

# NOTES OF AN UNDERGROUND HUMANIST



Chris Wright

# **Notes of an Underground Humanist**

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Second Edition

# **Notes of an Underground Humanist**

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This book is dedicated to all who resist authority, in whatever guise  
it may assume.



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## Preface to the First Edition

I remember a time (seems like decades ago) when I still was sort of sanguine. I wanted to write a book that would serve as a wake-up call to the world, a book that would lay bare the absurdities and hypocrisies of our civilization. Sort of in the manner of Nietzsche. Writing it was a delight. All the invective, the glib reflections on human stupidity and conformism, the epigrams on religion and politics and capitalism. Periodically I wrote substantive analyses of society and the psyche, delved into philosophy, history, and literature. On the surface the book was a sprawling mess, but in its essence it was to be a “dialectically articulated artistic whole.” Basically I was striving for greatness. I wanted to catapult myself into history by resurrecting the spirit of Marx and Nietzsche. These pusillanimous times, I told myself, demanded nothing less.

You see, for a while—when I was still very young—I was preoccupied with the thought of my “genius.” Or lack of it. I wasn’t sure that life was worth living unless I could achieve genius. Mediocrity was the morass I was constantly clawing out of. I had to have potential, I just *had* to. I *did* have potential, in fact—I *was* the next [insert famous name here]—no, no, I *wasn’t*, I was just a hack, a talentless impostor—and yet, I was obviously so *different* from everyone!—surely I had the potential to *become* a genius, at least in the public eye (for I knew even then on some level that the idea of “genius” or “greatness” is dishonest and empty)—etc. I was neurotic, riddled with doubts and ambitions and self-contradictions, self-conscious to the point of doubting my self-consciousness. I saw myself as postmodernity personified, both in my personality and, to an extent, in my beliefs. To quote my former self:

My life consists of intellectual levitation. I have absorbed the trends of my culture and hover between conflicting worldviews. I recognize the truth in every philosophy from Marxism to psychoanalysis, from Hegelianism to post-

structuralism; I recognize the value of every ethical position from Christian morality to nihilism; I have sympathies for every political ideal from Chomsky's anarchism to Schumpeter's democratic elitism. I cheer the march of science even as I fear it. I support globalization even as it horrifies me. I am a mess of contradictions.

....My faith in the power of reason is totally anachronistic, and even contradictory with myself. I am the bastard child of a union between the Enlightenment and Existentialism—the Masculine and the Feminine.

If I start analyzing myself, though, I'll never stop, so let's just say I had a deep need to be affirmed by myself and others, and I overcompensated for a lack of recognition by creating in my own mind a potential myth of myself. I knew I was overcompensating even as I did it, and I knew how ridiculous my self-absorption was, but, perversely, I interpreted this knowledge as confirming the truth of my delusions: if my self-awareness was so keen as to see through itself—to diagnose itself—well then, I must indeed be pretty special! I must have some remarkable intuitive abilities! And so the very knowledge that I cherished self-delusions saved me from having to acknowledge their delusional character. I was deluded, but I wasn't.

Anyway, even back then, at the age of 19, I recognized the absurdity, the contingency, of life. Nothing was real, everything was to be doubted (even the injunction to doubt everything), everything was paradoxical, life was wonder. So I didn't take this stuff too seriously—although, of course, on another level I did. But the point I'm making is that despite all my torments I remained enough of an idealist to think I could have an impact on society by writing a book.

Luckily I came to my senses. Books are not dead, not yet, but their history seems to have passed its zenith. There are more books

now than ever before, but as their numbers increase their influence seems to decline. They become less relevant, less respected. Less culturally central. Their place is taken by movies, computers, the internet, television, magazines, video games, which, unlike books, serve to atomize people and attenuate culture itself. American culture is defined more and more by the negation of culture, namely interpersonal fragmentation, immediate gratification, the fetishizing of technology, bureaucratic routinization, universal commodification. Broadly speaking, in short, social life is too atomistic, too materialistic for anything esoteric to really matter.

You disagree? Look at the state of contemporary literature. V. S. Naipaul, surely an authority on the subject, has said that the novel is dead, and Philip Roth thinks it's dying. (T. S. Eliot even said it had ended with Flaubert and James.) Fiction can no longer be called very culturally relevant. The first thing to go was the art of narration, of telling *stories*, in the manner of Balzac, Dickens, Hugo, and so on. Modernism and postmodernism abandoned it as hopelessly old-fashioned, since it seemed to presuppose that life is comprehensible—even *simple*, “*linear*”—that there is such a thing as truth and authentic selfhood. “There is something inauthentic for our time,” wrote Lionel Trilling in 1969, “about being held spellbound, momentarily forgetful of oneself, concerned with the fate of a person [namely, the main character of the narrative] who is not oneself but who also, by reason of the spell that is being cast, is oneself, his conduct and his destiny bearing upon the reader’s own. By what right, we are now inclined to ask, does the narrator exercise authority over that other person, let alone over the reader: by what right does he arrange the confusion between the two and presume to have counsel to give?”<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, the modern contempt for narrative necessarily prefigured a contempt for fiction, given that the essence of fiction throughout most of history

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 135. I cannot refrain from saying that this little book is remarkable. It is lucid, a pleasure to read, yet challenging—thought-provoking as few books are.

has been narrative. Ergo: fiction itself has come to seem inauthentic and somehow frivolous to most people, though they may still read a novel now and then as a momentary diversion.

Poetry is in the same position. It's everywhere, like fiction, but there is a macrocosmic sense of "*Who cares anymore?*"

Or look at the state of theory. Philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics. Far from being very original or ambitious, they often are not even readable anymore! Philosophy has deteriorated into "research," in the process becoming so technical and tedious that it's a terrible bore to read. (I should know: I have a Master's in Philosophy.) In some ways I love academia, but I fear it has become an incestuous and largely irrelevant little community. If from one perspective academia appears comical or superfluous, that isn't entirely the fault of academics: it's because "the life of the mind" is less culturally valued now than it seems to have been long ago.

In a moment of sadness once I wrote this:

I can't imagine that the overripeness of our culture doesn't make every esoteric project otiose. I can't fathom the relevance anymore of art and intellectual matters. Philosophy, let us admit, is in its yellow leaf; this is uncontroversial, though painful for me, given that philosophy is, was, or would have been my vocation. Psychology and the social sciences don't fare much better, given the imperative of specialization as well as the public's apathy. Literature is passing away, losing its powers to engage society's imagination and tap the vein of rebellion—or (at any rate) discontent. Music died long ago. Even political activism founders on the rock of the System. My floundering, my depression, itself seems merely comical and narcissistic. When everything is pointless and society has reached the end of time, and whatever one does will not matter in the long

run, is it not presumptuous to ascribe *weight* to oneself? Truly, I might as well follow Byron's example and give myself up to masochistic hedonism.

For those of us who keep pace with the march of history, the illusion of immortality or "existential meaning" has dissipated, whether temporarily or permanently. Perhaps the situation will change in the coming decades or centuries as social structures continue to evolve, but as of now, the anguished existentialist way of thinking remains timely.

In light of all this, why have I written this book? If I no longer have any illusions about the power of writing in generating social change, what's the point? Well, actually, I didn't have to do much writing for this project: I simply culled my journal for "maxims and reflections" (in Goethe's phrase) and arranged them as a book. The product could easily have run to 600 pages, or 900; maybe I'll use the leftovers in future books. As for my motivation: like many people, I'm bored. Tired of endless reading, endless thinking, endless journal-writing; I'm 26 and I want my fifteen minutes of fame. It would distract me, at least, from "existential nausea." We all want recognition, and some of us chase it through writing.

I was about to say that this book is my answer to Pascal's *Pensées* and Nietzsche's works, but that wouldn't be quite right: it isn't intended to break new philosophical ground. Originally I wanted to include substantive analyses of the self and society, but that would have become academic in tone. Nevertheless, I have included a semi-academic paper I wrote on John Brown because it ties into the themes that have guided me in this endeavor, namely the apparent demise of "humanism," the inhumanity of the modern world and the self's struggle to persevere. I wanted to celebrate the individual. The unphilosophical nature of the project is how I justify the many "self-contradictions" scattered throughout the book, the changes in tone, in emphasis, in ideas. The reader should keep in mind, moreover, that, being taken from an intellectual journal, it's all experimental and hypothetical. (The hypothetical in

question is, “*If I took myself seriously...*”) Parts of it may offend, parts of it may shock, but as long as it stimulates, I’m content.

Part Two of the book differs from Part One: it consists of a short story about the demise of a kind of ancient primitive “humanism” in contemporary Vietnam and, secondly, of a satire on modernity written in the form of the Book of Job.

## Preface to the Second Edition

The world has changed since 2007, when I wrote the preface to the first edition of this book. That was still the age of capitalist triumphalism, of glacial politics in the U.S. and the Despair of the Activist. Cultural ennui—personal ennui for me. Aimlessness. Since 2008, though, and especially since 2011, life has taken on a new coloring. Horizons have opened; the world is in tumult, even more than it was, and nothing seems permanent anymore. Things have continued to get worse for most people and will continue to do so for decades, but now at least in activist circles there is the sense that the old world is crumbling and a new one is beginning its laborious birth.

In other words, between 2008 and 2012 the world, particularly the West, began the long transition from an age of sick individualism to an age of healthy collectivism. Social movements began their long march back into the mainstream—social movements against *economic* injustice, the most fundamental kind of oppression. The recent evolution of economic power-structures—the institutions around which society pivots—is responsible not only for the brute material horrors of increasing class polarization and the global immizeration of billions but also for all the social atomism that has grown in the U.S. since the 1970s (or really the 1940s), the privatization of life, the human alienation, the destruction of public spaces and public discourse, the erosion of civil society so that now *churches* are practically the only functioning institutions that have some kind of positive relation to popular empowerment. Society has been gutted, because that has been in the interest of certain segments of the capitalist class. (Marx's historical materialism, in its essence, is merely common sense.) The task for *human* beings now, as opposed to the *capitalist* beings who have brought us to the brink, is to reconstitute the public, the social. That is the way to save the world. And that is what Occupy Wall Street began in the West, with its tentative moves toward remaking public spaces and reminding the U.S. of *class oppression*.



I find it a bit embarrassing now to read what I wrote in 2007, the little preface I wrote. It's too self-fixated, sickly in its self-consciousness. It, and much else I wrote in my twenties, belongs to the postmodern era, the era of individualistic existential anxiety and hyper self-consciousness, of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Infinite Jest* and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, etc. However great these and other such artworks are, they are symptoms of a diseased society, as acute and alienated self-consciousness always is. Expressions of cultural decadence grounded in "bourgeois" social atomization. Products of the "reification" of life, in Marxian jargon. I knew this; I knew it was true of most twentieth-century art in general: I had read my Georg Lukács (*Realism in Our Time*, for instance, published in 1964) and absorbed the Marxian, humanistic critique of bourgeois culture. In fact, I had always despised postmodernism, especially its theoretical manifestations. Some healthy instinct of self-defense had made me innately suspicious of all things postmodern—indeed, all things post-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, my cultural embeddedness and immaturity ensured that the first instantiation of this book didn't live up to its (rather ponderous) title.

Hopefully this edition is more satisfying. I have tried to edit out whatever narcissism and traces of cultural decadence tainted the first version, and I've nearly tripled the book's length. Most of it still consists of stuff written in my twenties, but this time I've made the selections (from my journal) more judiciously and added much more material on history and capitalism, in honor of the times. As before, the thread that hopefully ties the whole gallimaufry together is the admittedly nebulous one of "humanism," which can take the many forms, negative and positive, it assumes in this book. What I mean by humanism is what I meant in 2007: authenticity, integrity, the celebration of creativity and individuality, freedom, truth, beauty, love, compassion, resistance to dehumanization—all those quaint traditional values that have for millennia, but more dramatically in recent centuries, been fighting a war against the anti-human practices of "civilization." The victories of Occupy Wall Street

belonged to humanism, as did its defeats; labor movements and peasant uprisings and slave rebellions from time immemorial have been arrayed in the battlefield alongside humanism. Power-structures have always fought savagely against humanism, warring to suppress freedom and popular self-determination. And the individual set against his society, persecuted by the elite mob, has been a lone warrior on behalf of the human.

The reader will notice, therefore, that this book isn't academic, nor does it evince respect for institutional conventions of any sort. Institutions are indeed, perhaps, what I dislike most in the world (however necessary they are in some form). Nearly all the barbarous inhumanity that confronts us daily is explained by the workings of impersonal institutions, bureaucracies and the principle of *authority*. When the police viciously destroy spontaneous communities that arise in moments of disaster, as after Hurricane Katrina, that is institutional authority at work, not some supposedly innate human instinct of destructiveness (Freud's "death instinct" or whatever you want to call it). In fact, such brutal destruction of community is an apt symbol of bureaucracy itself—as well as its capitalist parents, marketization, commoditization, and "privatization"—which, like its perfection totalitarianism, functions by disrupting human interactions, natural human responses, thus atomizing people, making possible the amoral world we see today. The bureaucratization and commoditization of everything are the twin evils of the age, the overarching evils of modern capitalism.

In more insidious ways too, though, the "institutionalization" of society is detestable. It means groupthink and conformism, disregard of originality and genuine merit, hostility toward individuality, the fetishizing of superficial "success"—accolades, credentials—as determined by the interests of institutions and ultimately the imperative to perpetuate established power-structures. The mediocre and dishonest is often celebrated (is *allowed* to be celebrated) because it rarely challenges social structures and, partly for that reason, tends to sell well. Other things being equal, I'm inclined to respect someone less the higher he has risen in society or the more recognition he has, because of what his

success suggests about him. There are many honorable exceptions, people like Naomi Klein, Howard Zinn, and Amy Goodman, who confront the dominant institutions head-on in their mission to expose injustice and hypocrisy—and their success shows just how thirsty the public is for *honesty* in political discourse. But far more symptomatic are the hordes of conforming intellectuals in elite universities, policy institutes, the mainstream media, law firms, neoliberal organizations such as the IMF, government institutions, and corporations. The “institutional” mentality—the greatest threat to humanism, indeed to the survival of the species—is on subtle display, for example, in the response one professor gave to my praising Noam Chomsky: he curtly dismissed him with the smug assertion that “he lacks academic bona fides.” In other words, “he’s not ‘one of us,’” so we can ignore him (as nearly all academics do, despite the wealth of information he provides from every conceivable source). A little statement like that, as innocuous as it may seem, is the beginning of inhumanity: it signifies the elevation of institutional norms, a tribal mentality, at the expense of human values and fundamental truths, such as Chomsky serves in his work. The truly bureaucratic mentality that worships institutional authority and *rules* isn’t far off; and the Adolf Eichmann phenomenon, the banal bureaucrat filing papers that make possible the deaths of millions, isn’t far off from that. —Again, it’s the horrible capitalism-spawned *atomism* of modernity.

I’ll return to all this later in the book. At the moment I just want to frame what follows. I expect that almost everyone will find something to like and many things to dislike in this work, for it flouts most cultural and political mores that prevail in the West. Everything from philosophy and psychology to history and sociology to poetry and artistic criticism is represented here. There are short academic essays I’ve written because they relate to my broader concerns, and there are even summaries of books that have struck my fancy. I include these because it seems to me that, at this point in history, honest intellectuals have an obligation to disseminate as much information as they can to the public, to “educate the masses” on the pressing issues of the day. There is an

incredible amount of good scholarship out there, but only a small proportion of the world has easy access to it. It is the task of those of us who do have easy access to break out of the academic bubble, collect and summarize the best scholarship—start a conversation with the millions who matter, and in the process be educated ourselves.

Considering the state of the world, it is easy to be discouraged. And this book gives ample expression to that inevitable human emotion. But in the end, to waste away in discouragement is a *choice*, not the only rational response to the way things are. In moments of hopelessness or disgust with the world I try to think of people like Malalai Joya, the heroic Afghan activist for peace and women's rights. If she can rise above cynicism, then so can I. We should follow her example and fight to “humanize” society, rebel against pernicious authority and every shibboleth that justifies inaction. Hopefully this book makes some small contribution to that collective project.



## Chapter 1

### Detached Thoughts

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*The naïve idealist's despair.*— “Philosophy! My eyes glisten at the sight of your death throes! What treasures the Greeks and Romans bequeathed to us, and the ancient Indians and the Europeans!— what treasures have we buried! The vast thoughts of the Upanishads echoing through millennia, echoing in the orotund voice of primeval civilization, reverberating insights into our origins from beyond time’s chasm. The pioneering logical rigor and skeptically confident idealism of Plato. The heroic struggles of Nietzsche to overcome the nihilism attendant upon God’s death by creating edifices of ideas couched in luminous prose. The noble if quixotic attempts to scale the vault of heaven and look Creation in the eye. The sheer desperate determination to *plow on* in the face of all odds and pierce the veil of Maya just to catch a glimpse, however fleeting, of truth—propelled not by any utilitarian consideration but simply by the obsession to consummate this Wonder that is practically coextensive with consciousness. The taming of the turmoil of experience into a *Weltanschauung* and the brief triumphant respite as the thinker contemplates the world he has created, knowing full well that soon his Homeric restlessness will reassert itself, the prospect of adventure will tantalize him, and he’ll set solitary sail on seas of uncharted peril. He may not reach his destination, but the quest is what electrifies and justifies him. He needs nothing else; and if he is deprived of it he is nothing, in his eyes and the world’s. He is ignorant of the force that compels him toward his Faustian destiny, but it acts on him as the wind acts on a leaf.

“His spirit has dissipated in postmodernity. Now we have the hordes of scribblers scribbling critiques of critiques of dead philosophers’ ideas from their spiritual cubicles and receiving a paycheck in return. Immersing themselves in the sacred texts but unable to imbibe the Dionysian essence that wafts from the words

to anyone with unslaked thirst for meaning in life. Such empyreal joy is unnatural in a society that worships money, that prostrates itself before The Corporation, and has been bureaucratized into a minutely organized division of labor—a division of labor that places intellectual worker-bees in isolated combs with high walls that prevent them from seeing their aggregate, crushing their latent ambition, if indeed it was latent at all. —Yes, modern bureaucracy has crowded out philosophy and left room only for ‘scholarship.’”

\*

*What is philosophy?*— One could write an entire book in answer to this question. Here I’ll say only that philosophy, as I understand it, is not what it has become. It is not logical symbolism or formalization; it is not occupied purely with methodology or linguistic analysis; it does not consist in shallow discursiveness or logical exercises, and certainly not in the trivial questions that occupy so many academics now. Rather, it is something that the intelligent, informed layman can comprehend, something he can be *moved* by. It is nothing more nor less than an intellectually honest engagement with the perennial questions of life. It ought to *inspire*; it ought to broaden one’s vision, impel one to think on one’s own, for it is man’s original and instinctual attempt to assimilate the world—his primordial impulse to ask questions. To bring order out of chaos. All the sciences emerged from it. They are extensions of it.

Philosophy is, in fact, the broadest of human endeavors. Every curious child asking his parent why the sun sets is a *pure philosopher*; every great poet and scientist is in a direct line from Plato. Percy Shelley, Wordsworth, Milton, Shakespeare, Whitman, even Wilfred Owen—analytically they weren’t *rigorous* thinkers, but the spirit animating their writings was philosophical. Wonder, awe, despair at universal absurdity, joyfulness in *living*, the drive to understand. The true philosopher has a mind so expansive that he is often dissatisfied with himself; and his dissatisfaction drives him to push the boundaries of thought and life. He might be called a “genius,” but he is really just a thoughtful person who, because he

can't find contentment in ordinary life, spends his time contemplating himself and the world. Indulging his fascination is what makes him happy. —The “great philosophers” are not “great”; they're just philosophers.

In this broad sense, moreover, philosophy is rebellion against the status quo. And philosophers are necessarily rebels. They have to be, because they are *individuals*. Social conditions are never modeled on “truth,” so the thinker is bound to come into conflict with them, since he pursues knowledge and criticizes what is false. Especially in a world where alienation is the norm, where power-structures suppress the individual's development as well as his understanding of reality, philosophy must take on the character of rebellion. It must be socially critical and engaged; but it must also be *lived—passionate*, for it requires passion to subvert ossified ways of thinking and being.

No, philosophy can never die: the world is too immense and wonder-full.

\*

*Wonder vs. knowledge.*—

“Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!  
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.  
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?  
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,  
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering  
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,  
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?  
Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?  
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood  
To seek a shelter in some happier star?  
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,  
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me  
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?”



The poet in me understands Edgar Allan Poe's bitterness toward the scientist. The poet cherishes life only so long as he can marvel at it. He prefers myth to "dull reality," and wonder to knowledge. His ignorance of truth allows his fantasies to roam freely, unencumbered by the pangs of a guilty intellectual conscience. The "scientist," on the other hand, cares nothing for flights of fancy; he wants only to chase away the confusion of not knowing truth. He hates living in doubt; he feels as if doubt forces him to put his life on hold. To always speculate on the causes behind phenomena is debilitating.

Taken as a whole, I'm neither a poet nor a scientist, though I share traits with both types. I relish the experience of wonder: it gives *magic* to life; it substitutes the Universe for God. Through wonder I can *strive*; I can worship a world that is beyond me—beyond my existence and my limited capacities for understanding. But unlike Poe, I don't enjoy not having knowledge. I have little need of romantic self-delusions. In other words, he dislikes reality and wants to avoid it; I love reality and want to seek it—but never to attain it completely, because then life would cease to be "beyond" me, superior to me: it would be *equal* to me and thus boring. No longer would I have goals: in *understanding* them (their psychological causes, their transience, their ultimate meaninglessness) I would despise them. So I work feverishly to gain knowledge even as I hope that I fail. And yet, I can't tolerate living in confusion—which means I hope I *don't* fail. Which is worse: living in confusion or understanding everything? Which is better: knowledge or wonder? Admittedly, the two aren't always mutually exclusive—in fact, an increase in knowledge can often increase wonder: for example, the more I learn of the brain sciences, the more stupefied I am—but, ultimately, the perfection of knowledge is the negation of wonder. I suppose the answer is that, inasmuch as I'm human and not divine, I'd rather continue to live in confusion (i.e., wonder) than know everything.

Gotthold Lessing was right to choose the hand that offered striving over the hand that offered truth.

\*

*The intellectual virtue of humility.*— The fact that intuitively we find it a *complete mystery* how our limbs move—“miraculously”—when we “will” them to proves the hopelessness of our trying to understand ourselves. Consciousness is sunlight glancing off the ocean’s surface.

\*

*To be or not to be?*

The ticking of the sun determines life  
Among us earthlings; we’re beholden to  
A trillion nuclear explosions. Flares  
Upon the solar rim determine cloud-  
Movements and weather patterns and daily life  
Here on the earth. Ten million miles away  
Our future is decided, *predecided*,  
Concocted in a boiling brew of atoms.  
—One knows not how one should react to this.  
Is horror most appropriate? Or awe?  
Or wonder? Or is fear more sensible?  
Or maybe suicide is suitable,  
Since life in such conditions seems for naught.  
A “floating” Earth—embedded in a viscid  
Cosmos—which travels on a curved straight line  
Around a (literal) space-coagulation  
Unendingly—or, *billions* of times—  
Is quite indifferent to the destiny  
Of helpless little lice inhabiting  
Its many tufts of hair—which they call “forests,”  
And which, stupidly, they shave away,  
Thus leaving only a bare scalp with scars  
All intersecting, grey, ugly;—and yet,  
At least, they give the lice the means to keep  
Proliferating parasitically

(Because of some bizarre connection between  
Such scars and liceal regeneration).  
And so, in short, the black enormity  
Of crimes perpetrated by space and time  
On us poor lice, together with our crimes  
Against ourselves as well as gentle Earth,  
Lead one to think that...—no, just to despair!  
There is no point in thought, nor action! We  
Can only sit in immobility,  
Thoughtless, despairing immobility,  
And wait in trepidation for the end.  
—Right? ...No, I disagree. I choose to live  
In wonder, and in awe all full of love.  
Yes, love! That thing poeticized to death,  
Yet utterly deserving of the praise.  
Forget about the horror! Think, Chris, of Anna,  
Your “soul-twin”—or the Vietnamese angel  
You talked to yesterday, while your heart  
Grew wings! Think of when she bent over,  
And her...—well, yes, it was a pretty sight.  
(That’s all that need be said.) I wonder when  
I’ll see her next. Tomorrow? Saturday?  
I wonder if she’s interested in me.  
And when will Anna come to St. Louis?  
I wonder... Ah well. Earth, keep orbiting!  
You have permission to ignore me. But  
My fellow lice, *you* do not! I want  
Your love, because I love you—stupidly,  
It’s true, and mindlessly, instinctively,  
And blindly, but...well, after all, I’m just  
A louse. You can’t expect *too* much from me!  
Blind love is all you’re gonna get. Blind love  
And blinder wonder. —So say your prayers and love  
Your neighbors, and live Christ-like lives (Good luck!),  
And love your cosmic insignificance  
Because it means you’re just a visitor,

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A tourist without responsibilities!  
And Anna: I'll see you soon, I hope, and when  
I do I'll let you tear apart this poem.  
(Your critical sense is more refined than mine.)

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*The sovereign of nature.*— A case can be made that the human brain, or certainly the human body, is the most complex structure in the universe.

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*Majesty in the 'microscopic.'*— The universe's most awesome achievement is to have created a being capable of contemplating the universe, and of partially *understanding* it! A being that can even *pass judgment* on the universe! Star-dust contemplating stars. Humans are so wondrous that even they cannot fathom how wondrous they are.

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*Experimental thoughts.*— Though Hegel was, in some ways, an intellectually dishonest thinker (which didn't prevent him from being one of history's greatest philosophers), one of his fundamental intuitions was right: humanity is nature's self-consciousness. In our attainment of power over nature, nature has achieved power over itself. —That's commonly understood, in an abstract way, but rarely is it *imagined. Intuited.* Think about this: when you study neurology, billions of cells in your brain are, so to speak, trying to understand themselves. They're looking at pictures of themselves, they're learning how they operate—they're learning that dendrites are stimulated by neurotransmitters released into the synapse, that action potentials traveling along axons are sped up by a myelin coating on the cell—and then they cooperate with each other to feel collective amazement at the fact that these impossibly intricate biological processes are occurring inside them, and then they reflect that despite all this newly acquired knowledge they still

manage to delude themselves by maintaining the appearance of a single substantive self that is doing all their thinking for them... They ascribe all these ideas to *us*!—to consciousness! We get all the credit for their work! I almost want to reprimand them: “You should have more self-respect, guys!”—until I remember that this would really be *them* reprimanding *themselves*; I’m just the (nonexistent) intermediary they create so as to perpetuate their own existence (because without the illusion of a self, this body that is called “me” couldn’t survive, since humans rely on communication and communication relies on consciousness).<sup>2</sup> And through these cells, nature has reached the point at which it can control itself: it can genetically engineer organisms, it can self-consciously create chemical elements, it can revel in its newfound power by blowing up nuclear bombs. —In the end, it will probably be able, through us, to decide the course of its own evolution. “I want to create a race of supermen,” it thinks to itself. “The films I’ve made exploring the horrors of this scenario are, after all, only films: in reality I’ll be able to do it better.” And so nature, in its over-confidence, will end up destroying the animal that allowed it to realize itself, and it will have to start again, propelled by its “will to power.”

Yes, nature has its demon, just like we humans—who are, after all, nature.

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*Nature’s desire for recognition.*— Had humanity not been created, what a ridiculous comedy the universe would be! All this pageantry, all these spectacles, all this beauty for nothing! It would be a play performed for no audience, with no purpose. The beauty of the sunset, of New Zealand’s landscape, of an evolutionary equilibrium that is an *artistic masterpiece* would have no observer, no Other to appreciate it! It would not exist; it would be dead. A brute fact opaque to itself. *Humanity* created it. In nature’s creation of humanity, nature created itself.

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter three for more thoughts on the “self” and its illusory nature.

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*On value.*— One reason I'll never be truly happy is that there isn't a God. There isn't a "Truth" in matters of value (moral value, aesthetic value, personal value).<sup>3</sup> No such thing as greatness or genius, because these concepts are, implicitly, values made into objective truths, which is impossible. Predicating greatness of someone is not like predicating some value-neutral quality like "featherless biped"-ness of him, predications that can be simply *true*. But that's what I unconsciously strive for, greatness and genius. So I'm plagued by this cognitive dissonance, this disjunct between my more primitive ambitious side, which can't be reasoned with, and my knowledgeable side, my reason (which tells me that my desire to be "objectively valuable" is impossible because the notion of objective value is meaningless). If there were a God I could strive for his approval, which would be approval from Reality and would thus objectively confirm my value. But because there isn't, I'm destined to be restless and unsatisfied. Similarly, the absence of God, or of objective truth in matters of value, means that there is no point in seeking fame if it's done for the sake of confirming your value to yourself (which, of course, it is). Recognition (or fame) proves nothing, because there is nothing to prove. In short, there is nothing outside of self-respect, no "reality" that one's self-respect can correspond to or be justified by. One's belief in one's value is neither true nor false. But we all think it's true or want it to be and act accordingly, trying so very hard to prove our worth, or bolster or confirm our self-esteem by bringing our self-image in line with notions of the ideal human being. Value-talk is an illusion, but it's a psychologically inescapable one: hence the "Wise Man's" cognitive dissonance.

All there is is people respecting you or you respecting yourself and so on. There is only subjectivity here, no objectivity. There are only attitudes—attitudes and more attitudes, no firm ground

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<sup>3</sup> To say it in an illustrative way: no scientist will ever discover by investigating nature that murder is wrong. In philosophical jargon, "realism" about values is mistaken.

anywhere, just a floating around in the fog of *attitudes*, a bottomless pit. It's maddening! I have to *stand* somewhere—I can't keep hovering here my whole life, it takes too much effort—but there's no ground anywhere! And I'm going to keep living my life trying to achieve certainty (repose) in this one area like everyone else but there can be no repose because we humans are irrelevant and superfluous like everything else in the universe. There is no meaning, it's all *de trop*.

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*Cognitive dissonance*.— Here's the paradox: people say and do things that make you, e.g., contemptuous of them, but you say and do those things yourself—or you *could* do them while remaining essentially the same person you are. If a driver on the highway cuts you off you think “Jerk!”, and you're convinced of your judgment. But you could do and probably have done the same thing, even though you know you're not a jerk. So why is *he* a jerk and you're not? Maybe you'll retort, “My opinion that he's a jerk is an outgrowth of anger, and I don't really mean it.” But no, you do mean it. In the moment when you think it, you're sure of it. You're disgusted and dismissive of him. “He's a jerk!”: *that's what he is*, that and nothing else. He doesn't merit further thought because he is inferior. You're wrong, though, as you recognize when your anger has subsided.

Similarly, in thinking that George W. Bush is a bad person because of his actions and beliefs, you're making a mistake. Aside from the fact that “bad person” and “evil man” have little meaning—because they're value-judgments, or *subjective reactions* that project themselves into supposed *objective facts*—you're writing him off as “*this, and only this*.” You're ignoring his individuality, his humanity, treating him as a *thing*, before trying to understand his position or the experiences that have led him to it. You're *wrong*. To understand is, in some sense, to “forgive.”—And yet I, more often than most people, feel palpable contempt for political conservatives. That implies that I'm treating them as “things,” as *fixed, immoveable*, as though it is of their *essence* to be

contemptible. In order to live in truth you cannot pass value-judgments on people, or at least you have to recognize the conditionality and relativity of such judgments.

But, damn it, it's fun to despise conservatives! Like Karl Rove! What a repugnant man! Seriously, part of me can't understand how such people are *not* "bad," bad in their essence. — I'm trapped between these two extreme positions. It's distressing. I fluctuate from one to the other and never attain certainty.

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*The Dalai Lama as role-model.*— The source of fanatical inhumanity is certainty in value-judgments. The cure to such inhumanity is to recognize that value-judgments are basically meaningless—reifications of attitudes of approval or disapproval—and relative to some set of standards, not "absolute." Compassion and tolerance are not only humane but *true*;<sup>4</sup> hatred and intolerance are not only horrible but *false*.

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*The greatest error.*— Human life revolves around the illusion of objectivity.

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Value-judgments are always relative to something, not absolutely true (not just "true, period"). A person is not intelligent, period. He is intelligent relative to someone or to some standard.<sup>5</sup> Hitler was not *bad*; he was bad relative to certain standards (and, in

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<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, the attitudes themselves are not "true," since attitudes aren't the sort of things that have truth-values. Rather, compassion is more compatible with a recognition of the relative unfoundedness of value-judgments than hate is, because hate is premised on impassioned belief in someone's "badness."

<sup>5</sup> Actually, "intelligent" may be more descriptive (value-neutral) than evaluative. I'll leave aside such terms.



a slightly different sense of “relative,” relative to certain people).<sup>6</sup> A value-judgment not made in relation to some set of standards is not really meaningful. The desire to help people is good...not “in itself” or “objectively” but given other values. The problem is that when we make value-judgments, the form of the assertion is categorical or “absolute” or “objective” in the way I’m criticizing, which means that the assertion is not wholly meaningful. “It’s good to help people”: that statement seems to have a very determinate meaning when you first look at it, but the more you think about it, the more elusive its meaning becomes. Insofar as the meaning is unanalyzable, it doesn’t exist. Only if you give reasons for the statement, i.e., justify it on the basis of other values, does it acquire a concrete meaning. So, why is it good to help people? Because, e.g., that reduces suffering, and you value a reduction in suffering. Thus, helping people is good inasmuch as it brings about the realization of some further end—and *this* statement is wholly meaningful. It isn’t a categorical claim ascribing “intrinsic value” to something, a notion that makes no sense.

There is no such thing as intrinsic value. Not even happiness is “intrinsically valuable,” at least in the sense I’m discussing. What would it *mean* to say, “Happiness is intrinsically good”? Or “Beauty has intrinsic value”? Every value is such in relation to a preference (i.e., an act of valuing). A masochistic person might deny that pleasure or happiness is valuable, and this is a perfectly coherent thing to do.<sup>7</sup> Why do I think happiness is good? Just because I prefer it to unhappiness. It isn’t good in itself; it’s good because of (or “relative to”) my set of preferences.

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<sup>6</sup> Contrast “This patch is yellow” with “This painting is beautiful.” The former is “objective” and non-relational in a way that the latter is not, however much it appears to be. The painting is beautiful *to me*, or relative to my preferences.

<sup>7</sup> The only way it would be incoherent is if happiness is *defined* (emptily) as that which a person desires or values. But the common definition is that it’s a pleasurable, conflict-free state of mind—and it’s coherent for one to prefer pain and conflict.

On another understanding, though, there *are* intrinsic goods. Virtue is intrinsically good, in that it's good by definition. Vice is intrinsically bad. But specific vices are not "intrinsically bad"—except insofar as they're classified as vices. For instance, lying is not intrinsically, *essentially* "bad"; it's just a way of behaving, like any other way. But insofar as it's classified as a vice, it *is* bad, because vices are defined that way. Of course, this is really just saying that "insofar as it's bad (a vice), it's bad."

If an intrinsic good is something that is desired or valued for its own sake, then there are intrinsic goods. Pleasure is usually desired for its own sake. So is happiness. So is recognition, or self-confirmation. These aren't good in themselves; they're good insofar as they're valued, and they're intrinsically good insofar as they're valued for their own sake. But it is worth noting that specific instances of these general goods are not valued for themselves: for instance, a massage is valued not for its own sake (what would that even mean?) but for its pleasurable quality. So, a massage is extrinsically good, good on account of something else (conceptually distinct from it) which is realized through it.

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Value characterizes a relation between a subject and an object. It is incoherent to say that an object (or a person) is valuable in itself, i.e., with no reference to a subject (a subject's purposes, attitudes, etc.), because this contradicts the nature of value. But this is basically what one is doing when one makes a value-judgment. The statement "That painting is beautiful," by virtue of its form, ascribes intrinsic value to an object, i.e., considers it valuable "in itself"—without reference to a subject—which is incoherent. The meaningful way of expressing the same sentiment is to say something like "*I find* that painting beautiful," or to list the criteria by which one judges aesthetic merit and then say that that painting fulfills the criteria.

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*The meaning of life?*— Life is not totally “meaningless.” People’s commitment to their work, to relationships, and to life itself proves that. However, it is hard to deny that life is not as meaningful as we’d like. It is the evolutionary product of “meaningless” random variation and natural selection, not meaningful teleology or some kind of cosmic purpose. The course of a person’s life is molded to a great extent by accidents; his very existence is an utterly improbable accident. No one is as special or valuable as he thinks he is. Whether he is popular or unpopular does not mean what he tends to think it does, that he is (respectively) valuable or not valuable. There is little justice in the world. A person’s basic existential project of objectively confirming his self-regard, or his value—which is ultimately what the desire for “meaning” is all about—is unrealizable. He implicitly wants to be remembered by the world forever, or at least for a very long time, because he thinks that that kind of recognition would make his life more consequential, but he will not be. And even if he were it would not matter, because he’d be dead. His life is organized around illusions, such as that of the durable, “permanent” substantival self, and of the special value of loved ones, and of the “necessity” of his own existence. His place in the universe is not what he likes to think it is. In the long run and on a broad scale, his achievements are inconsequential. All this is not *meaninglessness*, but it is *insufficient meaningfulness*.

Another way to say it is that in wanting life to be “meaningful” in some deep sense, people want the world to have value “in itself.” *Intrinsic* value. Their desire for some kind of recognition from the world (i.e., for self-confirmation)—which is inseparable from their desire to have a meaningful life—is also inseparable from their implicit belief that the world has value. (We want recognition, love, etc., only from things or people to which/whom we attribute some sort of value.) But it doesn’t. Nothing has value in itself; its value comes from the subject, in other words from us. We give things value by adopting a certain orientation to them. The world and life itself have *no* “intrinsic value,” whatever that means, which is to say they are essentially

meaningless. Thus, the human project, viz., the urge for self-confirmation, is, from at least one perspective (in fact several), fundamentally deluded. It presupposes that there is some *value* in “confirming” oneself, in objectifying one’s self-love, in making it a part of reality so to speak, which itself presupposes that reality or the world has some sort of “objective value,” which it doesn’t. In any case, the notion of objectifying one’s self-love is nonsensical, because freedom and value are necessarily *subjective* things.<sup>8</sup>

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“*Meaning.*”— A purpose, a goal, a project, self-transcendence, community, recognition, self-confirmation in the world, the realization of self-ideals, purposive self-projection into the world, making a contribution, changing something, making lasting change, devoting oneself to something “other,” love, commitment, faith, hope, spiritual “ordering,” “centering” oneself, awareness of *connection*, transcendence of atomizing self-consciousness, transcendence in various ways of the merely “given,” immersion in the other, passion, truth, authenticity, spontaneity, affirmation.

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*More thoughts on values.*— I don’t understand how a criticism or a compliment of me can be true—or, more accurately, I don’t

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<sup>8</sup> More exactly, from *one* perspective it is nonsensical to “objectify” or “confirm” your self-love. From another perspective, though, it isn’t; we do it constantly. We project our self-love into, and through, our activities and interactions with others, thereby in some sense actualizing it or objectifying it. But the goal of putting your self-love, your *self*, into the world so that it stays there, so to speak, i.e., so that the world from then on necessarily reflects to everyone “John’s value!” or something like that—something that can be *read into* the world—is nonsensical, though we all desire it (implicitly). What we desire, in other words, is to overcome the boundaries between self and world, self and other. That’s what it all boils down to, the desire for meaning and everything else. But it is impossible, indeed meaningless.

understand what it would *mean* for a criticism or compliment to be “true.” I am who I am; to say that certain things I do are, for instance, “weak” or “petty” is ultimately meaningless. What does it mean to class a person or some aspect of him under some evaluative property? “He’s arrogant.” Okay...he thinks he’s better than other people and acts like it. So what? What is really being said? The implication is that, insofar as he’s arrogant, he is unpleasant or bad. Arrogance is a flaw. But flaws or strengths are such only from an external viewpoint, an “otherly” viewpoint. From the perspective of the subject, the interior, they have no significance. I can think of people who might call me selfish or generous or whatever. But from my own “internal” perspective, these words wash over me. They can’t stick, they can’t have much meaning; and to say they’re *true* would be a nearly empty statement. I’m just living, just a thing in the world changing from moment to moment, experiencing myself and others, acting and reacting; whether I or my acts “have value” is a whole other kind of thing divorced from me, an artificial, static, other-imposed label, a way of simplifying and categorizing the experiencing of me. This applies to everyone.

Thoughts like these are hard to pin down. All you can do is grope towards them.

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It’s hard for me to take seriously people’s responses to me, whether positive or negative, because in different circumstances they would have responded in the opposite way. It is never just *you* to whom people respond, but *you in such and such conditions*. An indefinite number of external factors enters into people’s attitudes toward each other. (It’s true that these attitudes are rarely groundless. They are merely not as grounded as they pretend to be.)

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*Admiration.*— To admire is to misunderstand. It means to pick out and simplify certain traits or acts, abstracting them from the

person's living totality—which, after all, incorporates other things you wouldn't admire. All people are merely people, "good" and "bad" in different ways, determined largely by innumerable factors outside their control.

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It makes no sense to praise someone for something over which he has no control. Since people have very little control over who they are, it makes little sense to praise someone for his personality or his "noble mind" or his wit or his talent or his natural propensity to work hard or any such quality. And insofar as his acts express his propensities, it is senseless to praise or condemn him for them. In fact, similar reasoning probably leads to the conclusion that *any* act of condemnation or praise is, in a sense, misguided. (Other chains of reasoning also lead to that conclusion. For example, if the principle is that an act ought to be praised insofar as it is motivated by concern for others, then no act ought to be unreservedly praised, since all acts are motivated by at least as much self-regard as other-regard. Or, rather, they—at best—implicitly express both self-love and other-love. There is no "purely unselfish," or "purely unselfish," act.) The paradigm for all these value-judgments, their "form" and real meaning, is revealed in something silly like the implicit approval that people project towards a good-looking person. It is a cognitively senseless<sup>9</sup> emotional reaction. Properly speaking, it has the form "I like" or "I am impressed," not "You deserve" (even though *for the admirer*—i.e., in the phenomenology of his mental state—the form is the latter, the objective statement, not the former, the subjective statement). When we judge people's worth we're trying to say something about *them*, but, ultimately, the more meaningful—and *sensible*—thing is what we're saying about ourselves, such as the implicit statement "I don't like him" or "I am in awe of him" or whatever.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As in both "meaningless" and "not sensible."

<sup>10</sup> Insofar as our judgment, however, incorporates a *description* as opposed to an *evaluation*, it is meaningful. For example, the statement

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Having finished reading Albert Camus's *The Fall*, I feel obligated to myself to make a few observations on the book's relation to me.

The narrator's successful, happy, easy life was interrupted one day when he realized that he was not as virtuous as he pretended to be. —On second thought, no, I don't feel like laying it all out for you. The point is that the narrator experienced a crisis when he realized he was not "an innocent man" but a guilty one, and that everyone is fundamentally guilty. The problem was, how could he live his life under the glare of this knowledge? How could he live in an unhypocritical way, in such a way that he could go on judging people as always, as everyone must (in order to justify his implicit self-love), without deserving to be judged by them at the same time and for basically the same reasons that he judged them? He wanted to have a clear conscience, to believe he was superior, as he always had, but by rights he couldn't. For a while he struggled with this problem, until finally the solution came to him: if he judged himself with sufficient severity (*"J'accuse—moi!"*), he could go on judging others and dominating them with a good conscience. If, from time to time, he "profess[ed] vociferously [his] own infamy," he could go on permitting himself everything (for example, the duplicity that he couldn't help practicing, being a modern man). The point seems to be that by repenting periodically, accusing himself, he salvages the craved conviction of his superiority (presumably because he knows that other people *don't* accuse themselves, and so to that extent at least he is better, or more honest and insightful, than them). "The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you."

This is all very similar to what I've said many times. All these paradoxes, all these ironical self-justifications, are classic me. The difference between us is that we adopt different "solutions." (Mine, needless to say, is better.) While the narrator, Jean-Baptiste

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"He's an idiot" is meaningful insofar as it gives, or half-gives, a value-neutral description of his intelligence.

Clamence, judges himself mercilessly, thereby giving himself the right to judge others, I say that we simply have to go on living our lives as before, judging and so on, while remembering in the back of our minds that our judgments are ultimately superficial and often hypocritical. Indeed, the very act of judging is virtually meaningless. And yet at the same time I recognize something that Clamence doesn't, and which at least apparently can justify certain judgments: taking ordinary values as our yardstick—perhaps even clarifying them a little, making them more honest, etc.—some people, after all, have more worth than others. Some are worse, some are better. Dick Cheney is worse, Albert Schweitzer is better (*relative to particular standards*, not “objectively” or “in his essence,” as though one could list his qualities and include “goodness” in them). It isn't as though everyone is simply “*guilty*” (as Clamence thinks) and nothing else can be said on the matter. There are subtleties, there are gradations in worth. If all goes well, I myself am one of the good ones—and so to that extent I'm justified in putting myself on a (low) pedestal and criticizing others. My solution is the better one because it's more subtle and insightful, less self-deluding, and more ironical.

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Reading Hannah Arendt's classic *On Revolution* (1963). In her analysis of Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, she remarks insightfully that “The sin of the Grand Inquisitor was that he, like [the French revolutionary] Robespierre, was ‘attracted toward *les hommes faibles*,’ not only because such attraction was indistinguishable from lust for power, but also because he had depersonalized the sufferers, lumped them together into an aggregate—the people *toujours malheureux*, the suffering masses, etc. To Dostoyevsky, the sign of Jesus's divinity was his ability to have compassion with all men in their singularity, that is, without lumping them together into some such entity as one suffering mankind.” Yes, reification, depersonalization, is really the origin of “evil,” and to the extent that even “good” people reify others they're not far removed from “bad” people. So, in a way, the hero



of Camus's *The Fall* was right: in modern society everyone is guilty, because everyone necessarily reifies "humanity." Goodness is compassion, and compassion is concrete, not abstract. Nevertheless, it is psychologically impossible for us not to posit abstract entities like humankind or "the poor" or "the rich" and act with them in mind; the best we can do is to try to keep in mind the interests of *real* people when acting on behalf of abstract concepts or ideologies.

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It's paradoxical that what makes us human, the ability to abstract from concrete things, from the concrete "other" (a capacity that accounts for self-consciousness), is what makes possible not only the concept of morality but also the horrors of Nazism, of hating an abstract thing called "the Jew" and wanting to kill everyone who instantiates this thing. Gandhi and Hitler are made possible by the same human capacity of *mediation*, of abstracting from the immediate and subsuming people under categories.

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"*What goes on behind the scenes?*"—In most cases, "essence" differs from "appearance." Truth has to be uncovered painstakingly, *dug out* hour by hour, year by year. Like a miner digging through a mile of granite for a nugget of silver. The essence of our thinking and behaving is *false, deluded*. For example, the self—what is the self? Not some sort of "spiritual substance," a "soul," a *personal entity* or *self-identical thing* like "Chris Wright"—what deceptive things are names!—or *me* or *you* or something metaphysically real. The self is, in a sense, an illusion—yes, the Buddhists are right: at its core it is nothing but *self-consciousness*, consciousness looking at itself, consciousness of consciousness. *I*...am a will-o'-the-wisp, an *ignis fatuus*, a mere fold in consciousness, a brain-produced, brain-controlled, invisible glint in its (the glint's) own eye. There is a body, yes; memories, yes; consciousness, yes; a name, yes—a name to enhance the

illusion—and thus all the appurtenances of a “**SELF**” exist. But what is behind it all? David Hume said it: *nothing*.

No self? Then what is love? What is anger? What is ambition or hatred or shame or regret or admiration or any other experience? Certainly not what we think it is. But whatever it is, it’s somehow an illusion—because at the center of every experience is this illusory “self-substance.” Nature deceives us, tricks us into taking ourselves seriously.

Or think of something different: think of your patriotism. Or think of any cliché about America’s greatness. “The First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech.” Not true. No document “guarantees” anything. With a little digging, you learn that the reason we have anything resembling freedom of speech now is not the Constitution: the reason is that thousands, millions of people have fought for the right to express their opinions. Socialists, workers, women, African-Americans—decades upon decades of fighting. The Constitution has no power to do anything: it’s an inert document. It didn’t stop the Sedition Act from being passed (1798) and approved by the Supreme Court; it didn’t stop the Espionage Act from being passed during World War I; it didn’t strike down Jim Crow: that required a civil rights movement. —Any seemingly obvious preconception you have about America or the social order is probably wrong.

In short, he who wants to be justified in his beliefs has to *dig*, has to dig himself out of illusion. The granite-heavy accretions of eons-old “conventional wisdom.” Nature and society cooperate to hide truth from us.

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*An example of the above, from Marxism.*— According to Karl Marx, capitalism functions in such a way that its appearance differs from its essence. What happens in the marketplace conceals what is happening in the sphere of production. His theory of “commodity fetishism” elaborates on that claim, and it leads to the theory of “reification.” Both are sketched below.

Any economist knows that a commodity has two aspects: its use-value (its utility for the consumer) and its exchange-value (the price it commands). In *Capital*, Marx points out that, as a use-value, the commodity is something natural and particular, concrete, while as an exchange-value it is purely the proportion of goods it can be exchanged for. It “embodies” this proportion, so to speak; it is an abstract thing, a quantity, and as such is qualitatively equal to every other commodity. In this sense, commodities are abstract and comparable to each other; as use-values, though, they are just themselves, i.e., their manifold concreteness. They therefore have a dual phenomenology: they can be experienced as themselves, as things that were produced to have a specific *telos* and with whose natural properties one interacts, or they can be experienced as “alienated” from their utility-essence, by being viewed as a mere quantity of value. This second, alienated, aspect is the form they take in the marketplace.

The exchange-values of commodities appear to the consumer to be objective, “socio-natural” properties of the things themselves. Thus, commodities, as exchange-values, seem to take on a life of their own: price-movements are mysterious objective facts, things that just “happen”—determined by forces outside people’s control, by mysterious interactions between the things themselves when they enter the market. Exchange-relations between commodities confront the producer and the capitalist, and the seller and the buyer, as brute facts, impersonal and seemingly inexplicable. In reality, of course, exchange-relations are in no sense properties of the things themselves: they do not exist outside social relations, as appears to be the case, but rather express them. Exchange-values are really expressions of relations between *people*—between workers and competing workers, capitalists and competing capitalists, workers and capitalists, etc. Movements of prices, which are determined by the fluctuations of supply and demand, serve to allocate social labor, by providing economic agents with information they need to make economic decisions. For example, when the demand for a product increases, its price will rise because selling that product has become more profitable. At the same time,

the seller may well demand more of the product from its manufacturers (so as to sell more of it and make a higher profit), who will therefore either raise its price or move proportionately more labor into its production than into the production of other goods. Hence, in the economy as a whole, a change may take place in the allocation of labor. The higher price of the product expresses the higher value of the labor that goes into producing it—that is, the now-greater social necessity of employing labor in production of this particular commodity. So its price is basically a monetary expression of the changed relation between spheres of labor, and between individual laborers, even though it *seems* to express only a relation between things themselves.

Thus, in a capitalist society relations between people are reified into relations between things. And these thing-like relations are seemingly subject to their own laws of movement. The result is that “a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the nonhuman objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article.”<sup>11</sup> Social activity in general acquires more and more this alienated character, this character of being determined by strange forces outside the individual’s control. One can’t find a job in a certain sector, so one has to enter another until something happens and one gets laid-off, etc.; relations between friends and family members are conditioned by the impersonal functioning of the economy, and one feels increasingly like a cog. One is compelled to take jobs one doesn’t want; one desires mindless entertainment and release from the unpleasant “realm of necessity” (hence the love of video-games, television, “smart phones”); and one’s relationships become increasingly dysfunctional. Ultimately, “just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness

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<sup>11</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1971), p. 87.

of man,”<sup>12</sup> such that life becomes more stressful, more mysterious, more atomistic. It comes to be dominated by the half-conscious perception of a vast impersonal Other that gets associated, in his mind, with the faceless strangers he sees, with the company he works for, with his boss, with his dissatisfaction and his unfulfilled desire for recognition (for freedom). He develops an amorphous hostility, sort of an indiscriminate distrust that colors his relationships with people.

Of course, the culture of our own *late* capitalism exacerbates alienation in ways not analyzed by Marx. (See, for example, the movie *Office Space*.) The point is that only by getting below appearances can one understand the way the world works.

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*“The human harvest.”*— Peter Marin: “Kant called the realm of [human] connection the kingdom of ends. Erich Gutkind’s name for it was the absolute collective. My own term for the same thing is the human harvest—by which I mean the webs of connection in which all human goods are clearly the results of a collective labor that morally binds us irrevocably to distant others. Even the words we use, the gestures we make, and the ideas we have, come to us already worn smooth by the labor of others, and they confer upon us an immense debt we do not fully acknowledge.” When you talk or think, you are channeling the past and other people. When you put on your clothes or drive your car or use your computer, you are relating yourself to a global network of people. We are all indebted to each other.

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*Excerpts from 2006. (Juvenilia.)*— American society, and increasingly the whole world, comprises, arguably, more schisms than any in history. Even societies torn by civil war have not had as many schisms as ours does. Theirs have simply had more dramatic

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

consequences. The “culture wars” that afflict America and the world—between religions, ideologies, ways of life—are merely one manifestation of late capitalism’s divisive character, and not the most fundamental. Not only has every major empire suffered from culture wars of some sort; more importantly, they’re an utterly predictable reaction to the international hegemony of a single country. After all, a nation’s imposition of its economy and culture on the rest of the world is bound to have repercussions. The American empire is the most powerful and wide-ranging in history, so the ideological conflicts caused by its advance are naturally going to be widespread and recalcitrant. To be surprised by them, or to treat them as signs of the apocalypse, is to be myopic.

Similarly, the so-called culture wars in America, exemplified by the debates over gay marriage, abortion, and evolution, are not particularly shocking or ominous. They’re just another manifestation of the millennia-old conflict between tradition and progress. Fanatical Muslims fight against capitalism and equality, fanatical Christians fight against science and equality. Religion is usually conservative, like most humans (who remain enmeshed in tradition their whole lives). Progress eventually triumphs, though; mere bigotry cannot indefinitely dam the flood of technological and scientific advance, nor of the social equality that tends to follow in its wake. Conservatives are always, in the long run, on the wrong side of history.

So, I’m not referring primarily to ideological schisms. I don’t find them particularly disturbing or even suspenseful; I think that wise political leaders could temper their vehemence. And economic evolution will, in the very long run, tend to reduce cultural differences anyway.<sup>13</sup> My concern here is with a more fundamental kind of schism, grounded in the nature of the economy rather than the thoughtless inertia of humanity. Far from being mitigated by

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<sup>13</sup> This is partly why some Muslims embrace “jihad.” They resent America’s cultural imperialism, i.e., the erosion of traditional ideologies, and so they fight it. Ultimately they’re impotent, though: nothing they can do (short of nuclear war) can stop globalization.

economic progress, it is exacerbated. In a word, I mean *atomization*. Atomization between individuals, and between professions, and between facets of the individual's psyche/personality. Such divisions are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and are grounded ultimately in the neoliberal economy's demands on social life.

Atomization is the real neurosis of the age, the fundamental cause of all the others. The "culture wars" are comparatively transient and unimportant; in fact, one of the unconscious functions of an individual's immersion in an ideology is precisely to escape atomization. The psyche will construct labyrinthine defenses against the loss of community, elaborate illusions to hide it from view, artificial means to restore interpersonal bonds, but "neuroses," on an individual or collective level, are always in some way a reaction against communal deprivation.

