" that fully summarize the whole story of his life and so concludes it as a meaningful narrative.

Benjamin sees consolation in such a story. "The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by

some virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we will never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about" [xv].

That is a way of describing the cold consolation of "The Dead," which gains its power from the author's awareness of the impasse that confronts his characters, his genre, and himself. As Benjamin noted, novels are written by solitary authors for solitary readers. We do better when we also have peers to share our experience with.

50. Midlife

The young speak to say something, to make a name.
The old repeat to hold themselves the same.
Midlife is for any age, a state of mind.
It's saying what you think you'd better say,
Like it or not, because the words, not you,
Might budge some dense thing in someone's way
(Although by speaking you are using time,
That dwindling light, that sinking sun).
Your words are not true, not original,
Not worth repeating, especially by you;
They have their purpose, they take their turn.
Midlife is the breadwinner, the driver,
The gentle nudge and the picture-taker.
Tender to those who speak to speak, and those
Who sing one more time what they fear to lose.

51. Hilary Mantel and Walter Benjamin

The *Mishna* says that God created humanity in the form of one original person to remind us that to kill one person is like killing all human beings. It means that when Henry VIII had Thomas Cromwell's head chopped off on July 28, 1540, Henry destroyed a whole world.

Hilary Mantel proves this fundamental moral truth by richly imagining the inner life of the Tudor politician in the three volumes of her *Wolf Hall* trilogy. The main character (almost always called "he," without a name), progresses through time and interacts with other people like an ordinary fictional protagonist, but often the narration traces his mind as it jumps to the past or envisions possible futures. Much of the trilogy is devoted to daydreams.

Cromwell is an unlikely candidate to be liked–a shrewd and sometimes ruthless political actor, a Protestant fundamentalist (in our terms), and a royalist. He's also poorly documented. Most

people have seen him as the villain or–at best–the cipher who killed Thomas More and Anne Boleyn. His portrait by Hans Holbein makes him seem private and distant. He is literally set further away than Holbein's other subjects.

I'm guessing that is why Mantel chose him: to exercise her genius for sympathetic imagination. She must invent most of his past and his inner life, presenting a whole subjective world that would otherwise be opaque. We care for Cromwell not because we agree with him or have behaved like him, but because we can see a whole world through his eyes.

Mantel's imagination is extraordinary, whether she is conjuring ordinary physical things like plums and footstools or spinning stories around the documented facts. Just for example, Elizabeth Seymour is sure she has been chosen to marry Thomas Cromwell. But he has invited her to marry his son. They talk at cross-purposes for a whole conversation until the awkward misunderstanding dawns on both of them. Who but Mantel would have thought to insert that twist?

In "The Storyteller"(1936), Benjamin suggests that the novel arises once words can be mass produced for private consumption. It is a capitalist object, meant for a market. It also arises when people become truly afraid of death–not just of dying, but of observing and talking about death. "Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one." But in the bourgeois 19th century, "the general consciousness of the thought of death … declined in omnipresence and vividness." The novel fills a gap by allowing us to imagine the death of an individual who is safely fictional as a way of contemplating our own mortality.

In a story, the hero is admirable beyond realism but hard to imagine from the inside. In a novel, the protagonist is flawed, and the more you read, the more flaws you see. Don Quixote "teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom." Yet we identify with the protagonist because her or his life functions like ours. Any life is a vast array of experiences, memories, and hopes, banal in their totality but unique in their details. A novel consoles us by implying that our life, too, is worthy. Benjamin says:

> To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living.

A life is coherent because the present person has memories of her or his own past. Each of us has a unique collection of memories, and we are sufficiently attached to it that we are sad to think it will vanish with our deaths. We vainly counter that fate with monuments and memoirs and by boring children with our recollections. But a novel allows us to see someone else's memories as a permanent object:

> "No one," Pascal once said, "dies so poor that he does not leave something behind." [NB I have not found this quote in Pascal's work.] Surely it is the same with memories too—although these do not always find an heir. The novelist takes charge of this bequest, and seldom without profound melancholy. …

Benjamin means to criticize the novel and lament the decline of the story. But his real target is capitalism, and the novel gets caught in the crossfire. Certainly, he understands what an achievement a novel is. And none seems to fit his theory better than Mantel's trilogy.

Particularly as Cromwell approaches his end, he seems obsessive about cataloging his past, as if he could leave it as a coherent legacy. He thinks:

> All your life you tramp the empty road with the wind at your back. You are hungry and your spirit is perturbed as you journey on into the gloom. But when you get to your destination the doorkeeper knows you. A torch goes before you as you cross the court. Inside there is a fire and a flask of wine, there is a candle and beside the candle your book. You pick it up and find your place is marked. You sit down by the fire, open it, and begin your story. You read on, into the night (Mantel 2020).

This scene of reading is exactly how Benjamin understands the novel, in general. It is a private experience of taking stock of a life to persuade oneself that it has meaning, even though each of us is but one among billions and fated to vanish.

Benjamin would probably emphasize that Thomas Cromwell was an early bourgeois, building a commercial commonwealth at the expense of the aristocracy and the clergy. Mantel describes foreign and court politics more than domestic policy, but the novel probably conveys–and it is plausibly true–that Cromwell revolutionized English society along bourgeois lines. That would make him a perfect choice for the protagonist of a Benjamin-style novel.

Benjamin doesn't mention that Quixote is about two men, not one. So is the *Wolf Hall* trilogy. Cromwell tells Henry (Mantel 2020):

> "What would I want with the Emperor, were he the emperor of all the world? Your Majesty is the only prince. The mirror and the light of other kings."
>
> Henry repeats the phrase, as if cherishing it: the mirror and the light. He says, "You know, Crumb, I may from time to time reprove you. I may belittle you. I may even speak roughly."
>
> He bows.
>
> "It is for show," Henry says. "So they think we are divided."

As this passage suggests, Cromwell and Henry are mirror and light to each other. We can see their relationship either way, Cromwell reflecting the royal will or Henry shining because of

Cromwell's brilliance. Cromwell can also see himself as a combination of the mirror and the light. "The silver plate, reflecting himself to himself: the mirror and the light of all councillors that are in Christendom."

As in the original master-slave dialectic (Hegel 1806), Henry needs Cromwell as much as vice-versa. Both are appealing in their respective ways, mixing needs and interests with a strong sense of responsibility. Each embodies his proper role–much like Archbishop Cranmer, who "does what is in him. It is all any man can do."

It's important that the trilogy is historical fiction. Mantel gives us access to an unfamiliar objective world along with an unfamiliar subjectivity. The implication is that a lifeworld can survive for five hundred years after the observer dies; maybe the same can happen to you or me. Yet the result feels fragile and precious, dependent on Cromwell's survival as a character and Mantel's art. That fragility charges the novel with suspense even though most readers will have a pretty good sense of how things must end. (Well, it's how all things must end.)

Mantel has invented a diction to summon the world of her novel: 21st-century English that closely describes 16th-century England, with a dose of free indirect discourse (third-person narration that adopts some of the tone of the character being described). Clear anachronisms are rare and may be mistakes. Several characters refer wittily to the sentence, "Et in Arcadia ego," which was coined ca. 1618. And Cromwell's thought, "Florence made me … London unmade me," suggests a reference to Purgatorio, V. 133, which only became famous after 1800. If these are flaws, they are tiny, and perhaps it's best to think of the book as a loose translation of 16th century speech into modern English.

In sum, Mantel seeks to build something that is a terrible shame to end. That is exactly what we should say about any human life: even the life of a renaissance courtier who had many other people's deaths on his conscience. In this sense, the novel is a moral achievement as well as a creative one.

52. When you know, but cannot feel, beauty

In his "Dejection: An Ode," Coleridge describes the sparkling stars and crescent moon above but bemoans his own state of mind:

> I see them all so excellently fair,
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!
> The reason is what we would call depression:
> A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
> A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
> Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
> In word, or sigh, or tear—

I consulted Coleridge's "Dejection" (1802) thanks to Anahid Nersessian's essay on Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" (Nersessian 2021). Nersessian is great at wiping away that sense of Keats as a languorous aesthete, a maker of pretty lyrics. As she shows, the Nightingale ode reports suicidal thoughts. The narrator is "half in love with easeful Death" and seriously considering whether it is time to end it all: "Now more than ever seems it rich to die." The three hard opening words, as Nersessian notes, violate iambic pentameter and ignore the ostensible addressee of the ode. Keats doesn't begin, "O, Nightingale …" but rather, "My heart aches" (Keats 1819).

Nersessian's essay is not a close reading, but it made me turn back to the text of the ode. I wondered: what exactly is the narrator's mental condition? (Remember: Keats had medical training, and the first stanza seems almost clinical.) The presenting complaint is a heart that aches. More specifically, "a drowsy numbness pains / My sense."

This is complicated. Being drowsy and numb suggests a lack of sensation, and that interpretation is reinforced by the analogy to a "dull opiate" that suppresses the narrator's conscious thoughts, sending him toward Lethe. But the numbness "*pains*" his sense, as though he had drunk hemlock. I am not sure whether we should assume that hemlock causes a quiet, sleepy death or an agonizing one: Wikipedia suggests that it triggers respiratory distress. I think that the question of lacking consciousness versus suffering is central to the poem as a whole.

In any case, what is the etiology of this numbness/ache? The narrator denies that he is envious of the nightingale's "happy lot." (The word "thy" in that sentence is the first mention of the ode's subject.) When people deny that they are jealous, sometimes they actually are. But the narrator follows with a subtler point. He does not envy the bird's "happy lot," where "happy" could mean "favoured by good fortune; lucky, fortunate; successful" (OED). The bird's lot is to sing in the mid-May evening, and Keats denies being envious of that. Instead, the nightingale causes heartache by "being too happy in [its] happiness"–in other words, by enjoying its role. This is precisely what Keats' narrator, being depressed, cannot do. The poem describes beauty, yet the narrator cannot *feel* what such precise and evocative words as these should convey:

> The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
> White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
> Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
> And mid-May's eldest child,
> The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
> The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Do we think that the nightingale is happy, in the subjective sense–happy in its happiness? Keats writes that the bird "sing[s] of summer in full-throated ease." I suppose I doubt that it sings "of"

summer. I assume it sings because the month is May, and its song is a component of what makes an English early summer lovely. I don't believe that the bird is describing summer, as a poet could.

To modify an example from Robert B. Brandom (2000)--who discusses a parrot trained to say "red" in the presence of red objects–the nightingale reliably informs us that it is summer by singing, but the bird cannot express the premises and conclusions that relate to this information. The bird cannot say, "It is summer; therefore, it is not winter," or "It is summer because spring is over," or "Since it is summer, we should spend evenings outdoors." To express points like that would be to talk *of* summer. Instead, the nightingale sings because it is summer, and as an aspect of summer.

Indeed, its happiness relates to its ignorance. Keats wishes to forget

> What thou among the leaves hast never known,
> The weariness, the fever, and the fret
> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
> Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
> Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies …

That last line may describe the recent and agonizing death of Keats' brother from tuberculosis, and it eerily foretells Keats' own death from the same cause two years later. These are serious matters, wrenching tragedies, and the bird's enviable condition is to know nothing of them. Its mental state is like that of a human being who has forgotten memories and fears of suffering.

We might expect that the bird's song would cause Keats to forget pain, at least briefly, as he becomes absorbed in the music; but that doesn't work for this narrator, because he is depressed. "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain." Instead, the narrator considers artificial solutions: "some dull opiate," "a draught of vintage," distracting reveries of "faery lands," or–most effective of all, intentional death.

The darkness and anger of the poem should be taken seriously; it is not some pretty thing. Yet it is rapturously beautiful, the source of such nuggets as "tender is the night" and Ruth "amid the alien corn." It is about not being able to feel beauty, yet it conveys beauty from that ailment.