What do I mean by "atomization," "loss of community"? I'll address this question in depth later; for now, I'll let the reader rely on his intuitive understanding. He has but to open his eyes to see examples of the problem. Communities all over the world are deteriorating every year; video games, television, the internet, urbanization, privatization are all causal factors. Similarly, schizoid personality disorders are increasingly common, far more so than a hundred years ago. (One has only to compare the psychoanalytic literature of both eras. Freud treated more cases of "hysteria" than schizoid-related disorders; more recent psychoanalytic theorists, such as R. D. Laing, Heinz Kohut, W. R. D. Fairbairn, and D. W. Winnicott, have been more interested in the schizoid/schizophrenic and narcissistic personalities.<sup>14</sup>) As the community disintegrates, so does the self.

At the moment, though, I want to focus on the other form of atomization I mentioned, namely professional specialization. Which generally amounts to specialization of the personality.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), pp. 34–43—or, indeed, the whole of chapter two.

People embark on a career, develop a few skills to machine-like perfection, and let the rest of their potential atrophy. Even in fields that would seem to lend themselves to, or even to require, a breadth of competence in their practitioners, such as political punditry or, indeed, any kind of intellectual endeavor, few people break out of the narrow mold. There is very little mingling between professions. An economist doesn't write about psychology; a poet doesn't write philosophy; a politician doesn't write at all (except puerile polemics or memoirs). People are becoming more specialized every year, less intellectually and "spiritually" ambitious, more dehumanized.

Yes, specialization is a form of dehumanization. It is a form of the dehumanization that Karl Marx saw was a product of capitalist economic forces (with the commoditization-of-everything that they entail). For the narrower are one's activities, the less one is exploiting one's human potential, and the less one feels like a human being. A person, after all, has almost limitless potential. This is the glory of being human. One can spend the morning playing sports, the afternoon reading or writing, the evening conversing with one's family and friends, and the early night playing the piano or reciting poetry. And the next day one can do something different (like, say, go to one's job). The possibilities are endless; and the more you exploit them, the more satisfied you feel with yourself. This is just common sense. It's a shame, then, for the privileged among us not to take advantage of living in a society that allows for more leisure time than any other in history, and is constantly allowing for more leisure time as economic productivity increases. It's a shame to conform and fall in line with everyone who lets himself be stunted by the habits of social life.

For the masses of the less well-off, who have to work all day in a mind-numbing job just to make ends meet, capitalism is a curse. It ruptures the communal support-system that the peasantry traditionally enjoyed and doesn't compensate that loss by permitting an all-round development of the individual. The laborer's life consists of ceaseless drudgery, thankless chores, an unremitting struggle to escape from poverty. One has but to read



Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed*—or just try washing dishes in a restaurant eight hours a day—to see how appalling are many people's working and living conditions in even the most "civilized" of countries. These are the people on whose shoulders rest all the affluence and leisure of the privileged classes; and one can hardly expect them to do much more than what they have to do to survive.

But even, or especially, when one's life consists of endless drudgery, a diversity in occupations is infinitely more satisfying than staying chained to a single activity. Consider these observations of a French worker in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who traveled to San Francisco during the gold rush: "I could never have believed that I was capable of working at all the trades I practiced in California. I was firmly convinced that I was fit for nothing but the printing of books.... Once I was in the midst of this world of adventurers, who change their jobs as often as their shirts, then, upon my faith, I did as the others. As mining did not pay well enough, I left it for the city, and there I became in succession a typographer, a slater, a plumber, etc. As a result of this discovery that I am fit for any sort of work, I feel less of a mollusc and more of a man."<sup>15</sup> No matter what one's station in life, a breadth of experience is almost always more satisfying, and ultimately more human, than narrowness.

Psychoanalysis also upholds that claim. Carl Jung's notion of "individuation" is relevant here. The individual, he thought, must become, as it were, an in-dividual: he must integrate himself, all the unconscious facets of his psyche and his latent capacities, into a coherent whole. He must realize himself, in all his potential breadth. This process is, to an extent, inevitable and involuntary as the person lives more and gets older, but by bringing it under his conscious control he can forestall neuroses and realize himself more completely and happily. Individuation is indeed, in a sense, the meaning of a person's life, of *every* person's life. On the deepest level and of necessity, it is his main existential project,

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 618.

though it is never completed. No one ever fully realizes himself; his potential is too great. But some people do a better job than others—people like Goethe and Da Vinci, Bertrand Russell, Simone de Beauvoir, even Albert Schweitzer. It is they who should be our role-models: we should adopt more or less the attitudes toward life that they adopted. (I say “more or less” because they too were a little stunted. Athletics, for example, is as important for mental health as—if not more so than—art and thought. Humankind was meant to live mostly outside, not cooped up in a study.)

These thinkers themselves have self-consciously pursued the ideal of self-breadth. From Confucius to Montaigne to John Stuart Mill, philosophers have understood its value and preached it—preached the gospel of self-cultivation, self-realization. No one expressed it better than Nietzsche in §290 of *The Gay Science*—where he put a slightly different spin on it than I have—but they have all had essentially the same idea in mind: the idea, namely, of creating and controlling oneself, of “molding” oneself in as many directions as possible and thereby affirming one’s humanity. Intuitively everyone understands the value of this ideal. It’s sad, then, that few people follow it in practice.

One of the crimes of our social system is that it prevents millions of people from enjoying the freedom without which genuine self-realization is impossible. These unfortunates are like the French worker quoted above before he had come to San Francisco, when he was forced to print books day in and day out. Not only have communal bonds been shredded, but the individual, in being denied means for the development of his personality, has been denied the opportunity to achieve self-respect. However, even the lucky ones among us—the intellectuals, the successful businessmen, the “white-collar workers”—succumb to the dehumanizing effects of money-driven routine, thus ensuring that our self-respect is more fragile and fickle than it has to be. In atomizing social relations, economic relations have also divided us from ourselves, from our psyche’s self-imposed imperative to “Become who you are!”, with the result that we don’t *deeply recognize* ourselves in our work or our relationships, or even in

most of our leisure-activities. We do things just because we have to, whether to make money or to get momentary release from the daily grind. They aren't experienced as spontaneous expressions of our sense of self, as intrinsically enjoyable affirmations of who we are, which make us feel "less of a mollusc and more of a man." – We're alienated, in short, from ourselves, from our work, from the community.

In order to attain the complete self-respect or -contentment that we're always half-consciously hankering for amidst our daily frustrations, we have to experience our life-activities as freely chosen by us—as free "objectifications" of our ideal self-perception, which is intuitive and never fully articulated. These objectifications would bolster our concrete sense of self, bringing it closer in line with how we ideally (would like to) see ourselves and our potential. But our potential—not only objectively but also as we subjectively experience it—is broad, branching out into many different spheres of inter- and intrapersonal interaction. The more we "diversify" ourselves, then—the more directions in which we develop ourselves—the more we'll feel as if we're integrating our real, concrete self with our ideal self(-perception), and are thus "individuating" ourselves (unifying ourselves). We'll come to recognize our full sense of self in the world, in our activities and in how people react to them; and the recognition (of who we ideally/concretely are) that others will show us will contribute greatly to our rich self-respect. It will, in fact, be perhaps the *foundation* of our self-respect, and as such will be an important cause of our ever-greater self-diversification (which is not only a cause, but also an effect, of deep self-esteem). More generally, though, individuation is nothing but the process of becoming profoundly well-disposed toward oneself, which, for reasons I'll go into later, requires that one be well-disposed toward others, which in turn requires that one be recognized or affirmed by them. For all these reasons, individuation can fully occur only in a fairly tightly-knit community, a community not riven by divisions, selfish competition and atomization.

As it is, though, what Marx wrote in 1844 is still true in 2006:

....What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, in the fact that labor is *external* to the worker [whether blue-collar or white-collar], that is, that it does not belong to his essential being [or his sense of his ideal self]; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel well but unhappy, does not freely develop his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker, therefore, feels himself only outside his work, and feels beside himself in his work. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His work therefore is not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that labor is shunned like the plague as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion. External labor, labor in which man is externalized, is labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Finally, the external nature of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in that labor he does not belong to himself but to someone else [or to some corporation]. Just as in religion, the spontaneous activity of human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual, i.e. as an alien divine or diabolical activity, so the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.

The result, therefore, is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most

in his shelter and his finery—while in his human functions he feels himself nothing more than an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.<sup>16</sup>

(If anything, this description is more universally true now than it was in Marx's time.) The unfree character of most work, which consists in its not being desired for its own sake—i.e., in its not emerging organically from an individual's "sentiment of [his] being" (in Rousseau's terminology)—causes the individual himself to feel unfree, which means that he does not experience himself as truly himself, which means that he is not in-dividuated.

I'll expand on all these thoughts in subsequent chapters. As I've said, my purpose right now is to look at a specific form of dehumanization (or atomization), namely the modern stultifying of people's potential breadth. Most of us are practically forced to specialize, both in our jobs and in our leisure-activities (which usually consist of watching TV or surfing the internet)—the latter because our whole way of being is saturated with a kind of self-laziness and one-sidedness. The type of social conditioning that results from (and is) "bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption,"<sup>17</sup> as well as the hectic pace of modern life, the commercialization of sex and love, the constant forging and breaking of shallow friendships, the deterioration of education, the widespread retreat into video games and television, the degradation of politics into spectacle, and the fact that all these developments (and more) have become common knowledge and are widely deplored but seem impenetrable to understanding and cannot be remedied—indeed, are intensified every year, snowballing

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<sup>16</sup> *The Portable Karl Marx*, edited by Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 136, 137. The thoughts in that passage are dramatized by many pop-cultural creations, for example the popular show "The Office."

<sup>17</sup> Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 32.

according to their internal logic—all this conditioning churns out individuals who suffer from a certain shallowness and discontentedness.

[....] We're anxious about how others perceive us, and we're so self-conscious that we constantly worry about how we perceive ourselves. Hence all the self-help books. Our lives are fundamentally divided; we can't decide who we really are. We don't have time, as it were, or stability enough, to lay out an abiding foundation for our identity, on the basis of which we could act in the world in a basically (self-)affirmative way, by aggressively exploiting our potential in ways that might even appear to be (superficially) contradictory. That's the paradox of self-realization: if it is undertaken on the basis of some sort of durable, intuitive sense of self, no amount of apparent conflict between the ways in which we realize ourselves can cause "identity crises." We can be athletes, poets, musicians, activists, parents, lovers, without ever wondering what our "true" identity consists in, as many of us do now. If, on the other hand, our psyche has not had an opportunity to construct a durable sense of itself—due to constant social conflicts, responsibilities, all the distractions in which contemporary life consists—then sometimes we can't even have a single job and a single child without feeling torn apart by conflicting loyalties and identities. Far from being able to luxuriate in multifarious self-molding, we can barely do what survival dictates without succumbing to neuroses or psychoses. We just go to work, pay the bills and then watch TV, grateful for a respite from ourselves and the dissatisfaction we hide behind our masks.

A certain kind of person has managed to cope by making a virtue of necessity: he embraces the modern person's insecurity, his obsession with how he is perceived by others and his consequent lack of an authentic self (i.e., of a firm sense of himself), by attuning his whole being to "the signals sent out by the consensus of his fellows and by the institutional agencies of the culture, to the extent that he is scarcely a self at all, but, rather, a reiterated

impersonation.”<sup>18</sup> In his famous book *The Lonely Crowd* (1953), David Riesman called this kind of person “other-directed,” contrasting him with the “inner-directed” person. “What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual.... This source is of course ‘internalized’ in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life.”<sup>19</sup> For whatever reason, this kind of person is able to adapt to the schizophrenic conditions of modern life less painfully than other people are, though he too lacks a secure sense of himself—i.e., a palpable “sentiment of being,” of being himself in and through all his activities, of being fundamentally free on account of his sense that his acts are his own. Indeed, “one prime psychological lever of the other-directed person is a diffuse *anxiety*.”<sup>20</sup> That he is able to make some constructive use of his anxiety doesn’t refute the fact that he has not attained authentic selfhood, which always has an element of inner-direction. Thus, far from being (able to be) well-rounded—which he often seems to be—this person doesn’t even know who or what he is, and is therefore fundamentally alienated from himself.

It’s time I ended this preliminary discussion. I’ll make only one more observation, or rather a response to a possible objection. I can imagine a postmodern intellectual shouting at me, “You keep talking about self-realization, individuation, authentic selfhood and whatnot, but it doesn’t even occur to you that the self is a fiction! There is no entity called the ‘self’ behind appearances!” This objection is confused, like all postmodernism, but it obscurely grasps a truth. The injunction to “Be true to yourself!” is

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<sup>18</sup> Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

misguided, for it postulates a dualism: it assumes that there is a specific self to be true to, a self that is somehow buried within each person and only requires a little coaxing to show itself. There is no such thing, no “already-given” self. Nietzsche’s “Become who you are!” is better—as is his statement that “Your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be.” These maxims, rather than encouraging you to navel-gaze (“Who am I *really*? Am I being true to myself right now? If I could only introspect deeply enough, I would know who I really am!”), encourage you to fix your gaze on something outside you—on the world, on your activities, on your freedom to throw yourself into life. One can realize one’s potential in many ways. Authentic selfhood is not a matter of acting in a way that accords with some sort of deeper, truer self; it is, rather, defined by an attitude one takes toward oneself and the world. This attitude isn’t chosen; it spontaneously emerges in the course of a healthy life. It is opposed to what Trilling, following Hegel, calls the disintegrated consciousness—the anxiety-ridden, self-doubting, self-contradictory, overly self-conscious consciousness, the alienated consciousness. The consciousness, in short, of modern man, who is what he is not and is not what he is (to quote Sartre). The “authentic self” is such not by being true to itself but by being deeply well-disposed toward itself, by being one with itself and its objectifications. —Questions surrounding the concept of authenticity have fascinated innumerable thinkers and poets, and I cannot settle them in one paragraph, but suffice it to say, for now, that the truly “authentic” self is integrated with itself and the world, is far along on the path of individuation, recognizes itself in its environment, has the capacity to exploit its potential, and feels free in everything it does—approaches life in the spirit of play, of spontaneity. The most “authentic” person is he for whom questions about authenticity don’t even exist, being totally superfluous and unconsciously understood as basically meaningless (especially for him). [....]



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It's a cliché but it's worth repeating: one cause of modern loneliness is the attitude of treating people as means to an end, namely happiness. "If a person doesn't entertain me or stimulate me," people implicitly think, "I'll end my relationship with him." Relationships have become conditional on stimulation and the achievement of satisfaction. But what's needed is commitment. You commit to someone as an end in himself, as you commit to an end. Commitment should be conditional, if at all, only on the other's respect for your humanity, on his treating you as an end. (No physical abuse, etc.)

Why does the modern attitude cause unhappiness? Because happiness comes from the interaction between oneself and a significant other. Happiness is relational: "happiness was born a twin," said Byron. The interaction between two equals, not between a lesser partner (a means) and a greater partner (an end). You necessarily desire recognition from someone you respect as you do yourself, because only someone fully human can fully affirm or confirm you. But we tend not to respect others as we do ourselves, i.e. as ends, which means we can't have a significant other (in the truest sense) in our lives. —One of the reasons for our lack of respect for others is that this is (unconsciously) a defense against rejection. If we don't let ourselves truly respect them, or if we don't get very attached to them, we won't care if they reject us. Perhaps we interact with them in a friendly, affectionate way, but we don't really allow them to become a part of our psyche. Unfortunately this is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: if we withhold true respect for people out of an unconscious fear of rejection, our doing so will cause them to reject us precisely because they can probably sense our lack of engagement with them. —Well, that's a simplification. Many people are fully engaged when they're with their acquaintances but can't develop deeper relationships anyway. This isn't mainly their fault; it is because society as a whole has instilled in people an underlying emotional distance (atomism), a

veritable *structure of feeling* that conditions how they relate to others.

Commitment is fundamentally not a hedonistic stance. It's a moral stance: it means commitment to the person, not to his or her function as satisfying you in some way. Hedonism even in a less crude sense than Benthamism or (in a different way) Freudianism has very little to do with the good life, with genuine happiness. The moral stance is not only the most *moral* one; it also makes possible your greater happiness than any other stance.

In short, you must *care for*, not *use*. Things are meant to be used; people are meant to be cared for. It's the practical versus the affective mode of being: the first should characterize your relationship to things, the second your relationship to people (and "aesthetic objects," like nature). But modernity is the upside-down world: we care for things and use people (and nature). Is it any wonder we're unhappy? We're misdirecting or suppressing our emotional energies. We're victims of social "reification," in Marxian jargon.

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What does it mean to treat someone as an end? Literally it means to adopt that person as a goal, as something you want to bring about. That is to say, you want to (help) bring about his sense of self, his desires, his "objective interests"—all of which, in the end, amount to his *freedom*, or his *self-confirmation* (as a free being). A person essentially is the urge or the movement toward self-confirmation, and self-confirmation is, by definition, a matter of freedom, because it's *self-confirmation* (the self's achievement of itself). So, Kant's formulations of morality in terms of both autonomy/freedom and treating others as ends do, in a sense, entail each other, as he thought. And they both entail specific commitments with regard to the organization of society.

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*A 25-year-old's love affair.*— Noam Chomsky is my intellectual conscience. I think about him every day, multiple times a day. He helps guide my thinking, at least on social and political questions. He has a genius for stating clear principles, premises or conclusions, which are nearly truistic but are surprisingly easy to ignore. Such as his insistence that the most elementary moral principle is that you apply to yourself the standards you apply to others. People have a very hard time doing this, which is why nearly everyone is a hypocrite in many ways. (They condemn snobbery but are snobs themselves,<sup>21</sup> condemn inconsiderate behavior but are inconsiderate themselves, and so on. I'm not immune to these lapses.) Especially in politics. When “*they*” (our enemies) do it, it's a crime, whereas when “*we*” do it, it's justifiable or even noble. This tendency to think and act hypocritically can perhaps be called a species of unintelligence, of “abstractly-interpersonal (or -empathic)” unintelligence. An inability to put oneself in the other's shoes, or to think of oneself from the position of the other. The very foundation of morality is the ability to imaginatively adopt the viewpoint, or occupy the situation, of the other—which is why morality in its explicit form is limited to the human species. (Humans are the animal most capable of internalizing the perspective of the other, i.e., of being self-conscious.) But most “civilized” people—or maybe most people in all of history—seem not to be well-endowed with this capacity.

Chomsky's great virtue, in other words, is simple clarity of thought. He can make explicit thoughts that are usually only implicit. For example, I've read a lot about capitalism and have always considered it unjust, but never have I explicitly drawn the obvious conclusion that *corporations are systems of private totalitarianism*. That thought has been implicit in my mind, but Chomsky makes it explicit, thus permitting clarity of thought. You can talk about contracts and unions and all that, but, in the end, a

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<sup>21</sup> Snobbery: not deigning to associate with certain people, considering oneself too good for them, because they're “nobodies.” Usually it operates on an almost unconscious level.

corporation remains a private tyranny because one side has vastly more power than the other and issues dictates to the relatively powerless, the employees. Orders are sent down through the ranks; democracy is not the operative principle, and one is expected to behave as a cog.<sup>22</sup> Since this is so, and if you accept that tyrannies are unjust, you're rationally bound to oppose capitalism, or at least neoliberal American capitalism. You may like that it has created great wealth and even improved standards of living, but *morally* it is indefensible, since it tends to deprive people of their autonomy.<sup>23</sup> (What limited autonomy they do have inside and outside the workplace is a result of achievements that have been won by the working class fighting *against* capitalism.)

Aside from these intellectual points, I can't help remarking that there's something irresistible about Chomsky's persona. He has an odd sort of anti-charismatic charisma, a self-deprecating grandfatherly sweetness. It's a humility, or humanity, that glows from his shy smile and his rumpled clothing. There are no fireworks about him, no honed maneuvers of manipulation and not a trace of self-aggrandizement; he is the opposite of everything pop-cultural. He also reminds me that people are fundamentally good, because a world that loves him<sup>24</sup> is a world that has moral value, a world worth saving.

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*Morality, a prerequisite for happiness.*— Strictly speaking, humans are not “ends in themselves,” i.e. intrinsically valuable, because nothing is. The notion doesn't make sense. (“Ends” are relative to values and desires.) But they are, or can be, valued for *their own*

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<sup>22</sup> See Harry Braverman's classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

<sup>23</sup> Fascism, too, and Soviet “Communism,” eventually improved standards of living for most people. Does that mean they were good ways of organizing society?

<sup>24</sup> The elite's hostility notwithstanding.

sake, so to speak: my valuing someone's self is effectively synonymous with my valuing my own self-confirmation, since it is through the mediation of another valued self that I confirm myself (my implicit self-love). My valuing myself is, in a sense, my valuing others. If I don't respect others then I don't fully respect myself, because it is through being respected (or loved) by someone whom I respect that I respect myself. Thus, if I am to fulfill myself, to attain a sort of complete self-confirmation, I have to value others as I value myself. Arguably that's impossible, maybe even incoherent. But it can be approximated.

In any case, morally speaking you should *act* as if people are intrinsically valuable. That's what morality is.

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*A revaluation of values.*— The quality of being a “natural leader” is not particularly admirable. For one thing, it usually entails that one tends to be overbearing, to act inimically to the collective exercise of spontaneous democracy. For another, “charisma” is not in itself a moral quality. It is neutral, neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. Third, a person who aspires to lead others aspires thereby to have power over them, which is an amoral goal at best. The kind of involuntary respect that leaders usually command is subhuman.

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*To sum up.*— The problem is that we tend to judge someone's worth, at least implicitly, on the basis of his intelligence and confidence, not on the basis of his thoughtfulness and how he treats people. That makes sense from an evolutionary perspective but not an ethical one.

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*Immoral socializing.*— It requires a special kind of cruelty, albeit a common one, to ignore a person.

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*Unavoidable immorality.*— I can't escape the impression that for me to be happy when others are unhappy is morally repugnant. If a friend of mine is depressed, what right do I have not to be depressed with him or her? What right do I have to forget his depression long enough to have fun with people, to hang out with them and have a good time? How can I be *happy* while he is *miserable*? The callousness is breathtaking. How can I walk past a hungry homeless person in the street and continue my conversation with my friend as though the hungry person does not exist? I must be a monster. We all must be monsters. In every minute of our lives we show how little other people mean to us.

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Ultimately, the things people do are done essentially, on some basic level, for themselves. Necessarily. In that half-empty sense, everyone is "selfish." The moral project is to incorporate others into oneself—as deeply as possible—and to incorporate as many others into oneself as possible, so that in acting for oneself one is also acting for others, ideally for humanity as a whole. *That* is morality, and that is how morality is possible.

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*L'enfer, c'est les autres?*— If hell exists, it is not other people. It is the absence of other people. An eternity of not being reflected in another. After a while, in fact, the self would simply dissolve for lack of something to contrast itself with and define itself in relation to. The "abstract Other" in its consciousness, which is essentially a half-conscious or unconscious residue of the totality of the self's experiences with other selves (including their expressions in books, television, magazines, etc.), would eventually lose whatever determinateness it has, which means that the self would lose its opposition to itself (in losing its internalized Other), thereby losing its self-consciousness. One would revert to an animal state.

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*Clues to human nature.*— It's the little things people do that are most revealing, the unnoticed things that reveal humanity. Like in the park today when the woman talking to her friend sitting on the picnic-blanket burst out laughing very hard, tipped backwards and raised her legs in the air and kicked them gleefully in a vertical sawing motion for a few seconds. I saw that and thought to myself, "That's a very natural, fun thing to do when you're sitting on the grass and laughing. Kick your legs up in the air! It doubles the pleasure of laughing. But why? Why exactly did she lean backwards and kick her legs in the air? It wasn't a considered, intended act; it was a spontaneous expression of glee. But why does glee express itself in that way? Waving your limbs about, running around, jumping up and down, just moving your body senselessly in any way can be a *joy*. Why? Because that's the way humans were meant to be: to be animals that take joy in their living, in their physical activity, in their *throwing* themselves into the world,<sup>25</sup> acting on it wildly like the wild frolicking animals they are." A whole world, a whole worldview can be contained in the simplest act of a woman on a picnic blanket in the park.

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*Innate humanism.*— When you watch a young child dancing and singing along to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, or a child inquiring about the world's causes and life's purpose, or a child painting a picture vibrant with color, you realize that the higher things in life are not *taught* to people but taught *out* of them.

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*The essence of humanity.*— The human spirit (the self) has three spontaneous manifestations, which are experientially united but can be analytically distinguished: to freely *create*, to freely *understand*,

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<sup>25</sup> Take that, Heidegger, you pessimist! [Heidegger emphasized man's "*throwness*."]

and to freely *love* (in several different modalities). Each of these is a manifestation of the human mind's—or the body's—essential impulses to, on the one hand, project itself into the world, i.e. remake the world in the image of itself, and, on the other hand, to assimilate and internalize the world. The self wants to abolish the separation between itself and the Other, the not-self; its goal, its unfulfillable project, is to be at one with the world. The frustration of one or more of the aforementioned urges to create, to love, and to understand may result in psychological disorders. Psychologists should take this fact as their starting point.

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*Against Poeian pessimism.*— Edgar Allan Poe thought that the desire to do mischief is buried deep in the human psyche. To do evil, like carve out a cat's eye with a knife (as in "The Black Cat")—there's a fascination with it and a suppressed desire for it. But can it really be somehow innate in the psyche? Surely not. Poe was wrong. It isn't a spontaneous upsurge of the human spirit. It is but a reaction to circumstances. It arises, in fact, from boredom and depression. Poe's "imp of the perverse" is a manifestation of boredom—and curiosity, of course. It can have more pathological causes too, but insofar as it exists among millions of people nowadays it's mainly a sublimation of boredom, or rather of the instinct for life in conditions of boredom. Yes, it actually arises from the desire to *affirm* life, to be *creative*!—but at the same time from the desire to deny life, namely this particular boring life. It's a revolt against alienated modern life, that's really all it is. This fascination with the dark side isn't an eternal fact innate in the psyche. —Well, no, the fascination itself may indeed be such a fact, just insofar as the "dark side" is very different from ordinary life; but the desire to actively descend to the depths is not, and that's what Poe was talking about. This desire is a historical creation.

The passion to negate is but a perverted expression of the deeper passion to affirm, to reach out and remake the world in one's own image.



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*Life for its own sake.*— The universal fear of death shows that in life itself is a profound, though profoundly subtle, pleasure.

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*My hope.*— History is so full of treasures, cultural and intellectual treasures, jewels of humanism scattered all over the earth—and I'm worried they will be buried in time! So much might be lost to future ages! Our traditions are so rich, there is simply too much to assimilate. So it will all be scattered, with some people admiring this jewel, others that jewel, and most forgetting most of them. What a tragedy! It cannot be. So I have made it one of my missions to collect all my favorite jewels—suitably re-cut and re-polished—and store them in my journal, to salvage them and pass them along to posterity. I want there to be *one place* to which people can go, an index, as it were. They will read about this and that, this artifact and that idea, and they will seek them out for themselves. And our tradition will reach a few more people (as will, incidentally, *truth*, of which the journal is a repository).

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*Technology in the service of humanism.*— If someone like Friedrich Nietzsche had been told that in a hundred years there would be an electronic network around the world allowing billions of people to share information at rates of speed measured in fractions of a second—and that this network could store nearly infinite amounts of data, including millions of books, and that it could all be accessed with a few movements of one's fingers—his reaction might have been to shudder with joy and envy at the thought of the vast education one could acquire by not even budging from one's chair. The internet has made it possible for humans to be exponentially more knowledgeable than they have ever been. Funny that it often has the opposite effect (a consequence of the consumer-capitalist structures in which it is embedded).

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*Our collective tragedy.*— Think about the poignancy of this situation.— In a civilization where communities have been shredded by technology, millions of young people find ways to construct artificial communities by using this very technology. They spend hours every day interacting electronically. They become virtual zombies, obsessed with the tenuous human connections they've made in cyberspace. This is what communities have been reduced to.

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*Humanism in Vietnam. (Journal-istic jottings.)*— One of my first impressions of Vietnam: people don't make love here. They don't do something as beautiful and romantic as making love. Instead they rut. Animal-like. In the dirt. The heat, the filth, the poverty, the masses teeming like maggots. It's a rutting culture.

But first impressions are one-sided, often meaningless. Hanoi is... I don't know. What is Hanoi?— Thousands of motorcycles on every street weaving and dodging pedestrians who are weaving and dodging motorcycles. Drivers chasing tourists yelling "Hello! Motorbike?"—most taxis aren't cabs. Vendors beckoning you incessantly to rip you off if they can. Opportunistic friendliness. Few English-speakers. A sprawling confusing Old Quarter from colonial times with crumbling European architecture—kept nice-looking in parts—and narrow streets and few traffic lights. Organized chaos. Every man for himself—good luck not getting run over! Astonishment at the ability of this city to function. —The invisible hand guides human pawns even here.— Sultry weather that doesn't deaden the vitality that seeps from their pores like sweat. Great palpable crystallized love of life around every corner in the gutter and the wrinkles on the elderly and the cigarette smoke. A determined optimistic *carpe diem* character like Lisbon's.

I'm staying in the Old Quarter—haven't been anywhere else—don't care to see ugly communistic capitalism—living on a street with lots of vendors selling toys. A man nearby is playing

with a wooden life-like snake on the street; two girls screeched and jumped when they saw it. People here are fascinated by toys.

What seem to be peasants walk with their conical wicker hats carrying a device over their shoulders—a stick with rope from each end on which hangs a bucket on each side that they put fruits and vegetables in. Men pedal things like rickshaws alongside cars (which are rare) and motorcycles. Old Europe in the buildings and new/old Vietnam in the streets. —This country is a collision of worlds.

[....] Took an overnight train Monday evening to the coastal town of Hoi an. Met a Malay and two Brits at the station. Friendly people but typical budget travelers: pushy, rude to natives, and maniacal about saving a buck. I followed them around the hotel neighborhood for an hour as they sniffed out the cheapest place. Had I been alone I'd have chosen the first one I saw, as I usually do. Haven't seen them since we got our rooms. Wanted to be alone; didn't like their control-freakish style. Uneventful evening. Didn't explore much of the town. —By the way, the reason Hoi an is worth seeing is that it used to be the main international port in Southeast Asia, five hundred years ago. So it was a crossroads for the Chinese, Portuguese, French, etc. cultures. The old section is famous and why I came. —At night the Vietnamese had their autumn festival—a two- or three-day celebration around the country—good timing for my trip because the festival is a unique chance to see the Viets let loose. I saw it in Sapa and Hanoi, and now here. As I was eating dinner some guys playing drums and cymbals marched past, an elaborate dragon composed of two costumed men dancing in front of them. *Several* dragons, actually. They stopped walking and performed for a crowd, impressively twirling and jumping and rearing like horses. The guy in the front was the head and neck, the (crouching, hidden) guy in the back the arse. Wearing golden, red, blue, green... cloths. The Vietnamese crowd just ate it up. They liked it more than the tourists did! For hours the show went on—actors taking turns to catch their breath—the procession (with its huge entourage) marching ten steps, then performing for ten minutes (drumming and dancing), then

marching ten more steps and so on, making its way around the town. The daredevils climbed onto each other's backs until there were three levels, the top being the head half of the dragon twisting and barely keeping his balance, potentially falling face-first onto the cement. But the dangerous part was a different set of acrobats nearby breathing fire out of their dragon costume. You know, that thing you've seen a hundred times with the torch and the gasoline-drinking and the spitting it at the fire. The spectators were enthralled like no one I've seen in the West. They were most delighted when the dragon head caught fire and the spitter threw it down from his perch on shoulders into the crowd, where, still flaming, it was kicked around and trampled on by bare feet and could have caused a tragedy. The people laughed and cheered and didn't give a hoot that it was fire they were kicking at each other. Then it was doused and the danger started all over again, the mask eventually catching fire and being thrown into the crowd. No policemen around. The behavior of the masses was exactly the opposite of what it would have been in all but the most insane Western social gatherings. Even grandmothers were screaming with glee. I was like 'Hey people—that flamy orange stuff there—that's, um...—that's fire—ya might wanna stay away from it.' But I learned that at the heart of this culture, despite poverty and oppression and the past, is a carefree Latinish love of fun and pushing the boundary. (I guess that used to be at the heart of our culture too, sort of, but in this age of litigation and political correctness it's been mostly killed.) Developing Southeast Asian countries tend to have that optimistic character.

Ultra-heat today. I walked through the Old Town drenched. Extraordinary number of art galleries. On the river, boats similar to the one in *Apocalypse Now* that has the puppy and the Vietnamese who are killed by Martin Sheen's gunners floated, waiting for tourists. As always, everybody wanted to sell me something and I had to say no to each person ten times—you think I exaggerate—before he'd leave me alone—and as it was I gave away a lot of money out of compassion. Saw some Chinese architecture—two communal buildings or meeting places or temples or something—

in courtyards—peaceful and indescribably beautiful. Later I rode a bike three miles to the beach on the South China sea. Palm trees, white sand, the sighing of the gentle sea—old ladies walking around wearing heavy clothes and wide-brimmed hats as protection against the sun selling pineapples and bracelets and blankets. Whole pineapples that they cut up and carved in front of you and you ate like an apple with an irregular shape.

This country is life. I don't look forward to returning to America and alienation.

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*American anti-intellectualism.*— The contempt in which intellectuals are held by most Americans is not necessarily contemptible. I'm inclined to think it is partially justified, though doubtless it takes crude and stupid forms. Intellectuals, in general, are parasites on the productive work that others do. They tend to lead privileged, comfortable, isolated lives, and they unjustifiably consider themselves superior to others. Most of the work they do is basically irrelevant and masturbatory, and they usually don't do it very well anyway. They pride themselves on their independent-mindedness despite being arguably the most indoctrinated and least independent-minded group in society. If the average American gave these reasons for his contempt, I'd have to conclude that "American anti-intellectualism" is healthy and good. On the other hand, insofar as it arises from the emotional fascist ideas that "intellectuals aren't 'one of us,' they're unpatriotic, they're liberal," anti-intellectualism is stupid and potentially dangerous.

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*Fame.*— People who are famous are overrated, and people who aren't famous are underrated. Indeed, ambition itself is by no means the virtue people think it is. I'm more inclined to respect those who *don't* thirst for stupid fame or money, who don't care much about social status but just live unassumingly like human beings and devote themselves to family and friends and the

community. Abstract recognition, a famous name, pseudo-immortality, is unreal and pointless; the desire for it is indicative of psychological insecurity.

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*“Success.”*— The more one experiences the world, the more one understands how difficult it is to be “successful” and have integrity at the same time. Maybe most successful people don’t have much of a “core self” to begin with; they’re just malleable, their essence from youth is malleability. Few convictions, certainly no courage of whatever convictions they have. Depending on which institution it is you want to succeed in, such things as pleasantness, obsequiousness, continual obedience, a willingness to narrow yourself, and a willingness not to challenge are required. Conventional behavior is, from a sort of “human” perspective, despicable. Most people understand this, and yet the successful are respected anyway. Why? In itself—other things being equal—success is more like something contemptible than something admirable. Yet frequently I hear people expressing near-reverence of this person or that person, this respected mainstream academic or that respected mainstream journalist, apparently forgetting momentarily what they acknowledge at other times, that success tends to be more like something negative than something positive. And insofar as it isn’t negative, it’s based largely on luck, on institutional connections and so forth. Some things that deserve respect are kindness, moral and intellectual integrity, activism on behalf of the downtrodden, contempt for authority as such, the challenging of conventions; talent as such deserves no respect (since one is, to a great extent, born with it), and mainstream success usually deserves even less.

For these reasons, by the way, I can’t escape residual doubts about the integrity of famous political radicals. Have they not had to “sell out” in order to become successful and famous? What deals have they made with the devil? It’s true that this preoccupation with integrity and honesty can be taken to absurd extremes, for it is impossible not to live in modern society without morally and

intellectually compromising yourself constantly. Just by virtue of buying products from a corporation or paying taxes to a government, one is participating (indirectly) in distant moral outrages. Social life, too, necessitates that one sometimes “lack integrity” in a different way, by pretending to like people one doesn’t like, etc. Nevertheless, there is surely a line to be drawn somewhere between this daily necessity of “lacking integrity” and a really contemptible sacrifice of integrity for the sake of money or power or fame. Such a sacrifice is even more deplorable in the case of a political radical, who, as such, is defined by his adherence to certain exalted ideals. The striking thing about some of the famous leftists I admire is that they seem to have achieved their success without *substantively* flouting their principles.

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*Thoughts on integrity.*— I’m reading my dad’s old philosophy dissertation, *Being Oneself: Its Meaning and Worth* (1979). “When somebody tells me to be myself,” he says, “what does he or she mean and why should I do it, and when somebody charges me with not being myself, what is it that I have been charged with and why does it matter? These are the questions which I try to answer in this book.”<sup>26</sup> After laborious phenomenological investigation of a variety of ordinary situations, he decides that not being oneself usually involves letting one’s concern for the opinion or approval of others guide one’s conduct, such that one puts on airs. The reason this is bad is that it jeopardizes or destroys one’s integrity, “and as that slips away from us, so does the respect both of others and of myself, to which I am otherwise entitled by virtue of being myself.” But, again, why is it so good to be oneself? Why does it deserve respect? He continues: “The source of this respect lies simply in the good of dealing openly with each other and the expectation that at least at certain times nothing less is acceptable.” That’s a reasonable answer. It’s definitely part of the explanation,

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<sup>26</sup> Notice that, unlike most “philosophers,” he asks questions that actually have some relevance to life and are not mere academic exercises.

but I suspect that another part is the even more “primitive” respect people have for a self that is certain of itself, that is full and confident. It is virtually a biological response. (Compare the obvious “respect” that higher mammals have for the dominant male in their group.) People naturally respect and are drawn to a self that is whole and spontaneously self-projecting, i.e., a person who has “more of a self” than others.<sup>27</sup> This, I think, is the essence of charisma. —On the other hand, there are plenty of charismatic people who lack integrity. So, evidently there is a distinction to be made between *types* of “self-certainty,” the moral type (integrity) and the “social” type (charisma).

It’s interesting that integrity is a *moral* ideal. To have a self in the fullest sense, to *be* a self, a self with an “incorruptible” core, a self that has “integrity” like a physical structure that won’t collapse—i.e., to have authenticity, to be an authentic self—that’s a *moral* ideal. Why? It seems less like an example of other-oriented morality (except on the margins, e.g. by making you honest and sincere in your dealings with people) than an example of self-oriented morality. By lacking integrity you’re betraying yourself first and foremost. People don’t really get *angry* at you for lacking integrity, as though you’ve done them some wrong; they have contempt for you. They see you, at least implicitly, as not a whole self, not a fully developed or mature person, an actor, someone with a deep emptiness at his core.

On the other hand, insofar as the statement “He has no integrity” is thought to be almost synonymous with “He has no (or *little*) morality,” the crime is not only a crime against oneself but against others. It means that the person doesn’t evince moral respect for others, he uses them opportunistically as means to his ends. So I guess that to lack integrity is in equal measure a crime against oneself and against others. When we say that Bill Clinton has no integrity we’re communicating contempt for him on the basis of his lack of morality, honesty, “principles,” respect for others in his dealings with them, sufficient respect for himself to

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<sup>27</sup> See chapter three.



make a stand on anything.<sup>28</sup> We expect a person to guide his behavior by principles, rules, norms that he applies consistently, rules he identifies with, which constitute the “boundaries” of his self. And since determination is negation (to quote Spinoza and Hegel), without these rules or (moral) “limits” on one’s behavior, one’s selfhood is not fully realized. Which can be expressed by saying that one lacks respect for oneself. Clinton, we think, doesn’t respect himself enough to *define* himself, just as he doesn’t respect others enough to treat them as “defined,” fully existing selves or moral beings (i.e., according to moral rules).

Wait, I forgot about the element of *courage*. Mom informs me that she associates a lack of integrity with a lack of courage, moral courage. Strength. Yes, maybe that makes more sense than the stuff I just wrote. To lack integrity is to be *weak*, as if you can’t give a “law” to yourself (cf. Kant), have no moral self-discipline, succumb easily to temptations or take the easy way out. Kant might say—partially backing up what I wrote above—that such a person is not truly autonomous and hence not a fully realized self, but I don’t know how much the ordinary person or our ordinary intuitions would agree with that. I suppose the essential thing is just the lack of strength and courage, the not-asserting-oneself with respect to values that one is seen as sharing with everyone—because everyone acknowledges on some level the worth of the ideal of integrity, and so if you nonetheless ignore it you must be weak, unwilling to follow through on your own values because they’re too hard.

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*Mainstream laziness.*— Nothing is easier than to be agreeable. What one should strive for is to be “disagreeable”—to provoke people out of their shallow role-playing.

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<sup>28</sup> That isn’t entirely fair. He took stands on measures that benefited big business, such as NAFTA.

*A false idol.*— The individualist is he whom everyone exalts in theory but condemns in practice.

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*The self-identity of banality.*— Mediocre minds think alike even more than great minds do.

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*Does “certainty” always indicate close-mindedness?*— You should remember that there are two kinds of certainty: Sarah Palin’s kind and Noam Chomsky’s kind. The one is founded on unquestioning acceptance of the beliefs one has been trained to accept; the other is founded on continuous critical analysis of one’s beliefs. It’s the certainty of close-mindedness versus the “certainty” of open-mindedness. The certainty of unreason versus that of reason. These two ideal-types intermix in everyone, but some people are more rational than others.

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*Two urges: to enforce equality, and to idolize.*— He who aims to rise above the crowd faces opposition from all sides, which, however, has a common source: the universal desire to keep him at one’s own level, not to let him step out of line or think he is “superior.” The most extravagant means will be employed to keep at bay his ambitions. But if he perseveres and triumphs, he is revered as a god.

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*“All hope abandon, ye who enter here.”*— Most blogs and other postings on the internet, such as the comments posted under YouTube videos or news articles, are like portals into the heads of ordinary people, into their thought-processes. Unfortunately, the world into which one steps through these portals is not well-lighted, has shadows everywhere, and is very, very frightening.

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*Dangerous intelligence.*— The greatest danger for the perceptive observer of humanity is that he'll become convinced of the smallness of life, and will thus retreat from a life of action into passive resignation.

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*The mind-body problem.*— Watching people interact, the impression is inescapable that they truly are beings of *matter*. Earth-bound beings with muddy souls. And one returns to the realm of spirits with relief....

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*Functionaries of the mind.*— In *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856), Tocqueville points out again and again, in astonishment, that *nobody* foresaw the French Revolution, even on its very eve. He opens his book with this sentence: “No great historical event is better calculated than the French Revolution to teach political writers and statesmen to be cautious in their speculations; for never was any such event, stemming from factors so far back in the past, so inevitable yet so completely unforeseen.” A hundred forty years later, Walter Laqueur, the political scholar, devoted much of his book *The Dream that Failed* to the question of how it was possible for Western academics to have failed utterly to predict the fall of the Soviet Union, even after glasnost and perestroika. Specialists on the USSR, people who devoted their lives to studying it, had no inkling whatever of what was about to happen. The *enormous industry* of scholarship on the USSR had not a single word to say about a REVOLUTION!!! or even the COMPLETE DECREPITUDE OF SOVIET SOCIETY!!! until after the fact!!! Fifteen years later, similarly, almost *no* economists foresaw the Great Recession. —The moral of the story, kids, is that the academic community is not to be taken seriously. The “analyst,” the “expert,” who has real insight is an incredible rarity. These people are just intellectual bureaucrats.

(Not to mention the “experts” who actually have a hand in guiding policy. The experts who led Kennedy into the Bay of Pigs, the experts who waged war on Vietnam, the experts who planned the Iraq war—a veritable army of them, in policy institutes, in the Pentagon, in the State Department, in the White House. It seems as though the more educated you are, the less in touch you are with reality. Which isn’t surprising, since “education” basically means “indoctrination.”<sup>29</sup>)

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*“Absurdity” in philosophy.*— As I was reading *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Germaine Brée, an amusing image struck me. I imagined hundreds of chimpanzees in their jungle, dressed in clothes, wearing glasses, huddled over manuscripts they were writing having to do with one chimp in particular, who had died decades ago. They were describing what he was like, describing his oddly contemplative character, his un-chimpish personality, his gentleness toward his fellow chimps, as well as certain discoveries he had made about the futility of life in the jungle, the dangerous animals that lurked in shadows, the forbidding height of certain kinds of trees, the absurdity of swinging gaily on vines and jumping from branch to branch while screaming like monkeys. All these chimpanzees sitting in trees silently, scribbling praise of this other chimp who had, like them, sat in trees away from his playmates scratching his head while watching the action below, occasionally baring his teeth. And I put the book down.

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<sup>29</sup> Chomsky: “One reason that propaganda often works better on the educated than on the uneducated is that educated people read more, so they receive more propaganda. Another is that they have jobs in management, media, and academia and therefore work in some capacity as agents of the propaganda system—and they believe what the system expects them to believe. By and large, they’re part of the privileged elite, and share the interests and perceptions of those in power.”

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*Present philistines, future scholars.*— What does it say about people that the most popular thinkers and writers in their time are usually not the most popular ones centuries later? It says that, in general, the recipe for success in life isn't genuine merit judged on the basis of transhistorical standards of reason, creativity, originality, beauty, etc., but skillful, "talented" obedience to the cultural and institutional norms of one's day. It says that most people don't know how to judge real merit *if it exists among them*—and maybe don't even care, since what matters is fitting into institutions and the dominant culture. However, they are better able to judge *past* merit, because institutional and cultural norms constrict their thought in relation to the present more than the past. They are supposed to apply to the living more than the dead—and so the dead are allowed to step outside the bounds of institutional respectability.<sup>30</sup> Also, the withering away of older norms and the rise of new ones means that works that successfully embodied the former are no longer celebrated.

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One way of describing the dissonance that disturbs me is to note the discrepancy between grandeur and smallness. Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger thought in grand terms, as did Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and dozens more. Some of them were more deluded than others (read: Heidegger), but they all strove for epic heroism. "God is dead!"—"I have destroyed metaphysics!"—"I am Spirit's knowledge of itself!"—"I will be the Philosopher-King, the Divine!"—"Two things fill me with awe: the stars above and the

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<sup>30</sup> That also has to do with the arrogance of the present: a person who reacted (creatively) against the "quaint" or "benighted" old traditions of his day is seen as anticipating the more sophisticated present. By appreciating the past rebel, the present is proving to itself its open-mindedness, generosity, capaciousness of thought, superiority over the past. Moreover, it flatters itself by appropriating the brilliance of the rebel. "It wasn't until *we* came along that Nietzsche could be appreciated."

moral law within!” And people have revered these men. But on the other side...humans are ants. Minuscule, microscopic insects proclaiming their immensity, their immortality. It’s a damn laughable farce. “Few people have dared to climb the mountain of Nietzsche’s thought!” says one commentator. Give me a break. Nietzsche was a man. These people leap unthinkingly into the delusion of transcendence, they live in transcendent denial of the mundane world, Nietzsche most of all. It’s comical.

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I *feel* bored only sometimes. But my whole life itself is infused with boredom—because I long for transcendence, perfection, but am trapped in a world of which I am the center yet *in* which I am insignificant. That’s the dissonance: I’m the center of *my* world but I mean nothing to *the* world. The knowledge of this is what I’m escaping when I watch TV or go to bars. In the distant past, by contrast, people were both the center of their world and central to the world. (The sun revolved around the earth, etc.)

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*Hero-worshippers coping with an irreligious society.*— Was Nietzsche’s animating spirit not merely a more profound and severe incarnation of Carlyle’s and Emerson’s?

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*A phoenix out of the ashes.*— This thinker’s mind is in a ferment; this society’s mind is in a ferment as well. But there is a difference: the second is the ferment of decline, the first that of ascent.

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*On profundity.*— Nietzsche had the good fortune to be miserable.

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*Romanticism vs. behaviorism.*— Some people preach the richness of our “inner life,” others deny its very existence. What a confused thing is man!

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*From the outside.*— A being not from our species observing a rock concert would conclude that we are creatures who operate on the level of instinct and have no notion of free will. When we watch a community of monkeys scream and go berserk in the excitement of a hunt we think, “How bestial!”, forgetting that their excitement is based on utilitarian concerns and is thus rational, while ours—in a rock concert—looks equally bestial and is senseless to boot.

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*Unity of opposites.*— A woman nursing her baby feels as if that animal act is the pinnacle of her humanity. —We are certainly mistaken to posit a categorical difference between ourselves and other animals.

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*Etymology; or, the profundity of language.*— You can gain great insight into the human condition, into the nature of the mind, by studying the evolution of words. For example, what’s the significance of the fact that words like illusion, elude, allude, and delude are variations on the Latin word for ‘play’? Johan Huizinga discusses this in *Homo Ludens*....

Or think of the word ‘interest.’ As Hannah Arendt says, “something is of interest to people [insofar as] it *inter-est*, it is between them.” It draws them together. “Philosophy is *inter-esting*.”

Arendt again: the word ‘sensible’ means, among other things, “capable of receiving sensory impressions,” a definition that leads to “receptive to external influences” (cf. ‘sensitive’), which leads to “having, containing, or indicative of good sense or reason.” In *The World As Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer notes that the

connection between *sensation* and *intelligence* revealed by this etymology is significant. A stupid person, he says, rarely has discriminating senses, so that, for example, loud noises don't bother him. In other words, the fact that he isn't sensible (reasonable, intelligent)—or, indeed, *emotionally sensitive*—is related to his not being sensible (sensitive to external stimuli). Fascinating insights embedded in language.

Perceive: *percipere*: *per-capere*, to take thoroughly. So, to perceive is to thoroughly take something in, which has philosophical implications. ('Take' is active. So perception is active, not passive. And the 'thoroughly' part suggests that there is a difference between perception and sensation, in that the latter is less thoroughly conscious than the former.)

Conceive: *com-capere*, to take with, to take in and hold (be together with). The pregnancy meaning was the original one; the word was extended to mean "to take into the mind" around 1340.

Behave: be-have. Have being. To behave in a certain way is to have being in a certain way, to have (or hold) oneself in a certain way. "Behave!" Have being! Have a determinate being! Stop acting crazily, "pull your self together," give being to your self!

Endure: *indurare* (harden against), *in-durare* (harden in (oneself, one's heart)). To endure something, you have to become *hard* in your self.

Enthusiasm: *entheos*, be inspired: *en-theos*, i.e., *a god in*. A god is breathing into you, so to speak.

Adjective: *ad-jacere*, to throw to. You "throw" an adjective to its object. Again, this reinforces the model of humans as essentially active beings, not passive recipients of external data.

Such words as 'lovely' are wonderful: "She is *love-ly*. She is beauty-full, wonder-full. She full-fills me."

Despair: *de-sperare* (to hope). As Kierkegaard says, to despair is to not believe in *possibility* any longer, to think that alternatives have become impossible. It is to lose faith in one's freedom (i.e., the reality of possibilities)—to treat oneself as belonging to the realm of necessity, the realm of thinghood, of remaining stationary in this state forever. "A possibility and the despairer breathes



again,” writes Kierkegaard, “he revives; for without possibility it is as though a person cannot draw a breath.” In other words, “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things...,” to quote *The Shawshank Redemption*. Hope, or freedom, the consciousness of possibility.

The “spiritual” meanings of a lot of words are merely metaphorical extensions of the original “bodily” meanings. For example: depress, repress, suppress, impress. Im-press: *press in*. Sub-press: *press under*. De-press: *press down*. Re-press: *press back, press again*. (Something presses in one direction, you press back to keep it in check. From *reprimere*, to check.) This fact is philosophically and psychologically pithy.

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Among the profoundest concepts is that of *repetition*. It fascinates me, and many other thinkers. Freud made productive use of it—it led to his theory of the death instinct; Nietzsche was dazzled by it; Aristotle and the ancient Stoics (and other cultures) believed in eternal repetition; Hegel recognized the importance to spiritual development of a sort of transformed repetition; an entire philosophy of history is premised on it; Kierkegaard wrote a book called *Repetition*. Throughout the cosmos, in fact, repetition is woven. Biologically it is of the utmost importance, from the infant’s *rhythms* to the very workings of DNA and RNA. Music is based on repetition, not only rhythmically but melodically and harmonically. —The concept is both the most commonplace and the most profound of all concepts.

Think of this: “Be constant in thy love.” (From my *Book of Joe*.) That means be faithful in your love. Con-stant: stand with, stand firm (*constare*). Stand firm in your love, stand *with* your loved one. But how does that manifest itself? Through repetition. You *constantly*, as it were, in every moment repeat the act of loving. (The connection between the two meanings of ‘constant.’)

Incidentally: how do you acquire the ability to stand firm (*constare*)? By standing with (*constare*). You get strength from your with-ness.

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*Tragic comedy.*— It's significant that when a stand-up comic gets no laughs he says later, "I died. It was like *death* out there," while when the audience loves him he says, "I *killed!*" A semi-Hegelian struggle for recognition. (Absence of recognition = death of the self. Either the comic or the audience wins the struggle.)

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*Hero-worship and other puzzles.*— It's easy to understand why I admire, say, Howard Zinn. But why do I *like* admiring him? Why is it emotionally gratifying? It isn't a mutual fondness; he doesn't even know of my existence. For some reason, liking and, to an extent, admiring people is in itself pleasurable. That means that in some sense it's self-affirming, self-confirming. But that doesn't explain much. My admiration is a kind of self-activity, self-initiated activity, and so is satisfying. But again, that formulation is at best suggestive. Maybe it's actually misleading, in that liking someone is not so much an *act* as a *state*, the state of being impressed (half-consciously) by a person's "validation" of your own proclivities, your personal likes and dislikes, thoughts, beliefs, sense of humor, etc. You like someone insofar as you implicitly recognize yourself in him or her (even if "objectively" the two of you might appear to be quite different), whether because he values you and acts accordingly or because his behavior reflects what you value, such as your political beliefs or your sense of humor. Similarly, you admire someone to the extent that he embodies your values (and thus, so to speak, *you*) perhaps better than you do. The "better than you do" is the part that can lead to envy and conflict; the "embodies your values" (thereby "validating," "confirming," "reinforcing" them) is what explains the subtle pleasure that exists in admiration.

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Some varieties of philosophical "eliminativism" intrigue me. Is there really a fact of the matter about whether I admire Occupy

Wall Street activists? Even if I say I do, and even if in the moment I say it I believe it, do I? Maybe half-consciously I'm just saying it because I know the other person will appreciate my statement. What is it to "admire" someone anyway? Or to hate someone or have contempt for him or love him or respect him? In one moment you say you hate him; in the next you correct yourself and say you only dislike him; in the next, you say that, well, okay, he's not acting in malice and he means well, and maybe you just pity him. What the hell! There's no "reality" here! You're just talking. And yet there is *some* mental state, some vague sort of attitude toward the person in question, backing up your talk. But the mental state isn't "determinate" in any way. It's just a sort of nebulous disapproval coloring your thought of the person. Most of the intentional content is in your words, not in your mind itself. The role of your mind is just to assent to the words coming out of your mouth in the moment you say them. So to return to the question about whether there is an underlying "fact of the matter," I guess all that can be said is that my attitude toward OWS activists is such that I'm fairly comfortable *saying* I admire them. But then you retort, "Do you *really* admire them, though?" Um, yeah, I guess. But you know, these kinds of words themselves don't have very determinate meanings, and the more you dig into them, the less there is. I don't know what the broader lesson is.... It's possible, too, that I'm conflating several issues.

Maybe part of the puzzle I'm groping at is that universals like 'admire' seem as though they should have an "essence," a determinate, substantive meaning, whereas often they don't. There's an incongruity between the impressive-sounding universality and apparent determinacy of 'admire' and the lack of a comparable referent in my mind, as well as, once you investigate, the lack of real determinacy in the concept itself. It's not determinate in the way that 'bachelor' is.

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*Another question.*— Why is facial beauty (feminine and masculine) important in attracting mates? What evolutionary advantage does

such beauty have? If you'll say that people unconsciously make the connection between a beautiful mate and beautiful children (the implication being that they want attractive children, so *they* can find mates), you're begging the question. Beauty isn't like the feminine instinct for nurturing or the masculine tendency towards aggression, which serve obvious purposes; universal ugliness would surely not be disadvantageous in the way that a universal absence of the maternal instinct would. In fact, it would have no practical effect whatsoever. —The solution to this problem may be that we unconsciously associate a good face with healthy genes (which can be passed on to our children). This, in turn, may be because (1) beauty projects self-confidence, which itself suggests healthy genes; (2) a pretty face may, for whatever reason, be unconsciously interpreted as *directly* signifying health and good genes; and (3) the good body that often comes with an attractive face *does* directly signify healthy genes. Moreover, such a body has clear functional benefits: for example, large breasts are maternal, and, in the case of a man, a muscular body is related to the ability to protect and dominate. Also, beauty is associated with youth, which is associated with health and the ability to impregnate/be impregnated.

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*On beauty.*— Facial beauty cannot be described or conceptualized. Recognition of it is solely intuitive. If you try to describe an attractive person by saying, "She has prominent cheekbones, full lips, tanned skin and sultry eyes," you have not explained why she's beautiful. Any of these features is compatible with unattractiveness—even all the features together. Beauty is holistic: it consists not in an aggregate of isolated features but in the totality of relations between them—relations which, to repeat, are not conceptualizable or denotable. We grasp them in an instantaneous intuition, but cannot reproduce them in words.

Indeed, this is true of every kind of beauty: musical, poetic, architectural, natural... To say that the beauty of some given thing consists in symmetry, or in vibrancy of color, or in a perfectly

balanced composition, is only to *hint* at it—to “gesture” at it. We can never fully explain it.

In fact, I suspect this is true of all aesthetic qualities. If so, what’s the significance of that?

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*We must not let “humanism” die.*— That the questions I’m asking may already have been answered by other people is not a reason for me not to ask them. As humanists, we must never cease independent thinking, no matter how much science has explained or how superfluous such thinking might seem. Insofar as it cultivates the self, it is valuable. Insofar as it prevents the self’s dehumanization in this alienated age, it is necessary.

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*Does the world exist?*— The millennia-long debate about radical skepticism about the external world can never be settled. There are two ways of thinking about consciousness: either consciousness is in the world, or the world exists only in (or for) consciousness. In the final analysis, there is no way of adjudicating definitively between these positions. Common sense and the “Other-oriented” nature of experience tell us that consciousness is in the world, that there is an external, mind-independent world; on the other hand, this external world is represented in, or to, consciousness and that is the only way we know of it. Everything we know is in consciousness, by definition. So, to ask George Berkeley’s question, why postulate an external world? Any number of reasons can be thought of, but ultimately none can do away with the fact that, from one perspective, everything we experience *by definition* exists, for us, only in, or “as apprehended by,” our consciousness. So you have skepticism (Berkeleyan or a milder form) and you have realism, and you adopt one view or the other on the basis of a “Gestalt-switch.” In one moment I’m a skeptic or an idealist; in the next I switch my perspective and I’m a realist. Neither perspective can be definitively established or refuted because consciousness

cannot step outside itself to see whether there is in fact an external world (or whether the world-in-itself “looks” like the world we see). So we’re stuck with the Gestalt-switches.

Here’s a clearer way of saying it: you can think of the objects in, or of, your perceptions as being either mere appearances or full-fledged, independent objects. Ordinarily we think of them as the latter, but through a Gestalt-switch you can adopt the former perspective. And nothing can prove it wrong. In fact, science tends to confirm it: the nervous system *constructs* our experience, and the world-in-itself is actually a “blooming, buzzing confusion” of particles and waves and electromagnetic fields, nothing at all like the ordered world of solid, colored objects we perceive. But on the level of common sense, Wittgenstein is right that it’s senseless to question ordinary objects or knowledge or to talk about “evidence” for the existence of objects; only when you step into the skeptic’s or the scientist’s Gestalt can you start asking these questions.

Complete, Berkeleyan skepticism, i.e. subjective idealism, is silly—though it can’t be *proven* false—but other forms of skepticism are not. Indeed, scientific realism, which incorporates a skeptical attitude about the mind-independent reality of the objects of ordinary experience, is almost certainly true. It is the best explanation of the success of science.

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*A puzzle about the self.*— Here’s a paradox: from one perspective, you could have been another person, or even another kind of animal. You didn’t have to be the person you are; you could have been born someone else a hundred years later, or you could have been a lion or a chimpanzee or whatever. This is why it made at least *some* sense for Plato to be thankful he was born a man and not an animal. From another perspective, though, you couldn’t have been anyone else, because you just are who you are. One entity can’t be another entity; it is itself, that’s all. So how do you reconcile these contradictory intuitions? What you have to do is distinguish between two aspects of the self. Specifically, from one

perspective you, like other animals, are simply consciousness;<sup>31</sup> from another, you are your “empirical totality,” your whole physical and mental being. The basic thing I have in common with you is my consciousness (my being conscious),<sup>32</sup> which is, ultimately, my selfhood. So, in a sense, we have our selfhood(s), our *selves*, our essences, in common. (This is an ancient and profound insight that has been rediscovered countless times over millennia.) But we are, after all, different people with different personalities, etc., and in that respect it makes no sense to say we could have been each other.

It’s true that things get more complicated when you bring other types of animals into consideration, since their “form” of consciousness is different from ours, in being less self-conscious. They have less of a (sense of) self. Nevertheless, insofar as they are conscious, yes, Plato’s statement has some sense.

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*The irreconcilability of subject and object.*— My existence. Here, now, at this moment in history. The facticity of it. Billions of years of my nonexistence...then *me*...then trillions more years of my nonexistence... It’s totally arbitrary that I was born when and where I was, yet at the same time it’s absolutely necessary, because *I*, after all, could not have been anyone else but had to be myself, this self at this point in time. “By definition,” so to speak. This body had to be this body; for it to be any other is...meaningless.

The problem is that it’s “absurd” to accept that one is simply an object in the world like all others, an object in history no different from those that one reads about. One tends, necessarily, to assume a position outside of history, the endless flux of unfortunate creatures determined by larger forces of which they’re unaware. I

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<sup>31</sup> I.e., the self is consciousness. And insofar as other animals can be said to have a self (which they can to the degree that they’re self-conscious), it, too, is their consciousness.

<sup>32</sup> That statement is ambiguous. But of course I don’t mean we have in common *my* consciousness.

am a subject. I am the Absolute *contemplating* history, not an object embedded in time, like any of those objects we read about from the 1800s or the 1500s or the 400s...

Sometimes when I'm on the train I think about all this, this unbridgeable gulf between the subjective and objective, the private and the public. I look at everyone else, and then I look at the reflection in the window and see another face—and I realize it's mine! But it looks no different from anyone else's! It isn't particularly special, it isn't glowing—but it should be, because it has a unique connection to *this self*. This (seemingly) *essential* self (essential to itself, that is). This self, this consciousness, which is sort of "outside" the world it encounters, appears to have an accidental connection to the body of Chris Wright, who is a being *in* the world no different from all others. The private (the mental), my consciousness, seems unrelated to the public (the physical), my body....but of course in some inexplicable way they're fused.

—Cartesian dualism, to some extent unavoidable and implicit in the way people have always thought about themselves. (Mind vs. body, spirit vs. matter, soul vs. "bodily prison," subject vs. object, self vs. other: dichotomies that differ from each other but are closely related.)

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The problem of free will amounts to the problem that there are two ways of describing people's actions: that which involves the "autonomous" self, its desires and reasons, and that which treats the person not as a self but as a sort of machine, or a product of innumerable factors. From the inside, so to speak, one *chooses* one's acts; the *self's desires and reasons* are what explain behavior. From the outside, scientifically as it were, it's theoretically possible to explain behavior without essential reference to the self. Or, if there is such a reference, as in psychoanalysis, the point is that it treats the self not as autonomous but as formed and influenced by factors outside its control. And with biology you don't even have to refer to the self at all; you just talk about stimulus and response, chemicals and electrical impulses. So, the problem is really that



there are two levels of reality, the first-personal and, in the final analysis, the deterministic. There seems no way to reconcile these two levels: they're absolutely opposed. Each is the negation of the other. And yet each exists! *I am free*, that seems indisputable. (I'm freely moving my fingers right now. My intentions are what make them move.) But *I am determined*, that seems indisputable too. (I'm an assemblage of cells interacting in such a way that these fingers are caused to move in the ways they're moving.)

So the free will problem is sort of a restatement of the mind-body problem. Two kinds of reality; the question is how they relate.

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*Notes (from 2006) for a paper on the mind-body problem*

The mind-body problem—which Jaegwon Kim characterizes as the problem of “finding a place for the mind in a world that is fundamentally physical”<sup>33</sup>—has been puzzled over for centuries, and is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. The reason is that apparently every possible solution has inadequacies. Anyone familiar with the philosophical literature is aware of all the problems with Cartesian substance dualism, reductive physicalism, eliminative materialism, behaviorism and functionalism, non-reductive physicalism and emergentism. One is tempted to agree with Colin McGinn that the cognitive apparatus of humans is intrinsically inadequate to the problem of explaining the relation between the mind and the brain.<sup>34</sup> How something like consciousness can emerge from something like the brain seems totally inexplicable.

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Barbara Montero, “Post-Physicalism,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2001): pp. 61-80.

<sup>34</sup> See Colin McGinn, “Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?,” in *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates*, eds. Ned Block, Owen Flanagan and Güven Güzeldere (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 529–542.

I suspect that *complete* understanding of the mind-body relationship is impossible, just as it is impossible with respect to the hypotheses of quantum mechanics and general relativity. “Formally”—mathematically, conceptually—we may be able to understand the latter theories, but “intuitively” they’re a mystery to us. We can’t visualize the worlds they describe, worlds of eleven dimensions or multiple universes or a finite but unbounded cosmos. Our possible experience is bounded, as Kant argued; we cannot intuitively conceive of indeterministic physical structures or of space in anything but three dimensions. Similarly, understanding the exact causal relationship between the brain and consciousness may, for whatever reason, be beyond our cognitive horizons. However, it might be possible to reproduce the reality in some sort of vague conceptual sense, by means of such concepts as, e.g., emergence, downward causation, and so on. These concepts are somewhat mysterious and will probably remain so, but if we can use them in a “solution” more plausible than any alternative—perhaps by removing their apparent incoherence—then we might be justified in supposing that we have gone some distance towards understanding the mind-brain connection.

In fact, I think that some version of the emergentist approach is the only possible quasi-solution. Nothing else is remotely plausible, as I’ll briefly argue below. Unfortunately, as it stands, emergentism is not yet a polished theory. This will be evident as I look at a couple of recent proposals on how to conceptualize it. I choose Roger Sperry’s version as well as the version put forward by Timothy O’Connor and Hong Yu Wong in their paper “The Metaphysics of Emergence”; I have found their defenses of the theory to be fairly sophisticated.

Over the years, O’Connor has criticized reductive accounts of consciousness, which propose that consciousness “really is” something else, something physical. He rightly notes that they are deeply counterintuitive. “The claim that ‘token’ mental states—i.e., particular, concrete mental occurrences—just are complex electrochemical events (which just are complex microphysical

events) implausibly denies that there is anything distinctive about mental activity in the world.”<sup>35</sup> Consciousness cannot be something other than *what it is*, namely thoughts, sensations, phenomenal experiences, etc.—not neurons firing. Consciousness is private, while physical, electrochemical events are publicly observable (at least in principle).

Indeed, any theory that tries either to “eliminate” consciousness or to reduce it to something else—something public, be it physical states, behavior, functional roles, or whatever—flies in the face of incontrovertible intuitions. Despite the efforts of such sophists as Daniel Dennett<sup>36</sup> and Richard Rorty<sup>37</sup> to deny that there is a qualitative, phenomenal, private or first-personal aspect to experience, it remains intuitively self-evident that mental experience has to be characterized in mental language, because it is private and qualitative. Phenomenal experience cannot be adequately described in anything but phenomenal language, and the same is true of intentional experience. No other sort of language, such as that of physics, does it justice, or is true to our experience.

Consider functionalism. Functionalists define (types of) mental states in terms of their functional roles, thus effectively denying the importance of the state’s private features, be they phenomenal or intentional. In his article “What is Functionalism?”, Ned Block writes that “according to functionalism, the nature of a mental state is just like the nature of an automaton state: constituted by its relations to other states and to inputs and outputs. All there is to....being in pain is that it disposes you to say ‘ouch,’ wonder whether you are ill, it distracts you, etc.” By reducing the mental

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<sup>35</sup> Timothy O’Connor and Hong Yu Wong, “The Metaphysics of Emergence,” *Noûs*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1990): p. 660.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., his article “Quining Qualia,” in Block et al., *The Nature of Consciousness*, pp. 619–639.

<sup>37</sup> See his paper “Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories” (1965). He argues there that sensations don’t exist, and that the only reason we think they do is that to eliminate talk about them from our language would be “impractical.” In other words, when he feels pain he doesn’t feel pain, but it’s useful to talk as if he does.

(the private) to something else, functionalists try to eliminate the mind-body problem. David Lewis, for example, writes that “The definitive characteristic of any (sort of) experience as such is its causal role, its syndrome of most typical causes and effects.”<sup>38</sup> But he is wrong: types of consciousness cannot be defined in a non-circular way, a non-mental way. The definitive characteristic of pain is not that it tends to cause a certain behavior, but simply that it hurts. The definitive characteristic of pleasure is that it feels good. *Consciousness is private*, and one cannot define (or “adequately describe”) the private in terms of the public. This is the essence of the “explanatory gap,” the essence of the mind-body problem—which can also be called (and *should* be called, for clarity’s sake) the private-public problem. Functionalists and behaviorists (and eliminative materialists, reductive physicalists, etc.) try to solve the problem by eliminating the private or reducing it in some way to the public, but they fail because there is manifestly a private realm of experience with its own *sui generis*, “first-personal” properties and features. None of the verbal legerdemain of contemporary philosophers has been able to get past that simple fact.

Frankly, I have never been able to understand how someone can be, say, a functionalist. Or a reductive physicalist. Does this person not have sensations? Is he not conscious? Is he a “philosophical zombie”? Can he not see that only *he* has the ability to perceive “from the inside” what is going on in his own mind, what thoughts he is having? To say that “*all there is* to being in pain is that it disposes you to say ‘ouch’ ....,” or that pain is *nothing but* a series of neuronal firings, is to deny that pain is qualitative and private. But this is to deny pain. —In order to recognize the falsity of functionalism (and reductive physicalism), it isn’t necessary to be an expert in analytic philosophy. One needs only a shred of common sense.

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<sup>38</sup> David Lewis, “An Argument for the Identity Theory,” in his *Philosophical Papers* Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

In short, O'Connor is right that the mind-body problem cannot be solved—cannot even be *formulated*, i.e., recognized as a genuine problem—unless one has first acknowledged that mental life is irreducible to publicly observable properties, be they physical, functional, or behavioral. But by acknowledging this, one has already thrown out the majority of proposed solutions to it. (Of course, they couldn't be solutions anyway, because they amount to a denial that there is any problem at all. For if consciousness “just is,” e.g., electrochemical activity, then there isn't a mind-body problem after all! That leaves it a mystery, though, as to why philosophers have thought for four hundred years that there is.) The correct theory has to be non-reductive. That leaves only substance dualism, some form of non-reductive physicalism more sophisticated than functionalism, or emergentism (which can in fact, I think, be considered a version of non-reductive physicalism).

It has long been recognized that substance dualism is problematic. The notion of two fundamentally different kinds of substances, which have nothing in common yet somehow interact—are indeed “wedded” to each other in any given person—is virtually incomprehensible. Its explanatory advantages, if there are any, are far less compelling than its disadvantages. So it has rightly been discredited.

All that's left is some sort of physicalism that acknowledges the “non-physical,” and in general the non-publicly observable, properties of consciousness. As I have said, this rules out functionalism. For, while functionalists admit that mental properties (such as painfulness) are not identical to physical properties (such as C-fiber stimulation), they think that the former *are* identical to *functional* properties (such as causal roles). But this cannot be true. Mental properties, like mental particulars, are private, or immediately accessible only to the consciousness that experiences them, whereas the property of fulfilling a causal role can be exhaustively analyzed and understood through public language. In other words, there is nothing it is “like” to be a cause or an effect as such, while there *is* something it is like to be in pain. Pain, then, cannot just be a cause of so-and-so and an effect of so-

and-so; there is something more to it than “its syndrome of most typical causes and effects.”

Another candidate is Donald Davidson’s anomalous monism. I will not comment on this theory except to say that insofar as Davidson adopts the Spinozistic position that a mental event is simply a physical event described in mental language, and vice versa, without explaining precisely what that means and how it can be possible—how, that is, a private, mental event can be identical to a public, physical event—his monism is unsatisfactory. It is incomplete. To be plausible, a physicalist theory (such as Davidson’s) has to do more than just say that a mental event is “also” a physical event. It has to give a precise account of the relation between the physical (public) aspect and the mental (private) aspect.

Now, only one theory that I know of has offered such an account. That is, only one theory promises to explain *in what sense* a neural event is also a private mental event. It is the only theory that accommodates our Cartesian intuitions while explaining in what way they are wrong. In fact, if one accepts that consciousness is private (subjective, intentional, qualitative) but also that it somehow arises out of the brain (which is *not* private, but rather publicly observable—e.g., during surgery or under the microscope), this theory is all that’s left. It has to be accepted; it is the only explanation.

The theory, of course, is emergentism. There is more than one version of it, but common to every version, at least implicitly, is the idea that an event in consciousness can be considered from two perspectives. The first is the perspective from which neurologists consider it, namely as consisting of a series of neuronal firings and electrochemical processes. From this neurological viewpoint, what is looked at is the *aggregate*, the “series,” of physical processes that “correspond to” the conscious state. The processes are atomistically “summed up,” so to speak: “first *this* happens, then *this*, then *this*....” A given state of pain or pleasure or whatever is considered as being a particular series of electrochemical events.

The other perspective is *holistic*. The neural events are considered together, as mutually contributing to some “larger” state. This holistic state, the *unity* of all the events in their interactions, is precisely the conscious event.

“Holistic” interactions are ubiquitous in biology. The cell is an obvious example. Each cell is constituted by molecules and molecular processes; in a sense it can be reduced to nothing else but these molecules. And yet it is also its own entity, an entity distinct from its micro-level constituents, possessing its own causal powers. (It can interact with other cells, for example.) Holistically, all the molecular events on which it supervenes interact to produce this new thing, the cell, which has causal powers that are not just the sum of the causal powers of its constituents (considered in themselves, isolated from their cellular environment). And so the cell is *emergent*.

But what exactly does that mean? The relevant definition of “emergence” is a matter of some controversy. There is a consensus, though, that various definitions have to be distinguished from each other. In the weakest possible sense, emergence is virtually ubiquitous: wherever there is a physical structure that has properties not possessed by its “micro-level” constituents in themselves, there is emergence. The mass of an object, for instance, is not an emergent property, even in this weak sense, for it is merely the sum of the masses of its constituents. By adding up the latter, one arrives at the former. The shape of a wheel, on the other hand, is emergent, in that it depends on a specific arrangement (or set of possible arrangements) of the particles that constitute it. In this incredibly weak and uninteresting sense of emergence, everyone is an emergentist. As J.J.C. Smart, a reductionist, puts it, “in saying that a complex thing is nothing but an arrangement of its parts, I do not deny that it can do things that a mere heap or jumble of its parts could not do.” “Smart admits,” writes Tim Crane, “that objects can have properties and powers which their parts do not have. But this doesn’t mean that these powers or properties are not reducible to the powers or properties of the parts. The very most it

means is that the properties need not be reducible in the ‘additive’ sense.”<sup>39</sup>

It is worth noting that even in these cases, there is, or there can be, a kind of downward causation. (The notion of downward causation—i.e., of “causal influence from the macroscopic to the microscopic levels of nature [such that] how things are at a higher level of complexity affects what happens at a lower level”<sup>40</sup>—is typically thought to be a defining feature of emergence.) Consider Roger Sperry’s example of a wheel rolling down a hill.<sup>41</sup> The properties of the wheel broadly supervene on the properties of the molecules within the wheel, and yet the former are able to influence the latter. For, while the downward motion of the wheel doesn’t cause “reconfiguration” of the wheel’s molecules *relative to each other*, it does reconfigure them relative to the rest of the world. At one moment a molecule is at a particular location relative to the grass; at the next moment it is at a different location. Thus, there is a kind of downward causation: certain properties of the macro-structure determine certain (“relational”) properties of the micro-structures.

Or consider the case of a bottle that falls to the floor and shatters. Were it not for the bottle’s macroscopic properties—its size, its fragility—it would not have broken, and thus the molecules that constitute it would not have been reconfigured relative to each other. Here again there is downward causation, and therefore emergence.

The example of the biological cell is a little different. The cell is a living thing that actively plays a role in its environment, by excreting and “ingesting” molecular structures. Likewise, inside the

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<sup>39</sup> Tim Crane, “The Significance of Emergence,” p. 8, at <http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/222/1/Significance%20of%20emergence.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> See Timothy O’Connor’s paper “Emergent Properties,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994): pp. 91–104. Cf. also Richard Campbell and Mark Bickhard, “Physicalism, Emergence and Downward Causation,” p. 26, where they give a fuller treatment than I do. (The paper is available at <http://www.lehigh.edu/~mhb0/physicalemergence.pdf>.)



cell are constantly occurring coordinated chemical processes. These processes are not purely random and accidental, as in the case of a non-living thing; they are tightly controlled, carefully “monitored” by means of unfathomably complex communicative mechanisms between all the molecular structures involved. The mechanisms and all the activities they regulate are ultimately caused by one factor alone: the holistic character of the system, the “web of interactions of the whole system”<sup>42</sup> itself. They are caused, that is, by the emergent structure (the cell) itself. This isn’t efficient causation; it is something that is harder to grasp conceptually. Something like “structural” causation, in the language of the Marxist Althusser. The efficient cause of a given cellular event is, of course, some other cellular event, some micro-level event or series of events. But *all* these events happen only because their totality constitutes an emergent entity, a holistic system (or structure) that itself makes possible the events, by organizing them in the way they’re organized. The properties of the whole, the cell, supervene on what is happening at the level of its constituents, but what is happening there is brought about through the “holistic” influence of the system, the cell.

All this is quite obvious, but it’s hard to conceptualize. It reminds one of the “chicken or the egg?” dilemma. You can’t have the cell without its constituents and their interactions, but you can’t have their interactions without the organizing principle that is the cell. Each factor, in a way, seems to cause the other. No wonder, then, that Jaegwon Kim, in his article “Making Sense of Emergence,” doubts the coherence of this reflexive variety of downward causation. “How is it possible,” he asks, “for the whole to causally affect its constituent parts on which its very existence and nature depend? If causation or determination is transitive, doesn’t this ultimately imply a kind of self-causation, or self-

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<sup>42</sup> Campbell and Bickhard, “Physicalism, Emergence and Downward Causation,” p. 25.

determination—an apparent absurdity? It seems to me that there is reason to worry about the coherence of the whole idea.”<sup>43</sup>

What ensures the logical possibility of this sort of downward causation is that it is not quite the kind of causation Kim has in mind in the quotation. It is not efficient (in Aristotle’s sense); it is not even on the same order of causation to which the question of whether it is “transitive” can be applied. Instead, it is “structural”: its causal influence is manifested through the micro-level states in (the totality of) which the holistic structure consists. Structural determination is, indeed, manifested in every cellular event. What this means is that the web-like structure of the “web of interactions” is ultimately responsible for the overall pattern of the interactions. To put the point paradoxically: the web-like structure is responsible for itself.

The odd thing about this sort of downward causation is that it is both puzzling and not puzzling at all. From one perspective, it’s easy to think that whatever conceptual difficulties there are arise just from the complexity of the subject-matter; from another perspective, though, it seems as if there are *logical paradoxes* involved, even given that the causation is not transitive. I don’t think that’s true, however; there is nothing really paradoxical going on. For the cell’s downward causation consists just in the (direct and indirect) interdependence of all cellular processes. What happens in the mitochondria at a specific time is indirectly caused by everything else that was going on in the cell prior to that time; for the distant events in, say, the cell membrane affect what happens in their vicinity (and are affected by what happens in their vicinity), which affects (and is affected by) other nearby molecular processes, which affect other processes, etc. etc., such that implicated in the chain of causation is the entire cell, from the membrane to the nucleus to the mitochondria to everything else. Crudely speaking, everything affects and is affected by everything else. This holistic interdependence is precisely what the cell’s

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<sup>43</sup> Jaegwon Kim, “Making Sense of Emergence,” *Philosophical Studies* 95 (1999): p. 28.

emergent nature, and its downward causation, consist in. And to say that the cell is an entity with its own causal powers is to say that it is an emergent or holistic phenomenon such that the whole determines itself, by determining all the molecular interactions in which the whole consists. It determines these interactions just insofar as it is their interconnectedness.

But not even *this* kind of emergence is the kind directly relevant to the mind-body problem. I have discussed it mainly to show that philosophers' attacks on the notion of emergence are misguided. Roger Sperry is right that emergence abounds in nature, and that it in no way contradicts the causal closure of physics or is a totally mysterious property. An emergent structure's downward causal influence occurs through the activity of the micro-constituents themselves. "Microdeterminism," writes Sperry, "is not so much refuted or falsified as it is supplemented."<sup>44</sup> That's why physicists and biologists have rarely felt the need to invoke the concept of emergence to explain an event: physical events can be explained "reductively," so to speak, even as the reductive explanations would literally have nothing to explain were the phenomena to be explained not embedded in a holistic environment. This environment is what makes the phenomena possible. Holism, or emergence, is a *philosophically* necessary concept, though not, in most cases, a *scientifically* necessary one, inasmuch as scientists can get empirical results simply by focusing on the individual chemical and physical events through which emergence manifests itself.

To explain *consciousness*, however, it is necessary to invoke a stronger and more mysterious kind of emergence. The type I've been describing—the type manifested in the cell—is, I suspect, essentially what Mark Bedau has in mind in his paper "Weak Emergence," as when he writes "[emergence] involves downward causation only in the weak form created by the activity of the

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in O'Connor, "Emergent Properties," p. 24.

micro-properties that constitute structural macro-properties.”<sup>45</sup> He contrasts his conception with O’Connor’s stronger version, which he thinks is inexplicable or “magical.” I’ll look at O’Connor’s conceptualization shortly, but first I want to explain what motivates it. That way we’ll be able to understand it better, and to understand what’s wrong with it.

First let’s recall the intuitive attractiveness of dualism. “The irreducibility of conscious experience and self-determining action already commits one to a kind of dualism, a duality of physical and conscious properties.”<sup>46</sup> But this dualism is not of the typical non-reductive physicalist sort, according to which mental features are in some unexplained way “realized in,” while supervening on, physical processes. Rather, “the dualism we must accommodate is ontological.”<sup>47</sup> We cannot just sidestep our intuitions, which are dualistic in a robustly ontological way. Functionalists and their ilk are inclined to do just that (i.e., to ignore intuitions), but the result is necessarily an unconvincing philosophy. What we have to do is find a middle way that avoids the extremes of substance dualism and reductionism of any sort, the first of which falls victim to logical puzzles and the second of which falls victim to both logical puzzles and irresistible intuitions.

In this age of philosophical shallowness, it is useful to keep in mind exactly why Descartes postulated dualism in the first place. In his *Meditations* he wrote the following:

On the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of my body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. ....There is a great

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<sup>45</sup> Mark Bedau, “Weak Emergence” (1997), p. 3, at <http://people.reed.edu/~mab/papers/weak.emergence.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> O’Connor, “Groundwork for an Emergentist Account of the Mental,” *PCID* 2.3.1 (October 2003): p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

difference between the mind and the body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and complete. Although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, I recognize that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind....

He recognized, as do most non-philosophers, that consciousness is partless or “non-structural,” unextended, unlike the physical objects of our experience. This means that it cannot be composed of physical things, as the cell is. Instead, it has to be emergent in some unusual way (which is, effectively, the only other option). But its “emergence” is very different from the cell’s structural emergence: while the cell is indeed a new “thing” with its own emergent causal powers, it is not a new *kind* of thing. But consciousness is.

I said above that consciousness can be analyzed from two perspectives; these are the physical and the “non-physical” perspectives. The former is the scientist’s approach when he considers consciousness as a series of neuronal firings and other electrochemical events. His approach is the “additive” one, the atomistic, non-holistic, aggregative one. As far as he is concerned, action potentials and excreted neurotransmitters and so forth are the building blocks of consciousness. He is not entirely wrong. For, while consciousness is not “made out of” them in the way that a cell is made out of molecules (i.e., structurally), when they interact together in a single holistic state they “produce”—or, from the holistic perspective, they *are*—a given conscious state, like pain. The *neural impulses* are not the mental state, but the holistic, emergent totality of their interactions is. This totality can and should be considered a physical phenomenon, in a sense, a neural phenomenon. However, its privacy, and its intentional and

qualitative features, distinguish it from apparently every other physical phenomenon in the universe; and this is the sense in which we are committed to dualism. Not *substance* dualism, though, because it is misleading—indeed, meaningless—to call consciousness a substance. Such terminology serves no purpose; it only propagates misunderstandings. Nevertheless, what we are confronted with is a kind of dualism, involving a phenomenon (consciousness) that can be analyzed from both physical and “non-physical” viewpoints, or additive and holistic viewpoints. —This is the only plausible way to conceptualize consciousness. Whatever difficulties it gives rise to, the greater difficulties of every conceivable alternative make the emergentist approach the most appealing.

No doubt Colin McGinn is right when he says that, insofar as emergentism doesn't explain *exactly how* the brain gives rise to consciousness, it is unsatisfactory. Insofar as it doesn't provide a scientific, empirical explanation of the emergence of consciousness, it leaves something fundamental unexplained. The mystery of how the subjective can possibly come from the objective is left mysterious. No amount of philosophical elaboration on the theses of emergentism can overcome that fact. It does no good, for example, to adopt Roger Sperry's line:

Instead of following the usual approaches that tried to inject conscious effects into the already established chain of microcausation, the logical impasse was resolved by leaving the microcausation intact but embedding it within higher brain-processes having subjective properties with their own higher-level type of causation, and by which the embedded micro-events are thereafter controlled.

....[E]xcitation of a cortical cell is enjoined into the higher dynamics of passing patterns of cognitive activity. A train of thought with one mental thought evoking another depends

throughout on its neurocellular physiology and biochemistry. Nevertheless, like molecules in passing waves in a liquid, the brain cell activity is subject to higher-level dynamics which determine the overall patterns of the neuronal firing, not relative to other events within this particular brain process, but relative to the rest of the organism and its surroundings.<sup>48</sup>

However true those ideas may be, they leave the basic mystery of the mind-body problem unsolved. They don't help to bridge the gap between the private and the public. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to reject emergentism for that reason. For it isn't as though the emergentist says *nothing*. His theory is not totally uninformative. While it cannot resolve the intuitive paradox of the mind's emergence from matter, no other theory can either. But its advantage over other theories (*one* of its advantages) is that it acknowledges its limitations, unlike, say, functionalism, which in effect—by denying the significance or existence of the “private” dimension of experience—pretends that the basic mystery doesn't exist.

This mystery, as I said earlier, will probably remain forever unsolved. It will always be inexplicable why the holistic state of neural interactions in a relatively simple system is *not* consciousness, while the holistic state of such interactions in a complex system like the human brain *is* consciousness. The fact that a change in quantity, so to speak, can in this way become a change in quality is impenetrable. It may even be the case that scientists will never fully understand why some neural pathways in the brain do not produce consciousness while others do. Still, none of this invalidates emergentism.

I have not yet said very much, though, about what the theory entails. Unfortunately this question is difficult—precisely because the relationship between consciousness and the body is difficult to

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in O'Connor, “Emergent Properties.”

understand. Consciousness is emergent, but does that mean it exerts downwardly causal influence on the electrochemical processes that are responsible for it? The cell's emergence is characterized by downward causation, but consciousness is not a structural entity. It is partless; it is not composed of molecules but rather of awareness, intentionality, qualia, which, as O'Connor notes throughout his work, are non-structural phenomena. So if it exhibits downward causation, it must do so in a different way than the cell does. But what way is that? On the other hand, if it *doesn't*, then is it not epiphenomenal? How could mental states have causal powers if not by influencing the neural states on which mental states are known to supervene?

Let's look at this question more carefully. A mental state, I have said, is a neural state—a “radically emergent” one, but a neural state nonetheless. So, when saying that it “supervenes” on neural states, what I am really saying is that it supervenes on neural events considered *additively*, as individual firings of neurons and particular interactions between neurons. In other words, the macro-level holistic state supervenes on the micro-level neural events. (An (imperfect) parallel is the cell's supervenience on molecular processes.) Both “levels” consist of neural events, but one is holistic while the other events are “additive.” Given the causal closure of physics, it is through this series of micro-level events that any causality is manifested. The *holistic* neural event (e.g., a particular sensation of pain) cannot be the direct mechanistic cause of a succeeding event (such as the act of removing one's hand from the fire), because all mechanistic, physical causation operates through individual “micro-level” neural events. There has to be this micro-causation.

Admittedly, it is conceivable that the act of removing the hand from the fire was “overdetermined,” in that it was caused *both* by a chain of neural events *and* by the sensation of pain, but this hypothesis is philosophically unattractive. It is uneconomical and counterintuitive. Kim rightly rejects it in his paper “Making Sense of Emergence.” It's implausible to think that an event has two



independent causes that operate at the same exact time. One cause does all the work necessary.

Similarly, it's absurd to say that the mental state somehow directly causes the neural events on which it supervenes. This form of downward causation is incoherent. It is literally senseless, for it entails causal circularity.

So then are mental states epiphenomenal? Are they mere side-effects of underlying neural processes, possessing no causal powers of their own? O'Connor tries to avoid that conclusion in "The Metaphysics of Emergence." He provides the reader with an elaborate diagram meant to show the (probable) relationship between mental states and neurophysiological events, according to which diagram a given mental state is the result of a complex array of neural events and mental states that somehow "work together" to produce the state in question. "As a fundamentally new kind of feature, [an emergent state] will confer causal capacities on the object that go beyond the summation of capacities directly conferred by the object's microstructure. Its effects might include directly determining aspects of the microphysical structure of the object as well as generating other emergent states."<sup>49</sup> Thus, an emergent state (says O'Connor) can be responsible for another emergent state as well as for the microphysical events on which such states supervene.

In his paper "Emergent Individuals" he describes his position as follows:

Since the...emergent states themselves will help to produce similar subsequent states—possibly resulting in a complex, stratified range of such states—the microphysics alone will *not* determine these later states. Likewise, emergent states will work in tandem with the underlying *micro*-states to determine later micro-states, manifesting a sort of "downward" causation. Hence, the existence of

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<sup>49</sup> O'Connor and Wong, "The Metaphysics of Emergence," p. 665.

emergent states is contrary to the assumptions of much contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of mind, assumptions which typically include the truth of some fairly strong mental-physical supervenience thesis and the causal closure of the microphysical realm. Neither of these assumptions will hold if there are emergent states as here defined.

That conclusion itself makes O'Connor's position unattractive and implausible. For scientists have accumulated no evidence to suggest that physics, or the microphysical realm, is causally incomplete. But there is another reason to reject O'Connor's ideas: they entail causal overdetermination. If micro-states *and* emergent states determine micro-states, then Kim's old objection is relevant again: the "activity of the emergent property" seems "redundant."<sup>50</sup> Consciousness cannot *directly* determine a micro-state, in the way that prior microphysical events determine it. Sperry had already rejected such a theory when he rejected the attempt to "inject conscious effects into the already established chain of microcausation."

Indeed, I find Sperry's conceptualization more plausible than O'Connor's. Sperry acknowledges the causal closure of physics: on his version of emergentism, as I said, "microdeterminism is not so much refuted or falsified as it is supplemented." The way it is supplemented, argues Sperry, is similar to the way it is supplemented in the case of the cell: while the cell's properties supervene on the properties of its constituent molecules, the latter properties are diachronically determined by the holistic state of the cell. Its overall state in a given moment determines (through molecular processes) the molecular processes in the succeeding moment, on which processes supervenes the cell's "overall state" in that moment, which determines (through the micro-level events) the molecular processes in the next moment, etc. Similarly, it's

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 670.

plausible to suppose that “individual nerve impulses and other excitatory components of a cerebral activity pattern are simply carried along or shunted this way and that by the prevailing overall dynamics of the whole active process”<sup>51</sup>—dynamics that are integrally related to the emergent neural states that are the mental states supervening on the nerve impulses in question. Precisely what the relation is between these “overall [cerebral] dynamics” and the conscious states is unclear—Sperry himself seemed to identify the two—but it’s likely that as neurophysiology progresses, that question will become less mysterious.

Experiments have shown, for example, that dogs that cannot feel pain willingly stick their snouts into fire and casually withdraw them. In general, a creature that doesn’t feel pain acts differently from one that does. So sensations appear not to be epiphenomenal. It is plausible to suppose, then, that consciousness as a whole is not epiphenomenal. The question is *how* it isn’t. How does it interact with neural events, and how does it determine an individual’s behavior?

Such questions, in fact, bring us to the controversy over “free will” and its meaning. And here we are in a philosophical quagmire from which there is, in all likelihood, no escape. From the perspective of natural science, acts are determined by biological processes; from the perspective of the self, acts are determined by desires and reasons. Can these perspectives be reconciled? One is deterministic, the other not. According to one, there is no place for “self-control”; according to the other, there is. It is hard to see how such opposed viewpoints can be made compatible with each other. Either consciousness and the self have causal power or they don’t. The biological sciences at least implicitly deny that they do (because the sciences reject attempts to “inject conscious effects into the already established chain of microcausation”), whereas our self-experience at least implicitly affirms that they do. And both frameworks for interpreting ourselves seem to have irresistible

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<sup>51</sup> Sperry, quoted in “Making Sense of Emergence,” p. 26.

power. So we appear to be at an impasse. It seems both obvious and impossible that consciousness is epiphenomenal.

It's possible, though I think unlikely, that sometime in the future scientists and philosophers will find a way out of these paradoxes. For now, however, we are compelled to invoke the wisdom of Aristotle: as philosophy begins in wonder, so it ends in wonder.

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*More thoughts on the mind-body problem.*— Reading parts of *Chomsky and His Critics* (2003), a collection of essays and responses to them by Chomsky. Philosophy and linguistics, not politics.

Chomsky: "I see no reason to question the general conclusion reached long ago that thought is 'a little agitation of the brain' (Hume), or a 'secretion of the brain' that should be considered no 'more wonderful than gravity, a property of matter' (Darwin)." Right. Gravity is mysterious, and thought is mysterious. That is to say, matter itself is just as mysterious as the relationship between "mind" and "matter." But that doesn't mean there is little point in discussing the conceptual mystery of the connection between mind and matter, as Chomsky seems to suggest.

He argues that the category of the mental is not fundamentally different from any other physical category in nature, such as the electromagnetic, the optical, or the organic. These are all just distinctions among various aspects of the world. But it seems to me that the "mental" has a special status. Simply stated, it is matter's experience of itself. It therefore introduces an element of reflexivity or self-reference. This is what gives it its "private" character, which is unlike the electromagnetic or the organic as such. So Chomsky is right that mind is not a different substance than matter, but he is wrong that it is strictly comparable to such categories as the mechanical and the optical.

As I said years ago when formulating my version of emergentism, the mental is physical but in a different way than the non-mental is. The latter is just unproblematically physical, and it

includes extended stuff like tables, neurons, molecules, atoms, protons, but also whatever non-extended entities and waves and forces and so on have been postulated by physicists. The mental, in being matter's self-experience and thus uniquely reflexive and emergent (from extended physical stuff), is not extended or spatiotemporal in quite the way of ordinary matter. (A sensation, as such, does not have an exact spatial location in the way that a neuron does.) So it is physical, but it is also oddly non-physical, or at least different from ordinary physical stuff. Hence the centuries of confusion.

Galen Strawson, a materialist, is right to reject the usual terminology of "mental vs. physical," because, after all, the mental *is* physical (albeit in a peculiar way, I think), like everything that exists. He substitutes for it "mental vs. non-mental," which are two broad categories of the physical.

In a sense, I don't understand what all the difficulty is with the mind-body problem, or why all these academics have to argue about it endlessly. Legions of them; they just don't have a clue. Strawson is better than most, but even he isn't perfect. He argues that consciousness is a form of matter, part of the physical being of the brain. Auditory experience, etc., is a *form of matter*. But that's wrong, and in any case it leaves you with all the old questions and perplexities. Neurons are a form of matter; atoms are a form of matter; consciousness is a form of the activity of matter, the "emergent" activity.<sup>52</sup> That formulation itself settles some of the perplexities, since they arise from supposed differences between *physical stuff* and consciousness, not between the *activity* of physical stuff and consciousness. As I remarked once when discussing Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, we have no intuitions about the nature of electrochemical emergence in the brain, as we do about the nature of the brain itself (e.g., its being divisible into parts, having a precise spatiotemporal location, etc.). It is our understanding of the *brain* that seems to contradict our

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<sup>52</sup> (Well, neurons and atoms are that as well, but my point is that they are also forms of matter itself, unlike consciousness.)

understanding of consciousness; our non-understanding of emergent electrochemical processes cannot similarly contradict our understanding of consciousness, simply because we don't understand electrochemical emergence. It's true it is still perplexing to think that consciousness can arise from electrochemical activity, but if you stress the word *activity* you'll see that at least now we've done away with the problems about ordinary physical stuff being divisible into parts (unlike consciousness) and having a definite spatial location (unlike consciousness), because we *don't* intuitively think that any kind of "activity" is divisible into parts or has a spatial location in the way that physical stuff does.

As Bergson said, philosophical solutions are always simple in their essence.

Strawson goes on to argue that everything we know about the ultimate nature of matter is perfectly compatible with consciousness. He criticizes certain philosophers for finding it mysterious that "technicolor phenomenology can arise from soggy grey matter," because physics has taught us that "the volume of spacetime occupied by a brain" is "not a sludgy mass but an astonishingly (to us) insubstantial-seeming play of energy, an ethereally radiant vibrancy" of "all the sweeping sheets and scudding clouds and trains of intraneuronal and interneuronal electrochemical activity which physics (in conjunction with neurophysiology) apprehends as a further level of extraordinarily complex intensities of movement and....organization." We shouldn't find it particularly mysterious, therefore, that consciousness can be physical, if *this* is what the physical is. I agree with him. These reflections do go some way towards dissolving the intuitive (and conceptual) puzzles. But, first of all, I think the puzzles can be largely dissolved simply by saying, as I did above, that consciousness is not matter itself but a kind of interaction between elements of matter, an interaction between, you could even say, spatially extended things like neurons and molecules and electrons and whatnot. But secondly, it seems to me that whatever the intuitive and conceptual compatibility between

consciousness and the “ultimate” nature of matter, what we naturally want to reconcile most of all is consciousness and the relatively “ordinary,” non-subatomic matter of our experience and of “ordinary” science like biology (with its cells, molecules, and the like). Besides, matter on the deepest quantum-mechanical level interacts with itself to create larger, spatially located and extended structures such as molecules and cells. These things exist. They are there, just as on a “different level” there is also the ethereally radiant vibrancy of energy and so forth. So, since both of these kinds of things exist—the relatively macroscopic stuff of cellular biology and the more microscopic stuff of quantum mechanics—both have to be reconciled with the existence of consciousness. We shouldn’t just *ignore*, so to speak, the existence of cells and “soggy grey matter,” as Strawson effectively does above. That stuff exists too, and so we have to conceptually reconcile it with consciousness. As I did (sort of) a couple paragraphs above.

Moreover, consciousness is a macro-level phenomenon (which corresponds in its “macro-ness” with the brain). So it is a different sort of thing than the infinitesimally small fields of force and energy postulated by modern physics. Which means that the apparent, metaphorical similarity between the latter and consciousness doesn’t have much significance. We shouldn’t think, “Hey, we’ve learned from physics that the ultimate nature of matter is after all not so different from consciousness!” and try to reconcile matter and consciousness in that way. First of all, it strikes me that even this quantum-mechanical stuff is very different from consciousness, however “spiritual” or “ethereal” our metaphorical pictures of it are. But even aside from that, consciousness and this stuff are on such vastly different “levels” of reality, the one so inconceivably microscopic and the other so enormously macroscopic, that I don’t really see how quantum mechanics can bear on the mind-body problem.

In general, I don’t think the mind-body problem is the sort of thing that science can have much bearing on. It’s a conceptual and intuitive thing, not something we can make empirical discoveries about. It revolves around the profoundly mysterious division in our

experience between public and private (or objective and subjective), and between extended and un-extended. These divisions cannot be “discovered” or “theorized” out of existence; they are conditions of our experience. Even if it turns out that matter-in-itself is essentially extended or has some other property inconsistent with consciousness, that doesn’t matter because the point is that consciousness is *emergent* from *interactions between* components of matter. That consideration is enough to “reconcile” it with matter, at least insofar as no gross logical contradiction remains but only intuitive wonder that consciousness can emerge from physical stuff.

Unfortunately, instead of sensible views like mine, what you get in the philosophical literature are extraordinary denials of the reality of consciousness (as a private, qualitative thing) or senseless assertions that it just *is* a form of matter, or arguments like Thomas Nagel’s (in “Conceiving the Impossible and the Mind-Body Problem”) that “our inability to come up with an intelligible conception of the relation between mind and body is a sign of the inadequacy of our present concepts,” in which “some development is needed.” Sure. Through the “development of concepts” we’ll someday be able to bridge the gap between *non-mental* and *mental*, *public* and *private*, *objective/quantitative* and *subjective-qualitative*. “We do not at present possess the conceptual equipment to understand how subjective and physical features could both be essential aspects of a single entity or process.” Good luck in your search for that equipment. There is simply no way around the conceptual chasm between mental and non-mental. You can’t ascribe to mental, “first-personal” states non-mental properties such as size and physical structure, nor can you ascribe to non-mental things mental properties such as phenomenal experience and intentionality. You can’t bridge the unbridgeable—which means you can’t explain how they could possibly interact,



how the mental could arise from the non-mental.<sup>53</sup> The best you can say is that certain physical processes in the nervous system can be considered from two perspectives, the “serial” or “atomistic”—a series of electrochemical events—and the “holistic” or “emergent,” which is the mental state. After that, it’s all a damn mystery.

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*On rationalism.*— In *Chomsky: Ideas and Ideals* (2004), Neil Smith says the following: “The part of his work for which [Chomsky] is most famous, infamous according to some, and the one for which he has been most vociferously criticized, is his argument that a substantial part of the faculty of language is genetically determined: it ‘is some kind of expression of the genes.’ [Horror of horrors!] The simplest formulation of this claim, which recalls the rationalism of Descartes, and explicitly juxtaposes this with the empiricism of Quine, is that ‘Language is innate.’ The claim is so radical [?], and so counterintuitive in the face of the existence of close on 10,000 different languages in the world, that it is necessary to summarize and evaluate the evidence.... [The evidence Chomsky cites includes] the speed and age-dependence of acquisition, convergence among grammars, analogies to vision and other modular abilities, species-specificity, the ‘over-determination’ of language acquisition in deaf or blind, or deaf-blind, children, but above all the existence of universals on the one hand and poverty-of-the-stimulus arguments on the other.”

It’s just astounding. Academics actually consider these ideas controversial, even “radical”! Why is there such aversion to the clearest common sense, and to the *biological* perspective?? Why the aversion to the hypothesis of innateness?? Why the centuries-long commitment to empiricism?? Honestly, it fascinates me. And why the ridiculing of the idea that the human mind has limited cognitive capacities, that it can’t necessarily understand *everything*

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<sup>53</sup> To clarify: science can demonstrate that phenomenal experiences, for example, arise from certain neural events, but it can’t conceptually explain how that’s possible.

about the world, for instance free will and the emergence of the mental from the non-mental? Every other species has limited capacities, so why not us? We're not angels, to quote Chomsky; we're defined, determined, organic beings, whose minds are not blank or infinite at birth. From my teenage years I've considered these rationalist ideas too obvious to discuss. But I guess people don't like to believe there are limitations to their powers or freedom or ability to mold themselves and understand everything. Childish delusions, residues of infantile narcissism.

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After reading Heidegger and commentaries on him, I can see the extent to which he influenced a whole variety of thinkers: not only the existentialists, phenomenologists, and poststructuralists but even theologians like Paul Tillich and eccentrics like Martin Buber. All the talk about "being" and "presence" and "anxiety," and much more, largely comes from Heidegger (and, through him, from Husserl and a few other phenomenologists). On the other hand, that doesn't mean he was wholly original. Far from it. He belonged to a large group of thinkers who were reacting against the Cartesian tradition, including Marx, William James, John Dewey—Heidegger took a lot from pragmatism—Nietzsche, even Hegel in some ways, Wittgenstein, and thinkers in other disciplines, e.g., psychoanalysis and anthropology. The humanities were inexorably heading away from Cartesianism, away from dualism and the self's "absolute freedom" (the chasm between mind and matter), emphasizing humans' social and natural embeddedness. At the same time, unsurprisingly, the individualistic perspective showed up in new ways, "spiritual" and "existential" ways, as social atomization intensified. (And in analytic philosophy, Cartesian-Lockean ideas inspired Russell, the logical empiricists, etc.) What resulted was a schizophrenic intellectual culture.

There is validity in all these approaches, from Descartes to his later antipodes. Cartesianism has a lot of truth; so does the nearly opposite tradition of the twentieth-century Continentals. It's all a matter of *emphasis*. You can emphasize our embeddedness

(Heidegger) or you can emphasize our freedom (Descartes and Sartre<sup>54</sup>). You can emphasize the division between the mind and the body or you can emphasize their connection. Human experience is full of ambiguity.

For instance, even Merleau-Ponty, who strongly opposed Cartesianism, observes that “How significance and intentionality could come to dwell in molecular edifices or masses of cells is something which can never be made comprehensible, and here Cartesianism is right.” So he does accept a sort of mind-body dualism after all.

In fact, there is surely no division in the world “as it is in itself” between mind and matter; there is only a division, necessarily, *for us*, for consciousness. The dualism is epistemological, not ontological. It’s a reflection of our lack of understanding, the insufficiency of our cognitive capacities—for the mental is simply the *activity*, considered from the “holistic” viewpoint, of a certain kind of matter.

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*Marx contra Heidegger.*— There are a number of ironic similarities between Heidegger’s thought and Marx’s. For instance, the partial rejection of the entire philosophical tradition. The criticism of *theoria*, the “artificial” and derivative theoretical stance, in favor of *praxis*, or being-in-the-world. Man is essentially *involved*; his habits of thought and so on grow out of his situation. The rejection of “metaphysics” (though for different reasons). The emphasis on alienation and inauthenticity, concepts that are related. The holistic approach to their subject-matter. The historicism and quasi-social constructivism. The existentialist view of human nature: man’s essence is his existence, he is his acts. The rejection of the language of consciousness in favor of that of “[social] being.” The distinction between appearance and that which lies underneath, is

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<sup>54</sup> Sartre’s system, however, is confused. It contains logical tensions or contradictions, such as the tension between a public and a private approach to the self.

“hidden” or “covered up.” (Marx called it essence, a word Heidegger rejected.) The use of phenomenological analysis to uncover this hidden truth—a use that is, admittedly, only partial in Marx’s case. (*Das Kapital* has more than a few “phenomenological” chapters, but its basic method is that of abstraction from appearance.) The conviction that Descartes was wrong: consciousness is not self-transparent but rather has its meaning and ground hidden from it.<sup>55</sup> But the differences between the two thinkers are just as striking, and are mostly to Marx’s credit. Ultimately, Marx not only had a far greater understanding of himself—his project<sup>56</sup>—and society, but was more theoretically revolutionary. More innovative certainly, infinitely more lucid in his thought and writing, more insightful, *realistic*, more ambitious and original. (Marx had Hegel and Heidegger had Husserl, but one gets the impression that Marx set out on his own to a greater extent than Heidegger did.<sup>57</sup>)

Marx’s superiority over Heidegger is revealed in the fact that the latter couldn’t escape the paradigm of idealism. He insisted on man’s being-in-the-world, on social practice, on our embeddedness in history and so forth, but he still failed to understand that material, historical conditions determine worldviews and social behavior. He reduced everything to metaphysics and idealism. For example, in his early work he thought that the reason why we moderns are so enamored of technology, science, and instrumental reason is that we can’t endure the experience of anxiety, of

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<sup>55</sup> Needless to say, Marx and Heidegger interpreted all these doctrines in very different ways.

<sup>56</sup> The very questions that Heidegger spent his life trying unsuccessfully to answer, namely “What is the meaning of being?” and “Why is there something rather than nothing?”, etc., are well-nigh meaningless.

<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Heidegger claimed that *Being and Time* adhered to the “principle of phenomenology”—i.e., Husserl’s method—more faithfully than Husserl himself did. And Heidegger’s account of time borrows a lot from Husserl’s. In any case, Husserl himself attempted a “phenomenological ontology,” a clarification of the being of entities in general, before Heidegger did.

understanding our own nothingness! Sheer psychologism, flagrantly ahistorical. Later he got even worse: he thought that the pathologies of modernity result from the self-concealment of being! Ever since Plato, “being as such had increasingly withdrawn itself from human view.” (What does that even mean?) The reason he initially loved the Nazis is that he thought they would bring humanity closer to being and nothingness, to authenticity. (And anxiety? They accomplished *that*, at least.)

“The issue,” Heidegger writes, “is the saving of man’s essential nature. Therefore, the issue is keeping meditative thinking alive.” –Ha! There, he said it. Man’s essence is meditative thinking. How surprising that a philosopher considers philosophy to be man’s essence. Marx had advanced beyond this position.

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*Existentialism’s “embeddedness.”*— In their fetish of radical (“terrible”) freedom and the essential meaninglessness of life, some of the French existentialists strayed pretty far from Heidegger. It’s practically the opposite of his emphasis on our embeddedness. But that’s the difference between old Germany and France: cultural embeddedness, national and racial pride, rootedness, fascism, as opposed to France’s atomism, individualism, liberalism, its revolt against the past (from the French Revolution onwards).

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I’m in the navel-gazing mood to discuss Sartre’s analysis of “bad faith” in *Being and Nothingness*. I’ve always been intrigued by that work, however flawed and infuriating it is. I have to agree with Roger Scruton when he remarks in his book *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (1981) that many of Sartre’s phenomenological analyses are “terrifyingly persuasive.” The psychoanalyst R. D. Laing was also impressed by Sartre, going so far as to adopt some of his ideas and his method.

To refresh your memory: according to Sartre, bad faith consists in a “refusal to come to terms with the ambiguity of the

human situation,” or “an illusion by which we seek to conceal from ourselves the uncomfortable ambiguity of our position.” For instance, a young woman knows or half-knows that the man she’s on a date with wants to seduce her, but she wants neither to be regarded as a mere sex-object nor to be treated in a purely, asexually “respectful” way. She deceives herself, therefore, by refusing to acknowledge the sexual character of the man’s behavior and by distinguishing herself from her body: “her hand rests inert between the warm hands of her companion—neither consenting nor resisting—a thing.” She is in bad faith because she’s refusing to make a decision that she can’t avoid making. She must either accept the man’s advances or reject them. Another example: Roquentin’s keeping a diary (in Sartre’s novel *Nausea*), by which he “seeks to impose a narrative structure on the random sequence of real events,” is an instance of bad faith, of self-deception.

But then clearly bad faith is inseparable from the human condition, and in a sense everyone is always guilty of it. For everyone structures his life, narrates it to himself, considers it to have meaning. Everyone deceives himself in some ways, all the time. But how futile and empty is the idea of “good faith” if everyone is always, necessarily, to some degree guilty of bad faith! Besides, we don’t have total control over ourselves, over our consciousness—we don’t have total freedom—because such a notion is meaningless. And we shouldn’t be condemned for something we don’t have control over. On the other hand, we seem to have *some* control, *some* freedom. There’s the rub: *how much* freedom? How is it possible to have only *some* free will? In certain situations one can rightly be criticized for deluding oneself; in others, one can’t. Where is the dividing-line? Should the woman be criticized? From one perspective, yes: she’s “leading the man on,” she’s being a little cowardly, (self-)dishonest, weak-willed, vain. (Likes the attention.) From another perspective, no: what’s so bad about postponing her decision? Why is it wrong for her to enjoy the moment? The concept of bad faith seems simplistic in its moralistic implications.