In the fourth stanza, Keats commits to join the nightingale not by drowning his sorrows in drink but through the power of verse:

> Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
> Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
> But on the viewless wings of Poesy,

Though the dull brain perplexes and retards …

His brain is a problem: it perplexes and retards. “Poesy” looks, at least temporarily, like a way out. But why is it “viewless”? That word could mean invisible: we cannot observe how poetry moves the writer or the reader to a better place. Or it could mean unable to see. Certainly, this poet has trouble seeing. Due to the deep darkness where the nightingale sings, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet.” Poetry offers words that name objects, but it does not actually allow us to see them. I think the central idea in the fifth stanza (Keats knows which flowers are present from their scent but cannot see them) is a metaphor for literary description. A poem conveys information but not actual experience.

Then he addresses the bird: “Darkling, I listen.” Calling a nightingale “darkling” is a clear allusion to Book III of *Paradise Lost,* where Milton writes:

... as the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal note. ....

The argument of this passage is that God is light; beautiful things reflect God’s love. Since Milton is blind, he cannot see these objects. He misses the “sight of vernal bloom, or summer’s rose … the cheerful ways of men.” Yet a miracle occurs. God makes the “celestial Light, / Shine inward,” and by purging and dispersing all the ordinary sights of life, allows Milton to “see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight.” Milton is like the nightingale, whose song tells of grace even though the bird cannot see in the darkness.

No such consolation is available to the narrator of Keats’ ode, who offers no hint that nature has a benign author. Nature is what gives people tuberculosis. Keats’ narrator is not only depressed but angry about it.

I will offer an alternative perspective, even though I don’t think Keats would agree with it. We are all like the nightingale; our vocalizations and other behaviors are caused by natural processes. (“Dependent origination.”) We cannot escape suffering, which is intrinsic to sentience and afflicts the bird as well as us. (“The first noble truth.”) Mental pain arises naturally. For instance, Keats must think of his recently deceased brother, because he is physically designed to feel grief. Forgetting such things is impossible, and drowning them out would be unethical. (“The middle way.”) However, Keats is not a real entity, and his condition needn’t interest the poet as much as it does. As he writes elsewhere (Keats 1818), the poet “has no self”; “not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature–how can it, when I have no nature?” (“No-self.”) His protean mind can,

however, fill with thoughts such as appreciation, gratitude, and compassion. (Mindfulness, the "third noble truth.") The beauty of the night is real, just like suffering, and he can focus on the former.

Those who make it across the river and come back to help others over do the most good ("karma"), and Keats' lyrics provide an example. They enrich the inner lives of us who read them. Keats claims no satisfaction from doing this, because he is depressed and because he doesn't hold a Buddhist-ish theory. But he achieves what he cannot recognize, and we can read him compassionately for that reason. After all, the last five words ("Do I wake or sleep?") are no longer addressed to the nightingale, which has departed for the "next valley-glades." They must pose a question for us, opening a dialogue with readers and perhaps seeking our compassion, which we can give. If our minds are filled with compassion, we have less space for pain.

Keats was an unbelievably good poet. What if we can't write immortal verse–can we then return to help others cross to a better place? I would say: Keats is a stranger to us, dead two centuries, and worth reading because his words are so excellent. The rest of us just say mundane things, like, "Did you hear that bird?" But we can say such things in relationships–to people we know and like or love. When embedded in a friendship or love, a remark like "Did you hear that bird?" conveys pleasure and care. By that means, we can alleviate suffering even if we could never come up with a phrase as good as "with beaded bubbles winking at the brim."

53. Foucault's spiritual exercises

Here is Michel Foucault's definition of "spirituality":

> *… I think we could call "spirituality" the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call "spirituality" then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth. Let's say that spirituality, as it appears in the West at least, has three characteristics.*
>
> *[1] Spirituality postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right. … It postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. … It follows that from this point of view there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject.*
>
> *[2] Eros [the subject's attraction to the truth, or the truth's movement to the subject] and askesis [labor] are, I think, the two major forms in Western spirituality for*

conceptualizing the modalities by which the subject must be transformed in order finally to become capable of truth.

[3] The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquility of the soul. In short, in the truth and in access to the truth, there is something that fulfills the subject himself, which fulfills or transfigures his very being. [Foucault, 1981-2/2005, pp. 15-16]

Foucault distinguishes spirituality from philosophy: "the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to the truth" (p. 15).

Although philosophy and spirituality are different, all the Greek and Roman philosophers–except (Foucault thinks) Aristotle–believed that a person could not have access to the truth without first being transformed into a better self. Therefore, all the classical philosophers argued *for* spirituality, as defined above. More than that, they combined their philosophical arguments with spiritual instruction, because they saw the two as inseparable.

One of the main topics that a self was supposed to understand was justice. To understand justice required improving oneself. In turn, learning about justice made a person better. "Consequently, taking care of oneself and being concerned with justice amount to the same thing" (p. 72, here interpreting Plato).

These presuppositions of ancient philosophy and spirituality contrast with two prevalent modern traditions. First:

- *Science* is that set of methods and institutions (such as labs, PhD programs, and peer-review) that allow us to know nature *without* having to improve the self first. A scientist "can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject" (p. 17). In turn, science generates knowledge that may not improve anyone spiritually. Nature is precisely the realm that is independent of our spiritual condition. If some scientists prepare themselves mentally to do their jobs or gain tranquility from what they discover about nature, those are incidental facts about them as people. Spiritual preparation may not be necessary, and it certainly isn't sufficient. Science is about methods, techniques, instruments, rules, and norms that prevent the self from influencing knowledge. And science pursues truth without flinching even when the results are morally problematic.

I would add another tradition as a contrast with ancient spirituality, although I am not sure Foucault would agree:

- *Liberalism* is the political tradition that seeks to base good government on well-designed institutions (rights, checks-and-balances, elections and other mechanisms of accountability) so that good government need *not* depend on the moral excellence of either leaders or the people. Good institutional design is a more secure basis for justice than human excellence. Further, in a well-designed polity, we can leave people alone in their private lives instead of badgering them to transform themselves. Thus liberalism is compatible with freedom as autonomy and with diverse understandings of the good life.

According to Foucault, classical spiritual traditions lived on in Christianity. Spirituality ran into trouble with the rise of scholasticism, which made the study of God into a kind of science. Drawing on Aristotle, medieval scholastics provided methods for understanding God and nature that did not depend upon spiritual self-improvement. They left methods of self-improvement to non-scholars, a division that continues today.

I struggle to decide where Foucault stands himself. Does he give detailed lectures about Greco-Roman spiritual traditions because he believes that modern science and governance are bad and he wants us to return to a better way? Does he describe these Hellenistic traditions dispassionately, as a contribution to truth that may not improve us or himself? (In other words, is he a scientist of the past?) Or does he seek to liberate us from spirituality *and* science by demonstrating the historical contingency of both? If we shed spirituality and science, what are we left with?

I don't know, but I enjoy the moments in the lectures when Foucault interacts with his audience. For instance, here he demonstrates concern:

> *[Is there] another room you can use? Yes? And are those people there because they cannot get into the other room or because they prefer to be there? I am sorry that the conditions are so bad, I can do nothing about it and as far as possible I would like to avoid you suffering too much. Okay, earlier, while talking about these techniques of the self and their existence prior to Platonic reflection on the epimeleia heautou [care of oneself], it came to mind, and I forgot to mention it to you, that there is a text … (p. 65)*

And here, he is playing with his audience:

> *I was saying that it seemed to me that at a certain moment … the link was broken, definitively I think, between access to the truth, which becomes the autonomous development of knowledge (connaissance), and the requirement of the subject's trans-formation of himself and of his being. When I say "I think it was definitively broken," I don't need to tell you that I don't believe any such thing, and that what is interesting is precisely that the links were not broken abruptly as if by the slice of a knife (pp. 25-6).*

Foucault respected and learned from his colleague Pierre Hadot, a great scholar of Hellenistic thought. Hadot emphasized that the Hellenistic thinkers did not write systematic treatises. They were teachers who worked with students or other audiences in concrete circumstances.

> Philosophy in antiquity was a spiritual exercise. … Whether we have to do with dialogues as in the case of Plato, class notes as in the case of Aristotle, treatises like those of Plotinus, or commentaries like those of Proclus, a philosopher's works cannot be interpreted without taking into consideration the concrete situation which gave birth to them. They are the products of a philosophical school, in the most concrete sense of the term, in which a master forms his disciples, trying to guide them to self-transformation and -realization. Thus, the written work is a reflection of pedagogical, pyschagogic, and methodological preoccupations.
>
> Although every written work is a monologue, the philosophical work is always implicitly a dialogue. The dimension of the possible interlocutor is always present within it. This explains the incoherencies and contradictions which modern historians discover with astonishment in the works of ancient philosophers. [Hadot, 1995, pp. 104-5]

Foucault's concrete situation was rather unusual. As a holder of a chair in the College de France, he was required only to conduct his own research and report the results annually in a series of lectures–free, public, and uncredited. Because he was an academic superstar, he gave these lectures to a packed lecture hall and overflow areas, with ranks of tape-recorders piled on the desk before him. The audience could not literally discuss with him, but he could address them in a dialogic way.

Here is Foucault's description of Epictetus:

> *Unlike Seneca, [Epictetus] is a teacher by profession [and] he really does have a school. He opens a school which is called "school" and in which he has students. And, of course, among his students there are a number, no doubt a considerable number, of young people who come to be trained. … It should not be thought that the care of the self, as principal axis of the art of life, was reserved for adults. But alongside this, intertwined with this training of young people, we can say that in Epictetus's school there is also what could be called, employing an unjust metaphor no doubt, an open shop: an open shop for adults. And in fact adults come to his school to hear his teaching for one day, for a few days or for some time. Here also, in the social world evoked in the Discourses, you see, for example, a town inspector passing through, a sort of tax procurer if you like. He is an Epicurean who comes to consult Epictetus and ask him questions. There is a man sent to Rome by his town who, passing through Asia Minor to Rome, stops to ask*

> *Epictetus questions and get advice on how he can best accomplish his mission. Moreover, Epictetus by no means disregards this clientele, or these adult interlocutors, since he advises his own students, young people therefore, to find prominent people in their town and to shake them up a bit by saying: Tell me then, how do you live? Do you really take proper care of yourselves? (p. 90)*

I think Foucault's own role is similar. And that makes him–not a scientist of history–but a practitioner and provider of spiritual exercises.

54. Tangled beauty

Let us be glad for tangled things--
  For soiled fingers raking thick-stemmed grass;
    For matted fur on long, warm ears;
A child's hair twisted, plaited, curled in rings.
  A thatch of ganglia fires in the brain's wet mass:
    A thought--electric--splits, connects, adheres.

All things rooted, snarled, or tensed,
  Whatever needs some mesh to form its mass,
With loops, forks; twists, knots; ends, tears.
  Let us give thanks for things both soft and dense

Fourth

55. Hush

Thin stands of bare-limbed maples and pines
Barely hide cinder-block buildings and signs,
But snow, fresh snow, wet snow: snow drapes all.
Each twig or needle bears as many crystals
As could possibly be piled upon it,
Becoming a slender line under white,
Each just a tiny part of the lacy whole.
Trees are huge versions of their own branches;
Branches, like their own ornamented twigs;
Drifts, composed of delicate, gem-like flakes.
No shortcuts. No “Paint that whole section white.”
Even in the densest thickets, each branch
Is intricately decorated with snow.
What superfluous generosity,
What quiet power. The road, too, is hushed.
Cars file through, wheels whispering, as if
Reminded of what they have done, although
The storm does not mean to chide or console.
It is not meant for us; it only is.

56. The sublime and other people

People appreciate natural phenomena, find ways to represent aspects of what they see, and share the results. We have done this, I suppose, for at least 64,000 years, since the oldest cave paintings we know.

In some cases, an explicit goal is to thank a benevolent power for the gift. For instance, I love how Gerard Manley Hopkins (1877) detects a Divine Father behind all “dappled things“–like “skies of couple-colour” or “a brinded cow.” “Praise Him,” says Hopkins. Unfortunately, I cannot share that type of explanation.

For others, the theme is the objective beauty of nature, understood as impersonal but perfect. “The hills / Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales / Stretching in pensive quietness between …” (Bryant, 1811 or 1816). I must admit that I am struck by the subjectivity of such

judgments. Our dog appreciates, but I don't think he is much taken by distant vistas of snow on sagging branches. Smelly fire hydrants are closer to his sublime. A nest of cockroaches has as much objective complexity and order as a snow-covered forest, but most of us human beings (although not all of us) would recoil from it. Nature gives us pure drifts of fresh snow, but also muddy slush and freezing rain. These examples cause me to doubt that beauty lies in nature.

Another response is that we are constituted to enjoy things like snowy views, and this is a wonderfully good fact about us. Just as we may lament our human proclivities to violence, despair, and cruelty, so we can celebrate our ability to savor what we find sublime. And not only celebrate it, but actively cultivate this appreciation and share it with other people through the representations that we create. In that case, the beauty is essentially in us, but it is really there, and that is a reason for gratitude.

I don't know whether human beings are automatically constituted to enjoy a snowscape. Perhaps we are, but our responses could vary by personality and culture. I am sure that my own appreciation is something learned. I do not simply see the snow; I see it with things already in my mind, like Christmas decorations, paper snowflakes on second-grade bulletin boards, Ezra Jack Keats' *A Snowy Day*, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "Hunters in the Snow," Han-shan's Cold Mountain lyrics, Robert Frost's "lovely, dark and deep" woods, Hiroshige's woodblock prints of wintry Japan, Rosemary Clooney with Bing Crosby. In short, I have been taught to appreciate a winter wonderland, a marshmallow world, and a whipped cream day. Some of these influences probably detract, but they were meant well, which is how I would defend "Hush."

It's sometimes said that when Petrarch climbed Mont Ventoux (in Provence) in 1336–simply to enjoy and describe the view–he was the first European ever to do such a thing. Clearly, some people outside of Europe had loved mountain views long before Petrarch. I find it plausible that certain communities of people appreciate vistas, while others do not. And some of us may have learned the sublimity of landscapes from a chain of people originally inspired by Petrarch, although he was surely influenced by the classical sources that he knew so well. We all see what we have learned to see.

To me, this debt to other human beings only deepens the sublime. Nature was not created for us; it just is. And we were not created to enjoy it, although–very fortunately–we do. But our fellow human beings have deliberately shared their appreciation and heightened our own, which means that we are the beneficiaries of benevolent intelligence after all. Praise them.

57. For Gerard Manley Hopkins

Gerard Manley Hopkins, interred
Two lifelengths long in loathèd Irish sod,
Somehow through the raked pebbles heard

A tourist throng his verse applaud.
Straining, he understood the docent say
That he'd been superstitious,
unpublished, bipolar, gay.
Born later, he'd have had his wishes;
Fame, sprung rhythms (think of rap!),
Love for man without the monkish trap.
He thought: *this* is the end I always mourned for;
This is the blight that I was born for.

58. The sublime is social

In secular (and probably upscale) reaches of our society, two suggestions are common for restoring mental health and equanimity: we should experience nature and reconnect to our bodies through meditation or exercise.

Of course, prayer is also an option, and activities such as walking in the woods and yoga have roots and analogues in religious traditions. Here, however, I focus on practices that are open to non-believers.

Such experiences are supposed to be authentic, personal, and at least somewhat distinct from the everyday world of conscious thoughts, words, social roles, organizations, and transactions. Although you can have these experiences alongside other people, an important aspect is inward and often literally silent. Something like the pure or raw self is thought to emerge.

This aphorism is a modest contribution to the argument–which others have also made–that it is a mistake to understand such experiences individualistically. Other people are always integrally involved, and it is wise to be maximally conscious of them.

Although practices like hiking and meditation can be routine or even trivial, they bear at least a distant relationship to notions of the *sublime*. That word has been defined in diverse and incompatible ways–producing an interesting debate–but a common feature seems to be an aesthetic experience that lastingly improves the self and that would be difficult, if not impossible, to convey in ordinary words. Either a sublime experience exceeds human language or else it requires particularly *excellent* words (such as verse by Homer or Wordsworth) to convey. The natural or religious sublime is sometimes presented as beyond speech, while the literary or rhetorical sublime defines superior speech.

The premise that a sublime experience cannot be shared using ordinary language contains the germ of the conclusion that we do not need other people to experience it. That conclusion is especially problematic in a consumerist culture with relatively loose social ties and high levels

of inequality–a society that generates headlines like this one from Wired in 2013, “In Silicon Valley, Meditation Is No Fad. It Could Make Your Career: Meditation and mindfulness are the new rage in Silicon Valley. And it’s not just about inner peace—it’s about getting ahead” (Schachtman, 2013).

Most thoughtful analysts are aware that words, conscious thoughts, and other people do not go away when one experiences the sublime. For one thing, we are always *morally* indebted to other people. We can’t go for a walk in the woods unless someone has preserved that forest and built those trails. In the Americas, the land was previously conquered from indigenous people. The shoes on our feet and the food in our stomach were made by other human beings. In many cases, the aesthetic experience was skillfully shaped by people: landscapers and foresters, yoga instructors, or whoever else is relevant. It is wise to thank those who made the sublime possible, yet empty expressions of thanks can be worse than nothing.

In addition, we acquire our tastes, our aesthetic values, and our ability to process experience from other people. None of us understands all the ways that our experiences have been shaped by our predecessors, but we all absorb the development of our societies as we develop from infants into adults. There is no raw self.

In fact, many have sought to combine explicit records of past human experiences with direct experiences of nature and one’s body. Thoreau says of his time alone at Walden Pond, “My residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world.” And David Morris reminds us, “Whether meditating by the sea, contemplating the night sky, or crossing the Alps, eighteenth-century enthusiasts for nature rarely forgot their reading: the classics were Addison’s guidebook to Italy, while Joseph Warton’s vision of unspoiled nature comes straight from Lucretius and Shaftesbury” (Morris 1972, p. 7).

Whether to combine introspective experience with literature is a personal choice; it is surely not the only path. But I do believe that the current tendency to see the sublime as purely personal is self-centered, in a consumerist way, and we must bring other people in.

With that in mind, let’s consider one of the most famous depictions of a restorative experience in nature, Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”. The narrator says that his memories of this spot on the Wye River have given him a “gift / Of aspect more sublime,” a “blessed mood” …

> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world,
> Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,

In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

This seems like a perfect example of what people nowadays might call self-care through nature.

The story told in the poem is a little complicated. We learn, but not in chronological order, that Wordsworth first came to the Wye River Valley "in the hour / Of thoughtless youth," when he could still enjoy nature spontaneously, almost as a part of it, "bound[ing] o'er the mountains … wherever nature led" with "animal movements." In those days, he did not need concepts or words ("a remoter charm, / By thought supplied") to filter his experience.

Memories of those "boyish days" sustained the narrator while he was busy in the human world of "joyless daylight; when the fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world" hung over him. Now he has returned to the same spot and finds that he cannot again feel the "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" of the place, but he is compensated by a new insight. Now in nature he hears "the still sad music of humanity" and realizes that "the mind of man, a motion and a spirit … rolls through all things."

At the outset, he is eager to portray what he sees as nature, not as culture. For instance, he mentions "hedge-rows" (which are planted and maintained by human beings) and then corrects himself: "hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild," as if they were nature's free creations. But by the midst of the poem, he acknowledges that mind and nature are "deeply interfused."

And then a third person appears in the poem (counting the narrator as one and the reader as two). This is a "you" who is "with me here upon the banks." This "dearest Friend" emerges as his sister, Dorothy. The poet's objective becomes to record her experience of the natural scene so that she can better recall it as her life proceeds, and so that she can vividly remember sharing this experience of nature with her brother. His poem will be a mnemonic (see Rexroth 2021) to give her "healing thoughts" amid the "dreary intercourse of daily life."

Thus Wordsworth's sublime is not private or individualistic in a simple sense. But perhaps it is not admirably social, either. In an influential 1986 article, Marjorie Levinson noted that Wordsworth not only chose not to describe Tintern Abbey in this poem (even briefly), but he also omitted many obvious features of the Wye River at that time: "prominent signs of

commercial activity" such as "coal mines, transport barges noisily plying the river [and] miners' hovels." Tintern was a mining village, and the woods were full of "vagrants" who "lived by charcoal-burning" or begging from tourists (Levinson 1986, pp. 29-30). The abbey was a literal ruin–albeit picturesque to some–because it had been suppressed in the Reformation and sold to landlords who had dispossessed the agricultural population, creating whatever unpopulated vistas one could see in 1798.

Levinson argues that Wordsworth knew all this well, and that "the primary poetic action" of the whole poem "is the suppression of the social." It "achieves its fiercely private vision by directing a continuous energy toward the nonrepresentation of objects and points of view expressive of a public–we would say, ideological–dimension" (pp. 37-8). The poem is a sign of Wordsworth's retreat from political engagement in the late 1790s.

Levinson's 1986 article has provoked some responses in defense of Wordsworth; I have not tried to assess the controversy. For me, these are the key points: Wordsworth exemplifies a currently popular way of addressing discontent or even anguish–enjoying nature–and he is conscious that "humanity," human language, and human relationships are part of that experience. Yet he is notably apolitical. An analysis of why nature looks as it does–who has profited and suffered from it–is missing from the poem. And this seems to foreshadow many contemporary versions of the sublime

59. More Temporate

Most trees have leafed out for two or three days.
Each leaf unfolding in place to fill its space, green;
But the trees that flowered are wilting now,
Bold blooms shrinking to leave more space between,
Dwindling to stipples along each bough.
Superimposed: a lacy screen, damascened,
Patches on a slate background--the dripping sky--
Grey except at some hidden place where a break
Must let the sun flood up to certain high
Shingles, a wire, a spire that's a streak
Of brilliant white. All silent, a still sheen,
Sheer, stretched thin to fade or end in a blaze.

60. The right and responsibility to be happy

Two theses:

> You have a right (and even an obligation) to be concerned about your own inner wellbeing–call it happiness, peace, lack of suffering, equanimity, satisfaction, or mental health.
>
> Inner wellbeing is a complex issue, not just a matter of maximizing a simple mental state, such as pleasure.

The first premise is far from obvious. More than three million children die every year from undernutrition alone. Their deaths are stark evidence of grave deprivation that affects many more who do not happen to die. Almost half a million human beings are murdered annually around the world, again just a fraction of those who suffer from intentional violence. And even within the United States, more than two million of our fellow citizens are incarcerated, reflecting both severe hardship for the prisoners as well as a trail of harms that many of them have done to others. Under circumstances like these, why may a person like me (who is healthy, safe, and affluent) pay any attention to improving my own inner wellbeing?

No doubt, I ought to be concerned about others. Yet anyone's inner welfare is also a valid and important concern *for that person.* This is because it seems to be necessary for human beings to be involved in making themselves happy or satisfied; no one can simply do that for us. So even if the goal were to maximize everyone's happiness, that couldn't be accomplished by a world of individuals who were concerned only with other people. They would also have to be responsible for themselves. Pure altruism or other-regardingness is not the ideal, because there would then be no one in a position to make each individual happier.

To be sure, we can ruin other people's wellbeing, for instance by putting them in fear or anguish. And we can fail to remedy objective circumstances, such as poverty or political oppression, that prevent others from achieving wellbeing. In other words, outer circumstances and inner wellbeing are related. But the links are fairly loose. Some people who know no physical pain and have plenty of money are nevertheless miserable to the point of suicide. Poor villagers who live under a repressive government can be happier than wealthy suburbanites who are well treated by the state. We could make the distribution of rights and goods perfectly just in a whole society and yet everyone could be miserable because they failed to understand how to achieve inner welfare.

Maybe if we organized societies better, everyone would be happier. That is certainly worth trying, but we must also remember the value of freedom. Aldous Huxley's 1931 novel *Brave New World* presents as a dystopia a future in which pharmaceuticals, sexual promiscuity, and efficient production have maximized happiness but thereby robbed people of the value and satisfaction that comes from having to struggle as independent and free actors. Free people choose diverse paths and set diverse priorities, some of which lead them to *unhappiness*. If we honor freedom, then we will be hesitant to make people happy at the cost of their freedom.