On a more basic level, though, the question is whether Sartre succeeds in showing that a person can't "be himself," that sincerity is an illusory ideal. *Mon père*, in his dissertation, thinks not, and I agree. With qualifications. Supposedly humans cannot "be what they are" because they are essentially consciousness, and consciousness is characterized not only by facticity but by transcendence. It transcends itself, transcends its moods, its thoughts, its objects, its past, its facticity, etc. Humans are a fusion of facticity and transcendence—the former is relatively "defined" and unfree, the latter more undefined and free. So if humans constantly transcend their facticity, their "givenness," the element of unfreedom in their being, they cannot *be themselves*, cannot be simply what they are, and so cannot be sincere or have integrity in any genuine sense. I think this is wrong on the level of ordinary daily life, common sense, interactions with people. Insofar as we can and do distinguish between, on the one hand, a person deceiving himself, deceiving others, dramatically adjusting his behavior to please others, acting with excessive concern for others' opinions, etc., and a person who is being sincere, honest, and acting with integrity, there is clearly some difference at work. In general, the latter is "being himself," the former not (depending on the specific circumstances).

However, on a deeper, "ontological" (?) level Sartre is not off the mark. His observations are in the same spirit as much of Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and others, so they are certainly not mere fantasies. First of all, incidentally, making a distinction between facticity and transcendence is one way of expressing the incoherence of the idea of free will. (That's ironic, since Sartre thought man is absolutely free. But he was confused.) Or, even more paradoxically, a being that is simultaneously facticity and transcendence—and surely man is—is a being shot through, at least for itself, with incoherence and paradox. "In itself" it can't be, since nature is not incoherent, but for itself, yes, such a being is a mystery. Partially free and partially unfree? How are we to make sense of that? Freedom and unfreedom mixed together in

the same consciousness? How is that possible and what does it mean? We have good answers to neither question.

The distinction between “facticity” and “transcendence” is imprecise and unclear, like many of Sartre’s ideas. It’s also a bit artificial, as though there are two definite and clear-cut sides to man. Whatever we decide the concepts mean—and they do have some meaning—human activity swirls them around together, so that to some extent there is facticity *in* our ever-present “transcendence” and vice versa. Maybe you can also think of them as denoting our nature viewed from two perspectives: from “outside” with facticity, as others observe you and judge you as *such-and-such*, and from “inside” with transcendence, as you implicitly sense that no criticism of you is wholly and forever true, since (as Sartre says) you’re not a thing like an inkwell. You transcend yourself, so to speak; you cannot be completely summarized in any judgment like “He’s a coward.” In reaction to such a judgment you can even consciously choose to act in the opposite way, thereby disproving the criticism, so to speak. But there may nonetheless be some truth to it—perhaps in terms of your “dispositions,” or your desires, or the ways you usually act, or whatever. Compared to other people, it might be true that you tend to be less courageous and more fearful.

In some ways, then, human life is even more “ambiguous” than Sartre thought (given his typically absolutist perspectives). People do not have perfect control over themselves. The self is determinate as well as indeterminate; it cannot simply choose itself, choose how it wants to be. There is *resistance*, *solidity* in its nature. The young woman on the date is not wholly “to blame” for her self-deception, because she is not abstract, un-situated consciousness. She is to some extent “a thing,” unfree and determined (by feelings, moods, situations, etc.); nor does she really *decide* to deceive herself. Her subtle self-deception simply emerges from the momentum of the situation and is pushed along by it. This, indeed, is true of all the self’s thoughts, acts, and feelings: while they can be more or less “chosen,” they also *grow out of* situations and are bound up with them. —Our freedom is



half-freedom, the self is not an absolutely free nothingness, and "sincerity" is possible despite the anguished existentialism of Dostoyevsky and Sartre.

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"*Intellectual impostures.*"— That's the name of a book by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont exposing the, well, intellectual impostures of postmodernists. I'll probably never read it, since postmodernism is generally a waste of time, but there are excerpts on the internet. For example in this review of the book by Richard Dawkins:

....The feminist 'philosopher' Luce Irigaray is another who gets whole-chapter treatment from Sokal and Bricmont. In a passage reminiscent of a notorious feminist description of Newton's *Principia* (a "rape manual"), Irigaray argues that  $E=mc^2$  is a "sexed equation." Why? Because "it *privileges* the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us" (my emphasis of what I am rapidly coming to learn is an 'in' word). Just as typical of this school of thought is Irigaray's thesis on fluid mechanics. Fluids, you see, have been unfairly neglected. "Masculine physics" *privileges* rigid, solid things. Her American expositor Katherine Hayles made the mistake of re-expressing Irigaray's thoughts in (comparatively) clear language. For once, we get a reasonably unobstructed look at the emperor and, yes, he has no clothes:

"The privileging of solid over fluid mechanics, and indeed the inability of science to deal with turbulent flow at all, she attributes to the association of fluidity with femininity. Whereas men have sex organs that protrude and become rigid, women have openings that leak menstrual blood and vaginal fluids.... From this perspective it

is no wonder that science has not been able to arrive at a successful model for turbulence. The problem of turbulent flow cannot be solved because the conceptions of fluids (and of women) have been formulated so as necessarily to leave unarticulated remainders.”

As it turns out, the real reason for the scientific difficulty of turbulent flow is that the Navier-Stokes equations are hard to solve.

These sorts of writers love to use scientific jargon out of context, as in this relatively lucid but meaningless sentence from Jean Baudrillard: “Perhaps history itself has to be regarded as a chaotic formation, in which acceleration puts an end to linearity and the turbulence created by acceleration deflects history definitively from its end, just as such turbulence distances effects from their causes.” And so on and so forth, from a galaxy of respected academics. Bruno Latour, for instance, arguing that a recent scientific discovery that a pharaoh from ancient Egypt had died of tuberculosis was nonsense because tuberculosis was invented (socially constructed) in the 19th century. What a topsy-turvy world, in which people like this are celebrated while real people who work two or three jobs to put food on the table for their families get no recognition!

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*Making sense of Foucault?*— C. G. Prado’s book *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy* (2000) is good, but in the end it succumbs to the inadequacies of its subject-matter. For instance, in expositing Foucault’s notions of archeology, genealogy, ethics and so on, Prado returns half-a-dozen times to the question of whether Foucault’s claims about truth are cogent. The problem is that, given his disavowal of the project of understanding “objective” truth, how are we to interpret Foucault’s own ideas? Are they not supposed to be true? Are they, as he seems to suggest, merely alternative “fictions,” or narratives meant to undermine prevailing power-structures, or “problematizations of established

truths” undertaken purely for the sake of problematizing established truths? Prado repeatedly acknowledges the force of the “self-refutation” charge, and he repeatedly postpones answering it. Again and again he offers tentative, “experimental” defenses of Foucault, but always he implicitly recognizes their inadequacy and says effectively “Keep reading; I promise to get to the bottom of this!” His postponements eventually become comical. In the penultimate chapter, devoted solely to the Foucauldian conception of truth, he fails to come to a conclusion, instead saying, *again*, “I’ll return to this in the last chapter.” When finally he has to face the music and tell us why we should take Foucault seriously (as a philosopher), he gives the following hilariously pitiful answer: “The point of [Foucault’s] ceaseless problematization of established truths and knowledges is to enable us to resist being wholly determined by power-relations.... [The purpose is to] ‘promote new forms of subjectivity,’ [which] can be accomplished only by changing the truths, knowledges, and discourses within which we are defined and in terms of which we define ourselves. A novel Foucauldian construal is not a thesis to be assessed for truth; it is an opportunity, a perspective-shifting idea that, like a concept as understood by Canguilhem, admits of quite diverse development. The construal’s cogency, then, is not a function of its initial content, but of how it is taken up.” In other words, the only value of the ideas is their usefulness in fighting the Man! Ironical that they aren’t particularly useful in fighting the Man. The best way to do that, the way that gets to the heart of power structures, is to focus on class dynamics, which Foucault didn’t do because he recognized that materialist politics were on the wane in the 1960s and society’s attention was turning to sexuality, gender, and subjectivity.

Anyway, the existence of “objective truth” is obvious. It is “objectively” true that, according to my experience, I am sitting in a chair right now. It’s objectively true that either the earth revolves around the sun or the sun revolves around the earth. Either mind-independent matter exists or it does not. The fact is that anyone who is interpreting the world or trying to explain it is implicitly

aiming for (“objective”) truth, even if he thinks he isn’t. What the typical philosophical postmodernist is saying, therefore, is that it’s true there is no truth. Not a very sophisticated position.

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Reading Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. One of the reasons for his fame is the quality of his writing: there’s a creativity, a forcefulness, a style that probably overawes a lot of academics who are willing to be impressed by that sort of thing when it’s manifested by one of their own.

But there is also the fact that Foucault’s obsession with power relations, his obsessive insistence that they permeate every facet of society and even the individual’s mind, and that the *subject* is a product of *subjection*, can be contagious. It really drives the point home. Even the academic reader can start to think, “Hey, yeah, *power*! And discourses, and disciplines, and the fusion of power and knowledge—and hey, I’m an intellectual, so that’s great for me—and all these cool terms like ‘political technologies’ and ‘political anatomy’ and ‘vectors of power’ and ‘micro-physics of power’! What a magnificent theoretical vision!” It helps that Foucault avoids talking about business and class relations, which means that society’s central power-structures have no particular reason to be very hostile to him. It’s striking how un-original it all is, though (and truistic). E. P. Thompson’s work shows how the modern subject has had to be disciplined—for the direct or indirect sake of capital accumulation, which Foucault tends to ignore; and then there’s Gramsci (whose ideas themselves are pretty obvious), and Freud, and Nietzsche, and Marx, and a galaxy of lesser-known thinkers who have dissected the workings of power. But Foucault had a gift for self-promotion, so he became a celebrity.

And what’s all this blather about “the body”? He goes on and on about how important the body is. Yes, I agree, bodies are important. And they’re objects of power, etc. Again, the reason this jargon became so popular among academics is that feminism and the sexual revolution turned society’s attention to the body—to women’s (lack of) power over their bodies, to cultural

interpretations of the body and sexuality, etc. Also, this kind of talk is conveniently un-Marxist, which is always good for having a smooth and successful career. It's basically a middle-class preoccupation—as most things “subjective” are—something that middle-class people have the luxury to think about, wondering what their attitude is toward their body, whether it's healthy or whatever, how society has influenced and perverted their relationship with their body. Actually, this intellectual turn toward subjectivity and the body is a symptom of the feminization of society since the 1960s, as decadence has set in (to quote Susan Sontag). With ultra-atomization has come a preoccupation with subjectivity, the self's insecurity; hence feminization.

By the way, a nice thing about reading Foucault is that his prose is so prolix you can skim through a lot of it without missing anything substantial.

Another nice thing, though, is that he is more interesting and substantive than his fellow postmodernist “pioneers.” He actually has things to say, although it takes a lot of intellectual digestion to see what they are. The problem, again, is that his writing is diffuse and abstract, consisting of a strange stream of reflections on, in this case, crime and punishment and their evolution. It isn't really philosophy, as it's sometimes called, but it isn't anything else either. It's uncategorizable. It's like a bunch of notes to himself on how to understand the “meaning,” given particular social contexts, of various crimes and punishments. Some of it makes me think of a historical phenomenology, while at other times I simply have no idea what's going on. “What is this stuff?” It is so abstract and self-indulgent you can't really pin it down, and after pages of reading you remember absolutely nothing of what you just read. Meaningless words passing under your eyes. It's comparable to the feeling of “zoning out” for a few minutes. (Not all of it is this bad, I should say.)

Another obvious problem is Foucault's idealism. He fixates on the opinions of reformers, philosophers, politicians, scientists, only occasionally descending to earth to note how things actually were. He's pre-Marxist, like most postmodernists. Or, if not exactly pre-

Marxist, unsophisticated in ways that Marx should have reminded him not to be.

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*A short book review.*— The first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is interesting but not excellent. It doesn't deserve all the praise it has received. The theme running through it is opposition to a "straw man" argument, namely that for the last few centuries sex has been repressed, mainly for the sake of preventing society's labor capacity from "dissipating itself in pleasurable pursuits."<sup>58</sup> What a crude functionalist position! *Obviously* it's a simplification, desperately in need of elaboration and supplementation. But Foucault's book itself contains plenty of simplistic hypotheses. Moreover, he constantly finds himself compelled to admit, without saying so, that the "repressive hypothesis" is partly, if not wholly, true. For instance, he repeatedly acknowledges that after the sixteenth century, sexual prohibitions were severe, and propriety demanded that one maintain a certain silence about sex, and so on. More importantly, "the multiplication of discourses concerning sex" that took place in "the field of exercise of power itself"—the "institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; [the] determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail" (he discusses at length the significance of the confessional, and of the new theoretic discourses concerning women's sexuality, childhood onanism, population control, sexual "perversities" like homosexuality and sodomy, etc.)—this "steady proliferation of discourses," which demanded that individuals and families monitor themselves, discipline themselves, divert their sexual energies into normal reproductive functions, surely fostered a tremendous anxiety about sexuality. Whether the anxiety was caused by enforced

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<sup>58</sup> In general, this setting up of straw man arguments is the postmodernist's method of choice. Attribute a simplistic position to your opponent and then argue that it's wrong.

silence/censorship/prohibitions (which Foucault denies) or by excessive “multiplication of discourses” (which Foucault affirms) seems less important than the fact that there *was* this anxiety, this “repression” (which he seems to deny). (Anyway, the anxiety was obviously caused by *both* the silence/prohibitions and the discourses. The two went hand-in-hand: had there not been so many discourses, there wouldn’t have been so many prohibitions, and vice versa.) No doubt Foucault is mostly right in his history of the “*scientia sexualis*” that overtook Europe with the onset of capitalism; but, if anything, his history *supports* the “repressive hypothesis”—or the “anxiety hypothesis,” as I’d prefer to call it, since the word “repression” has overtones of silence.

Still, there has been and still is a shroud of silence concerning sex, despite what Foucault says in the last pages of his book. The “proliferation of discourses” doesn’t negate the fact that most people are still somewhat uncomfortable talking about sex, that many women tend to consider it a shameful secret (whence, in part, their insecurities), that coquettish sexual games that lead nowhere are ubiquitous in our civilization. There is far more sexual frustration and anxiety in the West than in the remaining “archaic” societies, not to mention extinct prehistoric societies. As for Foucault’s idea that “sex” is simply a historical fabrication, an “imaginary element” that is subordinate to sexuality and power-relations: it’s perverse. “The theory [that there is such a thing as sex] performed a certain number of functions that made it indispensable. First, the notion of ‘sex’ made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.” (Yes, there we go again with the poststructuralist obsession with signifier/signified.) First of all, I fail to see how the unity thus constructed is “artificial,” and in any case, Foucault hasn’t argued for his claim. Second, this passage hints at the favorite—fallacy-saturated—method of postmodernists, which runs

through Foucault's book as a whole: to argue that because a certain theory or philosophy has a history and serves some function or other, it isn't true. This conclusion is never stated explicitly, since it's absurd, but the methods and rhetorical devices peculiar to postmodernists tend to derive their force from the implicit appeal to that argument. Foucault, Rorty, Derrida and all the others seem to think that by focusing attention on the process of philosophical creation—the vagaries and vicissitudes of it—and on a philosophy's uses to a given power-structure, they can invalidate the philosophy itself. That just ain't so. At most, it encourages the philosophy's defenders to be extra-rigorous in their defense.

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*Foucault's value.*— While I'm not a great admirer of him, I'll admit that Foucault can be useful as a symbol of certain intellectual tendencies, somewhat like Marx is. The latter was not totally original, but he is useful in having brought together a mass of important ideas, some of which were already in circulation before him. Foucault is like a pale version of that. He draws attention to the modern state's regulation of the body, of sexuality, of discourses, of social deviants and their punishment. More generally, he highlights the social construction of various features of life,<sup>59</sup> and the pervasion of power-relations throughout society. To an extent, all these ideas are truistic; moreover, they predate him. And his expositions of them are confused, obscure, and sloppy. Nonetheless, sure, it can be useful to associate them with a single thinker.

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<sup>59</sup> Let's not forget to take this postmodernist logic to its self-defeating conclusion: the image of Foucault as enormously important, as very original, etc., is itself a social construction, in fact a myth. The academic discourse about him is indeed a much purer example of the tainted social construction of knowledge than contemporary science is! Magnificent irony.



*Epiphenomena.*— Postmodernists rebelled against the idea of a social *reality* (truth), against society itself—withdrawing into their cocoon of literary theory and discourse-mongering—even as, and because, they implicitly accepted the new social reality of consumerism, narcissism, fragmented selves, fragmented ideologies, political disenchantment, and suppression of the working class. Their contempt for social reality was an expression of social reality.

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*Science, religion, and arrogance.*— Postmodernists and other religious people—for postmodern political correctness is a kind of religion, a fundamentalism, like free-market ideology and strains of Islam—are fond of accusing reason's partisans, such as scientists, of arrogance in relation to other ways of reaching "truth." It is ironic, therefore, that from one perspective scientists are actually the humble ones, Christians, Muslims and so forth the arrogant ones. For humility is the very essence of science. It is the *humility* of the scientific method that explains its power, and justifies its proponents' "faith" in it. Religious faith, on the other hand, is very arrogant, since, by definition, it isn't subject to continual testing and revision in the light of new evidence. It is a projection of the believer's desires and hopes into absolute truth.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the believer takes himself—his hopes, values, desires—as the measure of truth, whereas the scientist's method is devoted precisely to suppressing his subjectivity.

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Here's Jean-François Lyotard speaking in 1987 on his famous little 1979 book (*The Postmodern Condition*) that brought the term "postmodernism" into general circulation: "I made up stories, I

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<sup>60</sup> In the case of (much) postmodernism, the matter isn't quite so simple. Rather, the existence of "cross-cultural" truth is denied; the rigorous search for evidence is abjured, which effectively allows the believer to believe what he or she wants.

referred to a quantity of books I had never read, apparently it impressed people, it's all a bit of a parody.... It's the worst of my books, they're almost all bad but that one's the worst." This statement encapsulates the general attitude of postmodernism (with some exceptions). Making up stories, adopting an ironic and self-parodying stance, playing games with oneself and others, not taking things too seriously, not caring about intellectual rigor and honesty or science or the accumulation of knowledge. Playful solipsism. Culturalism, literary expression over clear communication, the "play of signifiers" over genuine argument. It's more appropriate to the analysis of literary and artistic creations than to the sciences or social sciences, because art criticism usually has less to do with truth, seriousness, "fixed meanings," standards of reason, than with playful interpretations of artworks, experimental probings of possible meanings, nuanced investigation of forms, artistic and linguistic self-reference that has no contact with an external reality, streams of consciousness that don't reach definite conclusions, speculative masturbation. Hence, postmodernism had great influence on artistic and cultural analysis and less on the sciences and social sciences. The latter march on much as they did before, while postmodernism is dying—or at least you hear about it less than you did fifteen years ago.

By the way, one reason phenomenology was attractive to a lot of postmodern thinkers is that it has tendencies to a kind of relativism and even to solipsism: it makes no reference to a world outside consciousness. Husserl enjoins thinkers to ignore questions about the "external world" and analyze "ideas" instead. So then later on you have European postmodernists, influenced by Husserl and Heidegger, saying that there *is* no external world, there is nothing outside language or discourse or paradigms or whatever they choose to call it. It's just subjective idealism jargonized for the benefit of a less honest and more confused intellectual class. Questions about the "*real*" causes or explanations of phenomena cannot even be raised—like, the explanations of language, or digestion, or anything else—because in the idealist scheme, contrary to what traditional idealists thought, it makes no sense to

talk about causes the operations of which we're unaware of (because there is supposed to be nothing outside consciousness). So natural science is thrown out the window—as should have been obvious anyway because it refers to mind-independent *matter*, but Berkeley and Schopenhauer and Ernst Mach and the logical positivists somehow managed to overlook that fact (that necessarily *realist* perspective of science).<sup>61</sup>

It's ironic, isn't it, that the logical positivists can from one perspective be lumped together with poststructuralists: they both effectively denied or ignored external reality, though in different ways and for different reasons. It isn't surprising, though. Even as science has made giant leaps forward by investigating a mind-independent physical world, the progress of modern society has made the individual ever more internal to himself, more skeptical of the world, alienated, set in opposition to the world, fixated on his consciousness (or his "sense-data"), more *aware* of himself as an individual distinct from the world. Hence you get phenomenology, existentialism, logical positivism, postmodernism, subjectivist and idealistic worldviews of all sorts.

It's true that not all postmodernists were neo-"subjective idealists," but all or nearly all were idealists of the more general anti-Marxian sort (emphasizing ideas and consciousness rather than economic relations and "social being"). Because they were obsessed with language and so-called discourses, most of them had

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<sup>61</sup> For the philosopher-casuists: I know the logical positivists didn't self-identify as idealists. But they wanted to avoid the "metaphysical" question of the existence of mind-independent matter, so they recognized only sensations, sense-data, logical constructions out of the latter, etc., which means effectively that they were idealists of a peculiar sort. (Bracketing the external world, admitting only consciousness, sense-data, language, logic, mathematics, and trying to construct a philosophical system around sense-data as if "matter in itself" didn't exist.) This is all silly, by the way, because the success of science is inexplicable except on the assumption that there *really are* such things as atoms, electrons, etc. Moreover, it is the postulation of such entities that makes scientific hypotheses explanatorily powerful.

little interest in sociology, economics or economic history, analysis of material conditions, class-structures, the state, business, “non-discursive” institutions. They basically ignored everything of real importance. In historiography, they had far more influence on cultural and intellectual history than anything else. In all his histories of madness, sexuality, the prison system and whatever else, Foucault somehow was able to largely disregard class, the economy, and the state, a fact that itself proves he wasn’t a serious thinker. He was essentially a rhetorician and an artist-historian, a historical artist who was prone to periodic flashes of insight. (He takes liberties with the facts, his scholarship is one-sided and unreliable, but his writing can be beautiful and occasionally insightful.) But all this idealism and sloppy thinking was appropriate to a time (post-1960s) when Marxist hopes had died, intellectuals were disillusioned with the working class and class analysis, business was on the offensive against progressive movements. Radical or formerly radical intellectuals retreated into their little academic world and pretended to effect revolutions in *theory*, devoted themselves to playing around with language and discourses and texts, declaring that these were the only realities. They were making a virtue of necessity: they had been outcast from social reality, so they decided that social reality was an illusion; only discourses, only *their* world, existed. It was collective therapy, or rather collective self-justification.

Moreover, postmodernism was *allowed* to be influential—it made it through institutional filters, as Chomsky would say, media filters, economic and political filters, academic filters—because it played into the hands of business and political power-structures. It didn’t fundamentally challenge consumer capitalism but in a sense justified it, celebrated it, proclaiming that “simulacra” were the only reality, that television was the new reality, that social class was just a “construct” and not of especial importance, thus effectively encouraging people to accept the world as it was and not to fight economic power. Any potentially oppositional “discourse” that reeks of solipsism or masturbation will be favored

and propagated by powerful institutions, because it militates against social engagement.

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*Postmodernism yet again. (Sorry.)*— It irks me when in class we're told that someone like Joan Wallach Scott has been hugely important to the historical profession, and is widely admired, because of her theoretical arguments that extend Derrida and Foucault and "the linguistic turn" of the 1980s into the discipline of history. Arguments like "We [historians] need to scrutinize our methods of analysis, clarify our operative assumptions, and explain how we think change occurs. Instead of a search for single origins, we have to conceive of processes so interconnected that they cannot be disentangled. [Truism.] ...It is the *processes* that we must continually keep in mind. [Truism, idiocy.] ...To pursue meaning, we need to deal with the individual subject as well as social organization and to articulate the nature of their interrelationships, for both are crucial to understanding how gender works, how change occurs. [Truism, idiocy.] Finally, we need to replace the notion that social power is unified, coherent, and centralized [— Who has ever been stupid enough to think that social power is unified, coherent, and centralized?] with something like Michel Foucault's concept of power as dispersed constellations of unequal relationships [utter truism], discursively constituted [?] in social 'fields of force' [pretentious, unilluminating metaphor]." Etc. This is what happens when people trained in history try their hand at theory, seduced, probably, by how profound and philosophical it makes them feel. But "the poverty of theory" is most evident when a Joan Scott wades into it.

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*On the history of theories of language.*— The prehistoric understanding of words as possessing magical power, as being means of conjuring gods and controlling nature, has analogues all through history. For example, as Benedict Anderson notes in

*Imagined Communities*, Church Latin, Koranic Arabic, and Examination Chinese were for a long time seen by their respective cultures as “truth-languages,” direct emanations of the divine. Essentially untranslatable, each the only medium through which reality could be apprehended. So, instead of being a tool for controlling the world (as in prehistoric, animist times), language—a particular language—was now only an *expression* of it, of the world’s innermost essence. One could no longer communicate with gods and influence them; one could only seek to understand them (or reality, the cosmos), by learning the divine language. This was a step towards the “disenchantment” of the world—as Max Weber would say—i.e., the self’s separation from essential reality, its alienation, its understanding of reality as *transcendent* instead of immanent (which it had been in the age of animism). With modernity came the final step, when the divorce between language and the world, thought and being, became absolute. Linguistic signs are now seen as arbitrary, in no way emanations of reality but rather “randomly fabricated representations of it.”

With postmodernism, though, it would seem that there has been an ironic—and ironically unconscious—return to the more naïve attitude. The separation between thought and reality, or “discourse” and the world-in-itself, has been repudiated, so that the world is now seen as *constructed by* discourses, “signifiers,” “significations,” etc. Actually no return to an earlier stage has happened; instead, alienation has been taken to an extreme: reality itself has been sloughed off, discarded, denied. There is no reality; there is only the play of subjectivities and significations. Truth, God, whatever, has become so “transcendent” it is supposed not even to exist! There is no anchor, only ethereal discourse. What can come after this stage? Presumably either the end of the world or some sort of negation of the negation.

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I can’t help stating the obvious: I’m thrilled that the age of primarily “post-materialist” activism is coming to an end. Finally! All those elite postmodernists in the 1970s, ’80s, ’90s, and 2000s

proclaiming smugly that the age of materialism, of class struggle, was over....precisely when the ground was just beginning to cave in beneath the feet of the middle class and, much more so, the lower classes! In fact, the reason it was even possible to be fooled into the postmodern, post-materialist creed was precisely the *intensification* of class war on the part of the corporate sector! With the help of government it broke the precarious post-WWII “capital-labor accord” (not an “accord” at all, really), smashed the labor movement, and so deprived labor of an effective voice in the political arena. But the crumbling of effectual class struggle on the weaker side coincided with, and was made possible by, the triumph of class war on the stronger side. Any idiot could have seen this. And any idiot could have seen that such trends couldn’t persist indefinitely, that a climax would have to come to the “rich-getting-richer, poor-getting-poorer” dynamic. A day of reckoning would come sooner or later. Feminism, multiculturalism, and gay-rights activism could make headway because they didn’t really challenge the class structure or the profit-making agenda of the corporate class (and because they had *money* behind them). The rise of postmodernism, therefore, far from invalidating materialism, Marxism, etc., was made possible by institutional facts that only a Marxian or “economistic” analysis can explain. Postmodernism was the quintessential symptom and proof of what it denied, thus refuting itself, so to speak. Its mere existence and popularity refuted it (because, institutionally speaking, *what was required* for it to become the hegemonic discourse?).

Post-materialist activism is important, but not as important as activism addressing the need for *shelter*, *sustenance*, and *security*. It’s a matter of privileges versus survival.

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*A meditation on John Donne’s Meditation XVII.*— “...No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me,

because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

This passage, from John Donne’s 17<sup>th</sup> Meditation, is one of the most famous in all literature. Virtually everyone is familiar with it, especially in its heavily digested form “Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” And everyone instinctively recognizes that it expresses a noble sentiment. Few people, however, give any thought to it; and the ones who do probably decide that it doesn’t have literal significance, consisting merely in a string of poetic metaphors. After all, how could another man’s death really “diminish” me? In what possible sense could *his* misfortune be *mine* too? This lack of understanding in itself justifies a reexamination of the passage. But particularly in our troubled era, our age of universal atomization, it is imperative that we understand what Donne meant. Maybe then we’ll appreciate the terrible moral implications of interpersonal isolation.

Donne embellished his thought by invoking God, but that isn’t necessary. In any case, God is dead. (He was one of the unfortunates killed in the French Revolution.) The real meaning of the passage—or the moral meaning; there are others—is that what happens to other people has metaphysical implications with respect to the value of my own life. For other people *are me*, in some sense: they are self-conscious like me, they have a sense of self like me, they inhabit the same world I do. What happens to them could have happened to me, and in some cases inevitably will happen to me. Their mortality is my mortality, because our essence is the same. They are me transposed in space and time, me in a different consciousness and set of circumstances.

When something terrible, unjust, happens to another person and his life is ruined, human life itself is made valueless. For in a world of injustice, in which destinies are determined by *chance*, life cannot have the value we privileged ones ascribe to it. The dictates of reason are irrelevant to it; truth is violated by it, and “necessity” is an empty concept. When I read in the paper that the family of an innocent Afghan man has been killed by an American drone attack I recognize in his despair the worthlessness of my own life, its



cosmic littleness—the total irrelevance to life of such notions as reason, truth, freedom, morality, necessity, and justice. If I happen to live well and be happy that's only a function of chance, because I could have been that man. But, knowing this, how can I be truly happy? How can I be convinced of the value of my life, knowing that life itself is the sort of thing that doesn't have value?

What I'm talking about is *absurdity*, in the existentialist sense. Life is fundamentally absurd in a world of violence and coercion. A radical disjunct is manifested between what we, as human beings, demand of life and what is delivered. That's what absurdity is, that disjunct. It means we are alienated from life, we cannot identify with it or glory in it wholeheartedly, because it is a stranger to the human way of thinking. The *beautiful* way of thinking. An absurd life is scarcely worth living. Consider a man who is buffeted by forces beyond his control, who is compelled to adopt unfulfilling life-paths, who is beaten into a bland conformity. On a broad scale, it would seem that his life is not a very wonderful or valuable thing. But that man is all of us. He is Everyman. No doubt some of us manage to carve out a little niche for ourselves; but fundamentally we remain subject to chance, to coercive social mechanisms, and the possibility is always real that our peace of mind will be shattered in an instant.

That Lebanese man's situation is a microcosm of mankind's agony. It is our collective sorrow magnified to an intolerable intensity. It serves as a reminder that, as things stand now, we are not masters of our fate but are instead blown like leaves in the wind of societal forces. Our "leaders" are in the same position as we, more or less (though they do have more opportunities than we to aggravate or mitigate our problems). But when the issue is something as urgent as the question whether life is to remain a tragic farce or is to become more in line with our notion of what is good, we can't rely on our leaders to act. We have to act ourselves, to do anything we can to push the world towards sanity. Indeed, if the concept of a "moral imperative" has any meaning at all, this is a moral imperative. This activism. It is not an option or a suggestion; it is absolutely necessary, if only because without such activism life

will continue being the universally valueless, contingent, coerced thing it is now.

In other words, as long as irrationality and senseless violence are the prime movers of life and history, our own individual life will remain an essentially nugatory thing, no matter how happy and secure it seems. Only if we create a stable and just world, a place not ruled by radical contingency, will life stop being “absurd.”

Probably you’ll say that such a world cannot be achieved, that it’s a ridiculous utopian fantasy. And you may be right. In the meantime, though, whenever you read the front page of the newspaper, you’ll hear the bell tolling—for you.

## Chapter 2

### History, Capitalism, and Marxism

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*Anger.*— I read an article about a middle-aged Lebanese man who had lost his wife, daughter and granddaughter in an Israeli airstrike [in 2006]. “Mr. Samra had been sitting with friends elsewhere. He raced to the building and frantically began to dig. He found his 5-year-old daughter, Sally, torn apart. Her torso and an arm lay separate from her legs. Another daughter, Noor, 8, was moving under the rubble. His granddaughter Lynn, not yet 2, had part of her face smashed. His wife, Alia Waabi, had died immediately.” After reading an article like that you have three options on how to live the rest of your life. You can accept that these things happen but detach yourself from them; you can spend every day until you die in rage and despair, from a too-deep knowledge that John Donne’s 17<sup>th</sup> Meditation expresses timeless truth; or you can emotionally detach yourself from the knowledge but devote yourself to fighting against war. When you remember that the article pointed out that the demolished building was the main office for the city’s emergency workers, and that it was targeted because a single Hezbollah official was suspected of living there, you’ll probably be tempted to choose the second option—with the emphasis on *rage*, though. Still, the only option you can choose with a good conscience is the third.

Ehud Olmert is a monster. The problem with him and most people in power is that they are bureaucrats. Bureaucrats and technocrats. Living in their bureaucratic bubble, they forget their responsibilities and let their egos seduce them into ignoring the “unpeople” and overseeing crimes against humanity. Like European monarchs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they see politics and war as games—extremely serious games, involving clever maneuvers for the sake of power and respect. One could draw parallels with chess. The world of these people really is nothing but a stage, and they are among the most dehumanized individuals on the planet.

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*When East meets West.*— One of the lingering effects of the Vietnam War is the health disaster caused by Agent Orange, which was sprayed by U.S. forces during the war. The U.S. government, of course, denies responsibility and even contests the link between Agent Orange and severe health problems. But there are millions of remaining victims, and the massive cleanup is only just beginning. Many of the more recent victims are children who have ventured into contaminated waters or eaten contaminated fish. The *Washington Post* published an article in 2006 that described the life of one five-year-old girl who can't go to school because her appearance frightens the other children. "She has an oversized head and a severely deformed mouth, and her upper body is covered in a rash so severe her skin appears to have been boiled." The parents' mistake was to eat fish from contaminated canals, thus passing on the toxin's side-effects to their then-unborn daughter. "'I am not interested in blaming anyone at this point,' the soft-spoken Nguyen [the girl's mother] said on a recent day, stroking her daughter's face. 'But the contamination should not keep doing this to our children. It must be cleaned up.'" Officials estimate that the cleanup will cost about \$60 million, of which the U.S. has, as of 2006, pledged to contribute \$300,000.

I've always found it striking that poor people in Asia tend to have more humanity and compassion than most Westerners. They aren't full of resentment or anger at the way life has treated them, at the way they've been treated by their governments and the Western powers. Indeed, they often seem happier than we Americans. We are greedy, petty, mean-spirited, concerned to blame others, to become fixated on our problems, while *they* accept their lot in life, live "communally" and understand the necessity of simple pleasures. Sometimes I envy them. —But then I remember that we are constantly exporting our suffering, the pollution in our souls, and I no longer envy them.

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*"The greatest country in history."*— Douglas Blackmon's *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* (2008) is one of the most horrifying books I've ever read. But beautifully written, and a tour de force of investigative journalism. It enlightens you as to the human misery potentially embedded in the ground you walk on, the bricks in city buildings, stretches of de-forested land, seemingly placid rural hamlets. America truly was built on the backs of slaves, chattel-slaves and wage-slaves, convict-slaves, immigrant-slaves—centuries of persecution, torture, forced labor, debt-slavery, human trafficking, genocide, imperial conquests, every horror imaginable.

In fact, it occurs to me that the U.S.'s history ranks among the most violent of all countries or empires. First of all, it's one of the few countries founded on genocide—possibly the most effective genocide ever. It has fought dozens of wars in only two centuries. Its military is the most lethal killing-machine ever devised. Apparently during Lyndon Johnson and Nixon's bombing campaign against Cambodia, more firepower was involved than was dropped by the Allies in World War II. The U.S. is the only country ever to have deployed nuclear weapons. In general, the government pursues an unusually militaristic foreign policy. It is complicit, moreover, in the crimes of the regimes it has supported, hundreds of authoritarian governments all over the world from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. *Domestically*, the history of labor has been uniquely repressive and violent (on the part of the ruling class). Don't forget slavery and the subsequent 150 years of black repression. Indeed, the rule of business is founded on a constant, daily reign of unreported violence, the suppression of rights in the workplace, the persecution of anyone who steps a little out of line, the segregation of tens of millions in ghettos, slums, etc. The U.S. violent crime rate is unusually high, and people have remarkable freedom to own guns. Images of violence pervade pop culture. Immigration and detention policies are appallingly arbitrary, despotic, and bureaucratic. The prison system, partly privatized, is a monument to inefficiency, bloatedness, and racism.

The “war on drugs” is absurdly unjust and violent (though ineffective), little more than a continuation of repression and imperialism by other means. Since the late nineteenth century, undercurrents of semi-fascist discontent and violence have seethed. Nativism and xenophobia have always been unusually strong. The list goes on.

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*The virtue of the vicious.*— To feel kinship with people because I grew up under the same government as they? Because I must abide by the same laws as they? Because we’ve been taught that we have a “common history,” whatever that means? Because a line has been drawn between the expanse of land we live in and the expanse of land “other people” live in? Am I really expected to place my hand over my heart and give a solemn oath to renounce reason?

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*The no-civil-liberties state.*— After attending a talk by Glenn Greenwald, I’m struck that Hannah Arendt’s classic definition of totalitarianism is starting to apply, at least in a very approximate way, to the U.S. That’s starting to be the *ideal*, the ideal of power-structures. It’s the logic of their policies, though fortunately it will never be realized. The surveillance and “national security” state—the police state—is doing all it can to make impossible human interactions that aren’t mediated or at least observed by power. Several billion hours of surveillance tape are produced *every day* around the country, and that amount is increasing. The National Security Administration apparently has intercepted and stored about *twenty trillion* electronic transactions. Drones are being deployed to spy on the domestic population. (Historically, militaristic experiments abroad are often used on the domestic society after they have been perfected. Impoverished foreign countries are the laboratory.) Cyber-warfare is becoming more sophisticated, eventually to be used on leftist groups among the citizenry. The tactic of instilling *fear* in people, intimidating them

through police brutality and so on, is being pursued all across the political spectrum, not only by the right. These are long-term trends that will intensify as the ruling classes sense that they're losing control over the world.

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The proper way to think about Republicans and Democrats is as follows. The Republican party is just a *slave* to conservative sectors of big business. As Chomsky says, it isn't any longer even a true party, a coalition of diverse interests; it is just a tool of the very wealthy (who are often religious conservatives—which is the “other” set of interests the party is commonly thought of as representing). The Democratic party is not quite a slave to big business; it is more like a serf, who on the day or two when he doesn't have to slave for the lord can do some work on behalf of the other interests he is supposed to represent, such as women, the poor, minorities, immigrants, workers, consumers, the youth, future generations (hence environmentalism and nuclear disarmament), the rule of law, and the cause of internationalism. Most of the time these other interests get short shrift, but every so often the serf will throw them a bone, like he would to a dog.

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*Contemporary conservatism.*— Republicans have, it is true, some things superficially in common with earlier conservatives, who espoused the positions, more or less, of classical liberals (while having forgotten the nuances, and to an extent the *spirit*, of liberalism). That is, Republicans want small government, like earlier conservatives—but only in relation to taking care of the population, *unlike* earlier conservatives. They want the death of the people's welfare state but the growth of the corporate welfare state. *No state for the people, statism for corporations.* And that flatly contradicts turn-of-the-century conservatism. Or, to be even more precise, Republicans are not satisfied with a state in the service of corporations; they want corporations to *become* the state. They

want most government functions to be privatized, so that inclusive democracy and public administration no longer exist. In a sense, this is the logical conclusion of twentieth-century corporate-statist trends. But it would horrify earlier conservatives, who detested the very existence of the corporation and especially the constitutional rights it had been granted by judicial activists.

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The state of our society and its trajectory since the 1930s are revealed in a simple juxtaposition: in the 1930s the government's message was "We have nothing to fear but fear itself"; nowadays the message is "We have nothing to fear but a lack of fear itself."

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*The farce of "progress."*— Aside from during World War II, there has probably never been more suffering among the human species than there is now. And this statement will continue to be true for decades hence, each year seeing the aggregate level of suffering rise.

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*Slavery and capitalism.*— We look back now at slave societies in astonishment, wondering how it was possible that it was seen not only as necessary but as *good* that some people were forced to sell themselves to other people just to survive. It doesn't occur to us that what we have now operates on the same principle: people are forced to rent themselves to others in order to survive. If it is morally wrong to (be forced to) sell oneself, it is morally wrong to (be forced to) rent oneself. The Lowell mill girls in the 1830s were wiser than our elite liberal intellectuals now; they understood that wage-labor is essentially wage-slavery. Whether a black slave was treated well or badly by his master did not affect the *principle* of the thing; similarly, whether an employee makes a lot of money or a little doesn't obviate the moral horror of having to rent oneself in order to survive.



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*Parasitism in pre-capitalist and capitalist forms.*— I don't see much difference, in principle, between ownership of capital and ownership of land: in both cases one derives unearned income from the bare fact of owning property. Others do the work that makes the property productive; the owner does nothing but supply some of the means by which the work is done (because he happens to have gained possession of these means, i.e., excluded others from possessing them; not because he has produced them). In principle he can lie on some beach and sip mint juleps as he collects the profits of others' labor. And that is appalling. Unearned income, unless it is distributed among the people, is appalling.<sup>62</sup>

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*Contrary to nature.*— Throughout history it has been the *parasites* who have had the most power and wealth.

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*Pigs.*— The role of police officers is not so much to protect *people* as to protect *order*, i.e., power-structures. First and foremost, they are agents of the ruling class—a truism that is borne out even by considering the *origins* of modern police forces in the U.S. and Britain (between the 1820s and 1850s).<sup>63</sup> To ensure people's well-being is at most indirectly and derivatively related to the cop's vocation, as shown by the regularity of police brutality, their

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<sup>62</sup> That many owners of capital do various kinds of productive work—managerial, technical—is not essential to their ownership of capital considered in itself. It is from this whence they derive their profits.

<sup>63</sup> As David Whitehouse, associate editor of the International Socialist Review, says, “To put it in a nutshell, the authorities created the police in response to large, defiant crowds—that was strikes in England, riots in the northern U.S., and the threat of slave insurrections in the South. So the police are a response to crowds, not to crimes.” You can hear his talk at <http://wearemany.org/a/2012/06/origins-of-police> (accessed November, 2012).

implicitly or explicitly violent behavior not only in any kind of unusual situation but even on the daily beat (aptly named). In general, the police defend specific *social relations* between people more than people themselves.

Said differently, the police officer is the “bouncer” for society, whose role is to keep out undesirables, those who do not conform.

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*Irony #973.*— It’s perverse that selling yourself as a killing-machine to semi-capitalist institutions that send you across the world to slaughter people you don’t know for the sake of the profits and power of people you don’t know—whose minions indoctrinate you into complete ignorance of what exactly it is you’re doing—is considered praiseworthy, in fact heroic.

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*Upside-down.*— People love the servants of power, the policemen and soldiers, for supposedly giving us our freedoms and protecting them, while they hate the radicals, the socialists, the workers, the feminists, who, because of their past struggles, are the real reason we have any freedom at all. What confusion! Worshiping authority for ensuring *freedom*, the one thing it violently opposes! The confusion is predictable, though: indoctrination works wonders, reason-defying miracles.

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*On WikiLeaks.*— In general, if something is bad for power, it is probably good for people.

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*Anarchism.*— “Anarchism” is a fancy name for a simple thing, a commonsensical thing that has been around for thousands of years among billions of people. Chomsky is right that it is not so much a worked-out political theory as a deep impulse in human thought and behavior. People don’t want to be subordinated to power-

structures; they want to be free. Whenever they rebel against authorities, that's anarchism in action. Whenever they come together to organize a grassroots democratic life, that's anarchism in action. A *pure* anarchist society probably isn't possible because every society, no matter how egalitarian, must contain power-relations, but I suspect we can approach such a society relatively closely.

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*The last will be first.*— One of the ironies of history is that it's the poor and oppressed, the workers, the slaves, the marginalized, and not the middle class or the privileged, who carry on in their struggles the exalted tradition of the Enlightenment, with its ideals of freedom, universal rights, humanity, and progress.

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*Forgotten truisms.*— The awesome power of business propaganda is revealed in the fact that most Americans scorn the idea of socialism, which is really just common sense. Essentially all it denotes is the ideal that working people should have control over their work, they shouldn't have to rent themselves to multimillionaire bosses for eight or twelve hours a day in order to make more money for the boss. It is nothing but economic democracy, opposition to human exploitation; in this sense, even the mainstream American philosopher John Dewey was a socialist. As was Martin Luther King Jr., especially in his late years when he turned his attention to the economic oppression of both whites and blacks. The central intuition of socialism can be fleshed out in many ways, from anarchism of various kinds to democratic state ownership and operation of the means of production, but as long as the overriding principle is workers' control of their economic life, it can be called socialism. Worker cooperatives, for instance, exemplify socialism on a small scale.

Communism is, if anything, an even more obvious moral principle than socialism, for it denotes the structuring of human

relations according to the maxim “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” This is but a corollary of the Golden Rule, that you should treat people as you’d like to be treated. Our common humanity demands that when someone is in need, we help him or her. David Graeber observes in *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011) that “all of us act like communists a good deal of the time.” We use our abilities to help others; i.e., we share and we cooperate, among friends, family, coworkers, and strangers. The fabric of every society is woven by this “baseline communism,” as Graeber calls it. A communist *society*, though, would be one in which the dominant mode of production and distribution is communistic; and *this*, on a very large scale, may well not be feasible. Or maybe it will be sometime in the distant future. History is unpredictable: no one in the eighteenth century could have predicted modern capitalism, just as no one in the present can plan out in all its details a future communist, i.e. moral, society. A prerequisite for such a civilization is the withering away of money in its present form and of the capitalist profit motive (both of which are relatively recent historical arrivals and have been unknown to the vast majority of societies throughout history). Be that as it may, the question of whether large-scale socialism or communism is feasible is one thing; the question of whether they are the ideals toward which we must strive is quite another. It is reasonable to deny the first proposition (although usually the grounds on which it is denied are absurd, referencing as they do “human nature” and demonstrating complete ignorance of anthropology), but it is decidedly unreasonable, or morally repugnant, to deny the second.

Since we live in a silly society, it is also necessary for me to make a few observations about the Soviet Union and other so-called “communist” or “socialist” countries. I remember that when I first started reading about Marxism, at 18, it seemed excruciatingly obvious to me that the USSR was neither Marxist nor socialist nor communist. And I was stunned that people could believe otherwise. Sure, it called itself socialist and communist, but it also called itself a democracy. Do we think, therefore, that it was

a democracy, just because it called itself one? Of course not. So why do we think it was socialist just because it said it was? If anything, it was less socialist than the U.S., because at least in the latter labor unions were legal and workers were not *all* glorified slaves. The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 was, in a sense, Karl Marx's triumph, his vindication over Stalin, who had perverted his doctrines and besmirched his name. What Stalinism really amounted to was a kind of state capitalist command economy.

I'll have more to say about the Soviet Union later. For now, the reader can judge how closely it resembled communism as defined by Marx in this excerpt from *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875): "In a higher phase of communist society,<sup>64</sup> after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois 'right' be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banner: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" Surely this is sufficient to show that the Soviet Union was the very antithesis of communism.

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*An excerpt from my Master's thesis.*— The capitalist mode of production, with its natural extension the "self-regulating" market economy—self-regulating in that the price mechanism tends to equilibrate supply and demand, so that public control and regulation of the economy are secondary to private competition—does not permit a socially efficient allocation of resources. Resource-allocation is determined by the twin structural imperatives of having purchasing power (on the demand side) and of chasing profit (on the supply side). If one has a need but lacks

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<sup>64</sup> He distinguished between two phases.

the money to back up that need, as for example survivors of Haiti's earthquake of 2010 did, one's need will not be met by the market. Conversely, investors will pursue only those projects that have the potential to make a profit. For instance, many areas of rural America were still without electricity in the early 1930s because investors had judged that the meager profits to be made did not justify the costs of supplying electricity to these regions; hence the New Deal's Rural Electrification Administration and the cooperatives that sprang up to supply electricity.<sup>65</sup>

Broadly speaking, the dynamic between capital and wage-labor, as well as that between millions of atomized units of capital each seeking profit at the expense of every other, makes for a very unstable and crisis-prone economy. Capital's interests lie in paying the worker as little as possible and in preventing him from exercising control over the process of production, while the worker wants to be paid as much as possible and to exercise greater control over production. This simple structural antagonism is the basis for the whole history of the labor movement, the unions and union-busting, the private armies deployed to break up strikes, the government suppression of labor parties, the revolutionary social movements, the constant and pervasive stream of business propaganda, and the periodic bursts of cooperative economic activity among the ranks of labor. At the same time, the vicissitudes of the market economy leave many people unemployed at any given time, unable to find work because their skills and needs are not valued or because of insufficient investment in their geographical or professional area, or because of outsourcing to countries where labor is cheaper, or for other reasons. In recent decades, the liberalization and financialization of the international economy have led many corporations to seek profits not through investment in industry and infrastructure-development but through the purchase and manipulation of exotic financial assets. This sort of investment, undertaken on the principle of "*Après moi le*

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<sup>65</sup> Deward Clayton Brown, *Electricity for Rural America: The Fight for the REA* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

*déluge*,” is not only risky but essentially adds no jobs and no real wealth to the economy, which tends to stagnate—or to contract, after it finally becomes evident that all these financial transactions have been grounded in “the baseless fabric of a vision” (to quote Shakespeare). So, millions more people are thrown out of work as capital withdraws itself from further investments, and government initiatives are required to set the economy on track again—for more risky financial investments and more stagnation, as opposed to contraction.<sup>66</sup>

However, even prior to the orgies of neoliberalism it was obvious that capitalism, or the market economy, is not socially efficient. Market failures are everywhere, from environmental calamities to the necessity of the *state*’s funding much socially useful science to the existence of public education and public transportation (not supplied through the market) to the outrageous incidence of poverty and famine in countries that have had capitalism foisted on them.<sup>67</sup> All this testifies to a “market failure,” or rather a failure of the capitalist, competitive, profit-driven mode of production, which, far from satisfying social needs, multiplies and aggravates them. This should not be surprising. An economic system premised on two irreconcilable antagonisms—that between worker and supplier-of-capital and that between every supplier-of-capital and every other<sup>68</sup>—and which is propelled by the structural necessity of exploiting and undermining both one’s employees and one’s competitors in order that ever-greater profits may be squeezed out of the population, is not going to lead to socially harmonious outcomes. Only in the unreal world of standard

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<sup>66</sup> See John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, “Monopoly-Finance Capital and the Paradox of Accumulation,” *Monthly Review* 61, no. 5 (October, 2009): 1–20.

<sup>67</sup> Naomi Klein documents recent examples in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Capitalists may indeed reach a *modus vivendi* to alleviate the mutually harmful consequences of competition, for instance by fixing prices, but the potential always remains for the antagonism of interests to reassert itself.

neoclassical economics, which makes such assumptions as perfect knowledge, perfect capital and labor flexibility, the absence of firms with “market power,” the absence of government, and in general the myth of *homo economicus*—the person susceptible of no other considerations than those of pure “economic rationality”—is societal harmony going to result....

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*Irony #1048.*— Cooperativism and quasi-“state socialism,” which help rectify the myriad market failures of capitalism, are what sustain the capitalist world-system, by keeping it relatively stable. For example, according to the International Cooperative Alliance, over 800 million people worldwide are members of cooperatives and three billion depend on them for their livelihood.

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*On neoclassical economics.*— Milton Friedman wrote a famous article in 1953 called “The Methodology of Positive Economics,” in which he argued that in science, the less realistic or more idealizing the model, the better.<sup>69</sup> A typically simplistic argument. But for a neoclassicist it served the function of making a virtue of necessity, thus allowing him to continue to believe his theories: since neoclassical economics is the most unrealistic, most idealized, most counterintuitive economic model of all, it’s the best! This Friedmaniactal methodology therefore lets economists retort to criticisms regarding the inability of their models to explain what happens in the real world, “That’s just because of the messiness and imperfections of reality! It doesn’t prove that our *models* are wrong. You policy-makers simply have to make reality

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<sup>69</sup> “Truly important and significant hypotheses will be found to have ‘assumptions’ that are wildly inaccurate descriptive representations of reality, and, in general, the more significant the theory, the more unrealistic the assumptions (in this sense).” Alan Musgrave refuted Friedman’s arguments in his 1981 paper “Unreal Assumptions in Economic Theory: the F-Twist Untwisted.”



conform more closely to our logically beautiful models.” Sure. Make *reality* conform to *models*, rather than making *models* conform to *reality*. To quote Herman Daly, former Senior Economist at the World Bank: “My major concern about my profession today is that our disciplinary preference for logically beautiful results over factually grounded policies has reached such fanatical proportions that we economists have become dangerous to the earth and its inhabitants.”

When translated into policy, the fetish of a *pure idea* always leads to mass suffering. Nazism, Fascism, “Communism,” radical Islamism, and the Free Market ideology. Nothing is more inhuman than the urge to remake people and society in the image of an ideal model.

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*On Milton Friedman.*— On the one hand you have Gandhi: “The movement against war is sound. I pray for its success. But I cannot help the gnawing fear that the movement will fail if it does not touch the root of all evil—human greed.” Ideas we *instinctively* recognize as good and noble. On the other hand you have Milton Friedman, Ayn Rand, Friedrich Hayek, and all the other ideological hacks doing the bidding of big business by defending greed, saying it’s inevitable and good, selfishness makes the world go round, everyone is necessarily greedy and should be. Reducing human life to a cost-benefit analysis, as vulgar and inhuman, anti-humanist, as the behaviorist ideology of stimulus-and-response. It would be a horrible thing if these deniers of humanity and compassion, creativity, love, solidarity and cooperation, were right. Fortunately they’re wrong. The world is not what their ideology implies it is, a dystopia of frenzied individualism. That sort of anti-paradise has been approximated only in Nazi concentration camps and such environments of sub-animal existence. Greed and selfishness—unless the concepts are broadened so much as to be meaningless—are in fact of marginal importance to human life. Ordinarily they’re recognized as pathological. They have no place in family life or between friends or lovers. Generosity is infinitely more common on

the level of personal relationships than greed and selfishness are. Cooperation and concern for others are universal, except in the perversely structured realms of the economy and politics in “civilized” societies (as opposed to tribal societies). The existence of greed has far more to do with warped social structures than human nature.

But at least Friedman, Hayek and their like were consistent: rather than recoil from repulsive personifications of their ideology like Pinochet and military juntas, they embraced them and facilitated their brutality, advising them, giving them the cover of intellectual respectability. Hayek was very impressed by Pinochet, and Margaret Thatcher became his firm friend. And when the ideology led to worldwide misery, Friedman maintained “the courage of his convictions,” like George W. Bush, and never recanted or modified his position. Doggedly loyal to his vision of greed and selfishness.

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One of the ironies about Ayn Rand is that her philosophy of extreme selfishness and individualism would, if taken to its logical conclusion and realized in the world, result in a society that bore resemblances to the totalitarianism she fled when fleeing Russia. Let’s leave aside her stupid love of laissez-faire capitalism, an impossible economic order that, to the extent it could be approximated, was responsible for the Great Depression and thereby the rise of Nazi collectivism. ....Or, on second thought, no, let’s look at this laissez-faire capitalism, since it is one manifestation of her vision. If a *pure* version of it were possible, it would be something like Murray Rothbard’s “anarcho-capitalism,” which, to quote Chomsky, is “a world so full of hate that no human being would want to live in it.”<sup>70</sup> As someone once said, the closest

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<sup>70</sup> The footnotes to Chomsky’s *Understanding Power* have excerpts from one of Rothbard’s “libertarian” books: “Abolition of the public sector means, of course, that *all* pieces of land, all land areas, including streets and roads, would be owned privately, by individuals, corporations,

we've ever come to a society of pure selfishness and individualism was Auschwitz, which was the culmination of a kind of totalitarian collectivism. The ironic parallels between Nazi (and Soviet) collectivism and Randian or Rothbardian individualism are significant: they're due to the profound atomization that each entails. In the latter, the individual is to treat everyone as a means to his end; in the former, the individual is to treat everyone as a means to the state's (or the movement's) ends. In both cases, no human connections are allowed, no treating the other as a being with his own value and his own claims on one's respect. Hate, mistrust, and misery are the inevitable consequences of both these dystopian visions.