This is why, in liberal democracies, happiness is not usually seen as a political objective. A government probably cannot make people happy and may threaten their liberty if it tries. The same is true of a parent within a family unit and a boss in a workplace. Each of these have real but limited responsibility for others' happiness.

Some authors have argued that the only thing to worry about is our own inner wellbeing. A strong example is Epictetus. This major Stoic was born around 55 CE as a slave: his name means "purchased." He was disabled, perhaps because of a master's violence. Later in life, he was sent into exile. Yet he became a byword for virtue among both pagan philosophers and early Christians. His core insight was that accidents like disease, enslavement, and exile need not affect your happiness. You can divide all matters into those over which you have control (your own desires, emotions, and private thoughts) and those that are beyond your control (not only disease, suffering, and death but also worldly riches and success). You can learn to care only about the things that you control and can put them in perfectly good order. For instance, you can come to care only about having virtuous intentions, and you can learn to accept whatever happens outside your mind. "Don't seek for things to turn out as you wish, but wish for them to turn out as they do, and then you will get on well" (Epictetus*, Enchiridion* 8.) Similar ideas have been worked out in Buddhist and Hindu traditions.

I think his view has two severe drawbacks. First, it reflects an unrealistic psychology. We are evolved, natural creatures. We evolved to be psychologically vulnerable to other people's treatment. We cannot control our desires and responses to the degree that Epictetus suggests. For instance, it is beyond most people's capacity to be happy when subjected to abuse or when abandoned and neglected. In fact, we could say that human beings are so constituted that we need other people to take care of us and that we must take care of ourselves. That is why living a good life requires having (and acting upon) the best possible ideas about your inner life and your relations to others.

Second, even when other people are able to make themselves fully happy, we must still be concerned about justice. For instance, if I were to encounter an advanced Buddhist sage who genuinely did not suffer even slightly when I stole his rice bowl, I would still be wrong to take it from him. Epictetus would agree so far; he is against mistreating our fellow human beings. But justice is more than refraining from harming people. I am also obliged to worry about whether other people are stealing food–and whether they have enough to eat in the first place. In other words, a good life includes concern for social justice: for the design, improvement, and maintenance of whole systems. That requires forming desires about the way society is organized and acting to realize those desires–in a word, it requires "politics." But politics belongs to the category of things that we cannot control, things that are governed by other people's wills and by fate. Just like making plans to be rich or popular, forming plans to improve a society exposes us to failure and disappointment.

Epictetus advises against political engagement:

> *You can become invincible if you enter no competition that is not in your power to win. When you see someone honored above others or able to do many things or otherwise admired, do not be carried away by the appearances and consider him blessed/happy. For if the essence of the good lies in what we can achieve, then there is no space for ill-will or jealousy. Rather, for yourself, don't strive to be a general or an office-holder or a leader/consul, but to be free. The only road to that is contempt for things not in your power* (Epictetus, *Enchirdion*, 19).

But the world needs the modern equivalents of generals, senators, and consuls, plus managers and committee chairs and active members of all kinds of groups. To be an active citizen is a of a good life–if not for all human beings, then at least for many. And that requires being concerned about justice to others as well as your own inner wellbeing.

The sorrows of Pandora's Box fall into three categories. Some forms of suffering happen to human beings because of the kinds of creatures we are. We can postpone death, aging, disease, pain, and fear, but they are inevitable. Our very existence requires the death of other people, or else the earth would be too crowded for the living. Modern science asserts that we can mitigate these sources of suffering. For instance, we may not be able to cure mortality but we can medicate to reduce pain, anxiety, and other adverse mental states. Stoics and some Buddhists would counsel that we can take the sting out of the same adversities by disciplining our emotional reactions. I am not sure that either strategy can fully succeed.

A different set of injustices are miseries for which we rightly blame our fellow human beings. For instance, we oppress each other politically, exploit each other economically, and exclude each other socially. And even if we are not guilty at a given moment of any of those sins of commission, we may be guilty of grievous sins of omission. I am failing right now to help people even though I own superfluous resources.

The third category is a failure to flourish, thrive, enjoy, and achieve equanimity or satisfaction. Addressing this third category requires focusing inward, on our own moral commitments and beliefs, and seeing if we can improve them to make ourselves happier. Insofar as we can help other people with that task, one of the best ways may be to set a good example.

In short, your happiness should not be your only concern, but it should be one of your concerns.

61. Happiness is complicated

Much valuable research is being conducted today on the causes and conditions of happiness. Traditionally focused almost entirely on distress and pathology, the discipline of psychology is

now turning to positive states and trying to learn what causes them. Meanwhile, economics is moving away from the simplistic premise that the purpose of an economy is to generate wealth and is beginning to conceive of a successful economy as one that makes people happy. The findings of happiness psychology and related research in economics tend to confirm what ancient Stoics, Skeptics, Epicureans and Buddhists advised.

For instance, people seem to gain happiness by being deeply immersed in a purposeful current activity, instead of thinking about the past or the future and instead of doing things that might seem pleasurable but that lack purpose. Acknowledging precedents in Eastern philosophy, the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi recommends "flow," or single-minded immersion in an activity over which we have control. Note that flow comes from activity, not from passive experience.

Another source of happiness is caring relationships with fellow human beings. Most people are happier when they feel they contribute to worthwhile communities. That doesn't mean that highly social people necessarily avoid being depressed. The psychologist Corey Keyes disputes the assumption that people fall on one continuum from depression to happiness (where the latter is defined as a lack of depression). Keyes' survey research finds that the depression/happiness spectrum exists, but there is a second spectrum as well. This second continuum ranges from "languishing" to "flourishing," where flourishing encompasses positive emotions, positive psychological functioning (such as believing that your life has purpose, or having warm and trusting relations), and positive social functioning (which includes positive beliefs about other people, confidence that one's own daily activities are useful for others, and belonging to a community). "Languishing" is basically the absence of flourishing. (Keyes 2002, Keyes 2007 and conversations with Keyes).

Since the flourishing/languishing scale is distinct from happiness/depression, it is possible to be depressed and flourishing. In fact, Keyes movingly discloses in public talks that he fits in that quadrant, being clinically depressed and also flourishing. His findings are important because flourishing brings powerful benefits. For example, it reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease to roughly the same degree as not smoking does. Although languishing is different from mental illness, languishing is bad for your mental health in the long run. In fact, your odds of suffering a diagnosed mental illness later on are just as bad if you are languishing now as if you have a mental illness now. If you would like to be free of mental illness in a few years, it's just as important to start doing purposeful good work for others as it is to treat your depression or anxiety.

Another finding is that anger and resentment are very bad for happiness, and the best remedy is genuinely to forgive and feel empathy for the person who is the source of anger.

These and other findings from empirical psychology are worth knowing. However, I would not literally commit myself to them as maxims, for four large reasons.

First, they are based on statistical research into large numbers of human beings. Individuals differ. Although there is a general tendency for people to have better inner lives when they care for others, that may not be true for all. There may be genuine introverts who are happiest alone, and also psychopaths who are happiest when they harm others. Even if you are neither an introvert nor a psychopath, you are still unique, not a statistical mean, and so it requires introspection and experience to determine what makes you happy.

Second, these findings are very vague and general. "Immerse yourself in a meaningful current activity" is a succinct statement of a valid general principle. But at least for me, it would have little force because I know that I can only immerse myself in some kinds of activity, at some times, for some purposes. Moreover, each of these activities has limitations, costs, tradeoffs, and risks. The kinds of principles that seem worthy of endorsement are much more specific and qualified than the general maxim to "pursue flow."

Third, other people are intrinsically involved. You can't, for instance, feel confident that your own daily activities are useful for others (one of Keyes' components of flourishing) unless you are actually responsive to other people's needs and interests. What they need and want varies and should influence you. There can also be genuine sources of happiness that should be tempered or even avoided because they are not fair to other people. For instance, when I am thoroughly absorbed in a creative activity, I experience "flow," but I am not being a very good parent, spouse, colleague, or citizen. Although life provides sufficient time for a bit of both, I don't want to commit to "flow" without acknowledging the tradeoffs for other people.

Finally, these psychological findings are about inputs (experiences, activities, or commitments) and the positive mental states that result. For instance, if you forgive other people, you will be less angry and less subject to stress. If you immerse yourself in the present, you will be happier. Those are causal hypotheses. They beg the question of what outcomes we should want. It is not self-evident that we should want to be happy. At best, that vague term needs to be spelled out in more detail. Are we after calmness and acceptance? Excitement and intense positive experience? Satisfaction? Passion? These are complex and controversial topics, and the science of psychology cannot answer them. It can advise about how to get the various outcomes but not which ones to pursue. In short, inner wellbeing requires analysis as well as explanation. We cannot just decide to attend to our own happiness. We must reason about what our inner life should be like.

Imagine that the only thing that mattered was how we scored on one simple scale from intense pleasure to intense pain. Then attending to our inner welfare would be a matter of moving ourselves up the scale as far as we could go at any point. But, as Robert Nozick noted in

Anarchy State and Utopia (Nozick 1974, pp. 42-45), we would not choose to be hooked to an "experience machine" that kept us permanently at the top end of the pleasure scale. Why not? Presumably because happiness–so defined–is not what we want, or to put it another way, the maximization of pleasure is not true happiness. The word that is usually translated as "happiness" from ancient Greek–eudaimonia–has complex meanings and associations, but it is closer to actively and intentionally flourishing than to feeling pleasure.

If we do not want to have as much pleasure as possible all the time, then what do we want for our inner lives? The answer may include some combination of pleasure, satisfaction, enjoyment, peace, equanimity, acceptance, hope, purpose, and passion, to name just some desirable mental states. Some of them go neatly and comfortably together. For instance, it could be that equanimity requires acceptance; then those two nodes are linked with an arrow. But some of these concepts are at least potentially at odds. To have purpose and passion may be incompatible with acceptance. Hope is a virtue in Christianity but not in classical Greek or Buddhist thought, which view hope as naive and inconsistent with equanimity.

Modern academic philosophy in the countries strongly influenced by the West is not especially focused on getting these ideas in good order. It attends more to ethics (in the sense of treating other creatures right) and social justice (organizing a social system fairly) than to inner wellbeing. In 1958, Elizabeth Anscombe noted and lamented that omission. "It can be seen" she wrote, "that there a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human 'flourishing'" (Anscombe 1958). To the extent that matters have improved since 1958, that is because academic philosophers in countries like the US and Britain have revisited authors from earlier traditions, notably the pre-Christian Greeks, the classical Asian thinkers, and subsequent works under their influence. Owen Flanagan (2014) argues that Buddhism and "Western" philosophy have compensating weaknesses and advantages. Buddhism gives rich and detailed accounts of the inner life but fails (as yet) to provide satisfactory accounts of social justice, especially in complex modern societies composed of states and markets. Western philosophy offers much weaker and more cursory accounts of the good inner life. We must put the pieces back together.

62. How to think about other people's interests: Rawls, Buddhism, and empathy

John Rawls (1971) argues that to know what justice demands, you should collect all the relevant available information about how the society in general works, but you should then imagine that you don't know your own position in the society and ask what rules and institutions you would favor–in your own interest–under this "veil of ignorance."

To make that method seem intuitive, imagine that I am considering whether it is desirable for such institutions as Yale University to exist. I should try to understand how Yale functions, today

and in the past, in the broader society. But I should try not to be influenced by the fact that I was admitted to Yale and graduated from there. I should ask whether the existence of Yale would be a good thing if I did not know whether I would ever get anywhere near it. Thus general knowledge plus self-interest plus ignorance about my own circumstance equals justice.

We could think of this thought-experiment as a way of modeling justice. Just as we test a model of a new airplane in a wind tunnel, so we test a theory of justice by using Rawls' veil of ignorance, because that will yield the same results as justice itself would yield if we could know directly what justice says.

Now compare Rawls' method to those developed in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. McRae begins her chapter (McRae 2017): "Imagine yourself as an old yak … your back weighed down with a load far too heavy, a rope pulling you by the nostrils, your flanks whipped, your ribs bruised by the stirrups." She is quoting the nineteenth-century Tibetan master Parrul Rinpoche, who offers it as an exercise in empathy.

McRae defines bodhicitta as a "radically altruistic moral orientation that centrally involves cultivating oneself in order to be the kind of person who can reliably, effectively, and wisely benefit others… . The cultivation involved in becoming a person with bodhicitta–a bodhisattva — … includes developing virtues such as patience, generosity, and wisdom, and moral skills such as mindfulness, moral reasoning, responsiveness, and, arguably, empathy. … .Empathy practices [such as imagining that you are a yak] are traditionally presented in the context of cultivating bodhicitta, since empathy triggers both virtuous emotionality (through the Four Immeasurable Qualities practices) and the realization of no-self (through exchanging self and other practices), both of which are necessary for bodhicitta."

Here are some differences:

- Rawls tries to make moral reasoning as impersonal as possible, whereas the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition strives for maximum concrete identification with other sentient beings.
- In the Buddhist tradition, you cultivate empathy. Rawls provides a way of determining justice that does not require empathy–in part because empathy can be biased, manipulated, and otherwise untrustworthy.
- Rawls treats every person as equal, whereas a stance of "radical altruism" implies that the thinker should count everyone else as more important than herself.
- Rawls' theory is limited to "persons" (probably human beings), whereas Buddhism extends to all sentient life.
- Rawls offers a technique for deciding what justice is, whereas for the Buddhist theorists, the problem is not deciding what is right–they presume that we should be as altruistic as possible–but rather motivating people to act right. "Exchanging self and other is not

simply a heuristic for determining the limiting condition on action ("how would you like it if someone did that to you?") or a mental exercise in perspective taking. It is a transformative practice that uses empathic imaginative projection to chip away at self-clinging by softening the boundaries of self and other."

And here are some similarities:

- Both methods are conducted by the thinker alone. Neither is dialogic, involving an actual exchange of opinions. You imagine you're a yak, but you don't ask the yak if you got that right.
- Like the Buddhist teachers, Rawls also softens "the boundaries of self and other," but he does so by asking you what you'd want if you did not know who you were.

If you happen to find both arguments persuasive, you're left with an odd proof:

1. Self-interest plus [a specific form of] ignorance = justice (Rawls)

2. Compassion plus radical altruism = justice [Buddhism]

So

3. Self-interest plus ignorance = Compassion plus radical altruism

True?

63. Imagining equanimity

I am a cheerful guy, happy with my work and family life, able to enjoy mundane events and relish extraordinary experiences. But for me, as for virtually everyone, an undercurrent of sorrow and fear is never completely absent. The sorrow is for pain and loss; the fear is anticipation of more. The individuals who are suffering or who will inevitably suffer include the billions of strangers whose pain is superficially noted in the newspaper; the hundreds of strangers whose tragedies are vividly described every day; one's close friends and family (including the ones who happen to be healthy, safe, young, and happy today); and oneself.

I respect, and perhaps envy, people who believe that suffering is limited or illusory because a reward follows death. I may envy, but I do *not* respect, people who simply don't care, who live for themselves or in the moment and push suffering out of their minds. Even if not caring were possible, it seems dishonorable.

I can imagine a state that requires neither supernatural intervention nor moral oblivion. This state would be difficult to attain, and in fact I do not expect to see it. But it violates no laws of nature. I take some consolation merely in envisioning it.

In the state that I imagine, I would live a life partly devoted to improving or repairing the world. Here is why: Complex and intricate systems are more likely to survive and reproduce if they have an inner drive. That is true of trees, cities, and anthills: they strive to grow, which is why they are prevalent. But they don't know that they are striving, hence they do not suffer. Sentience is a particular kind of will that is useful for promoting survival. We happen to have it and it explains why we have grown to number seven billion. Because every sentient system is vulnerable and ultimately dies, sentience introduces fear and suffering into the universe.

At the same time, the existence of animals and other complex, fragile, sentient systems creates opportunities to reduce suffering and to promote at least a transient security and happiness. If one envisions, helps to create, enhances, or preserves a garden, a city, an institution, or a life, it does not become immortal, but one's work reduces the suffering and enhances the flourishing of sentient beings, including oneself.

Note that "service" will not quite capture what it takes to improve the world. It is not about acting for others, but participating in the development and maintenance of complex systems that include oneself. Much evidence suggests that people who work in that way are happier: not liberated from the fundamental reality of suffering, but absorbed pleasurably in their activity while it lasts (Keyes 2002, Keyes 2007).

To devote oneself with perfect efficiency and relentless focus to public work would be excessive. If everyone did that, there would be no point to any of it: we would be taking in each other's laundry. Or (to use another analogy) it would be like envisioning and building a great cathedral which no one ever visited for prayer or pleasure. So, in the state that I imagine, I would place work in balance with two other activities. One is intimacy, time with family and friends, whom I would treat with partiality and loyalty regardless of their needs. The other is pleasurable appreciation of the complex systems around me, especially people and animals, society, nature, and art.

Co-construction, intimacy, and appreciation are already components of my life, and of most other lives. But I don't manage them with what could be called equanimity. Here is a little fable about how life could be lived better.

One day, I would go to my doctor's office for a checkup. I would choose to do that because my life, although fragile and limited, has value, and it is my duty to preserve it if the means are reasonable. On the way to the doctor's office, I would not be able to work or to spend time with the people I love, so I would appreciate the world. Instead of fruitlessly fretting about the tasks ahead, or even about more important causes and issues, I would be absorbed appreciatively in physical things. They could be evidently beautiful objects: the changing leaves glimpsed through a bus window. Or they could be objects whose beauty is easily overlooked:

the impasto of scraps on the wet floor of the bus. One can always turn inside– to the reality of one's own breath, the feel of one's weight–or to language and imagination.

On this occasion, the doctor would have news for me: a brain tumor, giving me at most three months to live. As I left her office, I would have different thoughts from when I had entered. I would have to change priorities, giving more attention to planning an orderly succession and documenting my work than to launching new projects. I might be in a bit of a hurry after the appointment, because there would be a lot to do. Yet I wouldn't feel fundamentally different. I knew my life was limited that morning; it is still limited now. It always promised suffering, but it also offered opportunities for absorption and construction. I would still have those opportunities.

On my way to the next activity–since once more I could neither accomplish work nor spend time with beloved people–I would again become thoroughly absorbed in the contemplation of physical objects, present or imagined. My imminent death would not be on my mind. I would heed the Buddha's Third Noble Truth: suffering ceases with the abandonment of excessive attachment. Another way to put this point is that we are constantly being reborn, so the moments of biological birth and death are less important than we presume.

This fable illustrates a state that violates no laws of nature or of reason. In fact, perfectly rational people would never regret facts they cannot control. The obstacles to attaining equanimity are not external: rules, forces, or demands from outside. They are my own emotions. The Fourth (and final) Noble Truth is something like this: freedom of suffering is possible if one exercises the correct discipline, which is not merely a matter of managing emotions and thoughts but also of living right with other people. If that Truth is true, it offers me just as much consolation as I would derive from news of an afterlife. It represents a perfect solution: suffering would have no sting. Death would be like a wall bordering a field: visible, significant, but in no sense spoiling the space it surrounds.

This Fourth Truth could, however, be false if our physical constitutions simply preclude our attaining equanimity. But one thing is clear: we can envision that state. The question is whether dwelling with that thought and pursuing its actual attainment can take us on the right path.

64. John Stewart Mill, Stoic

I see Mill's *Utilitarianism* in an entirely new way thanks to re-reading it after discussions of Epicurus, Buddha, and Emerson. It seems much less an explanation of the utilitarian principle of justice (maximize everyone's happiness) than I had remembered, and more an exploration of how an individual should pursue happiness. It thus belongs to a genre that Mill knew very well, the tradition of therapeutic philosophy inaugurated by the Hellenistic schools and revived by Montaigne (Hadot 1995).

In the text of *Utiliarianism* (1863), Mill refers several times to Epicureanism and Stoicism. For instance: "I do not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoic, as well as Christian elements require to be included." This passage suggests that Mill is interested in constructing the kind of "eclectic" view (drawing from multiple Hellenistic schools) that was popular from the time of Cicero and continued in early Christianity.

Of course, one should expect as much based on the author's *Autobiography* (Mill 1873). In the chapter on the "Crisis in My Mental History," Mill recalls how reading Jeremy Bentham in 1821 gave him "an object in life; to be a reformer of the world." He would apply the classical utilitarian principle of justice to improve the general welfare. "My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object." He says he was open to experiencing his own pleasures–"I endeavoured to pick up as many flowers as I could by the way"–but the purpose of his life was to achieve social justice, defined in a utilitarian way.

"This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed enough to fill up an interesting and animated existence." (Note that his personal satisfaction derived from two contingencies: political success and a supportive community.) But at one moment during the autumn of 1826, his satisfaction ended as suddenly as if he had awakened from a dream. He asked himself this question:

> *"Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.*

Mill fell into a deep depression that ended only with his father's death. A Freudian diagnosis is plausible (young John Stuart found momentary relief while his overbearing father still lived by reading a tragedy in which the fictional father died); but more interesting is Mill's own explanation. He says that he recovered when he saw that happiness requires special strategies and techniques of mind. For instance, he came to believe that you can't achieve happiness by pursuing it, only by aiming for some other end and becoming absorbed in that. He also learned that his own "passing susceptibilities needed to be cultivated as well as [his] active capacities, and required to be nourished and enriched as well as guided." With that in mind, he paid more

attention to poetry (especially Wordsworth) and music; “and the maintenance of a due balance among the faculties now seemed to be of primary importance.”

Above all, “I, for the first time, gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual. I ceased to attach almost exclusive importance to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the human being for speculation and for action.”

With that background in mind, it is striking how little his book *Utilitarianism* says about the “ordering of outward circumstances.” It doesn’t explain what policies would maximize aggregate happiness, how happiness relates to values like liberty and equality in a theory of social justice, or even how individuals should maximize their benefits to others. (No trolley problems at all.) Instead, Mill delves deeply into a theory of individual happiness.

For instance, he thinks that anyone who has achieved a higher grade of existence will prefer it to a lower grade, even though the higher grade permits “more acute suffering.” Evidently, we are not striving to avoid suffering, because then we would prefer a simpler or narrower mental life, less sensitive to pain. Something else must explain our preference for refined experiences, and Mill thinks the right word for that is “dignity.” (He notes that the Stoics called the same impulse “love of liberty,” implying that for them, “liberty” really meant pursuing higher interests rather than being free from constraints.) Thus, according to Mill, we seek at least two different things: happiness and dignity.

Mill is not very specific about what constitutes a higher grade of experience, and I think the text is compatible with two theories. First, it might be possible to make an objective rank-ordering of experiences, so that not only is poetry better than pushpin, but Wordsworth is better than Leigh Hunt because the former’s verse is superior. Alternatively, the quality of experience might mean the degree to which the individual happens to be stretched, engaged, inspired, etc. It would then be possible that playing an elaborate video game is a higher experience for a particular individual than hearing Beethoven, if the player engages more of his mind and soul in the game. We could objectively rank experiences by assessing the mental state of the participants rather than the activities themselves. Pushpin could beat poetry for champion pushpin-players.

In any case, Mill states that mental experiences are better than bodily experiences, and that active pleasures are higher than passive ones.

He also acknowledges that a person can abandon higher forms of experience due to indolence and selfishness. That scenario poses a challenge for him, because he has defended a distinction between higher and lower pleasures on the basis that anyone who has experienced both will prefer the higher. That argument preserves a thread between Mill’s position and classical

utilitarianism (which is all about maximizing subjective preferences), but the thread would break if Mill favored higher pleasures even though some people renounce them voluntarily. He has an answer:

> *But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both.*

Another key point is that sacrificing one's own interests can be good for the individual because it gives her a valuable and absorbing objective. The classical utilitarian would regard sacrifice as a cost, required only if the benefit to *others* outweighs it. Mill continues to reject the view that "the sacrifice is itself [is] a good." But he sees that some forms of self-sacrifice may constitute happiness for the person who experiences them. In fact, "nothing except [an ability to sacrifice oneself for other] can raise a person above the chances of life … and enables him, like many a Stoic in the worst times of the Roman Empire, to cultivate in tranquillity the sources of satisfaction accessible to him, without concerning himself about the uncertainty of their duration, any more than about their inevitable end." Mill observes that people who have privileges and yet remain unhappy tend to be those who don't care for others. Contribution to a community is thus one path to happiness, as Mill himself had found in his early years. But another path is aesthetic experience, and Mill presumably advocates a balance of the two.