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cooperatives, or any other voluntary groupings of individuals and capital.... Any maverick road owner who insisted on a left-hand drive or green for 'stop' instead of 'go' would soon find himself with numerous accidents, and the disappearance of customers and users.... [W]hat about *driving* on congested urban streets? How could this be priced? There are numerous possible ways. In the first place the downtown street owners might require anyone driving on their streets to buy a license.... Modern technology may make feasible the requirement that all cars equip themselves with a meter....

"[I]f police services were supplied on a free, competitive market....consumers would pay for whatever degree of protection they wish to purchase. The consumers who just want to see a policeman once in a while would pay less than those who want continuous patrolling, and far less than those who demand twenty-four-hour bodyguard service.... Any police firm that suffers from gross inefficiency would soon go bankrupt and disappear.... Free-market police would not only be efficient, they would have a strong incentive to be courteous and to refrain from brutality against either their clients or their clients' friends or customers. A private Central Park would be guarded efficiently in order to maximize park revenue.... Possibly, each individual would subscribe to a court service, paying a monthly premium.... If a private firm owned Lake Erie, for example, then anyone dumping garbage in the lake would be promptly sued in the courts."

Needless to say, people like Rand and Rothbard are not to be taken seriously, except as symptoms. But it's fun to glance at them sometimes because of all the little ironies you'll notice.

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*Chomsky speaks.*— “In a market system, your dollar is your vote. You have as many votes as you have dollars. If you have zero dollars, you have zero votes. Unborn generations have zero dollars, so what happens to them is of zero significance in a market system. What's done today, they have to live with. If we destroy resources, they have to live with it. So to the extent—the limited extent—that market systems are allowed to function, they're just guaranteed to self-destruct. That's why if you take a look at modern history, in countries that were more or less organized and functioning they never allowed market systems to function. In Britain there was an experiment with laissez-faire around the 1860s and 1870s, but it was called off very quickly by the business world because they saw it was going to wipe out communities and the environment. What they instituted in its place was a kind of social democratic system.” See Karl Polanyi's classic *The Great Transformation*.

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*Thoughts inspired by Naomi Klein.*— An obvious truth you'll never encounter in the mainstream media: “Chicago School economics [is] particularly conducive to corruption. Once you accept that profit and greed as practiced on a mass scale create the greatest possible benefits for any society, pretty much any act of personal enrichment can be justified as a contribution to the great creative cauldron of capitalism, generating wealth and spurring economic growth—even if it's only for yourself and your colleagues.” Why else do you think neoliberalism is orthodoxy? Because of its truth or intellectual integrity? Ha. Even if it were true or had such integrity, that would have nothing to do with whether it would become “the Washington Consensus.” It is simply the best system of ideas ever devised to justify an elite's orgiastic

indulgence in greed and profit-mongering. ‘The best thing for society is to let big capitalists do whatever they want.’ It’s so shameless and so contrary to common sense that you need the elaborate mathematical fantasies of neoclassical economics to make it remotely plausible, and you need to drum these fantasies into the heads of students in every major university in the world. The students really talented in the art of self-deception and theoretical perversity fused with verbal dexterity and confidence will go on to get jobs at the IMF, the World Bank, the U.S. Treasury, or top universities, so as to fulfill their function of providing a veneer of intellectual respectability for business’s smashing of civil society and democracy all over the world.

When you read accounts in the mainstream media about how this or that measure favored by business will “create jobs,” remember that what’s really being said is it will generate profits. “Jobs” = “profits” in business-speak. Business has little interest in creating jobs—often its interests lie in cutting them—and usually the number of jobs created by its activities is paltry compared to the number that could be created through public spending, which would also direct funds to where they’re needed most. Think of the successes of Roosevelt’s Tennessee Valley Authority and Works Progress Administration.

Chomsky has a nice way of taking us outside our subjective outlooks and considering matters from something like an objective viewpoint: he invokes hypothetical Martians surveying our planet from afar. For example, consider Martians encountering Earth for the first time. Think about what they’d see, the super-Gilded-Age inequality within countries and between countries. Millionaires and billionaires riding private jets over Somalian-type poverty and misery; “oligarchs racing around in black Mercedes convoys, guarded by top-of-the-line mercenary soldiers,” as the homeless are curled up in blankets on the street; people in suits hurrying past hungry children in the street; politicians, lawyers, doctors, businessmen living in opulent suburbs as a billion people live in slums. Would these Martians not have the impression that our world is, at least to a first approximation, divided up between a

class of cartoonishly evil power-brokers and a much larger class of the cartoonishly unfortunate poor?

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*Fighting against global warming*

As I talk to this person  
full of sincerity and urgency  
(human connectedness is urgent)  
her eyes leak deserts  
onto my wet words  
and in them  
I see  
a deserted future...  
Human kindness has been milked dry.

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Why has America always been such a *fearful* country? So afraid of the Other! Far more so than most countries. Whether it's been the Indians, the British, the blacks, the Chinese, the Germans, the Communists, the Japanese, the atheists, the Mexicans, the terrorists, or whoever, Americans have always been terribly afraid of some group. It must have something to do with the unstructuredness of the social fabric, the atomism that has characterized American society from the very beginning (after the Revolution), which was so different from Europe. Paranoia is fostered in such conditions. Think of the paranoia of the 9/11 Truthers, and the conspiracy theories that have always been popular in this country. Distrust has always pervaded the society, especially distrust of authority (hence conspiracy theories) and of any "new" group that is seen as unusually cohesive and thus threatening. Paranoia, mass distrust and fear, insecurity, xenophobia, are natural attitudes in an atomized society of few "civil-society" institutions or modes of association and a relatively fluid class structure, not to

mention weak safeguards against unemployment and poverty (and a high crime-rate). "They'll steal our jobs!"

Obviously an equally important factor is the intentional propagation of such attitudes by the media and other power-structures. Sometimes the xenophobia is consciously whipped up, as during wars. But the fact is that this sort of indoctrination, whether conscious or not, is very useful to the ruling class for more than one reason.

What is the explanation for the unique American hatred of taxes? Whatever it is, it's essentially related to the distinctive American preoccupation with freedom (from government, from class; freedom to make money, to be an entrepreneur or adventurer, etc.). And both are a product of the social structure, privatized and atomized. Think of the old Western frontier: people resented government intrusion into their lives, preferring to work their farms privately and do as they liked. The social meaning of the fragmentation varies between regions and times, from the frontier to the Eastern city and so forth, but the basic fact of fragmentation or "individualism" or "freedom" remains. It's a society without close ties, without a tangible class-structure along old European lines, with few social institutions except churches; the predictable result is that people want to be left to themselves (making a virtue of necessity, so to speak, or of the traditions in which they've been raised) and don't want to have to pay for others' health care or education or Social Security. An atomized society fosters the desire to be atomized ("free"); a tradition of solidarity fosters a love of solidarity. Traditions in general tend to propagate themselves through the generations, because people, having been raised in them, naturally continue to behave in accordance with them and in fact valorize them, as they valorize their sense of self.

But of course the hatred of taxes also has *a lot* to do with the power of business in America, with indoctrination, with propaganda. A broadly anti-union culture, created largely through relentless violent suppression of unions and workers' rights, specific *policies* pursued by business and government. A very disciplined propaganda-system exalting the free market, individual

initiative, distrust of the government and anything hinting of semi-collectivism.

“Why should I help that old widow across the street? Why should I help pay for her meals? Why should I help fund public education if I have no children in school?” You can see from these questions—which exemplify the anti-tax attitude—that it all comes down to the fragmentation of the social structure. “These people are strangers to me! Why should I care about them?” In a more solidaristic social structure, questions about why you should help widows and children would seem totally absurd, symptomatic of a dysfunctional mind. Selfishness might even be considered not immoral but senseless.

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*Summer activism*

apathy-baked blisters  
popping open  
in the leaden heat of tradition-drenched climates  
across the swamp of American suburbia,  
neighborhood-wide blisters  
that ooze “no”s and “*I don’t care*”s and  
such polluted cynicism.  
knocking on doors and opening pores  
that seep fetid  
selfishness—*smellable*  
selfishness  
in the curled snarls  
on the fat and aging faces, gargoyles  
twisted into the woodwork.  
splintered faces—blistering.

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*The throes of transition.*— A society in which a Glenn Beck can become a sensation is dying, and deserves to die.



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*On Andrew Jackson.*— With him, for the first time, you see the baleful essence of the political appeal to the “common man,” i.e., the common conservative white man (who might also happen to be a white woman). Later on the same phenomenon would underlie modern conservatism, as in Reagan and Bush 2—except that this time the rhetoric about simplicity and old-fashioned values would disguise a servility to big business, which is very anti-Jacksonian. In fact, the real meaning of the appeal to the common man would change: with Jackson it was relatively sincere, and there was a genuine aversion to big, undemocratic power-structures as symbolized by the Bank of the United States. Jackson and his Democrats were also ambivalent about capitalism; they were not disguised servants of capital. They were like Jeffersonian Republicans, not Hamiltonians. (In that respect, as in others, their ideology was reactionary and doomed. The future was in wage-labor.) Modern conservatism, however, is more ambiguous than Jacksonian democracy. Among the people, it taps into a real, albeit unconscious and confused, ambivalence about modern capitalism and a nostalgia for traditional security and hierarchy; among the powerful, it is a tool of big business and profit. But elements of Jacksonianism are nevertheless used in business propaganda (i.e. conservatism) because of the implicitly authoritarian, *pseudo*-democratic, demagogic, racist, obfuscatory, divisive, scapegoating, anti-government nature of the Jacksonian creed.<sup>71</sup> Almost any ideology that favors the white man above all is useful to business.

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*What is fascism?*— Populist conservatism.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See Daniel Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (2007).

<sup>72</sup> That’s the essential core, but classical fascism manifested it in quite specific ways, relatively “pure” and “complete” ways. Note that, as a form of populist conservatism, American religious fundamentalism has the same essence as classical fascism. It has similar social and political

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*A celebrated bureaucrat.*— In the library today I happened to pass Harry Truman's memoirs. Picked the book up and flipped to the pages on the atomic bomb. "...General Bloodlust [or whatever his name was] wanted to drop the bomb on Kyoto, but Secretary Stimson argued that Kyoto was an important cultural and religious shrine." Stimson had spent his honeymoon there and had fond memories of it; hence, it was saved. Because of a honeymoon. A treasure-trove of history and culture saved because one guy said "No" because of his honeymoon. And then you tell me there's a God!

Upon receiving the telegram reporting that the bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, Truman "was deeply moved. I turned to the sailors I was having lunch with [on some battleship somewhere] and said, 'This is the greatest thing in history. We're going home.'" Yes, he said it was the greatest thing in history. And—the next page is on a different subject. No reflections on the meaning of Hiroshima or the decision to use the bomb; just...it was the greatest thing ever, and then on to his negotiations with Stalin. The man was amoral. An arch-bureaucrat, an amoral machine, like Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, and most heads of state in history.

How that level of unreflectiveness is possible, I don't know. Years afterwards, as he's writing his memoirs, he doesn't stop to reflect on his decision to kill more than 200,000 (with the after-effects) civilians. He takes it for granted that American lives are more valuable than Japanese lives, and that it's better to kill hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians (women, children) than to let *fewer* American soldiers die. Had the Japanese not surrendered, he and his generals would have gone on dropping as

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functions, is supported by similar sectors of the economic elite, etc. Whether (semi-)fascism takes a nationalist, a religious or some other form is secondary to the fact that it diverts attention from the class struggle and so is in the interest of business and the status quo (or reaction). This is why it keeps appearing—is *allowed* and *encouraged* to appear—decade after decade.

many bombs as necessary. They would have been happy to obliterate every city. A million deaths, two million deaths, priceless cultural artifacts destroyed...it would have been okay, because it would have ensured that they won the war.

Being a “man of action” is not a positive thing. It means that you’re *not* a man of reflection. It signifies only the absence of reflection.

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*Institutional evil.*— Skimming Gar Alperovitz’s book *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, and the Architecture of an American Myth* (1996). Truman calling the bomb “merely another powerful weapon in the arsenal of righteousness.” Absolutely jubilant upon hearing news of Hiroshima. As for Nagasaki, even Alperovitz’s scholarly excavations unearth no rational reason for its bombing so soon after Hiroshima, before giving the Japanese significant time to respond. It seems to have been only a result of the determination to end the war before the Russians, who had just declared war on Japan, had a chance to enter Manchuria. (Obviously the Americans wanted to keep them out of the east.) The decision to use the bomb at all was militarily unnecessary, as high-level generals and advisers stated years later and argued in private at the time. In fact, the war could have ended weeks earlier if the Americans had simply assured the Japanese, who were desperate for peace, that the emperor could remain on the throne (a request that was later granted, *after* the bombs). But Truman and Byrnes, the secretary of state, wouldn’t make this concession. Why? Probably because their knowledge of the bomb gave them an “ace in the hole” at the 1945 Potsdam conference, and they wanted a chance to demonstrate the bomb to the Russians. So, from this perspective, far from shortening the war, the bomb may have lengthened it by a few weeks, by motivating Truman to reject Japan’s overtures for peace. (Yes, he rejected them, in July!) But of course once the Russians declared war on Japan, the Americans wanted peace immediately. At any rate, the evidence is conclusive that the bomb didn’t save American lives, since alternatives to

invasion of Japan existed.<sup>73</sup> It was a maneuver undertaken for the sake of the Great Game with Russia that America had inherited from England. And Truman, along with Byrnes, Groves, LeMay and the rest, is among the great villains of history. (Actually, much like G. W. Bush, he lacks the grandeur to be a “villain.” But objectively he is.)

By the way, neither Hiroshima nor Nagasaki was a military target, despite Truman’s self-justifying lies to the contrary.

A journalist close to military thinking expressed it well:

We were twice guilty. We dropped the bomb at a time when Japan already was negotiating for an end of the war but before those negotiations could come to fruition. We demanded unconditional surrender, then dropped the bomb and accepted conditional surrender [by allowing the emperor to remain on the throne], a sequence which indicates pretty clearly that the Japanese would have surrendered, even if the bomb had not been dropped, had the Potsdam Declaration [in July] included our promise to permit the Emperor to remain on his imperial throne.

What if Stalin had been the one to drop the bomb and had justified it by saying it probably saved Russian lives? Would we be defending the decision? No. We’d be saying, rightly, that the use of the bomb was horrifying, that in itself it enshrined Stalin as one of the arch-villains of history.

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*On mainstream American liberalism.*— Richard Goodwin, one of the Best and the Brightest, speechwriter and adviser to John F.

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<sup>73</sup> For instance, given that Japan was on the verge of collapse anyway, a weeks-long wait, combined with the shattering blow of Russia’s declaration of war, might have resulted in victory.

Kennedy. His respected book *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (1988), a flabby liberal whitewashing of history. Hero-worship of a young pretty personification of charismatic egomania whose 1963 assassination was in fact not all that tragic—far less so than King’s and X’s. (Tragedy requires a contrast between promise and reality.) The intelligence of the “good and bright” overwhelmed by an utter lack of wisdom. A McNamaran absence of moral imagination. The Vietnam War was an “error,” the Bay of Pigs invasion a “miscalculation,” the Reagan terrorism in Central America a “terrible error,” and so forth; none of this was fundamentally *wrong*, because by definition everything we do is done with good intentions. And through it all, this litany of apologetics and qualified self-criticisms, is an abdication of responsibility (even when momentarily admitting that “we liberals” were, despite ourselves, responsible for an error or two): the ultimate truth is that our good intentions were ineffectual in the face of reality, fate, bureaucracy, inertia, whatever abstraction comes to Goodwin’s mind. It’s a rotten book, disgusting.

And the platitudes, my God the pieties! Kennedy the symbol of the American idea, the Great Man who could have led the country to moral greatness, the “exemplar who led others to discover their own strength and resurgent energy,” the man who “fueled the smoldering embers” of the 1960s (terrible writing), who could do no wrong even when he did wrong because at heart he was a hero for the ages, and of course don’t forget the gloriousness of America as a symbol, an eternal beacon of light, the ideal of a restless, searching people who expanded to occupy a continent (let’s not talk about those other people who had already occupied it for millennia).... But now, alas, we’ve become a nation of cynics! Ah, if only we had continued to follow the light of reason, the inner American in us all! Woe are we who have lost our faith! —This nostalgic liberal apotheosis of Kennedy and America and democracy and freedom evinces a mind-boggling moral and intellectual immaturity, a stunning childishness in thought and deed. It signifies little more than the liberal intellectual’s celebration of himself, his defense of himself: ‘Yes, some of the

things we did were wrong: we were too idealistic! We didn't understand the evils of the world. We thought we could use reason to remake the world, but alas, the world is an unreasonable place.' Astonishing, despicable shallowness, being so self-blind as not to see that one's effusive praise of the so-called American idea is nothing but effusive praise of oneself. It's also totally stupid in its own right. Christianity is a far more rational religion than this liberal American one.

The book is enlightening, however, as a window into the mind of the Harvard liberal, revelatory of the sort of thoughts this kind of person has, his worldview. Liberalism from the inside. A prettified ideology, bland but appealing, with the reference to spiritual truths, reason, ideals of harmony and peace, a rising tide lifting all boats, the fundamental compatibility of all interests in society (except for those we don't like, of course), the nonexistence of class struggle, government's ability to solve all social ills, history as a progressive battle between knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness, reason and unreason, open-mindedness and bigotry, and any other set of binary abstractions you can think of. The whole ideology hovers above reality in the heavenly mists of Hope and Progress. It's all very pretty, hence its momentary resurgence—which succumbed to disillusionment—with Barack Obama. And hence its ability to get through the filters of the class structure, to become an element in the hegemonic American discourse, floating above institutional realities like some imaginary golden idol one worships in lieu of common sense. It serves a very useful purpose for business, averting people's eyes from the essential incompatibility of class interests toward the idea of Gradual Progress by means of tinkering at the margins, making nice policies.

One is almost surprised at the contradiction in people like Richard Goodwin and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., on up to Robert Reich and Paul Krugman, between native intelligence and blind liberal stupidity. But institutions mold people to fit into them—or rather, they mold those people who are willing to be molded, i.e., who are ambitious and obedient. However intelligent you are, if you're ambitious you're going to have to let yourself be taught to

believe what you have to believe in order to fit into your chosen institution. Thus arises the phenomenon of apparently brilliant people who you suddenly notice have this gigantic blind-spot in their mind that underpins their brilliant maneuverings.

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*Thoughts on Marxian common sense.*— An example of intellectuals' need to make everything more complicated and difficult than it has to be is the unending debate over the meaning and validity of the Marxian claim that the economy is the relative foundation of society, that production relations (which presuppose given levels of "productive forces," i.e., technology, scientific knowledge, etc.) are ultimately the most important kind of social relations. One would have thought this claim to be commonsensical, but apparently it isn't. Its basic meaning and truth are revealed in the single consideration that the institutions and institutional actors with the greatest access to resources are going to have the greatest influence over society. Fewer resources, less influence. Institutions directly involved in the production and accumulation of resources—of money, capital, technology—are naturally going to have the most direct access to these resources, i.e., the greatest control over them. The people who control these institutions, then, are going to have more power than other people, and they will seek to make other institutions throughout society "compatible" with their power or subservient to it. Which means making them compatible with the form of organizing relations of production in that society that has the most control over the most resources. In other words, the "dominant mode of production." In non-prehistoric societies, the class structure and implicit class struggle, which are defined by the relations between antagonistic positions in the mode of production, will therefore be central to social dynamics. The more exploitation of the producing classes, the more power there will be in the hands of the exploiting classes, i.e., those who occupy the dominant positions in the dominant mode of production. (Their dominant position is a function of their control over the resources necessary to force others to produce for

them.) The exploiters will try to increase exploitation as the exploited try to diminish it. The vicissitudes of this struggle will go far towards explaining other political and cultural phenomena, because the struggle—which is integrally connected to the evolution of the relations of production, of the class structure, of economic institutions, as well as the closely related evolution of the forces of production—largely determines who has how many and what kinds of resources when, what sorts of institutions and values the people with resources will promote, etc.

It is true that in other senses, the biological division between the sexes can be called the “foundation” of society. But not if you’re talking about the specific forms that particular societies take. Biological facts do not explain that (do not explain differences between societies); economic institutions—in addition to environmental circumstances and the nature of existing productive forces—do, at least to a very rough approximation. (One also has to keep in mind Raymond Williams’s concept of the “residual,” the cultural, political, and economic residues of previous systems, as well as the sheer infinite complexity of a society’s economic institutions, including the coexistence and even interpenetration of different modes of production.)

To take a non-capitalist example, in the Middle Ages the Church owned vast tracts of land and had immense wealth. As a consequence, it had enormous influence over the whole society. What could be more commonsensical? The Church’s and the feudal aristocracy’s ability to force others to work for them and/or to appropriate their surplus product allowed them to impose their institutions, norms, and values on the rest of society. Their control over the means of violence was necessary, of course, to their economic power—and was in turn the result of prior economic facts, prior accumulation of resources by certain people and institutions, etc.

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It’s funny that people often deprecate Marxian materialism as an explanation of society and human behavior, given that virtually



no one cares much about ideas. People *think* they do, but basically they're wrong. They insist that ideas, ideological motivations, and spiritual matters are very important to people....but then proceed to ignore them in their lives. Just listen to humans talk and you'll see they're essentially unfamiliar with ideas and don't think about them very often. Their understanding of the world is utterly superficial; their ideological commitments exist mainly on the level of *words*; quotidian personal interests are what preoccupy them. Food, money, success, power, relationships, entertainment, etc. Every so often religion or politics will come up in conversation and people will get strangely animated for a few minutes, but that isn't very significant. Anyway, most of the time a person's commitments to certain ideas, such as they are, derive from their reflection of his or her interests, or their being a sublimation of his or her interests. *Some* selflessness might be involved—and with many people that's a very important element—but even then, of course, the ideas are merely abstract reifications of concrete interests or feelings or modes of interaction with others. “Material” realities, that is. But I've strayed from my original point.

I'd also note, incidentally, that often when people object to “ideas” they're really objecting to changing their way of *doing* things. Religious conservatives oppose liberal reformers in large part because they're used to doing things (rituals) a certain way, and the thought of changing that makes them profoundly uncomfortable. The human mind/brain, after all, like that of other animals, is a pretty “conservative” thing: it finds comfort, so to speak, in patterns, habits, routines, rituals repeated again and again, such that encountering or doing new things can be very disturbing. Not always, especially not in the case of children (although observe how they react upon meeting strangers or when their parents force them, for whatever reason, to change some habit or discard some toy they're used to). Curiosity and *learning* can be a source of great pleasure. But changing one's behavior or attitudes is hard, sometimes impossible. Sartre notwithstanding, the self is not “free” in this way. Therefore many people object to the “idea” of gay marriage, because it hasn't been a part of their routine. It isn't how

*they* have lived their lives—they find it challenging to their ways of acting and thinking—so they oppose it.

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People usually think of religion as an example of the importance of ideas, and to an extent that's true. But not to the extent that is commonly thought. Religion is not only *ideas*, after all, but also *institutions*. Social roles. Modes of interaction. And simply an excuse to get together with people once or several times a week, to socialize and act out rituals that reaffirm community. These kinds of *behavior*, as opposed to mere thinking about various transcendental ideas, are the most important aspect of religion for most people. And one reason why religion is so tenacious in the modern world is that *institutions* are tenacious, especially institutions with a lot of power and resources backing them up.<sup>74</sup> It isn't only "ideas"; it is generation after generation being socialized into institutions, to respect power-structures centered around priests and bishops and reverends and pastors and so on—an especially easy thing to do because such respect gets people communal affection and allows them to participate in a significant part of social life. In the light of so many satisfying and self-affirming communal rituals molding one from one's childhood, it is easy to understand why millions would believe in God and try to act as he wants (because that means acting as the community wants). "Ideas" are in this case, as in most others, little more than reflections or residues of social behavior. By being influenced by the idea of God, one is being influenced by social structures that one has internalized.

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*A riposte to an idealist.*— I can imagine that a contemporary "idealist" might defend the importance of ideas and ideologies by

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<sup>74</sup> In the U.S., for instance, since the 1970s conservative business sectors have subsidized the propagation of fundamentalist religion.

invoking the Tea Party and its Republican representatives, most of whom are definitely ideologically driven. I would respond that, yes, an ideology can be important in this way, but only because it serves the interests of some set of institutions. Sectors of business are funding and helping to organize these ideological movements because it is in their interest to do so. They are blasting society with billions of dollars' worth of propaganda and political-campaign money. The very idiocy of the Reaganite, Tea-Party ideology, together with its popularity, is evidence of the power of moneyed interests—because unless people had been subjected for decades to well-funded public-relations campaigns, they would not have succumbed to such a stupid ideology. Business propaganda is so ubiquitous it has destroyed people's common sense. Thus arises an ideological movement like the Tea Party, which offers solutions to people's material grievances that promise to *aggravate* their grievances. (For instance, Tea Partiers hate Wall Street, but they want to rein in the power of the federal government, which is the only thing that can regulate Wall Street.)

So, in short, the Tea Party, far from being proof of the power of ideas, is proof of the power of wealthy institutions.

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*You, nationalist, are an idiot.*— You can say whatever you want about the importance of nationalism and its challenge to Marxism; in the end, the fact remains that *class*, or economic and environmental situation, is more immediately important to people than “nation,” which is an imaginary construction and took centuries of warfare and indoctrination just to be *recognized* by ordinary people. Peasants have always been more concerned with survival and their immediate situation than “nationality”—even since the 19th century, when they were finally made aware of the principle of nationality. Serfs were always more invested in their struggles against the nobility than in some educated elite's preoccupation with “national identity” or whatnot. As for the thousands of years of tribal wars and barbarian invasions and imperial clashes and all that shithheap of history, that was mostly a

function of the quest for economic power, material resources, material domination. In recent centuries, yes, a few other things have been added into the mix, which interact with political and economic power in complicated ways. But these newer principles, such as ethnicity, are ultimately secondary to class domination and subordination, because without *resources* (and their specific distribution, determined by class relations) nothing is possible. Whatever social, cultural, and political institutions there are, and whatever purposes they're directed towards, they need resources first, and those depend on modes of production and distribution, which entail specific power-structures with specific interests. "Nation"? Get real.

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*Class, race, and gender.*— The significance of each of these is multidimensional. Class, however, seems to have a unique sociological importance insofar as class structures, or economic structures, constitute society's essential "infrastructure," the skeleton that is fleshed out in culture, politics, ideological trends, etc. Race and gender, by contrast, are primarily subjective identities, not *objective structures* rigorously defined and enforced in the ways that capitalist class-relations are.<sup>75</sup> In imagination, one can picture rearrangements of the occupants of positions in class structures; black people could occupy capitalist positions and whites occupy wage-earning positions, or the current relative places of most women and men could be reversed in the same way. And society would continue to have basically the same institutional configuration it does now, with lower wage-earners viciously exploited—only these would be white men. In fact, blacks and women *have* made advances along these lines, even as the real sources of mass oppression have barely been touched due to the lack of *institutional* change. To change the institutional structures

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<sup>75</sup> To be more accurate, race and gender are "objective structures" to the extent that they more or less coincide with economic relations. Forms of racial oppression fit into forms of class oppression.

and so *really* change society, capitalist class-relations have to be abolished.

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Concentration of power and resources has, from the very beginning, been the overwhelming source of the world's ills. (Not religion, as Richard Dawkins et al. would have you believe.) Abolishing it is the sine qua non for establishing a humane society. —Yes, it *is* that simple. All the sophisticated analyses of historians and economists and philosophers boil down to the fact that it's imperative to abolish the concentration of wealth, and therewith the concentration of power.

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*The Barbarous Legacy of Capitalism in Latin America. (A short academic paper.)*

Since its colonization about five hundred years ago, Latin America has been ever more dominated by relations of commodity production for external markets, and secondarily for internal ones. With crucial collaboration by Latin America's merchant and landowning classes, Europe and, later, North America have ensured that the production (or extraction) and export of such commodities as silver, sugar, tobacco, coffee, rubber, fertilizers, bananas, indigo, oil, and cocaine have for centuries been foundations of societies south of the U.S. This fact has had deleterious implications for both the people and the environment of Latin America. Dependency theorists argue that it has entailed the continent's underdevelopment by means of the metropole's extraction of economic surplus—which has meant a corresponding depletion of wealth available for the continent's development—but in this paper I will focus on the brute facts of class conflict and environmental destruction. These have occurred all over the world as capital has deepened and broadened its dominion since the 1400s, but Latin America, like much of the global South, has suffered in ways

somewhat different from the North, due both to the continued presence of indigenous peoples and to the subordination of internal development to the needs of foreign capital (and its effective “representatives” in the domestic economy). In the following, accordingly, I will consider several examples of how export-oriented commodity production has shaped Latin America’s social landscape in conflict-ridden ways.

Steve Stern states the matter concisely in the first sentence of *Peru’s Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest: Huamanga to 1640* (1982): “This book tells how conquest transformed vigorous native peoples of the Andean sierra into an inferior caste of ‘Indians’ subordinated to Spanish colonizers and Europe’s creation of a world market.”<sup>76</sup> For the sake of extracting economic surplus, from the mid-sixteenth century the colonizers began to impose on the native peoples of Peru such oppressive institutions as the *encomienda*, the *mita*, and, later, *yanacónaje*. The forced labor of the *mita*, for example, was for decades the principal means of exploiting mercury and silver mines, in addition to organizing work in such enterprises as textile workshops and sugar mills. Aside from the horrors of work and the low pay in a regime defined by *mita* labor, indigenous communities were gradually coerced into losing their ancient integrity, their self-sufficiency and internal vitality. Indian resistance was fierce, however, although it usually manifested itself in subtler and shrewder ways than collective uprisings, especially after the colonial state had been consolidated by Toledo’s reforms in the 1570s. More commonly, Indians used Spanish juridical frameworks to defend their land and independence, often successfully. By the seventeenth century, their constant litigation “disrupted enterprise and incomes, shut down workshops, and pinched production with labor bottlenecks. Cheap *mita* labor grew scarce and unreliable.”<sup>77</sup> The state form of

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<sup>76</sup> Steve J. Stern, *Peru’s Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest: Huamanga to 1640* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), xv.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

extraction that consisted of mitas and tribute payments therefore deteriorated under the impact of pervasive and institutionalized Indian resistance.

In the long run, however, things did not improve for most natives; rather, new modes of controlling labor appeared that continued to undermine indigenous society and independence. Private forms of exploitation such as *yanaconaje* (long-term personal bondage to a master) and primitive wage labor became more integral to the social system than they had been earlier. As the market economy penetrated deeper into former enclaves of indigenous self-sufficiency, monetizing economic transactions and exacerbating divisions between rich and poor, and as entrepreneurs expropriated valuable resources such as irrigable lands and coca plantations, poorer Indians were compelled to rent themselves out in order to pay off debts or simply to survive. "Over time, then, colonial relationships gave rise to economic dependencies driving natives into the arms of colonials."<sup>78</sup> People abandoned village life in order to accumulate funds or start their lives anew, perhaps hoping to follow in the path of the minority of successful Indian entrepreneurs. The social structure continued to evolve in contradictory ways, but the ultimate result is clear: as Stern says, "The most dramatic creation—and legacy—of the first century of colonization was Indian poverty."<sup>79</sup>

Indian dispossession and poverty have continued up to the present; Emilio Kouri discusses an intervening period, the late nineteenth century, in *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico* (2004). Unlike Stern, he focuses on a specific commodity, vanilla, showing how its growth in popularity overseas contributed to the demise of communal landholding in a particular region of Mexico between the 1870s and 1890s. Broadly speaking, Kouri recognizes three causes of the privatization of land in Veracruz: first, government officials had a fanatical commitment to the ideology of liberalism and private

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 185.

property; second, putting communal lands in private hands would augment property tax revenues and so assuage Veracruz's dire fiscal condition; third, the boom in the vanilla trade (among others), which resulted largely from improvements in communications and transport, heightened the value of land and made it worth controlling. The actual division of communal lands was a complicated, decades-long process full of interruptions, temporary compromises, legal machinations, government corruption, outbreaks of violence, two large rebellions, and state repression. By 1900 the transformation was complete: almost a third of Papantla's old communal territory belonged to townspeople, mostly big merchants, and a small Indian elite; the rest of the lands remained the property of native family farmers who had become landowners. More than a half of Indian households, however, were left propertyless by the triumph of privatization and parcelization, and inequalities in wealth and power were now guaranteed by differential access to land.<sup>80</sup> "Town merchants and Totonac [indigenous] bosses now reigned supreme," Kouri summarizes, "many Indian agriculturalists were now anything but independent, and the old bonds of community—whatever they once were—had long since frayed. This was the world that vanilla had made."<sup>81</sup>

Strictly speaking, of course, it is not a particular commodity that makes such a world but capital itself, the flow of ever-accumulating capital, which uses commodities as means to augment itself, a process that often entails privatization, dispossession, mass oppression, and environmental despoliation. A particularly effective way for capital to valorize itself is by extracting and refining oil; not surprisingly, such activities, being especially useful to capital, are also especially destructive to natural and social environments. This is clear from the two books *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and*

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<sup>80</sup> Emilio Kouri, *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 278-280.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.



*Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (2004) and *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (2006), by Suzana Sawyer and Myrna Santiago respectively. Although the books pertain to very different times, places, and categories of people, there are striking parallels between the stories they tell. In both cases, multinational oil companies invade a region and tear apart communities and natural habitats; the state is either unwilling or unable to assert itself against them sufficiently to protect the populations affected; the latter, whether Ecuadorian natives in the 1990s or Mexican workers in the 1920s, unite to defend themselves against corporate tyranny. A key difference between the cases is that the Mexican workers were citizens of a state that, during and after the Mexican Revolution, was ideologically and to some extent substantively on the side of “the people,” which opened up opportunities for organized labor. As Santiago relates, the militancy of Mexican oil workers, while frustrated for many years by the power of multinationals and the weakness of the revolutionary state, finally, in 1938, provoked one of the decisive events of modern Mexican history: President Cárdenas’s nationalization of the foreign oil industry. The details of this event need not concern us; suffice it to say that it grew out of a collective-bargaining dispute between labor and capital dramatized by the latter’s flagrant violation of Mexican laws and the former’s strike activity, which forced Cárdenas to act—on behalf of law and labor. This example serves as a welcome reminder that, while Latin America’s history is a tragic one, not all the major victories have been won by the plunderers.

Ecuador in the 1990s conforms to the usual depressing pattern, however. Facing an alliance between the neoliberal state and multinational corporations, Indians fighting to protect their communities, their independence, and their habitat did not have much of a chance. Through popular mobilization they achieved some partial victories, and they succeeded in creating headaches for the state and its wealthy allies, but on a broad scale the neoliberal agenda was unstoppable. In 1994, for example, the government not only passed an important law that threatened communal lands but

also revised the Hydrocarbon Law so that state intervention in the oil industry was diminished, the price of gasoline was deregulated, new oil fields were granted to private companies, and environmental protections were undermined.<sup>82</sup> The fatal potential of these developments is clear when one reflects that crude oil's most toxic components have been shown to lead to skin disease, nerve damage, reproductive abnormalities, and cancer in humans, and that the industrial processes associated with oil extraction themselves produce pollutants.<sup>83</sup> Since industrial accidents were rampant in the 1980s and 1990s, the indigenous peoples of Ecuador had cause for alarm. What happened in Mexico in the early twentieth century, however, was even worse, as the rainforest in the Huasteca was destroyed, oil conflagrations that lasted months killed workers and indigenes, "worker housing was showered with toxic chemicals routinely," and mundane accidents caused death-by-asphyxiation or oil-drowning.<sup>84</sup> All these tragedies make oil, as a commodity, the quintessential symbol of capital's violent nature.

Some commodities, by virtue of their production process, give workers more opportunities to exercise agency than others. According to Gillian McGillivray, sugar in Cuba was such a commodity, at least in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. In *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959* (2009), she recounts how sugarcane farmers and the workers they hired frequently burned cane fields as a way to assert their interests against sugarmill owners or in times of political upheaval. "It created jobs," McGillivray notes, "to burn cane that would otherwise be left standing until sugar brought a better price. The burned cane had to be cut and hauled to the mill,

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<sup>82</sup> Suzana Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 96, 97.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>84</sup> Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195.

and the fields needed to be cleared and replanted during the dead season leading up to the next harvest.”<sup>85</sup> (Burned cane had to be cut and milled within twenty-four hours lest it lose its sucrose.) Burning cane also made it easier to cut, and it improved working conditions in the fields. In certain contexts, such as times of political repression, burning fields could also be a revolutionary act, a means of protesting colonialism and elite rule. Undertaken on a sufficiently large scale, cane fires were an effective form of economic sabotage and a way to spread revolution. Their political importance was summed up by one of Fidel Castro’s comrades: “Revolution in Cuba means burning sugarcane—it did in 1868, 1895, and 1930-33, and it did for us.”<sup>86</sup> Through this sort of resistance at the point of production, i.e. at the fulcrum of society, workers turned their daily subordination and dependency on its head: they showed that in fact capital and its social order were dependent on them, that they had the power to shut society down. They could even install political leaders who promised to overthrow the rule of capital, as in the case of Castro.

Again, though, the balance of power under capitalism is such that it is usually capital, not labor, that wields violence and remakes the world in its image. The history of Latin America is one long confirmation of this. Consider the 1980s, for example. The violence of that decade in Central America was largely due to capital’s attempts to suppress leftist insurrections by means of death squads and U.S.-backed paramilitary forces. Jeffery Paige makes it clear in *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (1997) that a major impetus behind the reactionary savagery in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala was the coffee-growing landed elite, which had a greater interest than the “agro-industrial” class in controlling labor. “The revolutionary crises of the 1980s,” he argues, “were crises of the

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<sup>85</sup> Gillian McGillivray, *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

coffee elites and the societies they made at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.”<sup>87</sup> As usual, therefore, the supremacy of a specific export commodity, or rather of capital as invested in the production of this commodity, brought hardship and even death for peasants and workers in Latin American countries. A similar thing happened in the 1930s, when uprisings against elites in El Salvador and Nicaragua were bloodily crushed by military force. The hubris and inhumanity of capital are on full display when tens of thousands of campesinos and laborers are slaughtered for the sake of maintaining complete capitalist control over society.

A bourgeois apologist might argue that capitalism as manifested in Latin America has had more positive than negative consequences for the environment and the majority of people, but that would be a hard argument to make. Examples can be multiplied almost without end of environmental and human agony as capital has steamrolled the continent. Since commodity production is the foundation of the social structure, Indians and workers have had most success at softening their oppression when interfering with production itself. For instance, when Pastaza Indians in 1989 threatened seismic crews working for an oil company and confiscated their equipment, a presidential advisor flew in with company representatives to discuss indigenous grievances.<sup>88</sup> Interference with production could not simply be ignored. Nevertheless, even such minor victories as this have been rare compared to the number of defeats—the constant stream of defeats, from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first, from Mexico to Argentina. How long this sad history will continue is an open question, but one can expect it not to end until capitalism itself does.

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<sup>87</sup> Jeffery Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>88</sup> Suzana Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles*, 64.

*Irony #2853.*— The U.S.’s drug war, which really began in the Progressive era of the early twentieth century, used to be directed against drugs. The suppression of the drug trade was the goal. Its dramatic intensification in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with its catastrophic failure, which coincided with its unqualified success as determined by a new set of standards. Aside from being an excellent way for the powerful, especially conservatives, to frighten the public, increase their authoritarian control over society, and get more votes—which it had always been, to some extent—the drug war became a wonderful excuse to do two things: throw economically redundant people (mostly black men), potential troublemakers, into prison, which then allowed corporations to profit off their cheapened labor; and intervene in the affairs of Latin American countries so as to suppress rebellious political movements under the guise of fighting the drug trade. This latter function also had the benefit of giving the U.S. government revenue, through arms sales.

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Mumia Abu Jamal is right to refer to America’s “prison-industrial complex.” Prisons may be America’s most dynamic growth industry, at least until very recently. Communities want prisons to be built in them because they provide jobs. Prisoners are the raw material, so to speak, on which employees work; and corporations make fantastic profits off the construction of prisons and the exploitation of cheap prison labor. At the same time, sending millions of black and Hispanic males to prison for minor offenses rids society of an economically superfluous population that, as it grows, threatens the stability of corporate capitalism. So capitalism has accomplished the impressive feat of making a *business* of getting rid of people whom the system has made economically redundant and politically dangerous. Finding a way to make profits off the redundant and unprofitable, *precisely by protecting capitalism from them*—that’s genius. Satanic genius. That it happens to destroy millions of lives is an unfortunate externality.

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*Deindustrialization.*— The causes of America's deindustrialization are complex, involving heightened international competition and declines in the growth-rates of manufacturing profitability and investment. The basic story can be stated in one sentence, though: greater international competition (since the late 1960s) and diminished growth of profitability have necessitated feverish cost-cutting, which has meant more automation, employee layoffs, wage-cuts, and offshoring of production—which in turn, by reducing purchasing power in the domestic economy, have in the long run reinforced trends toward lower sales and profits, which have themselves reinforced the need to cut costs, thus creating a vicious circle of American "de-development." This seems to be the story as many critical economists see it (such as Robert Brenner), although of course it has to be embellished.

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Why is deindustrialization bad for the economy? *Is* it bad for the economy? A lot of mainstream economists actually argue that there's nothing wrong with a decline in manufacturing employment, that it's a sign of progress, in particular of the higher productivity in manufacturing than in the service sector. Manufacturing productivity in America has become so high that we need very few workers to produce an equivalent level of output to the 1960s. The employment lost in manufacturing can be compensated by higher employment in the services. Etc. There is some superficial plausibility to this view, but a bit of sensible thinking shows it to be false. One major problem with losing manufacturing employment, I suspect, is that it entails a loss of powerful unions, thus a loss of high wages in the core economy (the "standard-setting" economy), therefore a stagnation or decline in the standard of living and a shrinking of effective demand. With lower demand, the service sector can't grow sufficiently to stably employ the tens of millions who would have had manufacturing jobs if the industrial sector had continued to grow instead of shrink.

Said differently, the basic problem seems to be that it's harder to unionize in services than in industry, because of the greater incidence of part-time and informal employment, the fragmentation and "personalization" of the sector, the lack of standardization in work processes, the transitory nature of employment, etc. Furthermore, since it is inherently more difficult to raise productivity in the services than in manufacturing, it's more difficult for wages to rise indefinitely—at least in "mass" jobs like retail and clerical work. There isn't a constant stream of inventions permitting greater output that raises the possibility of higher wages. Also, according to some economists, manufacturing jobs generate more secondary (derivative) jobs than those in the service sector do. On top of all this, there is the obvious fact that problems of "transition to a new economy," the "temporary" problems of inadequate training for new well-paying jobs, are by no means insignificant, especially in a country that devotes few resources to properly training laid-off workers for new careers. Conceivably, deindustrialization in the U.S. did not have to be the agonizing process it has been, if tens of billions of dollars had been directed to programs of "retraining," i.e. *education*. But that couldn't have happened in a country with the class structure of the U.S. It wasn't to the advantage of the financial sector—or real estate, insurance, retail, entertainment, or energy corporations.

Another thing to keep in mind is that deindustrialization has coincided with a major increase of capital mobility, which has changed the power dynamics between capital and the population. Even apart from its contribution to deindustrialization, this greater mobility bears a lot of the blame for the dramatic rise of economic insecurity since the 1960s. It surely helps keep service-sector wages low, for one thing; and even if there were still a lot of manufacturing jobs in the U.S., high capital mobility would probably ensure that unions had little power and manufacturing wages were low. But of course deindustrialization itself can be attributed in part to high capital mobility (in a context of competitive pressures on a national and international scale).

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One of the many sources of instability in the world today is the immense surplus of labor. Hundreds of millions of people who don't have an integral economic role. Just subsisting at the margins. There are two primary ways of dealing with this reserve army: either absorb it by giving it things to do, or repress it. Since the 1990s, China's main strategy has been to absorb it (through infrastructural projects and so forth);<sup>89</sup> the U.S.'s has been to repress it (and to give it meager welfare benefits). Neither of these strategies will prove sustainable for a long time, though. Keynesianism cannot last for many decades anymore, and repression will eventually face insurmountable resistance. Both strategies will start to meet their limits in the next ten years or so, though the repressive option will continue to be used for a very long time. Things are about to get interesting....

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*The fulfillment of the prophecy.*— As capital has become more mobile internationally since the 1970s (the era of globalization), undermining national boundaries and cultures, and has accumulated in ever-larger concentrations, undermining the “relative independence” of the state and producing a global proletariat (or “precariat”), the world has approximated ever more closely the pure model of capitalism that Marx described in *Das Kapital*. The West slowly sinks to the level of the Rest, and the Rest slowly approaches the industrial-capitalist condition of the West. The latter deindustrializes and eventually sees its infrastructure deteriorate, the former industrializes and sees its infrastructure build up a bit, though not sufficiently. Class polarization in the West approaches levels in the Rest. Conditions everywhere tend to equalize, with a hyper-elite set against an enormous reserve army of labor. A revolutionary situation ripens as the world becomes

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<sup>89</sup> Needless to say, repression hasn't been absent.



more uniform and the Western middle class, that historical bastion of conservatism, disintegrates.

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Here's a simple way to think about the downfall of capitalism: for over a century, oppressed people all over the world have risen up again and again, year after year, decade after decade, to overthrow institutions either integral to or, if residual from the feudal past, temporarily strengthened or made harsher by capitalism. And people will continue to do so, each generation continuing the fight. Their prospects for revolutionary success, however, have been limited as long as the core of capitalism in the West has had a fairly stable social structure and intact civil society. As long as the richest states have not faced insurrections themselves but have been able to intervene (usually successfully) whenever such insurrections threatened elsewhere, global capitalism has been more or less safe. Only when, finally, insurrections elsewhere coincide with massive revolutionary movements in the core—resulting in part from the decline of an integral civil society—can capitalism fall. This condition wasn't really fulfilled even in the 1930s. Only now is it *beginning* to come to fruition.

Moreover, the necessity that civil society decay means that capitalism's fall has to coincide with that of the nation-state, which, historically speaking, matured symbiotically with civil society. The latter's decline entails the former's.

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### *The Tortured Demise of the Nation-State*

In the age of advanced globalization, it is common for intellectuals to argue that the nation-state is in decline. David Held, for example, who distinguishes between a state's autonomy and its sovereignty, contends that international organizations such as the European Union, NATO, and the World Bank both limit states'

autonomy and infringe upon their sovereignty.<sup>90</sup> Edward Said, on the other hand, observes that a “generalized condition of homelessness” characterizes contemporary life.<sup>91</sup> One could embellish this insight by pointing to the *social atomization* that seems to be ever more pronounced in much of the world, and that vitiates the *rootedness* of truly belonging to a national community. It appears, therefore, that the nation-state is under assault on more than one front. In this paper I will argue that that is indeed the case; I will also clarify some of the processes at work.

It is necessary, first of all, to define the nation-state. Anthony Smith gives a reasonable definition of the fully formed nation in saying that it is “a named community of history and culture, possessing a unified territory, economy, mass education system and common legal rights.”<sup>92</sup> The term “nation-state,” then, makes explicit the fusion of such a community with its own government that administers and regulates the social order. On this understanding, nation-states are a modern creation: history is full of empires, city-states, tribes, and nomadic groups, but before the late nineteenth century there were no full-fledged nations or nation-states. To say they are purely a modern “invention,” however, or an elite construct with no basis in historical reality—as some scholars imply—is to go too far. Smith is right that the nation has historical antecedents. Both the ancient and medieval eras boasted “durable cultural communities,” ethnic communities with common historical memories, homelands, languages, religions, and a sense of solidarity.<sup>93</sup> Some of these not-always-well-defined communities eventually formed the basis of particular nationalities.

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<sup>90</sup> David Held, “The Decline of the Nation State,” in *Becoming National: A Reader*, eds. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 415.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Liisa Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” in *Becoming National*, 435.

<sup>92</sup> Anthony Smith, “The Origins of Nations,” in *Becoming National*, 107.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 109, 110.

Benedict Anderson is right to emphasize *print-capitalism* as having made national consciousness possible by creating “unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars.”<sup>94</sup> In the centuries after Gutenberg’s invention, print-capitalism spread across the continent, “assembling” related vernaculars by creating “mechanically reproduced print-languages capable of dissemination through the market.”<sup>95</sup> Speakers of the many varieties of French, for example, could now understand one another through print. Literacy increased as writing became more accessible. Print-capitalism also gave a new “fixity” to language by encouraging the standardization of spelling and syntax. Third, Anderson notes that print-languages inevitably exalted certain dialects at the expense of others: High German and the King’s English, for instance, eventually became languages of power, causing other dialects to atrophy and sometimes to die out. These processes fostered linguistic uniformity, which contributed to the rise of national consciousness.

In fact, without print-capitalism it is hard to imagine most of the things that are thought to have facilitated the emergence of the nation-state. The Reformation was made possible by print, as was the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the spread of such ideologies as liberalism and republicanism, thereby the French Revolution, industrialism, the immense bureaucracy of the modern state, mass education, etc. Similarly, the large-scale state projects undertaken in the heyday of the nation-state would have been impossible without print. One might consider the history of the state to have climaxed in these projects that exemplify what James C. Scott calls the “high modernist” ambition for the “administrative ordering of nature and society,” with which such figures as Le Corbusier, Stalin, Robert Moses, and Robert McNamara are

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<sup>94</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 44.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

associated.<sup>96</sup> Soviet collectivization is an example, as is the construction of Brasília between 1956 and 1960. Similar projects are still going on today—though not, it seems, in North America or Europe—as for example China’s relocating of hundreds of millions of peasants into newly constructed cities such as Chongqing.<sup>97</sup>

Considering the importance of print-capitalism as a foundation for the rise of the nation-state, it is ironic that what one might call *electronic capitalism* is contributing to the *decline* of the nation. Here, however, we must distinguish between the nation as an “imagined community” and the state, the government apparatus. The former is declining faster than the latter. Already with the spread of television in the 1950s and 1960s, the atomizing potential of electronic media was becoming apparent. In a sense, television gave and continues to give people common cultural touchstones, shows they can watch and discuss, advertisements they can all relate to, news items, ubiquitous soundbites, etc. More fundamentally, however, television has fragmented communities and families, atomized the national culture, instilled mental and behavioral patterns of *passiveness*, and in the long run degraded civil society. Lauren Berlant is right that “television promotes the annihilation of memory and, in particular, of historical knowledge and political self-understanding.” Print media have a tendency to encourage dialogue and reify culture, to bring people together to participate in a broader community, ultimately a national one; electronic media—in the context of capitalism, at least—tend to substitute isolation and self-involvement for direct interaction with others, as well as to degrade communication into instantaneous visual and auditory stimuli whose effect is to undermine identities (be they personal, national, or whatever).

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<sup>96</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 88.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, “Chongqing: Socialism in One City,” *The Nation*, November 18, 2009.

These trends are even more evident when one considers the impact of video games, cell-phones, computers, the internet, and such “social media” outlets as Twitter and Facebook. A society in which most people spend an inordinate amount of their time sitting in front of TVs, playing video games, shopping online, searching for soulmates through internet dating, imbibing bits of information in short bursts from an endless variety of global news and entertainment sources, and electronically “chatting” with acquaintances or strangers located anywhere from the next room to the other side of the world—such a society does not have much of a tangible national culture, and its “imagined community” is indeed *imaginary*, a mere abstraction with little basis in concrete reality. In short, the individualistic, passive, and *consumerist* nature of a capitalist society saturated by electronic media<sup>98</sup> is interpersonally alienating and destructive of civil society, hence destructive of a shared national consciousness.

At the same time, because electronic technology makes possible nearly instantaneous communication across the world, the kind of community it fosters is global rather than national. One may start to feel more affinity for people ten thousand miles away than for one’s compatriots. Global social movements become easier to coordinate; things like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street can emerge to break down national barriers and birth a *global* consciousness.

Electronic capitalism has also helped make possible the hegemony of transnational corporations, which have their own role to play in the destruction of the nation. First and foremost, their actions tend to bring about the equalization of conditions between countries. As corporations seek cheap labor abroad, impose ever-poorer working conditions on domestic employees, deindustrialize Western countries in part by obsessively pursuing productivity advances that make possible shrinking workforces, and fight to dismantle economic regulations and the welfare state, they cause a

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<sup>98</sup> And by “print versions” of such media, for example magazines devoted to celebrity gossip and instant gratification of whatever sort.

creeping Third-Worldization of the core capitalist countries—while facilitating a creeping industrialization of the former Third World. The point is not that the Global South will ever achieve anything like the once-prosperous level of the North; rather, it is that the world is heading towards a relative convergence of social conditions everywhere, in the form of extreme economic inequality, political disenfranchisement of the majority, environmental degradation, “privatization” of resources, and so forth. In the West especially, class polarization is increasing and infrastructure deteriorating. National differences thereby become of less substance; the urgent task appears of *globally* confronting power-structures, since it is only on the global stage that transnational corporations can potentially be defeated. (After all, they can play off country against country in their quest for advantageous regulatory regimes.) The slogan “Workers [i.e. non-capitalists] of the World, Unite!” becomes more timely than ever before, since nation-states *really are*, this time, deteriorating from within and from without.

Like the national community, though less obviously, the state—particularly in the core capitalist countries—is under assault. As David Held says, it is slowly losing its autonomy and sovereignty to international organizations, and increasingly it has to coordinate its policies with other states. As it grows ever more debt-encumbered and beholden to corporate entities,<sup>99</sup> it begins to lose its ability to administer the social order, which itself is becoming less governable and more unstable as the population increases, class polarization intensifies, and infrastructure decays. The predictable consequence is that a quasi-police state will take the place of the welfare state—as is indeed happening, with heightened government investment in the “national security” state, in powers of surveillance, the expansion and privatization of

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<sup>99</sup> For some of the reasons behind these developments, see Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (New York: Verso, 2006).

prisons, the militarizing of police forces,<sup>100</sup> the ever-more-frequent suspension of civil liberties, etc. From one perspective, such developments *heighten* the power of the state; seen in their true light, however, they are symptoms of a social and political crisis. Far from indicating the health of the state, they show its sickness. In the long run they may prove to be its death-throes.

Said differently, the Western state is ceasing to be the *public* state it once was; it is becoming a government explicitly for the rich, a “private” state, a “security” state. More and more of its functions are privatized, including education, national security, law enforcement, and administration of prisons. The repressive functions of government—some of them taken over by outside contractors—become more important as the citizen-empowering, civil-society-enhancing functions start to wither away. Again, this is all in the interest<sup>101</sup> of “The Corporation,” which can accumulate more capital and power as citizens lose their capacity to resist.

No doubt reactionary nationalist movements will appear, in fact are appearing, as these crises deepen. Their significance, however, is precisely the death of the nation-state, not its resurgence. David Held is right that the world is simply too interconnected now, and transnational corporations have too much power, for a return to the era of sovereign and autonomous nations to occur. Xenophobia and nationalism are vomited up with the drawn-out death-rattles of the Western state, as conservative sections of the public take up arms against the implications of corporate globalization.

The impact of all this on capitalism itself is another interesting question. Suffice it to say that, just as capitalism and the nation-state matured symbiotically together, so they will probably meet their demise in a fatal embrace. As capitalism evolved from its primitive commercial character in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to a more mature mercantilism and proto-industrialism,

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<sup>100</sup> See, e.g., Arthur Rizer and Joseph Hartmann, “How the War on Terror Has Militarized the Police,” *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2011.