Mill also observes that a "continuity of highly pleasurable excitement" is impossible for us. A better objective is tranquility and acceptance, plus occasional excitement. "The happiness which ["the philosophers"] meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing."

65. Remembering how to read

I enjoyed Ezra Klein's interview with my former colleague Maryanne Wolf, who is a great expert on reading: the neuroscience of this activity and how we learn to do it (Klein 2022).

Klein notes that there are many very different forms of reading, and Wolf discussed two in some detail. Skimming (or scanning, or scrolling) is a type of reading that involves quickly looking over large amounts of text in search of information. In contrast, deep reading means becoming immersed or even lost in an invented world and leaving one's regular life behind–except that we sometimes push beyond the author's thoughts, forming connections and making creative leaps beyond the text. Whenever someone reads deeply, the whole brain lights up on an fMRI machine.

These days, people like me constantly practice scanning and scrolling. My phone reports that I do that for more than five hours every day. We reinforce this skill and habit, and our devices are cleverly designed to encourage it further. On the other hand, people like me are losing the habit of deep reading, and our devices discourage it.

Maryanne Wolf's interview did not exactly alert me to this problem, because I have been explicitly worried about it for several years and I try to counter it. But Wolf and Klein offer a lot of relevant detail and context.

Why should we care? Scanning has many practical benefits, but it promotes confirmation bias (looking for scraps of information that we already agree with) and it is addictive. To feed this addiction may require more confirmation and more excitement–pungent details that reinforce what we already believe. Looking for these rewarding tidbits is like running on a treadmill.

On the other hand, deep reading may teach empathy and broaden the mind by exposing us to someone else's perspective. Even if deep reading doesn't educate us, it is still worthwhile. A life should not be completely filled with activities that prepare us to conduct other activities later on. The material of life is time, which should be spent in intrinsically valuable ways–or else, what's the point of it all? Becoming immersed in a well-crafted fictional or historical narrative (or an elaborate argument) is one of the intrinsically valuable ways of being.

I'd have liked to hear Maryanne Wolf talk about comparable activities. In the interview, she mentions daily meditation and listening to music, and she models an in-depth dialogue with Ezra Klein. To that list we could add performing and composing music or dance, deeply studying works of visual art, making art, tinkering with machines, closely observing nature, and prayer. Some of these behaviors are older than reading and may be less susceptible to being distorted by new technologies. (One of Wolf's influential points is that reading developed long after language did. Reading is not hard-wired, and people have constructed it in many different ways already.)

I suspect that the close observation of human-made visual objects affords many of the same advantages as deep reading and is threatened in the same way. Just as we scroll text, so we scroll images–risking our ability to see pictures closely. Close attention to works of beauty is a learned skill, and it is affected by the medium and context. It is, for instance, much easier to stare at a painting on a wall of a museum than on one's phone.

I have great respect for serious meditation, but I am afraid that some versions may function as short-cuts, almost like apps that promise brief relief from the constant flow of information. To meditate seriously can enhance empathy and equanimity and is arguably an intrinsically valuable state of being. But why would we expect that five minutes of listening to one's own inner voice (or to a recording of someone else) would provide the kind of expansion and "flow" promised by a major novel? We know that a novel will take many hours to read. This time commitment is a benefit, not a cost.

I generally presume that technological change was more rapid in the richest countries of the world between 1800 and 1970 than it has been during my lifetime. Industrial tools transformed life and nature during that period, and the pace has actually slowed since then. However, technology may have changed reading in a more dramatic way in the last decade than it did before. Klein confesses that, as a father of young children, he is often distracted by his phone. That couldn't have happened to me in the first decade of the 2000s, because I owned no wireless devices. And for our kids (who are still young adults today) the only screens that could compete with books were the TV (with no streaming services) and a desktop computer. Books easily held their own against these possible distractions. I sympathize with parents and children alike if they can no longer concentrate on printed texts.

For me, deep reading (to whatever degree I actually obtain depth) is closely related to *writing*. For instance, this volume ends with my reflections on The *Tirukkural*, by Thiruvalluvar, which I read too distractedly and disconnectedly but in an effort to read deeply. I don't think I would have made it through that text or given it as much attention as I managed if I hadn't begun to envision a written response as I read. The text began to confirm some theories I had formed about it, but it also challenged my theories, and as I read on, my mental draft evolved.

As the Internet age has progressed, my capacity to lose myself in someone else's narrative has definitely weakened, to my deep regret. However, I can still become completely lost in the act of writing–unaware of how much time has passed or even where I am sitting while I type. For me, deep reading almost always involves writing, as does the close inspection of a work of visual art. I type quickly (albeit with two fingers), but I revise constantly. WordPress tells me that I saved 24 different drafts of the short essay on the *Kural*. Revision is a process of listening to oneself, which can be solipsistic, but I am almost always writing about what other people are saying or have said. In that sense, I think writing is a process of empathy–at least at its best.

It's possible that I need the idea of an audience (even the possibility of one reader) to motivate writing. That is probably unwise; we should be more self-reliant. Still, writing works for me as a partial path back to serious listening, and we all need one path or another toward that destination.

66. Montaigne the bodhisattva

Several influential philosophical traditions assert that everyone is equally important. Since other people outnumber each of us–by billions–we should count ourselves and our interests for almost nothing.

That is a direct implication of classical utilitarianism. Sam Bankman-Fried endorsed it in an interview with Adam Fisher, conducted while he was actually stealing money for himself. (But hypocrisy does not invalidate a moral principle.) Another crisp statement comes in Śantideva's classical summary of Buddhist ethics, probably written in the 700s CE. Śantideva recommends that we

> *meditate intently on the equality of oneself and others as follows: 'All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself. … When happiness is liked by me and others equally, what is so special about me that I strive after happiness only for myself … Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation placed on this? If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, this goes for oneself as for anyone … This is why Supushpacandra, although undergoing torture at the hands of the king, did nothing to prevent his own suffering out of sacrifice for many sufferers. … Those who have developed the continuum of their mind in this way, to whom the suffering of others is as important as the things they themselves hold dear, plunge down into the Avici hell as geese into a cluster of lotus blossoms [to save the souls condemned there.]*
>
> *– Śantideva, 8.90, 8.95, 8.102-3, 8.106-7.*

Michel de Montaigne acknowledges that "most of the world's rules and precepts do adopt such an attitude, driving us outside ourselves and hounding us into the forum in the interests of the public weal." These philosophies advise "that one should forget oneself on behalf of one's neighbour and that, compared to the general, the individual is of no importance" (Montaigne, "On Restraining Your Will," 1580/1987, III, 10, p. 1137). Montaigne even says that his father held this view, and it motivated the elder Montaigne to be a devoted public servant.

Nevertheless, Montaigne dissents. He acknowledges one good thing about trying to treat every other person as just as important as ourselves. It teaches us not to be *overly* attached to our private interests, just as a "bowman, … to hit his target, raises his sights way above it"–or just as

"to straighten a piece of bent wood we bend it right over backwards" (Montaigne 1580/1987, p. 1138).

In other words, striving to count ourselves for almost nothing counters the fault of caring for ourselves alone. But our real target should lie between the extremes of self-negation and self-love. For …

> *the true degree of love which each man owes to himself is … not false love which makes us embrace glory, knowledge, riches and such-like with an immoderate primary passion, as though they were members of our being, nor a love which is easy-going and random, acting like ivy which cracks and destroys the wall which it clings to, but a healthy, measured love, as useful as it is pleasant. Whoever knows its duties and practises them is truly in the treasure-house of the Muses: he has reached the pinnacle of human happiness and of man's joy. Such a man, knowing precisely what is due to himself, finds that his role includes frequenting men and the world; to do this he must contribute to society the offices and duties which concern him. [C] He who does not live a little for others hardly lives at all for himself: 'Qui sibi amicus est, scito hunc amicum omnibus esse.' [Know that a man who feels loving-friendship for himself does so for all men – Seneca] The chief charge laid upon each one of us is his own conduct: that is why we are here. For example, any man who forgot to live a good and holy life himself, but who thought that he had fulfilled his duties by guiding and training others to do so, would be stupid: in exactly the same way, any man who gives up a sane and happy life in order to provide one for others makes (in my opinion) a bad and unnatural decision.*
>
> – *Montaigne* 1580/1987*, p. 1138.*

Montaigne's position requires a defense. After all, every person is equally valuable, in an objective sense, so why shouldn't we act accordingly?

First, Montaigne argues that to promote everyone else's welfare requires ambition. It means climbing the ladder of authority in order to influence the social order. Montaigne is highly skeptical of ambition, seeing it as a snare. Most people who attain high office are actually unable to accomplish much, yet they are quick to take themselves far too seriously:

> *Most of our occupations are farcical: 'Mundus universus exercet histrionem.' [Everybody in the entire world is acting a part — Petronius]. We should play our role properly, but as the role of a character which we have adopted. … I know some who transubstantiate and metamorphose themselves into as many new beings and forms as the dignities which they assume: they are prelates down to their guts and livers and uphold their offices on their lavatory-seat.*
>
> – *Montaigne* 1580/1987*„ pp. 1143-4.*

Those who enter the fray to improve the world also become partisans for particular positions. They take views about how things should be and are prone to disparage their opponents. Montaigne, on the other hand, strives for intellectual humility and uncertainty, and he looks for value in all views. “I am firmly attached to the sanest of the parties but I do not desire to be particularly known as an enemy of the others beyond what is generally reasonable” (p. 1145). After all, “A good book does not lose its beauty because it argues against my cause” (p. 1144).

But why do we need authority or ideology to improve the world? Why not humbly give away most of what we possess? Perhaps Montaigne should have done that–and perhaps I should now. Although he doesn’t directly address this issue, he does argue that wealth is unrelated to happiness. “Metrodorus lived on twelve ounces a day, Epicurus on less; Metrocles slept among his sheep in the winter and, in summer, in the temple porticos; ‘Sufficit ad id natura, quod poscit.’ [What nature demands, she supplies –Seneca.] (p. 1141).

Montaigne acknowledges that people want more than the bare minimum of worldly goods, but that is because we have become habituated to surplus and are averse to losing it to other people. “If I lack anything which I have become used to, I [foolishly] hold that I truly lack it” (p. 1142). Better not to obtain it in the first place. That implies that sharing one’s surplus with others would do them little good.

But Montaigne’s main point–throughout his work–is that happiness is hard to accomplish. Fear of death and other human frailties beset us, regardless of our social circumstances. “We are never ‘at home’: we are always outside ourselves. Fear, desire, hope, impel us towards the future; they rob us of feelings and concern for what now is, in order to spend time over what will be – even when we ourselves shall be no more” (Montaigne, I:3, p, 11). We can address such faults, but to do so requires introspection and self-care. If everyone devoted themselves to helping everyone else, no one would accomplish happiness.

Since I began this entry with *Śantideva*, I should present his probable rejoinder. He would agree with Montaigne that suffering is universal, and the only solution is inward. “Since I cannot control external events, I will control my own mind” (5.14). However, this Buddhist monk would recommend a different path from Montaigne’s. The more we fully grasp the suffering of the vast number of other sentient beings, the less space we have left to care about our own private interests. Caring about our interests–experiencing desire or craving–is the source of all unhappiness. Therefore, setting one’s aim, like an archer, at the good of all sentient beings is actually the best way to liberate *oneself* from suffering. “Whosoever longs to rescue quickly both himself and others should practice the supreme mystery: exchange of self and other” (8:120)

This doesn’t sound exactly like Montaigne. As I have noted, Montaigne rejects the advice to “forget oneself on behalf of one’s neighbour.” He famously retreated from the world’s struggle

to read and write in his private tower, making himself his only topic. “My business, my art, is to live my life” (1580/1987, p. 425, from “On Practice”). Also, Montaigne claims modestly that he has not achieved “noble Stoic impassibility” (p. 1153), because he hasn’t accomplished his inner peace by exercising any kind of discipline. Instead, he just happens to be easy-going by temperament.

Still, Montaigne’s writing radiates curiosity and empathy for the vast variety of human beings whom he has encountered in books and life. He abhors cruelty. He offers gentle advice aimed at liberating us from attachment. For instance: “There are so many awkward passages that the surest way is to glide rather lightly over the surface of this world. We should slide over it, not get bogged down in it. Pleasure itself is painful in its deeper reaches” (1580/1987, p. 1136).

And perhaps his essays are a gift. “Here you have not my teaching but my study: the lesson is not for others; it is for me. Yet, for all of that, you should not be ungrateful to me for publishing it. What helps me can perhaps help somebody else” (p. 423, from “On Practice”). This is Montaigne’s way of plunging into hell as a cluster of lotus blossoms.

67. Why we wish that goodness brought happiness, and why that is not so

> Socrates: Yes, indeed, Polus, that is my doctrine; the men and women who are gentle and good are also happy, as I maintain, and the unjust and evil are miserable.
> Polus: Then, according to your doctrine, the said Archelaus is miserable?
> Socrates: Yes, my friend, if he is wicked.
>
> — Plato, *Gorgias* (Jowett trans.)

> Now this is the noble truth of the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering. It is simply this noble eightfold path, that is: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right immersion.
>
> …
>
> And when the Buddha rolled forth the Wheel of Dhamma, the earth gods raised the cry: “Near Benares, in the deer park at Isipatana, the Buddha has rolled forth the supreme Wheel of Dhamma. And that wheel cannot be rolled back by any ascetic or brahmin or god or Māra or Brahmā or by anyone in the world.”
>
> – “Rolling Forth the Wheel of Dhamma,” Sujato trans. 2003

It would, indeed, be wonderful news if goodness reliably made us happy–and even better news if goodness were both necessary and sufficient for happiness. In that case:

1) We have a reliable path out of suffering, because one can always do what is best among the possible options, and that makes you good. If goodness then brings happiness, one can always be happy.
2) We can be happy while also satisfying our conscience: that tension is banished.
3) We have an effective argument for people who threaten us. We can truthfully tell them that they can only get what they want (their own happiness) by doing what we want (being good to us and others).

So I don't blame the monks and gods for raising a joyous shout when they heard the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth. But is it a truth?

Social science says that making a contribution to one's community is associated with feelings of happiness and satisfaction. That's important to know. I would go so far as to say that a person who is languishing psychologically should probably try collaborating with others on a goal of public value. It's wiser, too, to choose a career of public service than to be a rapacious capitalist or a tyrannical bureaucrat, because over time, you will have better odds of being happy.

But an empirical association isn't enough to win Socrates's argument in the *Gorgias* or to get the monks and gods joyously shouting. It won't suffice for several reasons:

Being good probably doesn't work for everyone. In the Gorgias, Callicles presents himself as a happy sociopath. Social science tells us those people are rare, but they may exist. And for them, goodness is not the path to happiness. So if you face Callicles, Socrates and the Buddha do not provide you with persuasive arguments.

Being good probably doesn't work in every circumstance. It is wise to choose an altruistic career, but that doesn't mean that you'll be happier if you neglect an opportunity to steal a million dollars from a big corporation and get away with it. The statistical correlation between goodness and happiness arises because most people, most of the time, don't have opportunities to be bad, safe, and happy. Alas, the opposite is also true: in tragic situations, being good is not much of a solace.

Surely one reason that goodness tends to produce happiness is that goodness is frequently rewarded, at least with the respect and gratitude of other people. But it is easy to think of cases in which doing the best thing will gain no respect or when acting badly is the best path to applause and acceptance. The statistical relationship between goodness and happiness breaks down in those–not infrequent–situations where goodness goes unnoticed or is actually disparaged.

The correlation between goodness and happiness is a variable, not a constant. In different subcultures, contexts, and times, goodness can either reliably produce happiness or come largely apart from it. If the relationship is a variable, then we can probably vary it. We can make

cultures and situations more communitarian–so that being good generally requires harmonious interpersonal relationships–or we can strive for rugged individualism, so that people learn how to be happy without being good to others. Socrates proposes an extremely communitarian utopia in the Republic, and the Buddha actually built one when he founded the Sangha. But that doesn't prove that people need community to be happy.

Finally, being good in order to be happy doesn't sound like truly being good. It's too transactional and self-interested; goodness becomes a coin that you accumulate to buy happiness.

Borrowing from Nozick's famous example (Nozick 1974, pp. 42-45): imagine that you are offered two pills. One will make you completely happy and impervious to all negative emotions for the rest of your life. Among the emotions that you will never feel again are guilt, sympathy, and righteous indignation. So you can live happily without being good. The other pill will make you good for the rest of your life: it will prevent you from wanting to make any unethical choices. I think most people would take neither pill, because we will not renounce our freedom and our sensitivity to the full range of emotions, including guilt and temptation. Happiness without goodness will feel hollow, and goodness without moral weakness will feel automatic and inhuman. But if your only goal is to be happy, you should take the first pill, not the second. And that shows that to want to be happy is not to want to be good.

This is why I think there are three different goods–equanimity or happiness, community or ethics, and truth–and none of the three guarantees any of the others.

68. Rebirth?

Death, according to Martin Heidegger, was a fundamental fact about human existence. Life was movement through time toward an end.

Birth, for Heidegger's critical ex-student Hannah Arendt, was the fundamental fact about human beings as moral or political creatures. At birth, our life course is maximally open, unpredictable, and, in that sense, free. Birth or "natality" symbolizes our power to start anew.

Rebirth, for the man we call the Buddha, was the fundamental fact about life. At least according to one tradition, he did not mean a literal transfer of the soul into a different body at death. When one of his monks taught that doctrine, the Buddha apparently rebuked him, saying, "From whom have you heard, you foolish man …, that I have explained the dharma in that way? Foolish man, have I not declared in many ways that consciousness is dependently arisen …?" (quoted in Mishra 2004).

What then did he mean? Here is a sympathetic reconstruction:

1) I cannot directly perceive my self or its effects. All I perceive is a sequence of sensations, judgments, desires, and other ideas. The Buddha is a strict empiricist. If we cannot perceive something by any means, it is nothing. As David Hume wrote, I am "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (Hume 1739, I, IV, §VI.
2) Each of these ideas has a cause. It does not arise from nothing but depends on something before it. We might identify the causes of ideas as other ideas *or* as physical processes in the brain. That is merely a difference in the level of analysis. Either way, the core premise is "dependent origination" (pratityasamutpada). Every idea is part of a long causal chain.
3) My ideas do not have the same span as my life. When I was one day old, I had none of the ideas that now fill my brain. Many of the ideas that I had when I was 5 or 15 are forgotten, although their indirect effects may linger. Some of the ideas in my mind today were in my father's head before I was born. I will forget some of my ideas while they still are alive in other minds.
4) I was not born free, in the sense of having a self capable of choosing its beliefs and desires. I was born as a thinking organism which learned its beliefs and desires from experience, strongly shaped by the already-living people around me. As Karl Mannheim wrote in 1928, "even if the rest of one's life consisted in one long process of negation and destruction of the natural world view acquired in youth, the determining influence of these early impressions would still be predominant."
5) My thoughts may have consequences ("karma") for others, going beyond my lifespan. Even if you sharply disagree with me, by sharing my idea with you, I have affected you.
6) If the self is a bundle of constantly changing ideas that are caused by other people's ideas and shared in part with other people, then the moment of my biological birth was not the beginning of "me," nor will my biological death be the end. The bundle that is me is constantly being reborn, in my consciousness and in other minds.
7) Notwithstanding 6, different minds are not the same. I am not you. Individuality is real, in some sense, and biological death matters
8) Notwithstanding 2, the sensation we have of choosing and controlling our ideas is valid (morally, if not metaphysically).

Rebirth captures this combination. A birth is a new beginning but not *ex nihilo*. It is wonderful but not literally miraculous, being the result of regular natural processes. It marks a break with a past, yet the newborn is completely dependent on and thoroughly influenced by adults. We might view rebirth as a *metaphor* for life, but if one thinks (with the Buddha and Hume) that the "self" is fictional or metaphorical, then what is metaphorical is the assertion that life begins in infancy. Literally, life is continuous renewal, and that makes rebirth more literal than birth.

69. Emerson's mistake

Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (1841) makes a provocative case for cultivating the self and shunning morality in the form of obligations to others. One famous paragraph begins, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. … Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." The same paragraph ends with an argument against charity as an entanglement that damages integrity: "do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong" (Emerson, 1841, pp. 134-5, 138).

Emerson strongly favors interacting with other minds, especially the geniuses who figure in the books that he devours in his private hours. Moses, Pythagoras, Plato, Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Milton, Copernicus, and Newton are just some of the names he invokes in Self-Reliance. He thinks these people (all men) had distinct and invariant characters. "For I suppose no man can violate his nature. All the sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being." Thus, to understand an author is to grasp something unitary and unique about him that inspires you to enrich your own equally coherent character, not by sharing his truth but by creating your own. In "Experience" (1844, p. 322), Emerson writes:

> Two human beings are like globes, which can touch only in a point, and, whilst they remain in contact, all other points of each of the spheres are inert; their turn must also come, and the longer a particular union lasts, the more energy of appetency the parts not in union acquire. Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided nor doubled. Any invasion of its unity would be chaos.

But this is false. To experience another person's mind (whether through a brilliant book or an everyday interaction) is not just to pick out one idea that you think defines the other. It is to begin exploring his or her web of thinking while sharing your own. You both have unique webs, but each element of your thought is shared with many other people. You gain the most by exploring many of the other person's moral nodes and their connections. This does not threaten your "unity" or risk chaos, because your own character was already a heterogeneous, evolving, and loosely connected web that you largely adopted from other people. Touching at just one point is a failure of communication and interpretation.

To be sure, you can strive to disentangle from everyday life and politics and prefer books to "dining out occasionally"--which, Thoreau found, interfered with his "domestic arrangements" (Thoreau 1854/1899, p. 62), but you should not persuade yourself that you have thereby

disconnected your network map from everyone else's. Your self is still a social creation, and you are still mentally involved with others, even if you detach politically and economically.

70. How to think about the self

Buddhist arguments: A Buddhist argument for "no self" goes like this: Look inward–as hard as you want–for some unchanging "I" or "self." You cannot find it. All you'll find are physical sensations, feelings, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness, coming one after another, free from your control, and constantly changing. The Buddha himself says, "mind, intellect, consciousness, keeps up an incessant round by day and by night of perishing as one thing and springing up as another" (quoted in Siderits 2007, p. 41). This stream cannot be *you* if "you" means some durable, controlling thing. But since that is all that you can find within, there is no you.

The idea of a durable, independent, yet fragile self is evidently not "Western" or "modern," because Buddhists have been working assiduously against it for more than two millennia. It seems to have been endemic in their various cultural contexts. Buddhagosa (a 5th-century thinker) implies that the sense of self arises automatically from having sensations.

> *When there is* rupa *[physical sensation], O monks, then through attachment to* rupa*, through engrossment in* rupa*, the persuasion arises, 'This is mine; this am I; this is my self.'*
>
> *When there is feeling … when there is perception … when there are volitions … when there is consciousness, O monks, then through attachment to consciousness, through engrossment in consciousness, the persuasion arises, 'This is mine; this am I; this is my self.'*
>
> — Buddhagosa, in Siderits 2007, p. 37.

Even if this is a universal human phenomenon, it is still bad and worth trying to combat, according to Buddhists. We should not think, "*This is mine; this am I; this is my self.*" That thought has two ethical drawbacks (where "ethical" is defined very broadly, to mean anything concerned with thinking and acting well and living a good life).