<sup>101</sup> The short-term interest, that is. See the final paragraph below.

thence to full industrialization in the nineteenth century, finally from this phase of so-called “competitive capitalism” to “monopoly” or “corporate” capitalism in the twentieth century, the nation-state evolved from its primitive beginnings in the late feudal era to its apotheosis between the 1930s and 1960s in the “high modernist” schemes that James Scott discusses.<sup>102</sup> Capitalism’s evolution made possible that of the nation-state, and the latter’s evolution made possible the former’s.<sup>103</sup> Capitalism’s continued maturation, however, in the form of advanced globalization, has, as we have seen, begun to undermine the nation-state, a process that in the long run cannot but undermine capitalism itself. For the latter has, at least since the 1500s, required a state to maintain order and facilitate the accumulation of capital. As the state loses its capacity to keep order, and as people across the world unite to resist the depredations of The Corporation, capital accumulation will face ever more obstacles.<sup>104</sup> In the end, one can expect the current world order to implode; some sort of post-capitalist, post-statist order will rise from its ashes. What it will look like, no one can foresee.

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*2011 vs. 1968.*— Despite what people are inclined to think, 2011 was in many ways more globally revolutionary than 1968. Everything that happened—the Arab Spring, the Wisconsin protests, Occupy Wall Street, protests all over Europe, demonstrations in Russia—it was all just the beginning of something very big; 1968 was basically the end, or at least the climax. 2011 was a manifestation primarily of *elemental economic grievances*, even in the Arab world; 1968 was a manifestation

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<sup>102</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1994).

<sup>103</sup> See Peter Kropotkin, *The State: Its Historic Role* (London: Freedom Press, 1997).

<sup>104</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) discusses these obstacles in detail.



largely of the youth's cultural discontent, European universities' dysfunctionality, anti-war sentiment, and, yes, young workers' dissatisfaction with conditions of production.<sup>105</sup> 2011 targeted society's central power-structures, namely big business, especially financial institutions (and, outside the West, political dictators); 1968 was directed against....authority in general. Its diffuseness indicated its political immaturity. The point is that 2011 was a symptom of a world order's descent into long-term crisis, whereas 1968 was produced by a variety of less systemically portentous developments. 2011 was the beginning of the real revolutionary period (two hundred years long?) of capitalism's decline.

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*Thoughts on socialist revolution.*— In retrospect it's obvious that something like socialism couldn't have happened until the nation-state system had disintegrated (which it's starting to do now), because the nationality principle conflicts with the class principle. Marx thought the latter was more powerful and important than the former, and in many ways he was right. But not in the way he wanted: *business* tended to be more loyal to class than to the nation, and it used the idea of nationality to divide the working class. Only when capitalism and the nation-state began to decline together according to their internal dynamics and not due to some voluntaristic, opportunistic Leninist coup from the outside would the wage-earning classes have the chance to supersede capitalism and its instrument the nation-state.

To say it more simply, Marx's main mistake was not to foresee the twentieth-century apotheosis of the nation-state period of history. He didn't foresee the welfare state. He overestimated the power—at least in the short run—of capitalism's class-polarizing tendencies; he didn't understand that other tendencies would for at least a hundred years be able to mitigate class inequality, tendencies such as that toward the assimilation of the working class into the dominant order, toward “pure and simple trade-unionism”

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<sup>105</sup> See, e.g., Chris Harman's *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (1988).

(mere reformism), toward the state's stabilizing management of the economy, as well as the pressures for workers to identify not only with the abstract notion of a social class that spans continents but also with the more concrete facts of ethnicity, race, occupation, immediate community, and nation. All these pressures interfered with the revolutionary dynamics Marx analyzed.

With respect to the very long run, though, he was always right that capitalism is not sustainable. There are many reasons for this, including the contradiction between a system that requires infinite growth and a natural environment that is finite, but the reason most relevant to Marxism is that ultimately capital can *never stop* accumulating power at the expense of every other force in society. It is insatiable; its lust for ever more profit and power condemns it to a life of Faustian discontent. It can never rest. Any accommodations, therefore, between the wage-earning class and capital—such accommodations as the welfare state and the legitimization of collective bargaining—are bound to be temporary. Sooner or later capital's aggressiveness will overpower contrary trends and consume everything, like a societal black hole (to change the metaphor). Everything is sucked into the vortex, including social welfare, the nation-state, even nature itself. The logic is that nothing will remain but The Corporation, and government protections of the people will be dismantled because such protections are not in the interest of capital. This absurd, totalitarian logic can never reach its culmination, but it will, it *must*, proceed far enough, eventually, that an apocalyptic struggle between the masses and capital ensues. A relatively mild version of this happened once before, in the 1930s and '40s, and a compromise—the mature welfare state—was the result. But then, as I said, capital repudiated the compromise (or is doing so as I write these words), and the old trends Marx diagnosed returned with a vengeance, and so humanity could look forward, this time, to a final reckoning. A final settling of accounts will occur in the coming century or two.

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*A history of the U.S. economy.*— In order to understand the present, you have to know the past. A particularly important part of the story is economic history, which everyone should study. Barry Eichengreen’s *Globalizing Capital: A History of the International Monetary System* (2008) is a superb book; Robert Brenner’s *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (2006) is a true masterpiece. A more readable work is David Harvey’s *The Enigma of Capital* (2011); a less readable but nonetheless excellent one is Greta Krippner’s *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (2011). Paul Bairoch’s *Economics and World History: Myths and Paradoxes* (1995) is a very good introduction to the subject. Here I’ll include notes I wrote on an older work that adopts a broader historical perspective, all the way back to the 1790s.

Richard Du Boff’s *Accumulation and Power: An Economic History of the United States* (1989) is excellent, since it takes a Marxian/Keynesian approach. Here’s the first paragraph: “Just after the Second World War, economists of the Keynesian, Marxian, and institutionalist schools shared one vision—that nothing in the workings of a capitalist economy assured compatibility between the demand side and the supply side requirements for steady growth with full employment. For several reasons this approach to economic history soon fell by the wayside (if in fact there were ever any attempts to make use of it). This book represents an effort to revive it.”

The first chapter consists of a polemic against neoclassical economics and its version of economic history. Boff’s analysis “focuses not on consumption and production choices in an allocative efficiency setting [as neoclassical analyses do] but on capitalist decision-making and its social consequences. That decision-making process is not seen as a series of adaptations to external market forces but rather as the major determinant of the pattern of economic growth and as the main element forcing change in the economy at large. In this view, the twin goals of capitalist enterprise are *accumulation* and *monopolization*.” Neoclassical theory likes to treat monopolies as a kind of pathology, an extreme departure from “perfect competition” or

“equilibrium” or some other invented concept, but anyone with common sense understands that monopolies are “the natural end product of successful competition, arising out of accumulation and the drive for control over an economy never in ‘equilibrium.’”

Okay, now for the history. “The earliest impetus to economic growth came from foreign trade, which boomed from 1793 to 1807. Revolutionary turmoil and the Napoleonic wars in Europe allowed American shippers to capture a major part of the international carrying trade and led to unprecedented volumes of exports and profits.... Exports probably constituted 15 percent of the national product....” America’s export-led economic growth ended in 1807 with the Embargo Act, which was a catastrophe for shipping interests. But it had the beneficial effect of encouraging goods-production at home, since goods were not available from Europe. “The growing demand for cloth prompted the mechanization of weaving and the integration of spinning and weaving inside a single ‘mill.’” Unfortunately, the end of Europe’s war in 1814 reopened the U.S. to British imports, which drove many American competitors out of business and wiped out much of the newly expanded manufacturing base, “bringing a decade of near-stagnation.” (If the IMF weren’t the slave of Western investors, it might draw certain conclusions from such facts as these. Opening Third-World markets to floods of Western goods is precisely the worst thing to do, from the perspective of the Third World.)<sup>106</sup>

Nevertheless, in some sectors manufacturing continued to expand, slowly. In textiles, for example, where a few large firms survived the British onslaught. Also, residential construction grew,

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<sup>106</sup> See the writings of the dependency theorists, such as Andre Gunder Frank’s important work *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (1969) and Walter Rodney’s classic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). Anthony Brewer’s *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey* (1980) is a good overview. The fundamental point is that every country that has successfully industrialized has done so through protectionism—a fact that directly contradicts classical and neoclassical economics. See also Robin Hahnel’s *The ABCs of Political Economy: A Modern Approach* (2002).

stimulating the production of nails, bricks, shingles, etc., as well as the machines to make them. At the same time, the Northeast's "commercial revolution" was happening. Commercial banks, law firms, insurance companies, etc. Public works in transportation and communication were important too. The growing volume of trade bred a new generation of middlemen, who themselves contributed to economic development. And state governments provided crucial help by chartering corporations, giving companies monopoly-type privileges and attracting wealth from small investors whose calculations of risk were influenced by their "limited liability." On top of all this, agricultural productivity was rising in the West.

Real per capita incomes rose 30 percent between 1805 and 1840. The urbanized population was 11 percent of the country by 1840. On the other hand, "by the 1830s the sense of social distance between rich and poor was growing," as a new class of wage-earners slowly developed. *Slowly*. By the 1840s, less than 10 percent of all workers were engaged in manufacturing. The structure of the economy remained pre-industrial.

"The modern accumulation process began in the 1840-1860 period, with the coming of the railroads." I won't go through all the ways that railroads stimulated economic development. The telegraph, too, proved to be of incalculable importance. Both accelerated the emergence of a national market, and of regional specialization.

"Agriculture's share of the labor force declined from 64 percent in 1840 to 53 percent in 1860; in the North the decrease was even greater, from 63 to 34 percent." At the same time, disparities in income and wealth (i.e. property) were increasing (although real wages for working people did rise). "By 1860 income disparities had risen to a 'high plateau of inequality' that persisted for the better part of a century." (And then, you know, a few decades of the welfare state, and then a resumption of extreme polarization, since the 1970s.) Inequality in wealth was even worse.

One sign of strong capital accumulation in the 1840s and 1850s was "the revulsion against internal improvements," i.e. public works, which had been quite significant earlier.

The defeat of national planning for internal improvements was no doubt related to the growing sectional conflicts, especially between the North and the South, and agitation for “states’ rights.” But the private business sector was also starting to oppose “government interference” in the economy. The ideological reaction apparently began with the great expansion of 1843-1857, when a generation of capitalists began to sense the burgeoning opportunities that lay in free-wheeling exploitation of new technologies and new markets. The telegraph provides evidence.... With the swift commercial success of telegraphy, a campaign for public ownership was undertaken by a number of congressmen and private citizens. Opposition was strong and effective from the outset. “Who should own the Magnetic Telegraph?” asked the *New York Mercantile Advertiser* in 1846. Surely not the Post Office was the reply, because of “its utter inefficiency, and its absolute inability to meet the wants of the public.... In comparison with individual enterprise it is perfectly contemptible....a bungling concern.”

Actually, historians have shown that the postal system was an astonishingly effective institution for its day. But the “private enterprise” and “government inefficiency” propaganda had already begun by the 1850s.

After the interruption of the Civil War, things heated up. Investment shot up simultaneously with the growth of consumer demand. Per capita incomes rose at a brisk pace. “Real income per person increased at an annual average rate of about 1.1 percent from 1800 through the 1850s; after the Civil War the rate jumped to 1.6 to 1.7 percent per year through 1900.” In the long run, growing demand has to come from improvements in productivity, “otherwise higher demand levels are not sustainable. Only

increases in the productivity of labor and capital can give the economy the added capacity to generate or accommodate more ‘demand.’” These necessary increases in productivity were happening at a great rate in the second half of the century, during the “second industrial revolution.” These are the years when mass production began, and giant business firms sprang up.

And yet, as always, economic growth was wildly disrupted by depressions and downturns. Between 1867 and 1900, “the economy expanded during 199 months and contracted during 197—a disappointing if not ominous performance in view of the glowing images the new capitalists were fashioning of themselves and their economic system.” Why such crisis-ridden growth? I think you know the answer. It is “capitalism’s endemic problem of maintaining levels of aggregate spending high enough to prevent productive capacity from outstripping demand.... [S]cience-based gains in efficiency....permitted huge expansions in productive capacity that tended to overshoot actual levels of private demand. The main problem lay in a system that encouraged efficiency gains but discouraged a distribution of income that could assure commensurate gains in worker purchasing power.” In general, labor-saving and capital-saving innovation, cost-cutting, “tends to generate excess capacity, as a given amount of investment becomes more productive and capital-output ratios undergo a long-term decline.”

I won’t summarize Boff’s long discussion of the second industrial revolution and the great merger wave around the turn of the century. Let’s continue with the theory. The point about the structural contradictions of capitalism is that in a regime of imperfect competition, “actions designed to promote profitable investment undermine economic stability—and the investment that depends on it.” For example, if events cause a corporation to cut back production and investment but *not* reduce prices, weakness in the economy will develop. Demand will grow more slowly, and the oligopolistic firm will cut its output levels. Excess capacity will then appear. “In a *competitive* regime, underutilization of plant and equipment brings on price cutting and the demise of marginal

firms. But under oligopoly the excess capacity cannot be competed away like this; in recessions total profits may shrink but excess capacity remains in place.” Investment will therefore continue to drop; consumers, being paid less and being employed less, will have less money to buy things and to service their debts, which could lead to defaults, which could interrupt cash flows and profits to banks and other lending institutions, which could precipitate a crisis in the financial system.

Labor-saving measures reduce production costs for a firm, but they also constrain consumption spending. Aggregate demand might therefore become insufficient to warrant further investment, which sets in motion the vicious circle. Also, because of all the cost-cutting, profits tend to grow faster than good investment prospects. Which tends to lead to economic stagnation.

I wonder how this emphasis on the malign effects of “excess” profits squares with Robert Brenner’s emphasis, in *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, on the malign effects of a low rate of profit. It’s funny that both high and low profits can be macroeconomically injurious. (Well, it isn’t the high profits themselves that are the problem; it’s the low demand that might be their obverse side, because it augurs badly for economic growth and profits in the long run.)

There are various ways around these problems, such as strong labor unions that insist on high wages (although if production costs increase *too* much, profits can be squeezed, which will tend to lower investment), but “they do not automatically prevent a mismatch between the nation’s productive capacity and the purchasing power to keep it utilized. There is, for example, no reason why the growth of demand that results from a given rate of investment should be exactly equal to the growth of capacity that results from that investment.”

It’s true that “over the past century or more, expansionary forces have prevailed.” There have been three great waves of economic expansion. But this wasn’t so much the result of the free market as of powerful *external* stimuli. “Epoch-making innovations” such as the railroad and the automobile opened up



vast new frontiers of investment—as Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran argue in *Monopoly Capital* (1966).

But the basic problem never disappears [Boff writes]. Sometimes capacity increases at very rapid rates, especially when the productivity of new capital goods is rising, at other times mass-purchasing power and final sales lag, and at still other times both phenomena occur. As a result, breakdowns of the investment-dependent system have been so severe that government has increasingly been called upon to guarantee stability not only through “regulation” but also by massive expenditures to prevent aggregate demand from collapsing as it did in the 1890s and the 1930s. The tension between forces making for expansion and contraction has not abated. Since 1929 it is easily discernible in the debate over the role of government in the economy, as well as in the business cycles that somehow keep happening.

Even after the depression of the 1890s had ended, when prosperity had returned, industrial spokesmen complained about excess capacity in the midst of prosperity. As one said, “We need to open our foreign markets in order to keep our machinery employed.... It can produce in six months all we can consume in a year.” And that was at a time of vigorous economic growth, in 1900. From 1907 through 1915, “real GNP grew very slowly, at an annual average rate well below 2 percent per year.” One important author later concluded (in his study of the pre-war downturn) that “increased industrial productivity [during those years] did not result in any substantial addition to the real income of employed workers in general.” As Boff says, “This suggests a tendency to divert productive gains toward profits rather than wages, with an eventual dampening effect on economic activity.”

You know about all the oligopolistic stuff that was happening in the early 1900s, so I won't go through that. All through the 1920s, trade associations and mergers and a permissive federal government ensured that competition was, "to a very considerable extent," controlled. That's the way things tend to be under corporate capitalism. Capital did very well in the 1920s—but "the increasingly promotional and financial basis of [the] merger movement indicates a surplus of funds seeking speculative profits, as opportunities for productive investment profitable enough for the corporate sector were waning." Remind you of anything? For example, our economy's financialization over the last thirty-five years, as "opportunities for productive investment profitable enough for the corporate sector" have waned? Yes, we're on the verge of another great depression. Or at least a very protracted slump.

Also, just like in recent decades, retail chains (characterized by low wages) did unprecedentedly well in the 1920s.

"What were the forces making for a sustained economic expansion [in the 1920s] that finally pulled the nation out of the doldrums of 1907-1915?" Boff's answer is simple: "The energy behind a vigorously growing market economy comes chiefly from a core of dynamic young industries. Between 1917 and 1929 electrification and automobiles provided the key investment outlets that came to fruition after World War I. They overrode the depressive tendencies of the oligopolistic investment mode, at least long enough to allow the economy to expand for several years without significant interruption." The statistics he gives for electrification prove the stunning importance of this new industry to economic activity in that era. The statistics for, and in general the importance of, automobile manufacturing, however, are simply mind-boggling. As before with steam power and railroads, "the accumulation possibilities opened up by automobiles invigorated the whole economic machine." Think of all the "forward and backward linkages," the many industries stimulated and created, the proliferation and expansion of roads and billboards and filling stations and garages and truck driving and suburban communities

and highway construction largely financed by state and federal governments that came to the aid of flagging private investment. Even in the 1930s it was already impossible to imagine the world without automobiles.

So why did this economic boom come to an end in 1929?

As the 1920s stretched on, the prolonged investment boom was sowing the seeds of its own demise, through its contributions to increasing productivity and inadequate consumer purchasing power. The years following the First World War were ones of record-breaking increases in efficiency, in output per worker and per unit of capital stock. The reasons are clear—electrification, automotive transport, and widespread mass-production innovations, with expanding markets and longer production runs bringing still greater economies of scale. The end of mass immigration in 1921 threatened to restrict the supply of labor and push up wage bills, leading employers to substitute machinery for labor at an even faster rate and to squeeze more production out of existing work forces through “human engineering” techniques.

So, while productive capacity was expanding quickly, “consumer demand could not seem to keep pace.” This problem was quite troubling to industrialists and business economists; they did everything they could to raise demand for their products. (Through advertising, etc.) But capacity utilization declined in the second half of the decade. The main problem was that, even though the real earnings of non-farm employees rose substantially in the 1920s, most of the increase went to people in upper-income brackets, who never spend as much of their earnings as less wealthy people do. (A similar problem today.)

Also, oligopolistic industries, as stated above, were (and always are) resistant to significantly lowering prices (as a way to pass on productivity increases to consumers). Instead, they tended to cut back production and employment, which hurt demand. "From 1929 through 1932, prices in competitive industries fell 60 percent compared to only 15 percent in 'the more concentrated industries.'"

As Boff says, however, all this might well have led not to a devastating depression but only to a characteristic recession. An important aggravating factor was, of course, the stock market plunge in late 1929. Earlier that year a downturn in business activity had already begun, but "the stock market debacle shattered business confidence, ruined countless thousands of private investors, and wiped out holding company and investment trust structures by the score. It effectively compounded factors making for output and employment drops that would not by themselves have produced a prolonged and desperate economic crisis."

Basically, the situation was that heavily indebted holding companies controlling much economic activity paid interest on their bonds out of the profits of the individual operating companies they owned. The decline in profits that began earlier in the year "led to defaults on a number of bonds and a series of spectacular bankruptcies. Meanwhile, the Wall Street collapse was drastically raising the cost of issuing new corporate equity and closing off this source of cheap finance as a way out.... Investment and consumption soon began to sink. As sales and prices fell, large corporations responded by reducing their outlays for inventory and capital goods and increasing their holdings of cash balances, withdrawing funds from the economy's spending stream...." The vicious circle had begun. Farmers and others faced shrinking markets for their goods, bank failures spread as loans could not be repaid, millions of Americans withdrew their bank deposits, etc. On top of all this, Hoover's misguided fiscal policies and the Fed's misguided monetary policies (it raised interest rates in late 1931 to protect the nation's gold reserve) made things worse.

“In Europe a similar crisis was swiftly developing, and as Europeans demanded gold, banks all over the world had to call in loans and shrink deposits. A new wave of liquidations, international in scope, followed. In the summer of 1931, the jerry-built house of international credit, debt, and war reparations finally gave way, crushing the last hopes for a ‘normal’ recovery.”

“The anemic nature of the recovery during the 1930s was a direct result of inadequate increases in government support for the economy.”

Boff’s conclusion: “What had really happened between 1929 and 1933 is that the institutions of nineteenth-century free market growth broke down, beyond repair. Had the chain of circumstances been ‘right,’ it could have occurred in 1920-21 or possibly 1907. The tumultuous passage from the depression of the 1930s to the total economic mobilization of the 1940s was the watershed in twentieth-century U.S. capitalism....” State intervention blunted capitalism’s crisis-prone tendencies even as it created “unanticipated additions to the full range of capitalist instability.”

Okay, so during and after World War II things got better, etc. Except for a series of short recessions, like the one that started in late 1948, when excess capacity appeared and private investment started falling. Luckily the Korean War happened in 1950, temporarily saving American capitalism from itself. And the pattern continued for a long time thereafter. “There is little doubt that the major growth stimulus for the American economy from 1950 through the early 1970s came from the public sector, not private investment.” In fact, Arthur Okun, who was chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under Lyndon Johnson, said that this expansion of government should be judged “not in dollars of real GNP, but in the very survival of United States capitalism.” It was government spending that prevented another Great Depression from happening. In the 1950s and 1960s, military spending accounted for more than four-fifths of all federal purchases. But “military spending” is not just for the military (as Chomsky often notes); it is really a sort of “backhanded planning” for various

sectors of the economy.<sup>107</sup> “The record-breaking, 105-month-long economic expansion from February 1961 to November 1969 was largely a result of arms spending.”

It’s also worth noting that in the postwar era, government’s taxation of profits and other non-wage earnings (for the sake of public spending, which increased aggregate demand) helped prevent excess productive capacity from developing to the extent that it might have. And excess capacity, to repeat, can trigger a recession by causing a decline in investment.

Let’s not forget automobiles. While the industry was important before the war, it was probably even more important afterwards. As usual, government had to do much of the investing and assumption of risk, but automobiles and their economic offshoots were a monster stimulus to private investment too. (Think of suburbanization.) The “Los Angelizing” of the American economy occurred after World War II. But, as I learned from Chomsky, that name is misleading, since Los Angeles was not always the car-cluttered hellscape it is now. It used to deserve its moniker “City of Angels,” being a paradise on earth. Beautiful scenery, very little pollution, quiet electric public transportation, no crisscrossing highways everywhere.... Unfortunately, “between 1936 and 1950, National City Lines, a holding company sponsored and funded by GM, Firestone, and Standard Oil of California, bought out more than 100 electric surface-traction systems in 45 cities (including New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Salt Lake City, Tulsa, and Los Angeles) to be dismantled and replaced with GM buses. It was understood that the sale of automobiles, gasoline, and tires would benefit too. The project was generally successful. In

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<sup>107</sup> Economic and ideological opposition to government programs that “compete with private capital or encroach on its domain” prevents the federal government from directly funding sufficient public works on infrastructure and so forth, so it has to take the indirect route through the Pentagon, which is less efficient than the alternative (something like the WPA or the TVA of the 1930s). See Chomsky’s *Understanding Power*.

1949 GM and its partners were convicted in U.S. district court in Chicago of criminal conspiracy in this matter and fined \$5000.”

Don’t forget, too, that the federal government was mostly responsible for the development of electronics in the 1950s and afterwards. Also synthetics (plastics and fibers). And the internet, satellites, containerization, etc. “Free market” dogmas are absurd, in other words.

Okay, let’s skip ahead to the long downturn after 1972. From 1973 to 1987, unemployment averaged 7.2 percent. The growth of private investment slowed considerably, manufacturing declined as the commercial sector (retail, communications, real estate, insurance, services) rose, debt increased all around, etc. See Robert Brenner’s above-mentioned book for details. To keep aggregate demand from collapsing as it did after 1929, the government has relied on military spending. This form of public spending, as opposed to infrastructure programs, “has highly functional characteristics for American capitalism.” “Military output does not interfere with or saturate private demand. Pentagon dollars jeopardize no business interests because they go to private firms, providing support rather than competition. The same cannot be said for low-cost housing, Amtrak and mass transit, public recreational and wilderness projects, and many social services like legal aid for poor households. A sizable expansion in areas like these would have disrupting effects on private production and on free labor markets. It would also demonstrate that the public sector can provide certain goods and services more effectively than private profit-seeking companies—a ‘bad example’ to be blocked at all cost.”

Moreover, military spending has the advantage of reproducing the oligopolistic structure of the corporate economy, “as it consolidates the power of some of the largest firms in concentrated sectors of the economy.”

In addition to military spending, transfer payments like Social Security, Medicare, and food stamps help stabilize the economy by helping to stabilize demand. But as you know, “welfare” spending has been slashed in the last 35 years. In fact, despite increases in

military spending under Reagan and afterwards, since 1972 state, local, and federal government support for the economy has plunged. "The relentless attacks on 'big government' by a resurgent right wing, anchored in the Republican party but well represented among Democrats, have borne their bitter fruit—a reduction of the amounts of public spending necessary to generate sufficient aggregate demand to keep the economy operating at a high level of employment and output. The laboratory test is the great postwar boom: in the absence of the rapid growth of government spending from 1947-48 to 1972-73, the economy would probably have exhibited the same stagnationist tendencies evident since 1973. With reduced growth of both investment and government spending, it is not surprising that the overall economy—GNP—has turned in such a poor performance since the early 1970s."

So what caused the downturn after 1972? Boff blames it on numerous things, including exogenous shocks like the OPEC happenings, worldwide shortages of commodities as a result of crop failures, and two devaluations of the dollar in 1971 and 1973....but he also mentions causes internal, or relatively internal, to the system. Like Brenner, he invokes heightened international competition, which depressed profitability and thus investment, the growth of productivity, etc. Lower productivity growth also resulted from the higher global prices of energy and other raw materials, which discouraged investment in energy-intensive plant and equipment. And rising labor compensation—not in wages but from increases in the "social wage" (such as employers' contributions to Social Security, health and disability, and pensions)—combined with lower productivity growth to squeeze profits. Apparently from 1965 through 1979, employers' "supplements to wages and salaries" increased much faster than money wages and profits. They went from 6 percent to 12 percent of national income.

Incidentally, if you're wondering what the relation is between Robert Brenner's emphasis on a slower growth of profit rates (due to international competition) and Boff's emphasis on lower aggregate demand as explanations for the long downturn, I'd



suggest that the lower aggregate demand was partly a result of the low profits.<sup>108</sup> Business had to cut costs to compete with intra- and inter-national competitors, which meant lower wages and less employment, which meant less effective demand. Which meant more excess capacity, which reinforced tendencies toward reduced growth of investment, which meant lower productivity growth, etc. A vicious circle. Heightened international competition wasn't the only trigger, but it was an important one. Boff might say that it ended up reinforcing—ironically—the stagnationist tendencies of America's oligopolistic economy (by encouraging greater cost-cutting....which *didn't* result in the “shakeout” of less-productive firms, as would have been the case in a more “purely competitive” economy, because of all the ways that oligopolistic firms in modern America have of staying in the game, including by relying on debt, on the government's military Keynesianism, on corporate tax cuts, on financial speculation, on investments in real estate, etc.).

So recessions got more severe. Boff notes, however, that recessions are functional for capitalism, and since the mid-1950s have always to some degree been policy-engineered. From the perspective of capital, they do “curative work” for the economy. They reduce inflation, assure adequate supplies of compliant labor, and “check speculative financings” that can imperil coordinated expansion of a market economy. Recessions can restore conditions for profitability. Government's role is to “allow a recession but to stop it short of catastrophe.”

Boff has a deprecatory attitude toward Reagan's supply-side economics. He doesn't even think it was particularly new. “Regressive tax legislation and assaults on labor were nothing new in U.S. history, but now they were reinforced by ‘deregulation’—the decontrol of regulated industries and the gutting of regulatory agencies that protect workers and consumers.” Another new development of those years was that “as deficit spending encouraged consumption to race ahead of domestic output, imports filled the gap and foreign savings financed both the budget and

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<sup>108</sup> Of course in the long run it has contributed to them, too.

trade deficits. That was the ‘new’ feature of supply-side economics—foreigners supplied the goods and the funds.”

Needless to say, one of the effects of all the deregulation of recent decades has been an acceleration of “the long march toward oligopoly,” as an analyst for the Wall Street Journal wrote in 1985. The fourth merger movement began (the first being the one between 1890 and 1902).

Boff’s final word on the long downturn is that “events since 1972 have done nothing to dispel the view that the chronic problem of capitalism is insufficient private-sector aggregate demand to keep production and employment growing.” He quotes an author: “Throughout the entire industrial phase of U.S. economic history the system has operated below its potential, with full employment obtaining only in brief spans surrounding cyclical peaks.... The decade of the 1970s thus reveals the face of long-run stagnation, unleashed by the demise of the state and local stimulus together with the failure of the federal government to compensate for this demise.” Brenner might not agree with that diagnosis, but there’s some truth to it. Boff immediately qualifies it, however, by repeating that one of the most significant factors was the change in the structure of the world economy beginning in the late 1960s.

“Supply shocks” raised production costs and impaired existing industrial capacity in the United States (and elsewhere), so that Keynesian demand stimulation would have produced only a marginal output and employment increase, but probably a significant rise in inflation. [This, of course, is what happened.] But this constituted no reason to reject Keynesian economics, as conservatives (and many neoliberals) so quickly proclaimed it did. All economists agree that any decrease in productive capacity tends to cause a rise in prices and a fall in the quantity of output. The response to the supply shocks of the 1970s actually validated Keynesian theory, as tight fiscal and monetary policies

depressed economic activity, generated persistent unemployment, and further discouraged the investments needed to get out of the trap.<sup>109</sup> This period, moreover, was also marked by growing competition among capitalist nations, creating an oversupply of capital stock on a world scale in textiles, steel, motor vehicles, shipbuilding, and other industries. Even during the 1970s, the old excess capacity dilemma was at work—and expanding to global dimensions, with companies in North America, Europe, and Asia fighting for the same markets.

It's possible that Boff puts too much emphasis on exogenous "supply shocks" and not enough on intensified international competition.

In the light of all these Keynesian ideas, it's even more clear to me than before that the government in 2011 is virtually digging the grave of American corporate capitalism by dramatically cutting spending, even military spending!<sup>110</sup> The economy is, on the whole, going to get worse and worse for years. A full-fledged depression might well break out. Will it be possible to reconstruct corporate capitalism in its aftermath? Doubtful.

I won't summarize the last two chapters of the book, but I'll mention a couple of arguments Boff makes about the nature of corporations—arguments I'd heard before, and which have always seemed obviously true to me. First, enormous size doesn't entail enormous efficiency. Corporate consolidation often happens at the

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<sup>109</sup> But Brenner would argue that in order to *really* get out of the trap, an even more severe recession, or a depression, would have been necessary first, in order to "shake out" all the unproductive capital in the economy. Indeed, Boff himself said as much a few pages earlier.

<sup>110</sup> (Actually, upon inquiring further I've learned that all the talk about cuts to defense spending is bullshit. Orwellian doublespeak. It only means reductions in the *projected future growth* of defense spending. Not actual cuts.)

expense of efficiency. (Market power, which doesn't seem to correlate with technical efficiency, is profitable.) Second, "giant companies are not the fountainhead of technological progress. The largest firms do not support R&D more intensively relative to their size. Small, independent inventors, unaffiliated with any industrial research facilities, supply a disproportionate number of inventions like air conditioning, the jet engine, [and] insulin. 'Radical new ideas,' *Business Week* concluded in a 1976 survey, 'tend to bog down in big-company bureaucracy. This is why major innovations—from the diesel locomotive to Xerography and the Polaroid camera—often come from outside an established industry.'"

Such facts suggest that Schumpeter's optimistic "creative destruction" theory "might be turned on its head. The revised sequence would be that, for big business, profitable growth strategies are linked to the attainment of market power, which often engenders bureaucratic management and conservative policies. Excess profits can accrue long enough to lull corporate giants into a false sense of security. Among the predictable results would be technological lag, periodic attempts to shore up profits and power through mergers, and administrative hypertrophy."

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Reading *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), by David Harvey. The inflation of the 1970s, as you may know, resulted largely from government attempts to keep the Keynesian, labor-accommodating state going in a poorer economic climate, an environment of slower economic growth than the two postwar decades. The high inflation manifested the crisis of the Keynesian state. Double-digit inflation couldn't go on forever; it had to end, surely, in more or less the way it did, with the turn to restrictive monetary policies that facilitated the destruction of unions and other conservative attacks on the population.

Harvey's observations on finance are interesting. The OPEC oil price hike of the 1970s placed vast amounts of money at the disposal of oil-producing states; the Saudis, under U.S. pressure,

agreed to funnel all their petrodollars through New York investment banks. “The latter suddenly found themselves in command of massive funds for which they needed to find profitable outlets. The options within the U.S., given the depressed economic conditions and low rates of return in the mid-1970s, were not good.” So the banks looked abroad, toward governments, which were the safest bet. In order to lend to them, though, international credit and financial markets had to be liberalized, a strategy that the U.S. actively pursued throughout the 1970s. Developing countries were hungry for credit, so they borrowed even at disadvantageous rates. What followed a few years later was the debt crisis of the 1980s. Here Harvey inserts a telling comment: “[Mexico’s debt crisis demonstrated] a key difference between liberal and neoliberal practice: under the former, lenders take the losses that arise from bad investment decisions, while under the latter the borrowers are forced by state and international powers to take on board the cost of debt repayment no matter what the consequences for the livelihood and well-being of the local population.” Good old-fashioned neoliberal hypocrisy. Market discipline for *you*, but not for us.

Useful:

[One general trend in neoliberalism] is for the privileges of ownership and management of capitalist enterprises—traditionally separated—to fuse by paying CEOs (managers) in stock options (ownership titles). Stock values rather than production then become the guiding light of economic activity and, as later became apparent with the collapse of companies such as Enron, the speculative temptations that resulted from this could become overwhelming. The second trend has been to dramatically reduce the historical gap between money capital earning dividends and interest, on the one hand, and production, manufacturing, or merchant capital looking to gain profits on the other. This separation had at various

times in the past produced conflicts between financiers, producers, and merchants.... During the 1970s much of this conflict either disappeared or took new forms. The large corporations became more and more financial in their orientation, even when, as in the automobile sector, they were engaging in production. Since 1980 or so it has not been uncommon for corporations to report losses in production offset by gains from financial operations (everything from credit and insurance operations to speculating in volatile currency and futures markets).

So how did elites manufacture popular consent in their efforts to restore their own class power after the 1960s and respond to the crisis of capital accumulation in the 1970s? Through propaganda, of course. The Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the newly organized Business Roundtable, and other groups set about conquering the political and the popular mind. Think-tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Hoover Institute were formed. And neoliberal economics captured the research universities and business schools that churned out the technocrats who worked at the IMF, the World Bank, and other such institutions.

Harvey has a good discussion of New York City's fiscal crisis in 1975. "Capitalist restructuring and deindustrialization had for several years been eroding the economic base of the city, and rapid suburbanization had left much of the central city impoverished. The result was explosive social unrest on the part of marginalized populations during the 1960s, defining what came to be known as 'the urban crisis'.... The expansion of public employment and public provision—facilitated in part by generous federal funding—was seen as the solution. But, faced with fiscal difficulties, President Nixon simply declared the urban crisis over in the early 1970s." That was ridiculous, but it served as an excuse to diminish federal aid. As the recession of the mid-1970s got worse, New

York's budget situation grew dire. Finally in 1975 a cabal of investment bankers refused to roll over the debt and pushed the city into bankruptcy. "The bailout that followed entailed the construction of new institutions that took over the management of the city budget." Draconian policies later associated with the IMF were imposed on the city, partly so that bondholders would get their money back and partly so that financial institutions could restructure the city in their interest. "Wealth was redistributed to the upper classes in the midst of a fiscal crisis," as would be the case in country after country for the next forty years. "The New York city crisis was 'symptomatic of an emerging strategy of disinflation coupled with a regressive redistribution of income, wealth, and power.'" After a few years of the austerity measures, "'many of the historic achievements of working-class New York were undone.' Much of the social infrastructure of the city was diminished and the physical infrastructure (for example the subway system) deteriorated markedly for lack of investment or even maintenance." Etc. In the meantime, investment bankers were remaking the city for the benefit of business (especially in finance, legal services, the media, and consumer-oriented areas), using public resources to build the appropriate infrastructure. "Working-class and ethnic-immigrant New York was thrust back into the shadows, to be ravaged by racism and a crack cocaine epidemic of epic proportions in the 1980s."

To sum up: "The management of the New York fiscal crisis pioneered the way for neoliberal practices both domestically under Reagan and internationally through the IMF in the 1980s. It established the principle that in the event of a conflict between the integrity of financial institutions and bondholders' returns, on the one hand, and the well-being of the citizens on the other, the former was to be privileged. It emphasized that the role of the government was to create a good business climate rather than look to the need and well-being of the population at large. The politics of the Reagan administration....became 'merely the New York scenario' of the 1970s 'writ large.'"

Meanwhile, businesses sought to capture the Republican Party as their own instrument, which was facilitated by recent campaign finance laws and pro-business decisions of the Supreme Court. To establish a solid electoral base, Republicans formed alliances with the Christian right.

Harvey is right that neoliberalism is riddled with contradictions, many of which fall under the category of hypocrisies. Both in theory and in practice there are contradictions. The result is that the neoliberal state is inherently unstable. Neoconservatism can be construed as a response to this instability, a way of keeping it manageable. In some ways, neoconservative nationalists and neoliberals work well together: they both favor corporate power, elite governance, private enterprise, the restoration of capitalist class power, and they're suspicious of democracy. But neoconservatives place a greater emphasis on "order" as an answer to the "chaos of individual interests" (neoliberal atomization), and they're attracted to the ideas of nationalism, cultural traditions, and so-called conservative morality as "the necessary social glue to keep the body politic secure in the face of external and internal dangers." In theory, neoliberalism isn't concerned with the nation but rather with the state (and the market); neoconservatism is interested in both. Taken to their logical conclusions, its prescriptions imply a world of competing nationalisms, competing cultures and moralities, competing authoritarianisms. It is, in other words, a modern incarnation of fascism. Quite different from neoliberalism, though in practice there are clear "elective affinities."

So how did neoliberalism spread from the U.S. and U.K. to the rest of the world? You know about the IMF's structural adjustment programs, Latin American dictatorships, and so on. (Neoliberalism couldn't spread through democracy; it had to be imposed by authoritarian means. See Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*.) Underlying all that was the increasing mobility of capital and the turn toward more open financialization, facilitated by the spread of the new economic orthodoxy to agenda-setting institutions. In addition, "the U.S. used the carrot of preferential access to its huge



consumer market to persuade many countries to reform their economies along neoliberal lines.” On the reasons for U.S. dynamism in the 1990s, Harvey remarks that “flexibility in labour markets and reductions in welfare provision....began to pay off for the U.S. and put competitive pressures on the more rigid labour markets that prevailed in most of Europe and Japan. The real secret of U.S. success, however, was that it was now able to pump high rates of return into the country from its financial and corporate operations (both direct and portfolio investments) in the rest of the world. It was this flow of tribute from the rest of the world that founded much of the affluence achieved in the U.S. in the 1990s.”

Neoliberalism has had a dismal record at fostering global growth;<sup>111</sup> its main substantive achievement “has been to redistribute [upwards], rather than to generate, wealth and income.” The primary means by which it has done this, according to Harvey, is “accumulation by dispossession,” or something similar to what Marx called primitive accumulation. That didn’t end centuries ago with the spread of industrial capitalism; it has continued up to the present and even accelerated. Under neoliberalism there are innumerable techniques for robbing people of resources. Even—or especially—public goods previously won through generations of class struggle, such as social welfare provision, public education, and regulatory frameworks, have been pillaged and destroyed.

—That reminds me of the destruction of the commons and of medieval regulations in Europe during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It’s always dangerous to construct abstract typologies, but there appear to have been two, or rather one-and-a-half, “cycles” in capitalist history. Abstractly you can think of it in this way: first, a lot of ancient communal practices and public goods were dismantled before, during, and after the Industrial Revolution. You could call this the first wave of privatization. (It has continued unceasingly all over the world, but let’s just call it

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<sup>111</sup> Insofar as the last twenty years have been economically dynamic, that has been due in large part to the rise of China. And China’s “state capitalism” departs from the free-market neoliberal model in many ways.

the first wave.) As it was going on, the victims of capitalism sought to maintain their old rights and/or acquire new, governmentally protected ones. At length they succeeded to some extent, and new public goods were consolidated under the 20th-century Keynesian welfare state. This was probably a nearly inevitable development, because, as Karl Polanyi said in *The Great Transformation*, marketization and privatization will, if unchecked, eventually cause the total destruction of society. So popular resistance, aided by sane elements of the upper classes, succeeded in regulating further depredations and temporarily saving society after the Great Depression. But technology kept progressing, capital mobility increased, global integration continued, populations kept growing, and the “public” and politicized nature of the Keynesian state started encroaching too much on capitalist class power. Finally the masses got out of hand, got too politicized, too powerful—all those crazy ideas of democracy in the 1960s!—and there was a capitalist backlash, made possible by (and making possible) ever-more-globally-integrated markets, elite institutional networks, and extreme capital mobility worldwide. The inflationary consequences of popular empowerment in a context of economic stagnation (the 1970s) were tamed, namely by destroying popular empowerment. That is, the second wave of privatization occurred, after the 1970s: public goods were again dismantled and “accumulation by dispossession” began anew (though, in truth, it had never really stopped). This time, the old nationalist Keynesian solution to the horrors of privatization wasn’t available, since the world had become too integrated and nations themselves were deteriorating, due to the post-1970s capitalist onslaught. So transnational social movements were necessary. But would they prove strong enough to save society?? Stay tuned!

Anyways, you see there’s a logic to it all, a “dialectical” logic.

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*Saving Marxism from Lenin.*— Peter Kropotkin’s essay “The State: Its Historic Role.” *L’état, c’est la guerre*. One of the state’s historic roles, of course, has been to transplant the peasantry from the

countryside to the cities so as to facilitate industrialization (i.e., to create Marx's "reserve army of labor") and make possible the exploitation of land for profit. This is one of the ways in which the nation-state and capitalist industrialization go hand-in-hand. China is doing it now, moving hundreds of millions of peasants to cities—the greatest urban-planning project in history. European states did it from the 1500s to the 1900s, in England with the enclosure acts, in France with the laborious destruction of the village communes, in Russia with Stolypin's legislation and then Stalin's Five-Year Plans, etc. There are other ways too. Chomsky discusses in one of his early essays the historic function of the Vietnam War in destroying on a colossal scale the peasant villages and sending former inhabitants to the cities, where they would become cheap labor for capital to exploit. This massive removal of the peasantry from the countryside is a prerequisite for capitalist development, indeed for industrialization of whatever kind. And it isn't "automatic," proceeding from purely market-driven causes, as bourgeois ideologists proclaim. It's intentional, political, brutal, the forced uprooting of hundreds of millions.

Kropotkin was always right that the regeneration of society, the anti-capitalist social revolution, couldn't be carried out primarily by the national state but rather by grassroots and quasi-grassroots movements (which of course can have leadership structures and some degree of power-centralization). The state is mainly an institution for domination, destruction, and "law and order"; it is not very *socially creative*, at least not on the required scale. Anarcho-syndicalism, likewise, was right that present economic structures will inevitably leave their mark on institutions built after the workers' political revolution—and therefore that the social (economic) revolution must substantially take place *before* the final conquest of political power, not after it. In the latter case it will fail, since capitalist holdovers of domination and exploitation will influence the "new society." (Cf. the history of the Soviet

Union, even its earliest phases.<sup>112</sup>) But this truth is also implicit in Marx's dictum that politics follows in the wake of economics. A post-capitalist social revolution can't be politically imposed, because in that case economic relations are not ripe for it. The new relations have to have already "matured," at least somewhat, under the old political regime, as happened during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Rightly understood, then, Marx was a kind of modified anarcho-syndicalist—or rather he should have been, logically speaking.<sup>113</sup> From his premises, the proletarian

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<sup>112</sup> Christopher Read has a good account in *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and Their Revolution, 1917–21* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>113</sup> Anarcho-syndicalists believed that workers had to create in the womb of the old society the institutions of the new. Socialism, they thought, would be structured around workers' councils and unions that had developed in the later stages of capitalism. They also rejected the idea of a "workers' state," proclaiming it to be impossible, and believed that the general strike was the most effective tool of revolution—two respects in which Marx would have disagreed with them. But arguably he shouldn't have. From his perspective there is no good reason to disavow the use of the general strike. Even his support for the idea of a workers' political party, which anarcho-syndicalists rejected (because they rejected all politics), is not particularly "Marxist," since political parties are usually forced to work within the confines of the parliamentary system and thus make compromises that blur the antagonism between labor and capital, in the end leading to the co-optation of the labor movement as a prop for the stability of the system. This was a danger that Marx and Engels were aware of, but they didn't take it seriously enough. Marx also should have made more explicit his support of direct action, which anarcho-syndicalists of course advocated. Nothing is more "Marxist" than direct action (which, like Marxist theory, tends to privilege material social relations over high-level politics). —On the other hand, I have to admit that Marx's advocacy of political activity was in some ways more realistic and less "utopian" than the anarcho-syndicalist position. But it was either Scylla or Charybdis for him, and for the working class: either the syndicalist route, which didn't truly succeed in any country for a variety of reasons, or a workers' party that would attempt to seize control of the

dictatorship's task could only be to finish the job, not to start it, as Lenin (and Stalin) tried. Workers' groups would have to do much of the societal restructuring beforehand; their subsequent political decrees would formalize and consolidate the institutions that the workers had already begun to create. Otherwise, given the foundation of the political in the economic, the new government's acts would inevitably have the taint of capitalist, bureaucratic structures that still survived. More than the "taint," in fact.

In short, despite himself, Marx knew that the attempt to politically will new liberatory institutions into existence wouldn't succeed (as Lenin, Stalin, and Mao tried). They have to emerge slowly, through popular struggle; otherwise they're artificial, "inorganic," bureaucratic, and coercive, since economic conditions aren't ripe for them.

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*A book review, sort of. (Repetitive of the above.)— The Food Wars* (2009), by Walden Bello, presents both a damning indictment of the neoliberal world food system and a vision of an alternative system based on small-scale agriculture, which Bello argues can be more efficient, socially responsible, and environmentally sustainable than capitalist industrial farming. Indeed, according to Via Campesina, such alternative agriculture (and hunting and gathering) is responsible for most of the world's food.<sup>114</sup> Not only is it an ideal, therefore; it is an incredibly important reality. However, Bello does not really *theorize* the hoped-for supplanting of corporate monoculture by what he calls "peasant" agriculture; he

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state but in the process would inevitably make compromises and finally succumb to a moderate reformism and bureaucratism, as happened all over Europe. (Alternatively, if it didn't become reformist, it would become ruthlessly authoritarian and bureaucratic, as most Communist parties did.)

<sup>114</sup> Via Campesina, "Sustainable Peasant and Family Farm Agriculture Can Feed the World" (Jakarta: September 2010), p. 5, at <http://viacampesina.org/downloads/pdf/en/paper6-EN-FINAL.pdf>.

simply says, or implies, that Marxists have been wrong to predict the end of the peasantry, that instead this category of producers can represent the post-capitalist future. In this paper I will provide some of the theory that is lacking in *The Food Wars*.

In my Master's thesis, entitled *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States*,<sup>115</sup> I tried to update Marxism, specifically its theory of revolution, so as to explain how a transition to a post-capitalist civilization could occur. The essence of the revision is the replacement of Marx's statist vision—his prediction of a dictatorship of the proletariat that plans and directs social and economic reconstruction from above—by a more grassroots-oriented, quasi-anarcho-syndicalist vision, according to which decentralized (or *relatively* decentralized) networks of workers, farmers, consumers, and communities gradually build up the new society within the shell of the old. Ironically, this anarchist vision is, I think, more compatible with the fundamental tenets of Marxism than Marx's own statism is, for several reasons, of which I will mention two. First, the idea of a state organizing a new, egalitarian mode of production in a society that, after a merely *political* revolution, is still dominated by authoritarian capitalist relations of production, is inexplicable in Marxian terms. According to Marxism, after all, political relations are conditioned by economic relations; the state cannot simply organize a wholly new economy out of thin air, purely by an act of bureaucratic will. That would reverse the order of dominant causality. Given an already existing authoritarian economy (namely capitalism), the "new" economy organized by the post-revolutionary state will necessarily be authoritarian as well, in fact will reproduce many of the essential relations of the old economy. This is what happened in the Soviet Union, when the Stalinist bureaucracy organized an economy based on the exploitation of workers, the accumulation of capital, and other essential features of

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<sup>115</sup> Available at [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=masters\\_theses](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=masters_theses).

capitalism. Socialism means workers' control of their own economic activity, which is the exact opposite of both capitalism and the Soviet economy. What has to happen, in other words, according to a properly understood Marxism, is that the economy be substantially transformed—in a gradual process—*before* any political revolutions,<sup>116</sup> as was the case during Europe's transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production. (The French Revolution, for example, happened after capitalism had already made significant progress in France.) The same will have to be the case with regard to a transition from capitalism to a properly understood socialism.

Second, Marx theorizes social revolution in terms of the “fettering” of productive forces by an obsolete mode of production. As he says in the famous Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859),

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure [of politics, culture, etc.].

This hypothesis is basically true, but it is expressed in a sloppy way that tends to support Marx's invalid statism. It is virtually meaningless to say, as he does, that a specific set of production relations starts to fetter the productive forces at some point in its history, thus finally triggering a revolution that sweeps away the

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<sup>116</sup> I.e., before any final “seizing of the state.”

old society—by means of a dictatorship of the proletariat, as Marx says elsewhere. For most or all of its history, the capitalist mode of production has both promoted *and* obstructed the development and socially efficient use of productive forces, by encouraging technological innovation but wasting resources in periodic economic crises, wars, socially useless advertising and marketing campaigns, an inequitable and irrational distribution of wealth, and so on. “Fettering” and “development” can therefore happen simultaneously, in different respects. In order to make any real sense of the notion of fettering, it has to be considered as *relative to* an alternative mode of production emerging within the bowels of the old society, a new set of production relations that is more productive and socially rational than the older set. Feudalism fettered, in a sense, the development of productive forces for eons, but it collapsed only when this fettering was in relation to a new, more dynamic mode of production, namely capitalism. Similarly, capitalism has in some ways obstructed the development of productive forces for a long time; it will collapse, however, only when it can no longer effectively compete with a more advanced, cooperative mode of production. Then, and only then, can a post-capitalist *political* revolution occur—i.e., after the (gradual) *social* revolution has already reached a fairly mature level.

In short, the approach of Via Campesina, the World Social Forum, and other such organizations to fighting capitalism—their decentralized, federated, grassroots, un-Leninist and un-Maoist approach—is wise (though it can and should be supplemented with a more “political” strategy too, as long as it doesn’t go to Leninist or Maoist extremes<sup>117</sup>). Moreover, it is a truly Marxist approach, if Marxism is cleansed of its authoritarian and un-Marxian elements. The notion of peasant activism as having a role to play in a

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<sup>117</sup> Leninists defend their hero against charges of elitism and so on by pointing to his historical context. Fine. Maybe most of his tactics were necessary given the political situation; the point is that the Bolshevik party was basically authoritarian, bureaucratic (as even Lenin admitted), and conspiratorial, as in its October 1917 coup.



transition from capitalism to socialism is not particularly un-Marxian, as long as it is understood that such activism has to work in tandem with urban, industrial activism in order really to lead to a new society. It is simplistic, however, to equate peasant agriculture with all small-scale farming, as Walden Bello seems to. A Marxist does not have to be committed to the idea that small-scale farming is doomed or has no role to play in an advanced capitalist or socialist society. All he is committed to is that the explosive growth of capitalism tends, in the very long run, to undermine or destroy feudal class structures and subsistence agriculture. These may persist for long periods of time, and subsistence farming in particular may last in some regions for all of history. It does tend to become less widespread, though, as industrial capitalism conquers the globe—a fact that Bello does not deny. Whether various forms of small-scale agriculture might be essential to the functioning of even late capitalism or socialism is a separate question, to which a Marxist can coherently answer “Yes.”

Questions about Marxism aside, Bello is right that the way to a new society is represented by the economic and political activism of the downtrodden classes in all sectors of the economy, be they agriculture, industry, public education (under attack across the West), the service sector, or whatever. The Marxian injunction that “workers” all over the world unite should be understood as referring not only to the industrial proletariat but to the exploited and marginalized of all stripes, non-capitalists in whatever form. Whatever Marx’s original intention was, this is the proper understanding of the revolutionary path. If peasants, low-paid workers, students, small farmers, the unemployed, environmental activists, victims of discrimination, and dispossessed indigenous peoples all join hands to carve a new economy and politics out of the collapsing ruins of the old, it is possible that humanity will live to see another era.

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*Another summary of scholarship.*— The history of the American city is worth knowing. It is analyzed thoughtfully in *Marxism and*

*the Metropolis: New Perspectives in Urban Political Economy* (1984), edited by William Tabb and Larry Sawers. David Gordon has a particularly good chapter. Marxists usually divide the city's history into three stages: the commercial city, the industrial city, and the corporate city, corresponding to the successive phases of commercial capital, competitive industrial capital, and corporate or monopoly capital. The commercial city, which lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century, was a center for trade, craft manufacturing, and mercantilist government. Its residential structure was relatively heterogeneous and not as segregated as it would become later: "People of many different backgrounds and occupations were interspersed throughout the central city districts, with little obvious socioeconomic residential segregation. In the central port districts, the randomness and intensity of urban life produced jagged, unexpected, random physical patterns. Streets zigged and zagged every which way. Buildings were scattered at odd angles in unexpected combinations." The only group that didn't share in this central port-district life was the poor—beggars, casual seamen, propertyless laborers—who lived outside the cities in shantytowns and rooming houses, moving from town to town. As the commercial city grew, the only major change that took place in its organization was the rationalizing of land speculation, the birth of the "urban grid" characterized by straight lines, ninety-degree angles, etc.

Early factories were located in small towns, but after a few decades they had moved to large cities. Why? First of all, they provided easy access to markets, workers, transportation, and intermediate goods. In other words, cities provided "agglomeration economies," as mainstream economists call it. David Gordon also suggests that, at least until the 1880s, it was easier for employers to control their workers and suppress resistance in large cities than in small ones. The reasons, he says, are that, "first, the greater physical segregation and impersonality of the larger cities seem to have isolated the working class and exposed it to community indifference or ostracism [which was very different than in small cities, where the middle classes often *supported* workers' strikes].

Second, non-industrial classes in smaller cities seem to have exhibited more militantly preindustrial values [such as human decency and fair pay] than their larger-city cousins.” In short, “the basis for industrial profits was best secured if and when a homogeneous industrial proletariat could be most effectively segregated from the rest of society,” which was more feasible in large than in small cities.

Huge factories were concentrated in downtown industrial districts, near rail and water outlets; segregated working-class housing districts emerged, located near factories; the middle and upper classes began to escape from the unpleasant center city, eventually being “arrayed in concentric rings” around the center; shopping districts arose in the heart of the city to cater to the more prosperous classes. The differences from the earlier commercial city are clear. “The central city was [now] occupied by dependent wage-earners rather than independent property-owners. Producers no longer lived and worked in the same place; there was now a separation between job and residential location. There was no longer residential heterogeneity; instead, the cities had quickly acquired a sharp residential segregation by economic class. In the Commercial City, the poor had lived outside the center while everyone else lived inside; now, suddenly, the poor and working classes lived inside while everyone else raced away from the center.”