First, a theory of the self as real but fragile encourages selfishness and love or regard of self at the expense of compassion and altruism.

Second, this theory causes avoidable discomfort or even suffering. For me, a common example is nostalgia. I remember an earlier stage of life–say, being a young parent with a toddler in my arms. I experience a desire to *be* that person again, or to have that experience directly instead of as a memory. As a result, my memory is infused with loss. But this is a mistake. The memory is an experience, just like any other impression. I can have the memory now, which is a blessing.

There is no "I" that could possibly possess the object of the experience more directly, transcending time. The past doesn't exist; all experience is current. Recognizing that truth spares me loss.

The same is true of fears of death or great old-age. I can imagine those states, but there is no reason to tie them to my present state. I am not old or dying. The idea that those states attach to me is based on a false sense of the self.

A third example is a kind of envy. I see a person who is a young parent now, with a child in arms. I want to have that experience instead of just observing it. Envy is not very virtuous in any circumstance. In this case, it also reflects a metaphysical error. The young parent's experience is real, and I can see it. But, as a logical matter, it cannot attach to me. I should be glad for the existence of the experience and drop the nonsensical idea that the experience should (or could) somehow be mine. The root of that mistake is a false view of self.

The crucial point is that a spiritual or ethical failing derives from a metaphysical error. Truly believing the metaphysical truth of no-self would prevent or cure the spiritual and ethical fault.

Kantian arguments: Kant was aware of the argument that the self is not real, because we cannot find it when we introspect. All we find is a set of specific experiences. He got this from David Hume.

But Kant argued that experiences are logically structured. Consciousness is not like a big screen with lots of disconnected pixels that change color randomly. I perceive three-dimensional objects moving through space, interacting with each other, and having sounds, weight, and smell as well as shape. The fact that I perceive such things implies that I (= my self) must have categories like space, time, and causality. These categories are built into what Kant calls "reason," which we might more comfortably call human cognition.

Kant calls his conclusion the "transcendental unity of apperception." That phrase is certainly a mouthful, but we can break it down. "Apperception" means perception with an element of understanding and self-awareness. You apperceive something as a 3-D object moving toward *you*. That can be a true belief about the world. "Unity" refers to the fact that our apperceptions are coherent across time and space. And "transcendental," in Kant's specialized vocabulary, refers to something that is a necessary explanation of something that we know from direct experience.

Could a creature inhabit our universe and have different categories from ours? God might, or Michael on "The Good Place." But to say that such a creature has different categories is basically empty, because we have no inkling of what that is like. For us, our categories are logical necessities. The best way to think about metaphysics is to begin by understanding what

we *must* believe, and then believe that. We must believe in space, time, and the self, which is tantamount to saying that these things are real. That is a transcendental argument.

Should we try to shake the idea of the self?

One aspect of the question is empirical/psychological. Is it possible–by means of concerted introspection, philosophical argument, sudden enlightenment, practice, or some other means–to rid ourselves of the idea of the self as a durable, independent agent? I am not sure, but I am open to the possibility that this happens.

A different aspect of the question is metaphysical. By ridding ourselves of the idea of the self, are we coming closer to the truth? That is a central point of disagreement between some Buddhist thinkers and Kant. But maybe it's not a gap between the Buddha and Kant, since it's possible that the Buddha is *only* interested in the good life. (Flanagan 2013, p. 122, writes: "Buddhism in both its classical and contemporary forms is first and foremost a theory of personal flourishing.")

That brings us to the third aspect of the question: Is it virtuous or ethical or otherwise a good idea to strive to rid ourselves of the idea of the self? Here I am inclined to a Middle Way.

On the one hand, Kant is right that the concept of the self is logically prior to many ordinary thoughts. At a minimum, it would be an arduous task to escape from this concept. That would take a lot of time and effort and probably involve a lot of wavering and backsliding. I am not convinced that it's likely to accomplish the ethical goals of reducing selfishness and improving equanimity. There is a risk that it might promote narcissism (excessive interest in moulding one's own cognition) or even avoidance of ethical responsibility. It is an empirical question how *trying* to attain non-self affects the character. Even if its net impact is positive, maybe there are better paths to virtue.

However, we should try to shake certain theories of the self that are not only false but also ethically problematic. It is wrong (both logically and ethically) to feel nostalgia, existential dread, or envy. These feelings are not only harmful but also reflect a mistaken theory of the self.

The mistake is not to believe in anything called a self. The mistake is to imagine that the self could time-travel or jump from one body to another. Reminding oneself of these mistakes might help to prevent or address certain spiritual ailments.

Kant tells us that time is a necessary aspect or component of cognition. But we don't jump from an awareness of time to a possessive attitude toward time. We don't think, "Time is mine; I want to hold it forever." We *do* make that jump in the case of the self, and that's our mistake.

We move from relying on the concept of a self to loving the self possessively. This is something we could teach ourselves not to do.

An underlying issue here is how metaphysics should connect to ethics. Owen Flanagan writes (2013, p. 116), “Buddhists claim a connection between understanding one’s own self, paradoxically as *anatman*—as no-self—and an ethic of compassion and lovingkindness. …. Diminishing the grip of the illusion of metaphysical egoism is causally connected to being good. What sort of connection is there—might there be?”

One answer is that we are obliged to believe whatever happens to be true. The truth is independent of our good,; and perhaps it is a virtue to recognize the truth whatever it may be.

Kant begins the section on the Transcendental Deduction with a legal analogy. He says that law professors distinguish “the question of right (quid juris) from the question of fact (quid facti).” They call a demonstration of right a “deduction.” In a similar way, we go around making lots of “empirical conceptions” without checking whether we have a right to them. Some of these are fine, but some are “usurped conceptions, such as fortune, fate.” Although these words are used by almost everyone, they “are occasionally challenged by the question, ‘quid juris?’” Kant wants to ask whether the concepts of space, time, causality, and self are used by right or are more like “fortune” and “fate”–unjustified ideas. (Kant, 1781/87, A84=B116) He concludes that they are in fact obligatory.

A Buddhist might respond that it’s actually a choice whether to remain wedded to standard conceptions of time and the self, or else to devote energy to trying to shake these conceptions. Kant says we “must” use these categories, and that is the basis for his claim that they are true or right. A Buddhist might challenge the ethical sense of that “must.” If it is possible–through concerted effort–*not* to think with the category of self, then Kant’s argument fails. It is then not necessary to use this category; and if it’s not necessary, it doesn’t have a transcendental basis for being true.

In the following passage, the Buddha moves from making a metaphysical claim (there is no self), to offering an existence-proof (a person can avoid believing in the self), to actually liberating his followers (they lose faith in the self and become free):

> *“the correct view in the light of the highest knowledge is as follows: “This is not mine; this am I not; this is not my self.”*
>
> *“Perceiving this, O monks, the learned and noble disciple conceives an aversion for rupa, conceives an aversion for feeling, conceives an aversion for perception, conceives an aversion for volitions, conceives an aversion for consciousness.*

"And in conceiving this aversion he becomes divested of passion, and by the absence of passion he becomes free, and when he is free he becomes aware that he is free; and he knows that rebirth is exhausted, that he has lived the holy life, that he has done what it behooved him to do, and that he is no more for this world.'"

Thus spoke The Blessed One, and the delighted band of five sramanas applauded the speech of The Blessed One. Now while this exposition was being delivered, the minds of the five sramanas became free from attachment and delivered from the depravities.

[Samyutta Nikaya III.66–68], in Siderits 2007, pp. 38-9

This is a different way from Kant's to put metaphysics together with ethics. But it depends on an existence-proof: actual examples of people who have become "free from attachment and delivered from the depravities." The question is whether that happens.

71. The Kural

The *Tirukkural* (or *Kural*, for short) by Thiruvalluvar is one of the acknowledged highlights of the Tamil literary tradition, which spans 25 centuries. The new English translation by Thomas Hitoshi Pruiksma (2022) has been highly praised, and I recommend it.

I usually find "wisdom literature" (didactic, aphoristic poetry) hard going, regardless of its background or main teachings. But *The Kural* is widely reported to be subtle, paradoxical, allusive, and lovely in Tamil, and Pruiksma's English has those virtues. For instance, here is a paradoxical verse about renunciation:

> Hold to the hold of one who holds nothing—to hold nothing
> Hold to that hold [350]

And here is an example of a memorable metaphor:

> Riches attained by those without kindness—like milk
> Soured by its jug [1000]

I don't know another unified poem that encompasses ethical directives (part 1), advice for monarchs (part 2), and erotic verse (part 3). The whole poem concludes with a section on "Sulking and Bliss," which recommends playing hard-to-get. The narrator is never identified, but part 3 seems to weave together the voices of two lovers, their friends, and other characters, almost like a drama:

> Though he's done no wrong pulling back

Brings him closer [1321]
...
Even free of wrong there is something in keeping
From my love's soft arms [1325]

Sweeter than eating—having eaten—sweeter than loving—
Sulking in love [1326]
...
Sulk my bright jewel—and may our night
Of pleading be long [1330]

The text was probably complete by 600 CE. There's a long tradition of identifying Thiruvalluvar as a Jain, although many other religious traditions (including, implausibly, Christianity) have claimed him. David Shulman (2022) reminds us that we know nothing about the author, even whether a single person wrote *The Kural*. (Almost certainly, the text incorporates numerous quotations.) Shulman writes, however, that the milieu is the "mobile world of the [South Indian] city, with its face turned toward international seaborne trade and also toward heterodox religions, like Buddhism and Jainism, carried throughout South Asia and beyond by wandering monks and holy men." Furthermore, the text largely avoids the kinds of claims that typically divide religious traditions, such as the identities and roles of deities or the origins and end of the world. A Buddhist, a Shaivite, or a Stoic could embrace *The Kural*, and that may be intentional. After all:

Delivering the complex simply and discerning
What others say—that is knowledge [424]
...
Those who can't speak a few faultless words
Love to speak many words [649]

In the sections on personal ethics and the good life for regular people, *The Kural* advocates what Owen Flanagan has called (writing about Buddhism) "equanimity-in-community." We should cultivate inner peace by restraining desire and craving. But we should use everyday ethical interactions to fill the space that might otherwise be occupied by those vices. *The Kural* emphasizes hospitality, generosity, friendship, forgiveness, nonviolence (*ahimsa*), "husbandry" (in the sense of cultivating one's land and animals), and family. I didn't pick up anything about yoga, meditation, or ceremony and ritual. Instead, passages like this evoke sociable, generous members of communities who are not overly concerned about their individual desires:

A well of abundant water—the wealth of the wise
Who love the world

A tree bearing fruit at the heart of town—wealth
In the hands of good people [215-6]

The implied reader is generally male, and the division of roles is patriarchal, but we can modify the advice to be more egalitarian. The text charts a middle way between pleasure and renunciation. An adherent to a Hellenistic philosophical school, such as Stoicism or Skepticism, could endorse much of *The Kural*, except that nonviolence is more explicit and prominent here than in late Greek philosophy.

The long middle portion of the book–on leaders, politics, and governments–belongs to the "mirror of kings" tradition: encouraging rulers to be responsible and moderate. Although *The Kural* strongly urges nonviolence and vegetarianism as components of personal ethics, it depicts good leaders as honorable and effective warriors. Some of the advice here is about how to win wars and retain power.

The third part comes as a surprise, because it is suddenly about ardent sexual desire, which had been criticized earlier. The style is more lyrical now, and the speaker is sometimes female.

Apparently, in classical Tamil love poetry, the lovers wake up under separate roofs, spend the day together (perhaps illicitly), and part unwillingly at twilight, which is a confusing time of shadows and dimness. In this verse, the "it" is passionate desire:

At dawn it buds—all day it swells—and at dusk
It blossoms—this disease [1227]

And here the (presumably female) lover resents the evening but tries to summon some empathy for it:

Is your husband hard-hearted like mine—bless you
You wretched bewildering evening [1222]

Although love is a "disease" that causes much sighing and suffering, surely the conclusion of *The Kural* celebrates it.

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