Problems—for capitalists—began to appear in the 1880s and later. The most important one was that as workers became more and more concentrated in large cities, labor unrest grew harder to suppress. Strikes bred demonstrations throughout the downtown districts. At the turn of the century, as the merger wave took off and monopoly capital entered the historical arena, manufacturing started moving out of the central city in search of more stable and secure environments (and lower taxes). Factory districts beyond the city limits cropped up, such as Gary, Indiana and East Chicago. Thus “the great twentieth-century reversal of factory location” began, because—at least in part—“corporations could no longer control their labor forces in the central city.”

Around the same time, especially from the 1920s on, central business districts were created and expanded. "Downtown office space in the ten largest cities increased between 1920 and 1930 by 3000 percent. Tall skyscrapers suddenly sprouted...." Why did it take until the 1920s for central business districts to flower? Apparently because "large corporations were not yet ready for them before then. Huge corporations had not consolidated their monopoly control over their industries until after World War I. Once they gained stable market control, they could begin to organize that control. They were now large enough to separate administrative functions from the production process itself, leaving plant managers to oversee the factories while corporate managers supervised the far-flung empire." They chose downtown locations because of agglomeration economies (the advantages of being near other headquarters, banks and law offices, advertising agents). Incidentally, Daniel Burnham's famous 1909 *Plan of Chicago* proves that even at that early date, the commercial business community was preparing for a "post-industrial" future. It's a strikingly modern plan, prioritizing urban beautification, the development of highways, new parks, railroad terminal improvements, civic and cultural centers, a more systematic arrangement of streets, and the gradual eviction of industry from the central city by means of zoning regulations and an increase of property values. The plan was partially implemented in the following decades.

Another major change that began with the transition to corporate capitalism was the political fragmentation of urban areas, i.e., the rise of "political suburbanization." A sort of primitive suburbanization had already been going on for quite a long time, but until the end of the nineteenth century, central cities had continually annexed outlying residential districts. Suburban residents usually opposed this, preferring autonomy, but they couldn't do much about it. Until the turn of the century. The last urban annexations (in *old* cities at least, not newer ones like Los Angeles) happened between 1890 and 1910. The reason for this cessation of annexation activity, it seems, was that the power

dynamics changed: as manufacturers themselves began to move out of central cities, legislatures and local governments were prevailed upon not to allow the annexation of suburban areas by cities. (What the manufacturers wanted was to avoid paying high central-city taxes and to stay outside the purview of progressive city legislation.)

Gordon concludes his analysis:

If a city had reached maturity as an Industrial City during the stage of industrial accumulation, its character changed rapidly during the corporate period although its physical structure remained embedded in concrete. Its downtown shopping districts were transformed into downtown central business districts, dominated by skyscrapers.... Surrounding the central business district were [eventually] emptying manufacturing areas, depressed from the desertion of large plants, barely surviving on the light and competitive industries left behind. Next to those districts were the old working-class districts, often transformed into “ghettos,” locked into the cycle of central-city manufacturing decline. Outside the central city there were suburban belts of industrial development, linked together by circumferential highways. Scattered around those industrial developments were fragmented working-class and middle-class suburban communities. The wealthy lived farther out. Political fragmentation prevailed beyond the central-city boundaries.

Many other, newer cities—particularly those in the South, Southwest, and West—reached maturity during the stage of corporate accumulation. These became the exemplary Corporate Cities. They shared one thundering advantage over the older Industrial Cities: they had

never acquired the fixed physical capital of an earlier era. They could be constructed from scratch to fit the needs of a new period of accumulation in which factory plant and equipment were themselves frequently predicated upon a decentralized model. (Orthodox historians explain the decentralization of manufacturing as a *result* of this new plant and equipment [which includes trucks, cars, and highways, presumably]; I have argued that an eruption of class struggle initially prompted the decentralization and, by implication, that the new plant and equipment developed as a result of that dispersal in order to permit corporations' taking advantage of the new locational facts.) There was consequently no identifiable downtown factory district; manufacturing was scattered throughout the city plane. There were no centralized working-class housing districts (for that was indeed what capitalists had learned to avoid); working-class housing was scattered all over the city around the factories. Automobiles and trucks provided the connecting links, threading together the separate pieces. The Corporate City became, in Robert Fogelson's term, the Fragmented Metropolis. No centers anywhere. [Los Angeles is the classic example.] Diffuse economic activity everywhere.

By the way, mass suburbanization and deindustrialization would have happened earlier if the Great Depression and World War II hadn't intervened.<sup>118</sup> —What an irony that the historic victories of the CIO in the 1930s happened only twenty or thirty years before

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<sup>118</sup> Patrick Ashton notes that in 1929 the population of suburbs was growing twice as fast as that of central cities. In 1900, about 10 percent of the U.S. population already lived in suburbs.

deindustrialization truly got underway and started to destroy the power of unions! (Whereas earlier in the century, decentralization of production was impelled by the desire to escape labor unrest, in the postwar period it was impelled largely by the desire to escape the power of unions. In both cases, class struggle explains the shift.)<sup>119</sup>

The urban fiscal crisis between the 1960s and 1980s was mainly a crisis of the “old cities,” the old industrial centers like Chicago and New York, not the new cities in the South and West. The Great Depression and World War II saved the old cities for a time, but eventually they had to succumb to declining tax revenues (from white flight and deindustrialization)<sup>120</sup> and increasing expenditures due to social problems. So, some of them nearly went bankrupt, and all of them were economically restructured from the 1970s to the present. They were made more “corporate,” more services-oriented, and recently more touristy, like cities all over the West—indeed, the whole world. Even the “new” cities that initially avoided the urban crisis have recently been losing jobs, this time overseas (as capital mobility has increased). So they too have had recourse to things like tourism, entertainment, urban beautification to raise property values, and the FIRE sector (finance, insurance, real estate). The so-called “neoliberal city” is really just the post-industrial city in a context of hyper-globalization. It is the latest form of the “corporate” city, which is going to continue evolving towards greater privatization and militarization.

It’s also interesting that with the acceleration of gentrification, which is a very conscious *policy*, more middle- and upper-class

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<sup>119</sup> It’s true that other factors were operative too. Another author writes, “The growing scale of [industrial] operation discouraged central [city] location where land was scarce. The wave of mergers around the turn of the century created giant bureaucratic empires which needed headquarters in which to coordinate their far-flung operations. Thus office activities began crowding out manufacturing from the central business districts....”

<sup>120</sup> Remember, too, that from the 1930s on, federal policies effectively subsidized the expansion of suburbs, because they were very good for capital.

people are returning to the city and lower-income people leaving it for the suburbs. Property values are rising, forcing many immigrants and minorities to move out to the suburbs where they can afford to live. City governments encourage this because higher property values mean higher taxes, in addition to a better “reputation” in the global competition to attract business. Needless to say, plenty of city neighborhoods remain in dilapidated, gang-ridden condition; their number is declining, though. Chicago’s Logan Square, where I live, wasn’t the safest of areas eight years ago, but it’s gentrifying at a rapid pace. Soon some of the Hispanics who live on my block might have to move elsewhere.

Nancy Kleniewski has a good paper on postwar urban renewal in Philadelphia. But much of what she says applies to cities all around the country. For example, in Chicago too (under Richard J. Daley and later), “urban renewal stimulated investment in the central city, it bolstered the values of central city property, it spurred the transformation of central [Chicago] from an industrial city to a corporate city, and it initiated a change in the composition of the population living in and near the central city....from predominantly industrial working-class, unemployed poor, and racial minorities, to predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle-class and professional.” The poor whose homes had been demolished were shunted off to public housing or to increasingly crime-plagued neighborhoods farther away from the central business district. And so things continue, in the new neoliberal forms of urban renewal and class segregation.

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A lot of mainstream people would criticize me for immersing myself in leftist scholarship and journalism, which they would say is a close-minded or partisan thing to do. They would say I should expose myself to *all* kinds of writing, not only the leftist variety. Actually, such a criticism is silly because I do read writings from a variety of viewpoints. In my classes, for example, I have to read mainstream scholarship, and every day when I browse the internet or read my roommate’s copy of *The Economist* I’m exposed to



mainstream and conservative journalism.<sup>121</sup> Aside from this, however, the fact is that among leftist writing there is a greater proportion of *good* stuff, honest and critical stuff, than among mainstream and conservative writing. That judgment has nothing to do with my “ideology”; it is simply a fact. Nor is the explanation hard to think of. For one thing, journalists and commentators in the mainstream usually do not have to carefully give a lot of evidence to establish their claims, because it is relatively rare that anyone will challenge them (or their narrative framework, at least). If what you say is consistent with the dominant narratives propagated all over society by power centers, most of your audience will simply take what you say for granted. If, on the other hand, you are challenging conventional narratives, people will demand evidence.<sup>122</sup> Thus, taking an oppositional stance to the mainstream, or to power centers, itself tends to foster a mindset of intellectual integrity—because people’s constant attacks on you force you to arm yourself with good arguments, so you can defend yourself.

Related to this is the fact that, because most people and institutions everywhere are constantly trafficking in mainstream ideologies and perspectives, it is relatively *easy* to do the same yourself. A scholar or journalist in the center or on the right usually does not have to dig very deep, uncover hidden truths or think critically about his intellectual framework. An author on the left, however, does. His whole project is to put forward views and uncover stories that are being ignored or no one knows about. All

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<sup>121</sup> Some of which is pretty good. Much of the business press has good, factual reporting (the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, *Business Week*—though rarely the *Economist*, which is ideological pablum)—but often such reporting, even in the business press, is precisely *leftist* in its implications and orientation. More leftist than anything you’ll read in the *New York Times*. Some of it could appear in ZMag or *Dollars & Sense*.

<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, if you’re Chomsky, your careful citing of masses of evidence will be ridiculed as intellectual bullying or as “his customary blizzard of citations.” Ultimately, the only way you can satisfy the guardians of mainstream orthodoxy is by espousing their own conventional ideologies.

the better that these tend to be the *human* stories, the *concrete*, *factual* stories, stories about workers striking against corporations, people protesting wars, billions living in sprawling slums, public services breaking down everywhere, women being sold into sex slavery, governments colluding with corporations, arms being shipped from the U.S. to governments that use them to suppress labor movements, governments ignoring the popular will (demonstrable from polls), economic polarization reaching new heights every year, or the fact that democracy and the middle class have historically been born from the efforts largely of the working class and the labor movement, etc. All this and more is *true*; the writings of a Milton or Thomas Friedman, or an Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (in his Kennedy years), or a William Buckley, are transparently superficial and partisan, even dishonest.

Ironical that it's the *leftists* who have always been accused of being ideological and biased! They're doing little but reporting facts and putting self-evident interpretations on them;<sup>123</sup> it's the centrists and conservatives who tend to be ideological and flagrantly biased (towards authority).

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*False consciousness.*— Leftists are sometimes criticized for being condescending toward the masses, for arguing that they are prone to displaying false consciousness in their political values and beliefs. But what *is* false consciousness? If you examine the notion rigorously, you'll see that, on at least some understandings, it can make perfect sense and is often applicable. All you have to do is assume that people have certain basic values and interests, such as being economically well-off, living in integrated communities, having political power, and having control over their work. Given such values, it is perfectly legitimate to criticize "secondary" values and strategies like opposing labor unions, civil rights, health-care reform, and government regulation of business. A different kind of false consciousness is exhibited in mistaken factual judgments,

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<sup>123</sup> I don't mean *all* leftists.

such as disbelief in anthropogenic global warming and belief in God. In general, insofar as someone is immune to rational considerations, he or she is exhibiting what can be called “false consciousness.” (Truth, after all, is reached and tested through reason.)

People are free to have whatever values they want. If religion makes them happy, then fine. In that respect it is reasonable for them to be religious (for it makes them happy). But in other respects religious values and beliefs can be unreasonable, namely insofar as they contradict other values and beliefs the person holds. And they often, or always, do, implicitly if not explicitly.

Anyway, it is just an obvious fact that economic and political power-structures are very good at duping people, manipulating them into voting or acting against their own interests. There is such a thing as propaganda, after all. Is it “condescending” to want to counteract propaganda by educating and organizing people (and being educated by them in the process)? Is it “elitist” to value reason? Is it wrong to deplore the disempowerment of “the 99 percent”?

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*Thoughts on the first half of the twentieth century.*— The catastrophe of the second “Thirty Years’ War,” from 1914 to 1945, had many causes, but right now let’s consider the ideological ones. Nationalism, racism (as a systematic philosophy), and antisemitism were both reactions against and sublimations of the atomized, competitive, depersonalized capitalist society of Europe at the time, with its implicitly Social Darwinist structure. But even earlier in the nineteenth century, ideological reactions—relatively benign ones—existed. Romanticism and Transcendentalism, for example: escaping from the ugly, selfish, competitive world of early industrialism into quasi-mysticism, idealism, art, exalted morality....but also a transformed individualism (hence the “sublimation” aspect). At the same time, for the masses there was religious revivalism—which, in its manifestations, sort of fused communalism and individualism, as most mass ideologies of the

last two centuries have. So there were these early “reactions and sublimations,” which didn’t last. (There were also, of course, early workers’ movements, but right now I’m considering “existential” movements and ideologies, not rational-interest things like fighting for higher pay and better working conditions. On the other hand, such movements can serve an existential purpose too, by allowing people to immerse themselves in a collective cause.) After the middle of the century, it seems that existential movements faded away for a while (except among pockets of intellectuals and students, and maybe in parts of Eastern Europe)—only to reemerge with a vengeance in the 1880s and afterwards. This time the ideologies were more political, and some of them related not only to emotional and intellectual needs but also to “rational” social interests. So, socialism and Marxism spread, and Populism in Russia, and varieties of nationalism, some of them genuinely concerned with social justice (as well as, in Eastern Europe, political independence and democracy). But among nationalists it became difficult to serve two gods at once, the nation and social justice, so the camps split apart around the 1890s (in Poland, for example), one committed primarily to socialism—although also to the nation inasmuch as it identified the “real” nation with the proletariat and/or other oppressed classes—and the other to national unity and greatness.<sup>124</sup> This latter camp became increasingly attracted to an “aesthetic” morality rather than a “justice” morality, taking inspiration from Social Darwinism and vulgarizations of Nietzsche.

Anyway, I already made the point I wanted to make in the second sentence of this section. Fin-de-siècle nationalism and antisemitism were uniquely powerful ideologies, accepting as they did the realities of power and struggle in the modern world, exalting authority, hierarchy, Social Darwinistic struggle, even hatred (of the national enemy)—thus proving useful to power-structures, effectively legitimizing them and their ever-greater

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<sup>124</sup> See Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (2000).

accumulation of power—but also promising the individual an escape from the horrors and petty daily miseries of all this struggle, these hate-producing hierarchies and social inequalities and structures of atomized competition, by holding out the *nation* as an arena of harmony and order and a kind of collective freedom, an arena in which one's material interests and emotional needs would be satisfied by one's immersion in the ordered mass. Nationalism in a sense accepted and legitimized all the dissonant and inequality-perpetuating aspects of modern life, by displacing them from an interpersonal to an international and interracial realm.<sup>125</sup> So people could continue to feel as much resentment and hatred as they wanted without thereby feeling weak, unsuccessful, and confused, because now they knew how to make sense of their hatred, indeed that they were *supposed* to feel hate, that it made them good patriots. They could wallow in their diffuse resentment with a good conscience—because at the same time they were rising above it and gaining power over it, channeling it into something meaningful and communal. And since nationalism was at bottom an emotional thing, not serving people's material interests, it was invaluable, as I said, to economic and political power-structures, which therefore fomented it, stoked it into a continent-wide conflagration. *Two* conflagrations.

After World War II, finally, the powerful realized that vicious nationalism wasn't so useful to them after all, so they stopped subsidizing its propagation. Instead, the welfare state and social regulation emerged to soften capitalism and keep the masses obedient. Now that postwar statism is dying, social polarization is returning to its old extremes and discontent is flaring up

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<sup>125</sup> [I think what I meant here, or one of the things I meant, is that, according to nationalism, if these "dissonant" aspects of life continued to exist it was because of foreigners and members of other races. This doctrine effectively "accepted" and "legitimized" them, because of course they were due mainly to inter-*class* competition, not international or interracial. Power-structures therefore seized on nationalism as effectively allowing them to go on exploiting people, with the people's confused consent.]

everywhere. Luckily *this* time nationalism won't be able to muck things up as much as it did a hundred years ago. It's the age of internationalism, or even "transnationalism."

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Finally reading E. P. Thompson's classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Query: why was England so impervious to social and political reform in the early 19th century, during the Industrial Revolution? Answer: in part because in the 1790s "the French Revolution *consolidated* Old Corruption by uniting landowners and manufacturers in a common panic [over the Revolution]; and the popular societies were too weak and too inexperienced to effect either revolution or reform on their own." It's like 1919 in the United States, when the Russian revolution, by terrifying mainstream America, helped consolidate the power of business as against workers. -For several reasons, in the long run the existence of the Soviet Union was the best thing that could have happened to Western capitalism.

Reading further into the book, I just had a minor epiphany. (Sometimes something you've sort of known for a long time suddenly sinks in or you appreciate its implications with utmost clarity.) One of the most commonplace sociological facts about pre-industrial or transitioning-to-industrial or newly-industrial societies is that the labor force or even independent artisans do not have a "Protestant work-ethic," a disciplined work-ethic appropriate to industrial capitalism. Employers and the like complain about the laziness, indolence, indiscipline, etc. of the lower classes and obsess over how to get them to follow mechanically the rhythm of the clock and the overseer. So you get the sheer physical brutality of the Industrial Revolution, the constant cumulative struggle on the part of employers to increase their minute control of the work-process and deprive workers of every shred of autonomy, Frederick Winslow Taylor's scientific management, Henry Ford's and others' attempts to "socialize" workers into being good moral religious un-alcoholic dutiful citizens, and so forth. Wherever industrial capitalism is in its early

stages, you see this Herculean effort—this *war*—to impose mechanical industrial rhythms on the workforce, through external coercion and more subtle “internal” means. I say it’s “Herculean” because, as Thompson points out, it’s like an attempt to refashion human nature. You have to stifle the desire for leisure, for social pursuits, for play and creativity—in a being that is virtually defined by its love of play. No wonder there’s so much resistance to it! Centuries-long resistance! And of course, luckily, the enterprise is never wholly successful. Human nature, contrary to Lenin’s and Taylor’s hopes, cannot be erased and redrawn. Even the nascent capitalist class, the one getting all the material benefits, needed psychological assistance to complete the transformation from semi-leisured medieval life to modern disciplined life; hence in early modern Europe you had the spread of Calvinism and its notion of the professional “calling”—and individualism, self-discipline, acquisitive values, etc. (See Max Weber and R. H. Tawney.) That is, the capitalist managed to convince himself he was accumulating wealth for the glory of God. But the working class too, a couple centuries later, needed some similar psychic mechanism to adjust itself to the new order, and so you had in England (and America?) during the Industrial Revolution the acceptance among workers of Methodism and other sects that preached the blessedness of poverty and hard labor, submission to authority, compensation in the hereafter, and the like.

After quoting some emotionally overwrought Methodist literature (ecstatic religious conversions, joyously self-abandoning abasement in God), Thompson says that

we may see here in its lurid figurative expression the psychic ordeal in which the character-structure of the rebellious pre-industrial laborer or artisan was violently recast into that of the submissive industrial worker. Here, indeed, is [Andrew] Ure’s ‘transforming power.’ It is a phenomenon, almost diabolic in its penetration into the very sources of human personality, directed towards the repression

of emotional and spiritual energies. But 'repression' is a misleading word: these energies were not so much inhibited as displaced from expression in personal and in social life, and confiscated for the service of the Church. The box-like, blackening chapels stood in the industrial districts like great traps for the human psyche.... These Sabbath orgasms of feeling made more possible the single-minded weekday direction of these energies to the consummation of productive labor....

Thompson's whole discussion is brilliant. You really see how Victorian England and Europe became the repressive, neurotic, hysterical place Freud encountered. It was all this religion, all this "methodical" morality to discipline the instincts and personality for the sake (indirectly, unconsciously) of accumulating profit. Religions of repression spread through the whole population. "Since joy was associated with sin and guilt, and pain (Christ's wounds) with goodness and love, so every impulse became twisted into the reverse, and it became natural to suppose that man or child only found grace in God's eyes when performing painful, laborious or self-denying tasks. To labor and to sorrow was to find pleasure, and masochism was 'Love.'" In some of its early manifestations Methodism came close to worshiping death. But apparently it had softened and humanized itself a bit by the mid-19th century.

Why did the working classes submit to all this repressive religion? Partly because of continual, intensive indoctrination. From an early age—in the Sunday schools, etc. Also, there was the immersion in community that it offered. And in its social reality Methodism was by no means always as harsh as its intellectual expressions could be. Fourth, Thompson suggests that Methodist recruitment and revivals between 1790 and 1830 were the "psychic (and social) consequences of the counterrevolution" (by which he's referring to the suppression of labor movements, the inability of the exploited poor to raise themselves out of misery). Methodism



among the poor at this time was, perhaps, the “Chiliasm of despair.”

I need hardly point out that once Europe and America went from being industrializing to being mass-consuming, mature corporate-capitalist societies (with the “establishment-bureaucratization” of labor unions and their “self-policing” of workers, etc.), the character of mass indoctrination changed from emphasizing thrift, industry, morality, submission to authority, assimilation, and Americanization, to emphasizing relative leisure, consumerism, sexuality, and instant gratification. Then new psychic disorders arose. (Narcissism, schizoid patterns, the ache of “meaninglessness.”)

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*On late-nineteenth-century decadence and its sequel.*— What is the significance of the fact that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries certain sections of the middle and upper classes in Western society started obsessing over heroism, manliness, strength, military virtues, and, conversely, society’s increasing effeminacy, “neurasthenia,” desiccation, decadence, etc.? It was indeed a near-obsession, and it helped make possible fascism. What brought it about? Obviously imperialism helped foster the glorification of manly struggle, racial vitality and so on, but people genuinely perceived a *decline* in the vigor and health of their culture. Why? Again, imperialism breeding racism intensifying nationalism led to a fixation on the supposed dilution of the nation’s purity through immigration and the presence of Jews, a concern ostensibly borne out by increasing crime rates, urban chaos and filth, social dislocation, etc. But I think that to a great extent all the worries and fixations were also a product of the traumatic contradiction between collective memories (still embedded in culture) of relatively unrepressed, unregulated, un-atomized, semi-peasantly “spontaneous,” “carnival-esque,” semi-uproarious (see E. P. Thompson’s book), only *semi*-business-structured societies and, on the other hand, the new evolving repressive, atomized etc. social order. Western civilization was in the later throes of its transition

from a post-medieval culture of full and only *moderately* regulated vitality (frequent festivals, carnivals, holidays, communal life, the majority of the population living according to the seasons) to a society of statist and business regulation and manifold means of instinctual repression (religion, welfare-capitalist programs of “Americanization” and such, patriotic mobilizations, regulation of holidays and pastimes of all sorts, increased policing of the streets, the beginnings of psychological therapy, mass advertising, mass education, Progressive reform movements such as temperance, etc.). Ex-rural immigrants and cities’ lower orders still had some boisterous tendencies, but they were slowly being extirpated. The essentially passive cult of *consumption* was conquering society. Consumption and ease, not self-affirming self-activity. Life, in short, was becoming more passive, more institutionalized, more indoctrinated, more atomized, with more idle free time, and more “excessive” comfort, for more people. Hence you had *fin-de-siècle* ennui and its desiccate cultural expressions. (Impressionism and so forth.) But at the same time, inevitably, you had the reactions, most of them reactionary. Cults of heroism, war, action, “superabundant vitality,” racial glory and conquest, etc. (which, again, were not only *reactions* but also served the purposes of powerful institutions and reinforced imperialist agendas). They had great appeal, promising remedies to modern boredom, resentment, and the frustration of people’s urges for community (i.e. recognition) and self-activity. Thus, in the end, fascism arose, intended at once to be a return to a more liberated society and a culmination of modern regimentation. (In this paradoxical fusion you see how it could appeal to both the masses and the institutions that wanted to control the masses.) Not surprisingly, the latter aspect prevailed over the former. Since it was regimentation/mobilization in the service of heroism, war, and national rebirth, it had to end in a holocaust (which turned out to be World War II). After the holocaust, however, the old trends continued, this time less dangerously or problematically because the old collective memories of cultural

vitality had worn thin and people had finally become accustomed to modern atomized life,<sup>126</sup> and anyway national power-structures had learned to integrate and coordinate with each other more effectively so as to prevent another conflagration. So the old progress of “privatization” and repression continued, until in the 1960s and 1970s another Western middle-class revolt against atomism and dehumanization occurred (coinciding with more elemental revolts all over the world, including in America’s South). It was crushed, but its “instinct”-liberating grievances and tendencies were taken up by business for the sake of profits, with the indirect result that no such “liberatory” cultural uprisings would occur again because they had become less necessary.<sup>127</sup> The economic system had managed to make room within itself for some degree of (degraded) instinctual liberation, even as social atomization and regulation continued apace. So here we are now, with business more powerful than ever, society more atomized than ever, culture more desiccated than ever (although it has given people instinctual outlets, thus fostering social stability), and popular resistance to the ongoing destruction of civil society in almost as bad a shape as ever. What is to be done?

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*Bureaucratic fanaticism.*— It might seem wrong to maintain, as I have repeatedly, that the modern predominance of bureaucratic social structures and their ethos—for which industrial capitalism (broadly defined, including the Soviet Union and even “Communist” China) has been largely responsible, in that it is an anti-personal social order in which people tend to be treated as instantiations of such categories as “wage-laborer” and “capital-

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<sup>126</sup> Television played a huge role in thus reconciling the middle classes to their generous allotment of free time, material comfort, boredom, communal fragmentation, cultural repression, and their patterns of passive consumption.

<sup>127</sup> After the 1970s, “identity-politics” movements continued but with less disruptive potential than the earlier movements.

owner,” everyone being a means to an impersonal end, one’s humanity necessarily being subordinated to the systemic imperative of accumulating capital, which, moreover, necessitates the proliferation of bureaucracies for the sake of keeping order, regulating workers and society, policing dissent, redistributing resources toward business interests and, occasionally, toward disadvantaged elements of the citizenry that might cause trouble if they aren’t mollified, etc.—bears, ultimately, the principal responsibility for the horrors of totalitarianism (or is at least among the most important *conditions* of it). It might seem that ideological fanaticism, as exemplified by both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, has little in common with bureaucratic atomism and inhumanity. But in fact they are related. This kind of ideological commitment—which is also displayed by the contemporary Tea Party and many mainstream economists and politicians, who have been perfectly happy to sacrifice millions of lives around the world in the service of their Free Market ideology—is facilitated by atomistic and bureaucratic social structures, which foster the tendency to think and act in terms of “reifications,” abstract categories, labels. In a society that functions by categorizing people and subordinating them to overwhelming institutional dynamics, the leap to mass ideological commitment (subordinating humanity to ideological considerations) is not terribly difficult. It is natural, being effectively a sort of extreme subjectivization of what is already the case in institutional functioning. The Free Market ideology is a good example, as is the antisemitism of the 1930s (which grew out of decades of institutionalized discrimination and institutional/social inequalities for which Jews were the scapegoat). Atomization and bureaucratization are among the conditions for mass ideological mobilization, which is a condition for totalitarianism. —But, in fact, it turns out that the masses’ fanatical antisemitism wasn’t as important to the success of Nazism as is commonly thought, precisely because this fanaticism didn’t exist to the extent you’d think. After the war, Germans were able to move beyond the past more easily than might have been expected, going about their ordinary lives and appearing not to be dedicated

antisemites. Much or most of their earlier *behavioral* antisemitism (killing Jews, etc.) had been due simply to their following orders, fitting into the institutional and social environment, being good bureaucrats. So, you see, *that's* the horror, *that's* the origin, that institutionalized atomistic alienation, a much more fundamental thing than "ideological" alienation, fanaticism.<sup>128</sup>

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*A strange change.*— The approaches of the Western working class and the middle class to raising children seem to have undergone near-reversals over the last hundred years. It used to be that middle-class parents were overly strict and repressive with their children, especially in the Victorian era, while working-class parents were more laid-back and permissive. Now, the latter tend to be cruel and strict with their children (think of lower-income mothers loudly scolding and slapping their children on the bus), while the former spoil theirs. When and how did this change take place? To be fair, I should acknowledge that contemporary working-class parents seem to fluctuate between negligence—perhaps somewhat like their forebears—and authoritarianism. Was the middle class still relatively authoritarian in the 1930s? Probably the 1960s and 1970s caused the decisive change in that regard, from mild authoritarianism to permissiveness, "liberation," etc. But things had already changed drastically between the 1910s and the 1940s. Mass public education and the welfare state must have played a role in undermining paternal and parental authority. World War I probably also undermined strict Victorian norms and puritanism, middle-class propriety, repression of the instincts—and then the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, the advent of mass advertising, movies, the

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<sup>128</sup> Note: In that paragraph I confused two issues, a bureaucratic etc. society as an essential condition for the emergence of totalitarianism, and extreme bureaucracy etc. as the most important and most destructive *manifestation* of totalitarianism. Both claims are true, I think. Mass ideological commitment is more important in the "movement" stage than in the "state" stage of totalitarianism.

democratization of culture partially liberated middle-class children from the parochial authoritarianism of the Victorian household. The 1950s, with their Cold War emphasis on authority and tradition, saw a partial regression, but authority was exploded in the 1960s. With astonishing swiftness, the demise of authority was institutionalized in the economy, for example in the forms of rampant sexuality (exploiting sex for every conceivable capitalist purpose) and the fetishizing of youth and beauty.

What about the working class? When did its ethos change from exuberance, boisterousness, spontaneity, communal conviviality, to something like resentment and mean-spiritedness? To an extent, these opposites are caricatures of reality. But there is some truth to them. Insofar as they're true, I would say that the change started to occur in the 1950s and progressed with deindustrialization in the succeeding decades. Ironically, it seems that it was with workers' economic victories through the institutionalization of collective bargaining, the welfare state, and the bureaucratization of work and benefits that their culture grew impoverished. It lost the *joie-de-vivre* character it had had even in the 1930s. More exactly, the change is probably a consequence of the destruction of a genuine, grassroots labor movement in the late 1940s and 1950s, the destruction of semi-autonomous enclaves of working-class culture due in part to the advent of television and the corporatization/privatization of society—as embodied, e.g., in auto companies' and governments' destruction of public transportation (for instance in Los Angeles, starting in the 1940s) in favor of highways and automobiles. With "privatization" inevitably comes alienation, boredom, frustration, political apathy, a feeling of impotence, perhaps hopelessness, the sense that one has to rely on oneself and others are untrustworthy, the sense that one has to "look out for Number 1" and not care about others, etc. All this breeds a poisonous culture and a destruction of communal spontaneity. When combined with the ongoing scourge of deindustrialization, increasing poverty, an inability to improve one's prospects in life, business propaganda that tells you everything is the fault of government and "liberal do-gooders," a

popular culture that is violent, hedonistic, and degrading to women, the proliferation of drugs and gang violence, police brutality, etc., it isn't surprising that improper parenting is the result.

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*Thoughts on the French Revolution.*— It's interesting that the French Revolution's liberalism in some ways helped make possible its illiberalism, its nationalism and authoritarianism. For, by enforcing the vision of a society of atomized individuals and "destroying corporate society" (outlawing "orders" and corporate bodies), the Revolution made it easier for people to identify with the single overarching community of the nation, and harder for them to resist dictatorship and Terror.

It's also interesting that some kinds of atomization are, therefore, evidently compatible with nationalism, while others are not. Contemporary business-imposed atomism undermines nationalism (a national culture), while the French Revolution's atomism intensified it. One of the reasons may be that the contemporary American version is far more extreme than the "atomism" of 1789, since lately people have become *strangers* to each other, private worlds of solipsism, which wasn't true in 1789. People could still identify with things back then; that has become harder in the age of neoliberalism. Also, an essential difference is that modern atomism is not inimical to "corporate bodies," being indeed founded on the existence of such bodies in the business world. Corporate bodies in business have grown at the expense of substantive identification with the nation or the national community (as opposed to the *rhetoric* of nationalism, which is still prominent—precisely due to its usefulness to power-structures and business interests!). But of course there are "corporate bodies" all over American society, many of them existing at the expense of national identification. So maybe you could say that revolutionary France's atomism was, in a sense, the reverse of modern America's: while corporate bodies were supposed not to exist, the structure of society was *not* such that people were semi-aliens to

each other. Now we have “interpersonal” atomism but a relative proliferation of so-called corporate bodies (intermediaries between the individual and the state).

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To say it again, one of the fascinating things about the Great Revolution is the essentially simultaneous ascendancy of two very different ideologies, liberalism and nationalism (between which, you might say, lies the concept of democracy). Individualism, atomism, “liberty,” as opposed to the unitary general will, national community, popular sovereignty, the “direct” democracy of “*the people*.” To speak simplistically, it’s the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man versus the 1793 Terror, the “democratic,” nationalistic Terror. Or, again, it’s the Legislative Assembly versus the insurrectionist Paris Commune of 1792.<sup>129</sup> -As I just suggested, though, between these two extremes, connecting them, is the notion of democracy. For, while the ideology of popular sovereignty or the general will can be perverted into totalitarianism, it is also not wholly opposed to liberalism, since the safeguarding of individuals’ rights is surely one manifestation of “Power to the people!”

The best concept of all these is socialism, since, in its classical form, it is an unambiguous fusion of liberalism with popular democracy. Economic democracy, workers’ power over their work and lives, leaves no room for anything reeking of totalitarianism; nor is it merely a half-empty equality under the law, as liberalism can be thought of.

By the way, the explanation for the rise of both liberalism and populist nationalism isn’t hard to think of: the former, which

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<sup>129</sup> Of course, the big Terror and the little terror of the 1792 Paris Commune weren’t “popular” in the sense of being supported by a majority of the country, but they were egalitarian, nationalistic, and democratic inasmuch as they were “formed under pressure from the *sansculotte* movement,” to quote François Furet (in *Revolutionary France 1770-1880* (1995)).



triumphed in the long run, was bourgeois, while the latter belonged more to “the people.” In all classical revolutions, from the English civil war of the 1640s to the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, this duality has manifested itself. The bourgeoisie and “the masses” have risen up together against the *ancien régime*, but the alliance has always been temporary because different classes have different interests. Economic and political liberalism were what the bourgeoisie wanted (and ultimately got), but the masses wanted more: true democracy, social equality, food, jobs, popular power. They’re still waiting for these things.

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*Marxism and the French Revolution.*— Let’s grant that the French Revolution was precipitated more by the nobility’s grievances than the bourgeoisie’s. And let’s grant that it had definitely un-bourgeois phases, such as Robespierre’s Terror and his obsession with “civic virtue,” republicanism, the general will, a phase that briefly approached totalitarianism. Let’s also grant that people from the bourgeoisie were not the main actors in the Revolution. None of this implies that the Revolution was not ultimately in some sense, or several senses, a largely “bourgeois” event, or that the Marxist emphasis on class is inapplicable to it. First of all, class dynamics can be fundamental to an event even if its actors don’t interpret their actions in class terms or don’t *seem* to be motivated by material interests. The *sansculottes* may have been consciously inspired by ideas of republicanism or resentment of the rich or status-envy, but mild self-deception isn’t exactly an unknown thing. It’s quite possible that an important motive—even if they didn’t like to admit it to themselves—was their desire for greater material comfort, greater economic power, less living-on-the-social-and-economic-margins. What “republicanism” meant for them, in fact, was more *power*, more power over their political, economic, and social lives. Questions of motivation don’t matter much, though. The point is that economic relations, economic conditions, are significant determinants of people’s acts, especially *groups’* acts. What your position is in production relations

conditions what kind of information you receive, the kind of people you spend time with, the sorts of places you live in or frequent, etc. Political and cultural solidarity, therefore, are structured largely around the occupation of similar locations in economic relations, due to the similar sorts of experiences that tend to correlate with that.

Besides, resentment or status-envy of the aristocracy, despite not seeming to be a “materialistic” motive, is basically a classist thing. And economically determined (beneath appearances).

As for the Revolution’s significantly—though not completely—bourgeois character, at least two things establish that. First, among its long-term consequences were the facilitating of capitalist economic activity and the spreading of bourgeois cultural norms.<sup>130</sup> The Code Napoléon was quite bourgeois, as was the political liberalism that prevailed off-and-on and then made several comebacks in the mid-1800s and then finally was permanently established (in France) in the 1870s. Economic liberalism, too, which capitalists favored, was in the air in the 1780s and 1790s—and later—even if under wartime exigencies and the influence of the *sansculottes* and peasants it was periodically held in abeyance. The dismantling of feudal restrictions encouraged capitalist activity, as did the Le Chapelier law of 1791 effectively banning trade unions (as guilds), strikes, etc. Aside from *consequences*, you can also consider *origins*. The Enlightenment ideas that inspired the revolutionaries had partially originated in England, the most bourgeois country at the time, and were propagated by Protestants and deists, who mingled in bourgeois, liberal circles. It was through such things as trade, the opening up of markets, the international exchange of ideas, the development of manufacture and science, and the increasing popularity of travel—all bourgeois things, at least in part—that the ideological, political, and cultural currents that helped undermine the *ancien régime* and lead to the Revolution

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<sup>130</sup> If you take a *really* long-term perspective, as Furet does in his above-cited book—all the way up to 1880, which is when he thinks the Revolution finally ended—then its bourgeois nature is undeniable.

spread. Liberalism in all its forms is quintessentially bourgeois, and most of the Enlightenment ideas on which idealist historians like Furet prefer to focus were nothing if not liberal. Even the idea of popular sovereignty is liberal in its milder manifestations. In the 1790s it was used to justify un-bourgeois things—which were a product mainly of the *sansculottes*’ activism, counterrevolutionary upsurges in France, and the foreign wars—but, yes, in revolutions the people and their representatives tend to get out of hand (from the perspective of the bourgeoisie and its hangers-on). The situation gets out of control, but in the end it subsides to normality. I.e., bourgeois stability.

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*More reflections on the Revolution.*— An endlessly thought-provoking event. Parallels with both fascism and Soviet Communism. On fascism: think of the resentment, the desire for revenge, against aristocrats felt by the lower middle class of Paris, similar to the desire for revenge against Jews felt in Germany later. An old society dying, throwing up *enragés*, the “mob,” with their “passion for punishment and terror, nourished by a deep desire for revenge and the overturning of society” (p. 131 of Furet’s book but reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), a desire that led to the massacring of aristocratic Others, enemies to the Nation, outsiders corrupting the body politic—“strangers in our very midst” (quoting Abbé Sieyès)—instantiations of nearly the same category that Jews instantiated in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. French nobles in the 1790s, German Jews in the 1930s—classes of people who had already lost most of their power and so were socially/economically/politically expendable (as Arendt says), hence the perfect scapegoats for social misery. Symbols of the old regime that had smothered the “mob’s” pride, spat at it, but now powerless and so contemptible. The chaos of an old semi-urban civilization in transition, everything in flux, wage-laborers joining with artisans joining with shopkeepers in burning resentment. And the necessity for Bonapartism (Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler) because of the government’s inability to transcend and subdue

political divisions.<sup>131</sup> And then the nationalistic expansionism.<sup>132</sup> And then the internationally orchestrated passage to a more stable order, as happened after the fall of both Napoleon and Hitler.

But on the other side, there's the element of so-called Communism. Thus, in France, the lower classes were already becoming hostile in the mid- and late 1790s to the bourgeoisie. "Before it had definitively vanquished the *ancien régime* and the aristocracy," says Furet, "the bourgeoisie was already standing alongside the accused [i.e., the nobility] in the court of revolutionary equality." That could be said of the Russian bourgeoisie in the years before and after 1917. And Robespierre's Terror against "counterrevolutionaries" surely had a clearer class element than Hitler's persecution of the Jews; in any case, it reminds one of Lenin's and Stalin's terror against supposed counterrevolutionaries. In general, the French Revolution signified a vastly greater social revolution than fascism—for it was genuinely egalitarian!—and it happened in a country maybe comparably primitive to Russia in 1917. But it ended up going in a bourgeois direction, not an anti-bourgeois direction, unlike the Russian revolution. The historian Robert Brady remarks, in *Business as a System of Power*, that Italy could have gone either fascist or Communist after World War I. These primitive riven-by-social-conflict countries in transition....they can go either way. Either to the right or to the left. But France simply couldn't go pro-oppressed in the 1790s (aside from brief phases) because of its lack of industrialism and urbanism, the lack of identical social interests between sufficient numbers of the urban oppressed—no massive factories, for example, which workers could take over. It had to go bourgeois eventually, just because the bourgeoisie, or capitalist

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<sup>131</sup> Admittedly, there are differences here between France and, on the other hand, Germany and Italy.

<sup>132</sup> Furet states that "one of [France's] most powerful passions" in the 1790s was "national greatness inseparable from glory." Sound familiar? As in, fascist?

economic structures, had far more power and more resources than its (or their) enemies. Unlike in Russia in 1917.

I've said it before, but here it is again: all these national convulsions were primarily, from a long-term perspective, *capitalist* revolutions.<sup>133</sup> Not socialist, not post-capitalist. They were stages in the transition to a society structured around capital. That was always the inevitable outcome, because of long-term global economic dynamics. In Russia, or the Soviet Union, and China there was the detour through ultra-state-planned economic authoritarianism (and remember that capitalism itself is nothing but relatively *fragmented* economic authoritarianism), but in a world globalizing around the dynamic of capital, such an anti-market economy was slowly going to be hemmed in on all sides, challenged, eroded (by black markets, etc.), until it either fell apart (as with the Soviet Union after perestroika) or adapted itself (as with contemporary China). Marx himself would have predicted these outcomes, and effectively did predict them. "Socialism in one country" is impossible.

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*"A people's tragedy."*— It is a curious thing that an event as consequential as the Russian Revolution, which ultimately determined the destinies of hundreds of millions, can depend in large part on a few personalities and a lot of luck. This is the inescapable conclusion of *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (1996), by Orlando Figes. There was no "iron necessity of history" or unstoppable Marxian dialectic leading

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<sup>133</sup> At the same time, though, they were to some extent *popular* revolutions, since capital's undermining of the *ancien régime* gave the masses relative freedom (and causes (such as intensified exploitation and communal breakdown)) to rise up against their age-old oppressors. In some places, such as Russia in 1917 and China in 1949, the popular revolution temporarily got the upper hand of the bourgeois revolution. But that was bound not to last in the long run. (In a sense, it didn't last at all: new "Communist" elites took control immediately.)

to Lenin's revolution of October 1917; there was contingency, free will, incompetence from some and reckless daring from others. It was anything but a true Marxist social revolution (of which there are no examples in history). Had Nicholas II not been so desperately stupid for twenty years, or Generals Evert and Kuropatkin not so incompetent in June 1916, or Kerensky not so reluctant to take action against the Bolsheviks in the months before their coup d'état, or Lenin not so determined to seize power *exactly* when he did, or had V. N. Lvov's machinations not led to the misunderstandings that eventually got General Kornilov arrested in August, and had a thousand other such accidents not happened, it is quite possible that the course of the twentieth century would have been very different. That is probably the main lesson of Figes' book. But the book is so comprehensive, evenhanded, and engaging, being a narrative history that fuses social and political analysis with an abundance of vignettes and personal sketches, that much else can be gleaned from it than merely the historical importance of contingency.

For example, *irony* leaps from its pages: the reader is reminded that ubiquitous irony is perhaps the only "iron law" of history. For it is ironic that the Bolsheviks' total misinterpretations of the significance of their acts—thinking they were establishing socialism or enacting a Marxist revolution when in fact what they were doing and creating was virtually the opposite of Marxism and socialism<sup>134</sup>—in a sense *confirmed* a basic tenet of Marxism, that "consciousness" is of secondary importance compared to "social being." The intellectuals and politicians who rise to the top are those useful to the power-strivings of some group or groups in society, be they economic power-structures (business, the landed aristocracy) or some broad section of "the people." Whatever the

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<sup>134</sup> "Socialism" means workers' power, and that was exactly what Lenin, despite himself, was effectively fighting against by creating a bureaucratic, terroristic, authoritarian state. Similarly, a revolution that relies essentially on peasant support is not a Marxist, or "post-capitalist," revolution. It is more like an anti-feudal revolution.

subtle meanings of these intellectuals' elaborate doctrines or however they interpret their own actions, as long as they shout, for example, slogans like "All power to the Soviets!" or "Peace, land, bread!", and the circumstances are right, they will rise to the top. Naturally they'll interpret their success as proof of their theories, but really it could be, and probably is, nothing of the kind. As Marx said, never trust the self-interpretations of historical actors! Ironically, Marx himself was a victim of this sort of self-delusion, in that the increasing popularity of his ideas late in life did not mean at all what he thought it did, that capitalism was or even *could be* approaching collapse. In retrospect we know that. The ideas of his that became popular were merely fine expressions of the grievances of workers and gave them useful theoretical legitimation. That's all. If capitalism does eventually collapse, it certainly won't be in the exact way he predicted.<sup>135</sup>

Figs is right that Lenin was a product at least as much of the distinctive Russian revolutionary tradition (Chernyshevsky, etc.) as of Marxism—and that he therefore departed from Marxism whenever he found it useful. The following passage is insightful:

All the main components of Lenin's doctrine—the stress on the need for a disciplined revolutionary vanguard; the belief that action (the "subjective factor") could alter the objective course of history (and in particular that seizure of the state apparatus could bring about a social revolution); his defense of Jacobin methods of dictatorship; his contempt for liberals and democrats (and indeed for socialists who compromised with them)—all these stemmed not so much from Marx as from the Russian revolutionary tradition. Lenin used the ideas of Chernyshevsky, Nechaev, [etc.]...to inject a distinctly Russian dose of conspiratorial politics

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<sup>135</sup> See Chris Wright, *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States* (2010).

into a Marxist dialectic that would otherwise have remained passive—content to wait for the revolution to mature through the development of objective conditions rather than eager to bring it about through political action. It was not Marxism that made Lenin a revolutionary but Lenin who made Marxism revolutionary (pp. 145, 146).

As I argue in the work cited above, an authentic, “*dialectical*” Marxism would be more like an “evolutionary” creed than a Leninist “revolutionary” creed. It would also repudiate the idea that “a revolution could ‘jump over’ the contingencies of history” (p. 812). As Figes says, Bolshevism’s embrace of this idea “placed it firmly in the Russian messianic tradition,” not the Marxist tradition. In this respect, the Mensheviks were more Marxist than the Bolsheviks.

What Russia’s revolutionary period at the beginning of the twentieth century really was was a *bourgeois* revolution that went off the rails. Its doing so wasn’t exactly “accidental,” although the way it did so was (more or less). In a gigantic country composed almost entirely of peasants filled with hatred for landowners and the government, a relatively smooth transition to industrial capitalism—i.e., a transition not disturbed for decades, say, by peasant uprisings and revolutionary demagoguery, or even by a so-called “socialist” takeover of the state—would have been extremely difficult under the best of circumstances. Given the unstable state of Europe at the time, with its imperialism, nationalism, racism, international arms race, and class conflict, it was almost impossible. Even had Russia’s generals during World War I been competent enough to win the war, it is likely that in the following decade or two, perhaps during the Great Depression, massive peasant uprisings would have occurred, probably coinciding with strikes and demonstrations in the cities. The government might have been able to suppress them, or it might have succumbed to its own incompetence and let power slip to some future Lenin. One cannot say for sure. Maybe a future Stolypin would have managed



the transition to capitalism with an iron hand. The point is that in primitive, predominantly rural countries like Russia, China, Italy and Spain in the early twentieth century, and in Latin America for a long time, it is virtually a toss-up whether the transition to industrial capitalism will bring to power a “leftist” government (Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh), a rightist government (Italy in 1922, Spain in 1939, China before Mao), or—more rarely—a centrist one (Italy and Spain before Mussolini and Franco). *That* is the meaning of the Russian revolution—namely its lack of meaning.

In fact, for a true socialist revolution to have happened anywhere in the twentieth century was simply not in the cards. Marx got his timeline wrong.

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*Excerpt from a paper.*— Marx completely misinterpreted early radicalism, not only the radicalism of the heterogeneous Parisian masses who manned the barricades in 1848 but even the radicalism that flared up in the 1871 Paris Commune or in America in the 1870s and 1880s. These battles, too, were fought by a heterogeneous people, some of them, like the artisans and craftsmen who felt themselves besieged by this terrifying new thing called industrial capitalism, “reactionary radicals,”<sup>136</sup> and others proletarians in the classic Marxist sense, but whose miseries could have been more effectively meliorated by reform than revolution. It was not a proletarian army “disciplined, united, and organized by the process of capitalist production”<sup>137</sup> but a disparate mass of the lower classes with disparate interests—some progressive, some reactionary—temporarily thrown together by the sheer chaos of early industrialism. It has been said before that Marx confused the birth-pangs of industrial capitalism with its death-throes; and while

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<sup>136</sup> See Craig Calhoun, “The Radicalism of Tradition,” *American Journal of Sociology* 88, no. 5 (1983): pp. 886–914.

<sup>137</sup> Marx, quoted in Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years, 1868–1936* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1998), p. 281.

this epigram is glib, there is much truth to it. As capitalism matured in the twentieth century, the working class was “disciplined and united” into explicit reformism, and it became obvious that revolution was not going to happen in precisely the way Marx had predicted.

Incidentally, one can’t help remarking on the poignancy of the old struggles for socialism or anarchism, international revolution, in the light of our retrospective knowledge that revolution was almost inevitably not going to be successful (in the long run) however it was undertaken, simply because economic conditions were not yet ripe. It really is an absurd tragedy, a symbol of the senselessness of human existence—millions of people in the Americas, in Russia, in Germany, in France, in Spain and Italy fighting and dying for a dream that would never have come to fruition anyway because, supposing they had achieved something like it in a particular region, such as Catalonia in the late 1930s or parts of Germany after World War I, and, miraculously, it had not been crushed by the forces of reaction, it would have slowly degenerated under market pressures from the broader capitalist society, pressures on wages—downward for the lower workers, upward for the higher—pressures to mechanize, and the business cycles that inevitably would have seeped in to these havens of relative cooperation and disturbed the order of things, and of course after the revolutionary fervor had subsided the usual daily problems of running factories would have cropped up, “alienation” would have returned because industrial work is inherently unpleasant, battles between management and the average worker would have spoiled the revolution. In Spain, Mondragon’s recent evolution confirms this diagnosis. So, the irony is shockingly cruel: it is when capitalist industrialization was *starting*, precisely when socialism was least possible, that workers, artisans, peasants, and intellectuals fought with greatest heroism and determination for socialism. Industrialization was so brutal and so conducive to the lower classes’ radicalization that visions of, and struggles for, a cooperative society were inevitable everywhere. On the other hand, the recent fading of revolutionary dreams itself facilitates the slow

emergence of some kind of post-capitalist order because, among other things, it means that there will be no more Leninist, Maoist misadventures, no more attempts to establish socialism by decree, which was never going to work. The old Marxist dreams of a single revolutionary *rupture* have become untenable, to the benefit of the revolution.

This statement of a participant in Latin America's solidarity economy is apt: "The old cooperativism [of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] was a utopia in search of its practice, and the new cooperativism<sup>138</sup> is a practice in search of its utopia."<sup>139</sup> Again, from a Marxist perspective, the tragedy of the old cooperativism was that consciousness outran material conditions, material possibilities, and so it was doomed to failure; the new cooperativism of the twenty-first century has placed consciousness at the service of people's immediate economic interests, so that a new mode of production is evolving step by step. Utopian dreams are subordinated to economic realities—thus making possible, perhaps, the realization of "utopian dreams" in the distant future.

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*On the emergence of the modern world.*— The evolution of early-modern European royal absolutism, not surprisingly, was ironic. Initially it was useful to the rising bourgeoisie, as the latter was useful to it, in both the bourgeoisie's and the monarchy's struggle against the feudal aristocracy. The monarch could act in the interest of merchants and other capitalists in order to increase his tax base and wealth (through trade and budding industry), as well as to diminish the power of feudal interests relative to his own and to that of bourgeois classes opposed to feudalism. In fact, you could probably say that absolutism depended on large-scale mercantile activities and the latter (on a large scale) depended on absolutism,

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<sup>138</sup> See [www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop).

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in Ethan Miller, "Other Economies Are Possible!", *ZNet*, September 9, 2006, <http://www.zcommunications.org/other-economies-are-possible-by-ethan-miller> (accessed May, 2010).

or at least on a powerful sovereign. But then capitalists—of various kinds, including commercial, financial, agrarian, and industrial—accumulated more and more wealth and became more central to the social order, and they wanted more political power, and their demands started to threaten absolutism. The population meanwhile was getting restless for reasons related to the rise of capitalism and the state's sponsorship of it. In the end, the absolutist state turned back towards the aristocracy as an ally in its struggles against the people and the bourgeoisie (and its "representatives," such as most intellectuals), but it was too late. Absolutism was doomed, and it collapsed. The bourgeoisie was ultimately the progressive force; absolutism was progressive only in relation to the feudal aristocracy, not to the bourgeoisie.

These dialectical ironies and self-underminings are how history evolves. The ruling class even now is undermining its power in the long run by augmenting it in the short run, through privatization and marketization—which is inevitably causing social discontent that will someday bring about the collapse of the whole edifice.

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*Random thoughts on the American Revolution.*— From the famous historian Bernard Bailyn:

The outbreak of the Revolution was not the result of social discontent, or of economic disturbances, or of rising misery, or of those mysterious social strains that seem to beguile the imaginations of historians straining to find peculiar predispositions to upheaval. Nor was there a transformation of mob behavior or of the lives of the "inarticulate" in the pre-Revolutionary years that accounts for the disruption of Anglo-American politics. The rebellion took place in a basically prosperous if temporarily disordered economy and in communities whose effective social

distances....remained narrow enough and whose mobility, however marginally it may have slowed from earlier days, was still high enough to absorb most group discontents. Nor was it the consequence simply of the maturing of the economy and the desires of American businessmen for greater economic autonomy, or of the inevitable growth of infant institutions and communities to the point where challenges to the parental authority became inescapable: neither economies nor institutions nor communities are doomed to grow through phases of oedipal conflict. There was good sense in the expectation occasionally heard in the eighteenth century that American institutions in a century's time would gradually grow apart from England's as they matured, peacefully attenuating until the connection became mere friendly cooperation. American resistance in the 1760s and 1770s was a response to acts of power deemed arbitrary, degrading, and uncontrollable—a response, in itself objectively reasonable, that was inflamed to the point of explosion by ideological currents generating fears everywhere in America that irresponsible and self-seeking adventurers—what the twentieth century would call political gangsters—had gained the power of the English government and were turning first, for reasons that were variously explained, to that Rhineland of their aggression, the colonies.

It seems to me that too much ink has been spilled on the “meaning” of the American Revolution as opposed to the French. Its radicalism or conservatism, etc. Sure, it was less radical, in a way, than the French, just because the French revolutionaries had centuries of feudal traditions and institutions to sweep away, and

millions of starving poor, and hordes of resisting aristocrats, and were surrounded by hostile European nations. A complete social upheaval was necessary for there to be a republican, “democratic” revolution in such a country. Americans already had relatively free institutions and lived in a fairly modern, (pre-)bourgeois society (compared to France), so their reaction against arbitrary authority did not have to take an uncompromising, world-overturning form. It wasn’t feudalism they were fighting against but a much milder form of oppressive power-structures. Nevertheless, the two revolutions were inspired by similar Enlightenment ideologies of liberty and republicanism, similar impulses against oppression and inequality, and they both signified early, “bourgeois” stages of the masses’ eruption into modern European history.<sup>140</sup> The English Civil War and Glorious Revolution had largely the same significance. Circumstances vary between countries and so social transformations take different paths, but on the broadest scale the meaning of all the classical revolutions even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the uprisings in Russia and China, was the struggle against feudal or, more generally, undemocratic power-structures, the middle and lower classes’ reaction against economic and political oppression, and the spread of “popular” ideologies (be they liberalism, republicanism, democracy, or socialism) and people’s power. Fascism, by the way, and all its variants are different and paradoxical: popular movements *against* various kinds of people’s power. Popular reactions to economic and political dislocation that look toward the past, toward order and hierarchy, rather than toward the future and increased freedom for all people. This is what makes them relatively acceptable to the ruling classes—and that is why they have been so influential since the early twentieth century or before. Business would prefer not to have the masses politically involved at all, but since they have to be somehow or other (as they didn’t for most of history), business

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<sup>140</sup> Again, certain stages of the French Revolution were far from bourgeois, but ultimately its bourgeois characteristics prevailed. Especially after Napoleon came to power.

propagates reactionary instead of progressive popular ideologies. It's a risk—the masses can get out of hand—but it's far preferable to the alternative of economic democracy.

If we follow Gordon Wood in understanding the “American Revolution” to be the long process of social change from about the 1760s to the early decades of the 1800s—in which case one could even argue that America's Civil War, a war against a pre-capitalist and “undemocratic” society (or mode of production), was its final stage—then we can place it even more clearly in the tradition of the English and French revolutions. It's true that the American struggle for independence in itself didn't have the same relation to society as the other revolutions, since it didn't signify an effort to remake an essentially feudal politics and society but was instead a mere revolt against a mildly oppressive imperialist power, and thus was more “accidental” than the chain of revolutionary events in Europe—especially because, as Bailyn says, wise political leaders in England could probably have defused the crisis and prevented the war—but Gordon Wood is right that it was symptomatic of underlying, long-term changes in economic and social relations, which in some form were happening in Europe too, albeit in more convulsive ways. And don't forget that there were, after all, traces of feudalism even in America, and these were going to be erased under various pressures. Economic and social relations were inevitably going to be progressively liberalized under the pressures of trade, manufacturing, population growth and migration, incipient industrialization, etc. At the same time, under the influence of early industrialists, protectionist laws and tariffs were almost inevitably going to be erected sooner or later in America, even if the Revolutionary War hadn't happened. The ties with England were inevitably going to be attenuated in either gradual or convulsive ways during the transition to early industrialism and greater commercialism. All this grew out of basically the same underlying processes of economic change occurring all over the West.

Again, it's true that the power-structures that Americans revolted against were very different from the structures that the French revolted against a decade later. Starting in the 1760s,

Americans became painfully aware—through economic depression, England's imposition of "intolerable" regulations and taxes, etc.—of their humiliating status as colonial dependents. In some respects Americans were becoming increasingly prosperous, free, and sophisticated (theirs was a very literate culture, for example); commercialism and mass consumption were among the forces undermining old norms of subservience between the classes and between the mother country and the colonies. Ordinary people were becoming more conscious of their dignity as producers and consumers, the freedoms and rights they were entitled to; their degrading treatment by Parliament, their status as mere outposts on an empire whose metropolitan center didn't even recognize their right to political representation, contrasted outrageously with the vibrancy of their civilization, its economic importance to the empire, and the democratic, rights-conscious practices present throughout every colony. They were a people bursting with energy, but England treated them contemptuously. And its behavior only got worse, not better. So an explosion occurred, a "democratic," popular rebellion.

Conditions in France were so much worse that, in a sense, its revolution proceeded from nearly opposite causes: the peasantry and urban underclasses were miserable, not growing in self-confidence or increasingly aware of their substantive freedoms and rights as contrasted with their political disfranchisement. Nevertheless, with both revolutions it was a matter of the multitudes' and middle classes' clamoring against harsh treatment by power-structures. In both cases there were *ancien-régime*-ish straitjackets on the economic and political enfranchisement of the population even as inexorable economic pressures were tending to burst open these straitjackets and empower the disempowered. (And even in France, as in the American colonies, it was becoming clear to commoners and peasants that the aristocracy was losing its political legitimacy, its right to rule. Its "hegemony" had long eroded. In France the nobility no longer had many important economic, political or juridical functions; it was becoming a class



of useless parasites, and the peasantry knew this. Compounded with their economic misery, this led them to revolt.)

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*A radical critique of academia.*— Reading Jesse Lemisch’s little book *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession*, presented as an essay at the lively 1969 convention of the American Historical Association but published later (by an obscure left press because it wasn’t mainstream enough to make it into establishment journals). In his introduction, Thomas Schofield explains that in 1969 Lemisch was “a historian who had been dismissed from the University of Chicago because ‘his political concerns interfered with his scholarship.’” In what may [have been] the most telling and fundamental critique presented before the AHA he proposed that the supposedly unpolitical stars of the profession (Allan Nevins, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Samuel Eliot Morison, Oscar Handlin, Daniel Boorstin and others) were implicit cold warriors who sought to use history as a vehicle in the fight against communism. Lemisch’s paper...argued persuasively that what so many object to is not that a scholar should take a political position but that he should hold views contrary to establishment shibboleths.” Duh. To argue that mainstream scholarship is “free from bias” is and was so wildly naïve as to be laughable. The guardians of every mainstream institution in history have been certain they’re right and “unbiased”; it’s one of the most predictable things in human existence, and one of the most ridiculous. *Everything*—or *nearly everything*—is political and “biased”; there are political and social relations, and political and social value-judgments, implicit in every (or nearly every) act. When you ignore a homeless person on the street, that’s implicitly a political act. When you write scholarship that is sympathetic toward the powerful and ignores the powerless, that’s political. When you spend your evening drinking with your friends rather than volunteering at a shelter for battered women, that’s political. The way a man treats his wife is political, as is the way she treats him. Society is saturated with power

relations; there is no escaping them. And such relations are always at least indirectly political.

So it is impossible to be unbiased or unpolitical. It's possible, though, to be less "biased," more objective, namely by being more "radical." As long as you accept such broad values as individual self-determination, democracy, the non-killing of innocents, and so forth, a consideration of facts in the light of these values will lead you to what are called "radical left" positions.

Lemisch's writing is, at times, delightfully inflammatory. No compromising with complacent liberalism.

Discussing the anti-radical ideology of respectable "politically neutral" liberal historians and social scientists such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Daniel Bell, Lemisch easily refutes Bell's 1960 "end of ideology" thesis by pointing out that, umm, the 1960s weren't very "un-ideological." In fact, Bell's little hypothesis, like Francis Fukuyama's little "end of history" hypothesis thirty years later, was nothing but the ideology of a few self-satisfied technocratic circles in the American elite at a specific point in time.

More interestingly, Lemisch puts short work to the 1950s' "Liberal Consensus" idea that McCarthyism was the product of an earlier populist tradition (the implication of which claim is that populism, hence the "vulgar mass," is irrational, paranoid, undemocratic, because McCarthyism was). In fact, so-called "McCarthyism" obviously began several years before the rise of McCarthy, in the late 1940s, with all the Truman-imposed loyalty oaths and the purging of the labor movement and all that rabid anti-radical bullshit. In other words, it was the elite that was paranoid, undemocratic, and irrational, not the people. But even regarding McCarthy himself, the smug liberal hypothesis is false:

[In *The Intellectuals and McCarthy*, Paul Rogin] has tested the pluralists' contention that there was continuity between McCarthy and earlier agrarian radicalism [e.g., that of the 1890s] and found it invalid. Testing the contention in the Senator's home state, Wisconsin, Rogin finds entirely

different social bases for McCarthy and [Progressive Senator Robert] LaFollette. McCarthy rose on a conservative constituency, the traditional source of Republican strength. Progressivism in Wisconsin “mobilized poor Scandinavian farmers against the richer areas of the state”; McCarthy “rose to power with the votes of the richer German inhabitants of the farms and small cities in southern and eastern Wisconsin....” Those counties which had been Progressive “tended to oppose McCarthy more than other counties in the state.” ....McCarthy did not represent any “new” American right—just the “old one with new enthusiasm and new power.”

In Rogin’s analysis, McCarthy emerged from conservative rural politics—which is far from mass politics, but rather the politics of local elites. Thus, for instance, Leslie Fiedler’s contention that McCarthy’s support by small-town newspapers was an indication that McCarthyism was another movement toward “direct democracy,” continuous with Populism, is practically reversed when examined more carefully. Small-town newspapers in fact had an enduring record of opposition to agrarian radicalism; such newspapers are generally the voice of conservative local business interests, and it was these small-town business people who formed a part of McCarthy’s base. Thus, Rogin notes, McCarthyism was a movement by a “conservative elite—from precinct workers to national politicians....” It “flourished within the normal workings of American politics, not radically outside of them” and was “sustained not by a revolt of the masses so much as by the actions and inactions of various elites.”

In short, McCarthyism was not so much populist as “faux populist”—if even that. “McCarthy,” says Lemisch, “is evidence for the evils of too little democracy, not too much.” It’s the same with the Tea Party movement nowadays. And even with the old racist George Wallace, to an extent. “Rogin has found the early support for George Wallace stronger among the middle and upper class than among the working class. ‘Is “middle-class authoritarianism” a more fruitful concept than working-class authoritarianism?’ he asks.” Public attitudes on the Vietnam War were another example of how the masses are often less conservative than the elite.

In fact, Lemisch argues convincingly that postwar liberal pluralism (“legitimate” groups competing against each other in the political arena, “countervailing powers” balancing each other) was a kind of Burkean conservatism transplanted to modern conditions. Many Consensus historians and social scientists admired Edmund Burke and disdained Thomas Paine and the French Revolution, indeed all radicals and even the abolitionists, as having fallen victim to the naïve and dangerous faith that men could make their own history, could remake society in the light of reason and reject old traditions. Like Burke, these postwar liberals found “wisdom” in traditions and institutions, and insisted that the essential flaws of “human nature” would always vitiate radicalism. Their polemic, of course, which shaped their understanding of history, was against Communism, but they broadened it to apply to all radicals of the past and present, to everyone who was discontented with mere technocratic management of society. Schlesinger Jr. and his ilk were basically anti-democrats who, like Burke—as well as nearly all of America’s founding fathers, and nearly all intellectuals and elites in history—radically distrusted the people. But because they lived in a society that exalted democracy, they had to pay lip-service to it while rejecting its substance. What they really valued were “stability and equilibrium.” For these people, says Lemisch, “stability and equilibrium were the goals of society, and since the

society called itself democratic, then stability and equilibrium must be democracy.”<sup>141</sup>

Lemisch savages all these smug, lazy liberals, exposing their ideas as establishmentarian tripe. It’s fun reading.

In spite of themselves, they indirectly grasped a truth: national politics in the U.S. has, with rare exceptions, always been more or less a matter of “consensus.” The U.S. has been basically a one-party state for a long time. Arguably since the beginning. As Chomsky says, variation and disagreement are permitted within fairly rigidly defined boundaries, which have always excluded the radical left. These facts result from many circumstances, including the electoral system and the elitist framework of the Constitution.

Later in the essay he turns his attention from ideas to actions, specifically actions taken by all the liberal historians and social scientists in the heady days of 1968 and 1969. The revelations aren’t surprising, but they expose these intellectuals as contemptible hypocrites. Celebrating democracy and freedom while justifying and participating in violent repression against students and radical professors, who were “threatening the foundations of democratic order.” Hofstadter, Handlin, Boorstin, Bernard Bailyn, Schlesinger Jr., Seymour Martin Lipset, Bell, Leuchtenburg, Eric Hoffer, Nathan Glazer, Lewis Feuer, Bruno Bettelheim, and many other big names: conservative establishmentarians obsessed with relatively small disruptions of their ordered little worlds at the same time that bombs and napalm were killing and mutilating millions in Indochina. *That* was not wrong (at worst “imprudent”); *student dissent*, on the other hand, was morally horrifying, the very death-knell of civilization, a resurgence of something like Nazism.

One of the less egregious examples is Schlesinger writing in 1969 on police violence against Harvard students. While “invoking the police may on occasion be necessary to preserve academic

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<sup>141</sup> As a result, student dissenters in the 1960s were denounced—paradoxically—as “undemocratic,” in that they upset stability and equilibrium.

freedom,” at Harvard it was wrong. Or, to quote Lemisch’s paraphrasing of Schlesinger, it was “not precisely wrong, but rather, imprudent; it was not the fact of ‘cops clubbing Harvard and Radcliffe students’ that offended him [Schlesinger] but the ‘spectacle’ of it, which ‘obliged the S.D.S. and illustrated its favorite thesis of the hidden violence of American society.’” And we all know how absurd that thesis is. It would be ridiculous to deny that America is a fundamentally peaceful place. (Peaceful for Harvard professors, at least.)

—Excellent, impassioned essay. Well done, Jesse. *Écrasez l’infâme!*

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*A Critique of Current Historical Scholarship*

If the history profession in the United States were to take stock of itself in 2011, it would have the right to be proud in many respects. It has come far in the last fifty years, become far more sophisticated. Social history has enormously enriched our understanding of the past, in particular the past of subaltern groups of people who tended to be ignored by academic historians up to the 1960s. Labor history is no longer mainly about trade unions and institutional politics; it also encompasses the *lives* of workers, as well as of their families and communities. The history of minorities is no longer excluded from the mainstream, and women are finally integrated into the historical profession—both as scholars and as subjects of study. The history of gender and sexuality has explicated the formation of subjective identities and shed light on varieties of oppression that were hardly even recognized in the past. Historians have become methodologically more self-conscious and self-critical, and their scholarship has become incredibly meticulous. Like culture itself, history-writing is incomparably more *inclusive* than it was fifty years ago—inclusive of more people, more ideas, more methods, more agendas, more countries and societies (hence “transnationalism”). It is diverse, and it is huge. Nevertheless, the discipline has by no means perfected

itself, nor should it be complacent about what it has achieved. In some ways it has not taken its recent democratic achievements far enough, while in others it has taken them too far, thereby losing sight of important issues and old insights. The discipline is also too fragmented and specialized, like most of the humanities and social sciences. One can accuse it, moreover, of being too “academic.” Being humanistic, it should not isolate itself from society but should critically engage with it, bring history to bear on the burning political questions of our time.

There is a myth among academics that “objectivity” entails “neutrality,” that to take a partisan position in some controversy is by definition to be non-objective and unscholarly.<sup>142</sup> This belief goes back decades, and helps justify the political disengagement of scholars that is a function in part of the insularity of their institutions. According to conventional wisdom, the university system is not supposed to be the plaything of political agendas; it is supposed to be dedicated to politically innocuous research and the unpartisan education of students. Otherwise universities might not be able to get funding from a variety of sources, and they would not be able to maintain their supposed autonomy from the rough-and-tumble world of politics. Corresponding to these institutional facts is the academic conviction, which serves to justify an apolitical stance, that to take a politically controversial position in scholarship or popular writing is to depart from the “disinterested” pursuit of truth.

This is a fantasy, as is the idea that the university system is even moderately removed from political influence and agendas. By virtue of their particular locations in social structures, academics are already integrated into the political economy in ways they might not even know about or like. They are already serving certain economic and political interests in their research and teaching, both of which are inherently political. Whatever position one takes in

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<sup>142</sup> See Thomas L. Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 1990): pp. 129-157.

teaching or writing, one cannot escape the implicit commitment to some set of political interests and institutions. By not challenging conventional interpretations, for example, one is upholding the hegemony of power-structures and the status quo, implicitly taking the “partisan” position that mainstream narratives, which like all interpretations exclude certain voices and include others, are substantially correct and that the powerful therefore are not only basically right but should remain powerful. By consciously avoiding political controversy in one’s work, one is making a statement that to some other group of interests, an unrepresented group, is controversial.

There is no such thing as “disinterested” scholarship. In Nietzschean terms, one necessarily proceeds from a particular perspective. Jean-Paul Sartre said something similar in arguing that one is inescapably *committed*, whether one knows it or not. On the other hand, it is possible to be “committed” in a relatively “objective” and “rational” way, namely by encompassing more voices, more facts, and more arguments in one’s position, and by being willing to assess it according to canons of logic rather than emotion or some other standard. An intellectual’s work can serve the interests of freedom and democracy in more objective and rigorous or less objective and rigorous ways, just as it can serve the interests of the powerful in rigorous or unrigorous ways—or, alternatively, in open and honest ways or implicit and unconscious ways (as it usually does). Every social scientist and humanist should decide which interests and values he intends to support in his work, and then do so as objectively as possible.

Historians, one might retort, often do serve democratic values and agendas in their work, as evidenced by the rise of social history in all its forms. This is true. However, there is still too much of a pretense of neutrality on issues of political moment, a neutrality that effectively supports the status quo. In many cases this neutrality takes the form of a specific method, viz. an “idealistic” method. In *The Global Cold War* (2005), for example, Odd Arne Westad argues that “the United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in



their politics.”<sup>143</sup> He pays little attention to economic dynamics and institutional imperatives as explanations of the superpowers’ foreign policy, instead relying to a great degree on policymakers’ self-understandings and rhetoric. His idealistic method lends legitimacy to powerful actors, their institutions, and their policies, thus implicitly legitimizing the political status quo and undermining the popular democratic hopes and strivings that he ostensibly supports.

Social historians, on the other hand, sometimes adopt a kind of status quo-supporting idealism precisely by virtue of their “democratic” method of telling people’s stories more or less as they lived them. Books like Bethany Moreton’s *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (2009) and Lisa McGirr’s *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2002) embody the commendable project of taking ordinary people’s experiences seriously and revealing such people as “active, articulate participants in a historical process.”<sup>144</sup> However, these works can have an extreme emphasis on ideology and culture insofar as people interpret their own experiences that way. Political correctness frequently suffuses this sort of scholarship; everyone is given “agency,” assumed to have control over his or her life because to deny that would be insulting or condescending. Institutional contexts and influences are frequently played down as the individual’s motives and self-interpretations are elevated. The consequence is to divert the reader’s attention from class structures and the overall distribution of power relations, which in turn often prevents this work from being politically very challenging or subversive.

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<sup>143</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas Ferguson, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 96.

Ironically, one can object to idealism not only morally but also by invoking the “disinterested” rational standards that scholars are so concerned with. For a materialism and “institutionalism” along Marxian lines is singularly *plausible* too, as contrasted with the various types of idealism manifested in much political history (e.g., *The Global Cold War*), postmodernist cultural history (e.g., Joan Scott’s *Gender and the Politics of History* (1999)), and a fair amount of social history, the “humanism” of which tends to have factually incorrect implications. To quote the political scientist Thomas Ferguson: “That ordinary people are historical subjects [as social historians assume] is a vital truth; that they are the primary shapers of the American past seems to me either a triviality or a highly dubious theory about the control of both political and economic investment in American history.”<sup>145</sup> The point is that one can overemphasize the historical importance of ordinary people’s experiences and self-interpretations, and that many historians do this. The simple fact is that in the history of capitalist society, large business interests or corporations have vastly more sway over society than ordinary people do. They have incomparably more historical agency by virtue of their access to material resources—surely a commonsense truth. Thus, if historians want to explain the dynamics and trajectories of societies, they would do well to emphasize economics, moneyed interests, and class structures far more than they do. Furthermore, as stated above, this would have the morally desirable effect of highlighting the injustice of current institutional arrangements, thereby bolstering popular struggles.

The intellectual’s moral and scientific responsibilities, which arguably are not being fulfilled by much contemporary historical scholarship, can be reduced to the responsibility to *challenge conventional wisdom*. Intellectuals are in a unique position to do this, having the necessary skills, leisure, and access to enormous amounts of information. Instead, they are usually the guardians of conventional wisdom, not its challengers. Most of their work reinforces the notion that class relations, which determine

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

differences in groups' control over productive resources, are, far from being the most important determinant of social dynamics, not of especial significance, that, if anything, culture, ideology, gender, group psychology, and so forth are historically more important than the brute institutional realities of control over economic and material resources. The age of postmodernism has ushered in a scientifically dubious and morally objectionable (in its political implications) subjectivism, culturalism, and obsession with "discourse," as if cultural discourses were not shaped precisely by institutional, ultimately economic, conditions and the play of competing interests. (It requires access to resources, after all, to propagate discourses, and access to resources is primarily an economic fact, i.e. determined largely by the dynamics of class relations, conflicts between groups of people with different economic interests by virtue of their occupying different locations in social structures.)<sup>146</sup> Analyses of discourses, ideologies, and gendered, sexual, and racial identities have their place in scholarship, but authors should keep in mind that to emphasize ideas and identities at the expense of structures of, and struggles over, economic production and distribution is already a political act, in that it tends to focus attention on politically peripheral issues and does little to develop a critique of the central power relations in society. This fact, of course, helps explain why it is so predominant in academia: institutional mechanisms tend to filter out

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<sup>146</sup> This paper is not an appropriate place to set forward all the arguments for "materialism"; the best I can do is give examples of scholarship that shows its true power. Thomas Ferguson's above-cited book is one example. Others are Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Beacon Press, 2001); Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (New York: The New Press, 2002); Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (New York: Verso, 2006); Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985); and Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913).

materialistic critiques of economic and political relations, since such “leftist,” “radical” arguments challenge society’s most entrenched power-structures, the structures that fund universities and influence political policies toward them. From the perspective of these moneyed interests, it is far safer to write about the formation of sexual identities or ordinary people’s “agency,” their supposed power over their lives and influence over politics. To emphasize ideologies, too, is politically safe, since it suggests that ideas matter more than institutions and that it is more important to change the former than the latter.

History writing should stop being as “academic” as it is; scholarship should more often be motivated by current political struggles. Historians could do popular movements, not to mention *truth*, a service by placing in its historical context, for example, business’s ongoing assaults on public-sector unionism, or by tracing corporations’ influence on federal and state politics or their systematic, decades-long dismantling of civil society (unions, communities, public transportation, etc.), or the ways in which public-relations firms craft media campaigns and thereby propagate “discourses” favorable to business. There is no shortage of politically controversial subjects—the controversial nature of which, incidentally, suggests their importance, their subversion of shallow conventional wisdom. That such scholarly projects and arguments are “partisan” is no argument against their essential truth, for there is no reason to think that truth should be benign toward or supportive of entrenched interests. Quite the contrary. It would be startling if social truths were unpartisan, i.e. acceptable to powerful interests, whose concern is not to propagate truth but to advance their own agendas.

Consistent with the foregoing critique is the criticism that historical scholarship is altogether too specialized, not “synthetic” enough. There is little cross-fertilization between economic history, political history, social history, cultural history, labor history, business history, and so on. To place everything in its proper social context, integration among fields is necessary. Historical materialist methods should in general be the foundation of most

kinds of history, since they are common sense (notwithstanding their having been knocked out of people's heads due to their politically subversive implications). Economic theory, too—at least the “realistic” kind of theory, e.g. Marxian economics,<sup>147</sup> not neoclassical fantasies about efficient markets, perfect competition, etc.—is relevant to history in that it helps explain social dynamics, and historians should study it. The consequence of *not* studying other fields or disciplines is the postmodern parochialism that pervades academia, the overemphasis on gender, sexuality, discourse, ideologies, subjective identities, in addition to the more general counterproductive fragmentation that itself does much to vitiate the political potential of scholarship.

One can argue, in fact, that “intellectuals” have a moral obligation to serve progressive political struggles, being the beneficiaries of other people's “surplus labor,” of an exploitive economic system that perpetuates poverty and disfranchisement among the large majority of the world population. Intellectuals have extraordinary privileges, which, because they are made possible by other people's *lack* of privileges, they are morally obligated to use for these other people's benefit. Such arguments, however, start to take us outside the realm of scholarship, so we will leave them here as suggestions.

The point is that political activism and scholarship need not be mutually exclusive, that politically partisan scholarship (or scholarship with partisan implications) can embody the highest standards of academic rigor, and that, far from being unrespectable, it is scientifically and morally imperative that humanist intellectuals use their work to undermine conventional narratives.

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<sup>147</sup> See, for example, Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*; Fred Magdoff and Michael D. Yates, *The ABCs of the Economic Crisis: What Working People Need to Know* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009); John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, *The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009); and Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy* (New York: Verso, 2002).

To do so, as I have said, historians ought to broaden their scholarship, integrate social history with economic history with political history and so forth. We have a lot of monographs on every conceivable subject; it is time we did more to integrate the best scholarship in numerous fields and so make it more compelling to the general public. The public hungers for knowledge untainted by political dishonesty—as evidenced by the popularity of such figures as Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Mike Davis, Glenn Greenwald, and others who bring knowledge to the masses. This is the next frontier in the history of the intellectual; historians should recognize that and celebrate it.

## Chapter 3

### Experimental Thoughts on the Self

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*Notes on the nature of the self. (Juvenilia.)*— Few issues are more prone to confusing philosophers than questions surrounding the nature of the self. Questions like “What is the self? Is there such thing as a self? Does each person have only one self? What is the relation between the present self and the past self? Is there any substance to the notion of ‘authentic’ selfhood, as opposed to ‘inauthentic’ selfhood?” Consider Daniel Dennett, the ludicrously respected philosophaster at Tufts University. This man occupies the dubious position of trying to explain away our sense of self without knowing he is doing so—specifically in his annoying book *Consciousness Explained* (1991), which is almost unreadable because of its cutesy, verbose style. Somewhere in that thicket of verbiage he manages to say that he thinks there is a self—indeed, that it’s obvious there is a self, for, after all, *someone* (namely, the author) is wondering right now whether there is a self—but that it is neither some kind of spiritual substance nor something corporeal: it is one’s “center of narrative gravity.” It is “an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is.”<sup>148</sup> The self is an abstraction, an idea, a narrative nucleus. Since Dennett is a clever sophist, he is able to hide the fact that he has effectively defined me, and you, as a metaphor. *I*....am nothing but a metaphor, a center of narrative gravity. This person who is writing, who has thoughts. I am not *active*, as my intuition tells me I am; I’m an abstraction, a concept, literally a metaphor. –If you find this idea at all coherent, I commend you.

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<sup>148</sup> *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), pp. 426, 427.

Other philosophers, influenced by Wittgenstein and the twentieth century's "linguistic turn" in philosophy, argue that because "the substantival phrase 'the self' is very unnatural in most speech contexts in most languages," the self itself is an illusion—"an illusion that arises from nothing more than an improper use of language." Galen Strawson, from whose paper "The Self" these quotations are taken, persuasively argues that that position is untenable:

The problem of the self doesn't arise from an unnatural use of language which arises from nowhere. On the contrary: use of a phrase like 'the self' arises from a prior and independent sense that there is such a thing as the self. The phrase may be unusual in ordinary speech; it may have no obvious direct translation in many languages. Nevertheless all languages have words which lend themselves naturally to playing the role that 'the self' plays in English, however murky that role may be. The phrase certainly means something to most people.... It is too quick to say that a "grammatical error....is the essence of the theory of the self", or that "'the self' is a piece of philosopher's nonsense consisting in a misunderstanding of the reflexive pronoun".<sup>149</sup>

For many decades, much of philosophy and other humanistic disciplines has consisted in a fetishization of language, unsurprising in that intellectuals traffic in words. Ordinary people, however, would be surprised to learn that they, their selves, don't exist, that they are illusions arising from improper uses of language.

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<sup>149</sup> Galen Strawson, "The Self," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5.6 (1997): 405–428.



So let's try to be reasonable. What is the self? What is this sense of self that all people except pathological cases have? First of all, it incorporates the impression of *continuity*. We perceive ourselves as being the same person from moment to moment and day to day. Second, we sense that we're active, that we're (usually) in control of what we do. We have free will, we're self-determining. When I read a book, I am choosing to do so.

These two facts (our continuity and our apparent self-control) seem to be the most important phenomenological reasons for the belief in a substantial, metaphysical self, a "soul." "*I* am something *permanent*," we think, "some kind of spiritual substance, some sort of *entity* or *thing*. This is intuitively obvious! It just *feels* that way." When I introspect, I feel as if I am some kind of ineffably substantial thing, even as I cannot get a clear grasp of what this thing is. This is the sense in which David Hume was right when he doubted the existence of a self:<sup>150</sup> no graspable entity corresponds to our "substantial" self-intuition. Simply stated, there is apparently *nothing there* (in consciousness), nothing that would qualify as a self. Nevertheless, the irresistible power of our self-intuition has led many people, including philosophers, to assume that each person "has" or "is" a *soul*, or a Transcendental Ego, as Kant called it—some sort of self behind appearances. Our self-intuition gives us access only to the *tip*, as it were, of this Transcendental Self. The rest of it is located mysteriously "within" or "behind" us. When we die, this thing is supposed either to have an afterlife or to be reincarnated, depending on one's religion.

I, however, am going to follow the Buddha, Hume, William James, Sartre, and many others in saying that the notion of a

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<sup>150</sup> In his *Treatise of Human Nature* he states, "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception." "The soul," he says, "so far as we can conceive it, is nothing but a system or train of different perceptions."

substantial self is a confusion, and a philosophically inelegant one. For it clutters up our conception of man. If we can provide a good explanation of psychic life without invoking a “soul,” we should discard the idea as violating the principle of Ockham’s razor. So for now I’m going to say that my, and your, self-intuition is deceptive: while it implicitly points to some sort of entity—a concrete *Self*—there is no such thing.

Indirect evidence exists for that conclusion. Consider the pupils of your eyes (or anyone else’s, for that matter). Ordinarily—say, when you look casually at a mirror—they appear ineffably substantial, as if they’re a *presence* rather than an *absence*. This makes sense, since we intuitively perceive the eyes as being the gateway to the soul, or the self. When we’re having a conversation, for example, we look at the other person’s eyes: this is significant because we think of ourselves as communicating with *him*, with his *self*, and so if we naturally look at his eyes, then the obvious conclusion is that we naturally associate his eyes with his self more than we do his other facial features. And yet—the pupil is an *absence*, a hole for light to enter! Our eye-intuition is mistaken! This is indeed rather horrifying, though most people don’t think so. But try this: get so close to the bathroom mirror that your nose is almost touching it, and look intensely into one of your pupils for a while. Keep looking until you suddenly get the intuition that your pupils are a *nothingness*. Then back away, and they’ll revert to “substantiality.”

When I conduct that little experiment I always “see” that there is no “self-substance” behind my eyes, which look vacant. For a brief moment I see it with irresistible force. And then when I back away I always find it disturbing that I involuntarily return to the old misperception that the pupils are a presence. Evidently our brains are hardwired such that we naturally have this misperception, just as we have the deluded intuition of a self-substance. (Interestingly, we also misinterpret shadows: we see them as a presence when in fact they’re an absence (of light).)

So I’m rejecting the strange and probably incoherent notion of a self-substance, something like “a spirit or thinking substance,” to

quote Bishop Berkeley. But then what is this sense of self we have? I can see that I exist; but what am *I*? I made light of Dennett's definition of the self as a metaphor, an abstraction, because it neglects the self's *active* nature. It is one-sided. All definitions of the self as some kind of idea suffer from this deficiency. They avoid Berkeley's and Descartes' mistake of attributing to the self a substantiality (which would imply an implausible mind-body ontological dualism), but they sacrifice the insight into the self's essential activeness. As Berkeley wrote in the *Third Dialogue Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), "I my self am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas." This active thing is what we should analyze first.

In his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James gives a multifaceted definition of the self. The part I want to mention now is what he calls the "I," as opposed to the "me." The I, or the "pure ego," is the "active principle" in oneself, i.e., "that which at any given moment is conscious." But what is this if not "the entire stream of personal consciousness" itself?—or, at any rate, the present segment of it. What else can be conscious but consciousness itself? "The I is a *thought*." "The consciousness of self involves a stream of thought, each part of which as 'I' can remember those which went before, [and] know the things they knew...."<sup>151</sup> James is adhering to the principle of theoretic economy: rather than positing a cumbrous division between thought and thinker, or activity and substance, he is fusing the two. The I is not separate from thoughts; "the thoughts themselves are the thinkers." If this fusion does the work that we need a philosophical theory of the self to do, then it should be accepted as true.

But what exactly is James saying? The self, the I, is a thought, the present thought in a continuous stream of thoughts. But which thought is it? It can't be the entire stream of consciousness, for the

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<sup>151</sup> William James, *Psychology* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1948), p. 215.

self feels itself as wholly existing in each moment, whereas the stream of consciousness extends over a period of time. Nor can the self be (every thought in) the entire state of consciousness at any given moment, for included in this state is an awareness of things like one's environment, one's body, etc. The self, in its most immediate manifestation, is neither its environment nor its body, nor the *thoughts* it has of its environment and its body. It is just *itself*. But what is this? Well, if the self is a thought rather than a substance, then it can be nothing but the *thought of itself*. In other words, it is *self-thought*, or *self-consciousness*. "*I am self-consciousness*."

Now we're in the territory of Fichte, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and other early phenomenologists. They defined the self as (self-)consciousness. Kierkegaard, though—at least until Sartre came along—may have been the one who most appreciated the paradoxical character of his definition. For self-consciousness, as such, is a relation—a relation of itself to itself—and a *relating* of itself to itself—and is thus both a self-difference and a "self-differencing." As he wrote in the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*, "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself...." In other words, while the self (i.e., (implicit) consciousness of being conscious) is, from one perspective, a relation, it is really an activity, and as such cannot be a mere abstract relation. It has to be a *relating*, a relating itself to itself. Moreover, this is *all* it is. It is just a self-relating—an (implicit) awareness of awareness (*as a particular awareness*).

I have to be careful how I express myself here. For there are many different kinds of self-consciousness. There is consciousness of one's past, one's personality-traits, one's emotions, one's nervousness in social interactions, etc. These are not necessarily entailed by the kind of self-consciousness I'm referring to. For the moment I'm ignoring them. Instead, I'm talking about the most universal and "immediate" manifestation of self-consciousness, namely awareness of being aware (of some given thing). All fully

developed and un-pathological human beings share this awareness. In certain moments it is merely half-conscious or “unreflective,” merely “implicit,” while at other times it is explicit and reflective. But in some form it is always present, this self-consciousness or sense of self. Gerald Edelman describes the phenomenon well: “[implicit in] conscious awareness of objects is the *immediate experiential apprehension* of oneself aware of them. Even when our attention is not on ourselves but on what we perceive, conscious perceptual awareness includes awareness of our own perceiving.”<sup>152</sup> What I’m saying is that, almost by definition, to the extent that there is this “awareness of our own perceiving,” there is a self—i.e., a sense of self.

It’s worth noting that this account of the self is basically tautologous. By discarding the idea of a substantival self (“behind appearances”), I’ve accepted the idea that the self just is the *sense* of self. And what can the sense of self be but self-consciousness? The two terms are synonymous. Since the most immediate and necessary manifestation of self-consciousness is consciousness of consciousness, this must be what the self is. Moreover, this definition is useful in that it explains our perception of free will: self-consciousness, in being *of itself*, tends to see itself as existing through itself, as being the cause of itself, as having self-control.<sup>153</sup> It must see itself as positing itself, just as each person—each I—implicitly sees himself as positing himself and his acts, or as having free will. Another advantage of the definition of the self I’ve given is that it explains Hume’s confusion. The reason this definition didn’t occur to Hume is that it’s so phenomenologically *obvious*.

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<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Kathleen Wider’s *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness: Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 146.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre* (New York: Meredith Corporation, 1970), p. 97: “The *self posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it *exists*; and conversely, the self *exists* and *posits* its own existence by virtue of merely existing. It is at once the agent and the product of action; the active, and what the activity brings about; action and deed are one and the same, and hence the ‘I am’ expresses an Act....”

His probing of his consciousness was too *deep*: he searched all its nooks and crannies (his perceptions, his memories, etc.) for some obscure thing corresponding to an entity called the “self,” when in fact it was right there in broad daylight. One cannot “search carefully” for the self without thereby passing right through it. Self-consciousness attends every thought; it is the human mode of consciousness, such that to look “*within*” oneself is effectively to look *past* self-consciousness, and hence the self.

[....]

I’ll distinguish between four main categories of the self’s relation to itself and the world, but the reader should keep in mind that these categories, as such, are simplifications, merely heuristic devices intended to simplify my discussion. There are no mutually differentiated “categories” in concrete consciousness; everything exists in an immediate holistic unity. Indeed, this is the case with regard to any object of analysis, be it in economics, psychology, biology or whatever: the object is always a unity, so to speak, its analytically differentiated facets thoroughly interrelated and interpenetrating, each empirically presupposing the others. The act of distinguishing them is an act of theoretic violence, which, however, is necessary if we are to understand the object. For understanding consists in placing concepts in such relations to each other that they “mirror” the object of analysis in fundamental respects.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Richard Rorty criticizes the correspondence theory of truth in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), but his account is, I think, incoherent. The notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation, or of truth as correspondence with reality, is implicit in all theorizing. Propositions “reach out” towards a “transcendent” reality; they are intended to portray or “picture” this reality. (Are the hypotheses of natural science not supposed to accurately represent nature, or those of the social sciences not supposed to be true of society?) In any case, when Rorty enjoins us to “see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature,” he overlooks the fact that these conceptions are not mutually exclusive.

The four categories I'll briefly discuss comprise four different kinds of relations between self-consciousness and the world: namely, its relations to *time*, to the *body*, to the *external world* and particular objects in it, and to *itself*. The latter category ultimately includes the others, but it's useful to distinguish it from them. One of the themes of my discussion will be that in each "mode" or "category" of experience, self-consciousness conflicts with itself—or, rather, features of its experience conflict with each other, ultimately because self-consciousness is self-negation. I'll use my analysis later in the chapter to make some sense of human relationships, including the individual's relationship with himself.

The first mode of experience I'll mention is the temporal one. Briefly stated, human consciousness is, for itself, temporally more extended than, say, a dog's. That is, the present moment as experienced by a human is more extended, more "inclusive" of the passage of time and more "retaining" of each past instant (*as past*), than is the moment experienced by a dog, which is characterized by a kind of brute immediacy. Likewise, the consciousness of a mentally healthy person is more aware of time *as time* than is the consciousness of someone, say, with Down syndrome. William Faulkner portrays this fact well in Part One of *The Sound and the Fury*, which is written from the perspective of a mentally retarded 33-year-old named Benjy. Benjy is apparently not capable of reflective self-consciousness; nor is he aware of the past as past. Time does not exist for him, and he does not fully exist for himself. As Faulkner said in an interview, "To that idiot [Benjy], time was not a continuation, it was an instant, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow, it all is this moment, it all is [now] to him. He cannot distinguish between what was last year and what will be tomorrow, he doesn't know whether he dreamed it or saw it."<sup>155</sup> The fully developed, healthy person retains the just-past in his consciousness—and is pre-reflectively, or "half-consciously," aware of it as just past—even as he anticipates or "protends" the

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<sup>155</sup> David Minter, ed., *The Sound and the Fury: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), p. 238.

immediate future. This phenomenon can be expressed in Husserlian language: the retentional and protentional structures of consciousness are more prominent in a human than in, e.g., a dog.<sup>156</sup> Peter K. McInerney summarizes Husserl's theory of time-consciousness as follows:

A perceptual act-phase (an instantaneous slice of a perceptual act) has one feature that retains earlier phases of the perceptual act, another feature that perceives whatever is present, and a third feature that protends later phases of the perceptual act. ....Although retention is actual at one time, its intentional object is at an earlier time. Retention reaches to earlier moments in time and directly intuits earlier moments as *earlier*. ....[P]rotention portrays the future emptily....as indeterminate and open.<sup>157</sup>

Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi elaborate:

The retentional structure of experience, that is, the fact that when I am experiencing something, each occurrent moment of consciousness does not simply disappear at the next moment but is kept in an intentional currency, constitutes a coherency that stretches over an experienced temporal duration. Husserl's favorite example is a melody. When I experience a melody, I don't simply experience a knife-edge presentation (primal impression) of one note which is then completely

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<sup>156</sup> The comedian Bill Maher was once attacked by the politically correct media for saying that a mentally retarded person is in some ways like a dog. He was more right than he knew.

<sup>157</sup> McInerney, *Time and Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 98–100.



washed away and replaced with the next knife-edge presentation of the next note. Rather, consciousness retains the sense of the first note as I hear the second note, a hearing that is also enriched by an anticipation (protention) of the next note (or at least, in case I do not know the melody, of the fact that there will be a next note, or some next auditory event).

Maybe you're wondering what the relation is between all this—this discussion of the temporal structure of consciousness—and self-awareness. Gallagher and Zahavi explain the connection:

The temporal (retentional-impressional-protentional) structure of consciousness not only allows for the experience of temporally extended objects or intentional contents, but also entails the self-manifestation of consciousness, that is, its pre-reflective self-awareness. The retention of past notes of the melody is accomplished, not by a “real” or literal re-presentation of the notes (as if I were hearing them a second time and simultaneously with the current note), but by a retention of my just past experience of the melody. That is, the retentional structure of consciousness captures the just-past qualities of intentional content only by capturing the just-past experience of that intentional consciousness. This means that there is a primary and simultaneous self-awareness (an awareness of my own identity in the ongoing flow of experience) that is implicit in my experience of intentional content. At the same time that I am aware of a melody, for example, I am co-aware of *my ongoing experience of* the melody through the retentional structure of that very

experience—and this just is the pre-reflective self-awareness of experience.<sup>158</sup>

Thus, humans' advanced temporal awareness is one manifestation of their relatively advanced self-consciousness. For it involves the pre-reflective perception that our present self is a continuation of the immediately past self, and that the immediately future self will be a continuation of the present self. In being aware of the *present moment* as extended, we are aware of *ourselves* as extended. This also makes possible our reflective awareness of our distantly past and distantly future selves as being, in a sense, *us*.

One of the “paradoxes” of the temporality of human consciousness is that the retentional and protentional features of experience exist “together,” as it were—indeed, together with the impressional feature. All three are somehow immediately united in consciousness; there is no temporal succession between them. A second paradox (closely related to the first) is that the present moment is both *fleeting* and *extended*. The reader has but to introspect to see how the moment is extended: it is experienced not as a discrete fraction of an instant but as a continuity. This property, I have said, is explained by the presence of retention and protention. At the same time, though, there is the property of *fleetingness*: reflectively we know that any given moment can be divided into instants that can be measured in milliseconds or less. But even pre-reflectively there is a fleetingness, as indeed there has to be if we are to be aware of the temporal structure of every moment. This essential fleetingness is not obvious when reflection first tries to discern it, because the *continuity* of consciousness is more noticeable. But try, for example, saying the word “now” a series of times, twice a second or so. “*Now now now now now now....*” Although the perception of temporal continuity remains,

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<sup>158</sup> Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, “Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2006 edition), Edward N. Zalta ed., at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness-phenomenological> (accessed May, 2007).

there is also an awareness of fleetingness, manifested by the fact that you experience each “now” as instantaneously prior to the next (and later than the previous). The continuity and fleetingness exist together on a pre-reflective level, such that there is a sort of temporal contradiction at the heart of self-consciousness. This isn’t just an “objective” contradiction that we don’t subjectively experience until we reflect on it; rather, it exists at the very heart of our subjective, ordinary, pre-reflective experience. Every waking moment is characterized by it. In every moment, then, self-consciousness exhibits a temporal restlessness, so to speak: continuity opposes fleetingness and vice versa; retention opposes protention and vice versa. Self-consciousness, or the self, is never at rest under such conditions. It is dynamic, in constant movement, perpetually “unsatisfied,” as Hegel saw.

The relations between (self-)consciousness and the body are similarly paradoxical. There is an implicit awareness of our separation from the body, but there is also an awareness of our union with the body. Both these awarenesses have been analyzed by past philosophers: on the one hand, phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty have examined the ways in which consciousness is united with the body. (See, e.g., the *Phenomenology of Perception*.) Merleau-Ponty pointed out that there is a kind of bodily self-consciousness, a bodily intentionality “present in motor activity and in perception”—“a form of intentionality that underlies the intentionality of the mental and of language.”<sup>159</sup> And Gareth Evans notes that “perception involves the subject’s awareness of himself as a sensorimotor organism acting in the world. There can be no perceptual consciousness of the world without consciousness of oneself as embodied.”<sup>160</sup> In general, I am aware of my body not only as *mine* but also as, in a sense, *me*. I am, e.g., thin and pale-skinned. I look in the mirror and see *myself*. But while the whole body is experienced as me, the face, of course, is especially important. For the face most directly manifests states of

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<sup>159</sup> Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, p. 122.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

consciousness. The experience of sadness consists partly in the experience of one's face as twisted into a frown; the pleasure of laughter is a result partly of the pleasure of smiling. The face is a direct "objectification" of the self, and the inner perception of one's facial expressions is an essential component in consciousness. (The universal preference of lovers for good-looking people would be inexplicable were the face not half-consciously seen as the person, or the self, himself. When looking at the face and body we are looking at the person himself; the idea of a self "behind" the face doesn't even enter our thoughts. Therefore, a good-looking face is seen as signifying a good, or desirable, person. Unfortunately the correlation is far from perfect.)

Moreover, in many modes of experience, the body is experienced almost unambiguously and immediately as the *subject* of consciousness, rather than as an object in the world. For example, when one is engaged in strenuous physical activity, one has effectively become one's body acting on the world. One's consciousness has become practically one's *bodily* consciousness. This example is yet another illustration of the "intermixture" between consciousness and body.

On the other hand, I am not really, strictly speaking, my body. The mere fact that I am reflectively able to distinguish myself from it is significant. Evidently there must be some difference between it and me. Dualists such as Descartes have expounded the differences, but even pre-reflectively everyone distinguishes himself from his body. One of the reasons is that consciousness looks out at the world from "up above," from the head and the eyes, while most of the body is located down below. So there is even, to an extent, a physical separation between consciousness and the body.<sup>161</sup> The half-conscious duality that this separation supports is what makes possible our reflective awareness of the body as an object, as something in the world that is different from the subject

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<sup>161</sup> I'm not saying that consciousness has a physical location. It doesn't. It isn't the sort of thing to which the predicate of "location" applies. Nonetheless, the head is in some sense (perceived by it as) its "home."

(the I) that is our immediate self-consciousness. But we even half-consciously distinguish ourselves from our *face*: while its contours and expressions, as inwardly experienced by us, are important components of our consciousness, the mere fact that we can't see it without using a mirror or some sort of reflecting device is enough to support our not completely identifying with it, since we *can* "see" our self at all times—and indeed we *are* seeing it at all times, in that we always have a sense of self (except during moments of unconsciousness). Others, not us, see our face; we, not others, are aware of our inner (sense of) self.

In short, consciousness has a complicated and paradoxical relationship with the body it inheres in, in that it is unreflectively aware of both its separation from it and its fusion with it. This relationship, however, does not signify quite the same self-restlessness and self-opposition as is implicit in the self's temporal relations with itself. The latter are essential to the very notion of self-consciousness, its very activity—the activity that constitutes self-consciousness as such. The former relationship, on the other hand, is between self-consciousness and something external to its self-constituting activity. Even so, this relationship can be the source of much psychological conflict and pain, depending on what a person thinks of his body and on the degree to which he identifies himself with it. If his body is obese, for example, his body-image might be extremely important to his conception of himself even as he doesn't want it to be, with the result that his sense of himself will be ambiguous and conflicted, fickle and insecure. At times (in moments when he identifies strongly with his body) he may be self-contemptuous, while at other times (when he rebels against such an identification) he may feel resentful and angry at the world, this world that has reduced him to his body.

The third main "category" of the self's experience is made possible by awareness of its separation from the external world and from other selves. Everything in the world confronts consciousness as an external thing, something *other*, whether it be as a brute object (such as a table or a stone) or as another self. A great deal

has to be said about the self's "being-in-the-world"; I'll do so later in the chapter.

The fourth and final universal category of self-consciousness's experience consists of "free will," which, however, is shot through with unfreedom. Let's consider the freedom first.—The I perceives itself as controlling itself, which is to say that a person half-consciously experiences himself as free. He chooses his acts, he even posits his own existence. His existence, as Fichte said, is experienced as an act of his: he "*exists* himself." At any particular moment he is actively "throwing himself" into existence, into the world, both through his physical activity and through the phenomenological structure of his self-consciousness. Actually, the two aspects are interrelated, since the self partly identifies with the body. In immersing myself in some activity or other, like writing or playing soccer or cooking dinner, I am projecting myself into the world, embracing my existence—bringing it to pass, in fact, causing myself to act and to exist. (I am not *literally* doing so, but this is how I implicitly or explicitly experience it.) I am "acting myself," acting my body, as well as my self-conscious being itself. For self-consciousness, even when it is occupied in acting-on-the-world, always, as such, is acting on itself, simply because it is *of itself*.

At the same time, though, it includes an element of passivity, precisely because it is "of itself." It is its own object; therefore it is unfree, just insofar as it is an object for itself. Inasmuch as it observes itself, it is free and active; inasmuch as it is observed by itself, it is unfree and passive. We can use the terminology of Martin Heidegger to express the point. Heidegger emphasized man's "thrownness," his "always-already thrownness" into the already-existing world. Man finds himself in the midst of a world he didn't create, embodied in a body he didn't create, possessing a personality he didn't choose, accompanied by a self he didn't create (namely, himself), saturated with an unfree facticity. To quote Magda King:

By “thrownness,” Heidegger does not mean that man is cast into the “natural universe” by a blind force or an indifferent fate, which immediately abandons him to his own devices, but means: his own “real” existence is manifest to man in the curious way that he can always and only find himself *already* here, and can never get behind this *already* to let himself come freely into being. But although he can never originate his being, yet he is “delivered over to himself”: he has to take over his being as his.... Tuned by moods and feelings, man finds himself in his thrown being, in the inexorable facticity “*that I am and have to be,*” delivered over to myself to be as I can, dependent upon a world for my own existence.<sup>162</sup>

Thus, the individual exhibits a certain passiveness in his relationship with the world. He doesn’t create it; it is always already there, as he himself is already here. He is therefore not *absolutely* free. –There is a kind of “dialectic” here, between the self’s freedom and its thrownness. There is an opposition, a self-opposition. The self feels itself free to do as it pleases; every act and thought feels as if it’s chosen, such that in its very existence (i.e., its being conscious) the self seems to choose itself. But at the same time, it doesn’t: the self is already here and can’t do anything about it. It never makes the choice to exist, nor to exist in the *way* it exists (possessing a certain body and personality), and on some level, in every moment, it obscurely recognizes this fact. The two contradictory terms in this dialectic (the freedom and the unfreedom) always exist in an immediate synthesis; they aren’t separated concretely, in consciousness, but only conceptually. They do, however, make for a certain half-conscious restlessness in the

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<sup>162</sup> Magda King, *Heidegger’s Philosophy* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), pp. 77, 78.

self, comparable to the restlessness inherent in the self's experience of time.

The individual's unfreedom and facticity are brought home to him especially forcefully in moments of self-dissatisfaction. Indeed, all unhappiness is first and foremost consciousness (however implicit) of unfreedom. There are, of course, always other conceptual and phenomenological elements in a particular experience of unhappiness, but the unifying thread through all such experiences is awareness of a frustrated desire (i.e., of unfreedom).

Anyway, the paradox of these self-oppositions is, in a way, not very paradoxical, for, as I have said, self-consciousness itself is a self-opposition, a self-difference. It relates itself to itself; it is both subject and object—its own object—i.e., active and passive, free and unfree. In other words, it is not completely identical to itself, which apparently means it violates, in some sense, the law of identity. Sartre agreed. He embraced this violation of the law of identity and made it the foundation of *Being and Nothingness*, in that it explains the distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. A chair or a tree, for example, is identical to itself; it just is what is. Self-consciousness, however, is not. Indeed, there are *two* reasons it isn't: the first, I've said, is that it "steps back" from itself and observes itself. "The for-itself exists as presence to itself. ....To be present to something requires separation from that to which one is present. So there must be a separation of consciousness from itself. 'If being is present to itself, it is because it is not wholly itself.'"<sup>163</sup>

The second reason is that consciousness is *intentional*, which means it is self-transcending. Awareness is never just itself, just pure awareness (of nothing). It is *of* something (as indeed the grammar of the word shows). As such, it transcends itself toward an object. It "goes beyond" itself. "Consciousness is not a thing, a determinate Dasein; it is always beyond itself; it goes beyond, or

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<sup>163</sup> Kathleen Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, p. 52.



transcends, itself.”<sup>164</sup> Or, as Wider says: “a phenomenological description reveals, for both Sartre and Husserl, that consciousness cannot exist without an object. Consciousness must always be of something.... [Indeed, it] must always be of that which is not itself, even when it takes itself as its own object.”<sup>165</sup> Its content, then—i.e., that of which it is—is, of necessity, not itself. Hence, consciousness is, from more than one perspective, not self-identical.

Many philosophers have objected to that Sartrean (Hegelian, Kierkegaardian) claim. After all, it throws out logic! Or at least it limits its range of applicability. Their objection is misguided, though. For they’re objecting to self-consciousness itself, not to a deficiency in the arguments of any philosopher. No one can plausibly deny that consciousness is necessarily of an object, nor that *self*-consciousness, as such, involves a sort of separation from itself. This is just the way it is, the way it logically has to be. In giving his “paradoxical” formulation in *The Sickness Unto Death* (which I quoted earlier), Kierkegaard was simply articulating what is logically implicit in the notion of self-consciousness. It has to be a self-relation, a self-difference; and consciousness of whatever kind involves an element of self-difference, because it is of something other than itself. Thus, the law of identity apparently does not apply absolutely to everything.

However, Sartre didn’t seem to appreciate the sense in which the law does apply to consciousness. For, after all, insofar as we speak of something, it is (identical to) itself. Otherwise we couldn’t speak of it. Insofar as some given thing changes in every instant or is necessarily different from itself, it is senseless to speak of it.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 16.

<sup>165</sup> Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, p. 42.

<sup>166</sup> Nietzsche recognized the degree to which language and thought presuppose stasis in (or the “self-identity” of) what is thought about, and therewith all the other logical laws. See *The Will to Power*, §520—or, indeed, the whole of section five in Book Three. For an account of self-consciousness that remedies the one-sidedness of Sartre’s, see Hegel’s

Self-consciousness is, therefore, tautologously identical to itself: it is (“identical to”) this thing that is a separation from itself, a presence to itself. The lack of self-identity is simply a property of this (self-identical) thing. *Formally*, that is, self-consciousness is just itself; its *content*, though, is (of) something that differs from itself.

All these ideas will be useful later, when I indulge in a bit of phenomenological psychology. Before I do that, though, I have to at least sketch answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of the chapter, in order to mitigate postmodern doubts about the nature of the self.

The “sense of self” I keep referring to—self-consciousness, the I—never exists in its essential purity, as bare consciousness of consciousness. But neither does any thought, as such, really exist. A thought, considered as a single “determinate” thing (a definite, clearly defined thing), is an abstraction from reality. There is never such a thing as “a thought,” a single thought existing in isolation from others. The “thought” of, e.g., this table exists in an empirical unity with many other thoughts, which all merge together in the same state of consciousness. For example, right now I’m aware of the computer I’m writing on, the music I’m listening to, the feel of the keyboard on my fingertips, the itching in my leg, the desire to be doing something other than writing, etc. Thus, while we are always at least implicitly conscious of consciousness (except when *unconscious*), we never experience self-consciousness “purely” or “in itself.” It is always combined with our awareness of other objects, as Kant saw.

Since self-consciousness interpenetrates and is interpenetrated by every other thought and sensation in a given state of consciousness, such that (in its concrete reality) it is, so to speak, implicit in each of them and each of them is implicit in it, the real (sense of) self that someone has (or *is*) in a particular moment is the entire state of his consciousness. One’s sense of self can be only

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*Encyclopedia*—or Robert R. Williams’s book *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 69–72.

imperfectly described, however, for it is fundamentally intuitive—and extremely rich, in part explicitly conscious (in a given moment) and in part implicitly.

Anyway, in order to explain people's impression of their own self-continuity we have to invoke the protention and retention I mentioned earlier, i.e., the perception of psychological and physical continuity over consecutive instants. I already noted that (self-)consciousness is (or experiences itself as) temporally extended; now I'm saying that the other aspects of one's being, such as the body and one's personality, are temporally extended as well. The reason is that they are objects of consciousness, and insofar as consciousness is extended in time, its objects are as well—including the body and its actions and sensations, as well as emotions and thoughts. These things differ from other objects of consciousness in that they are, crudely speaking, the main features of the world to which consciousness tends to have an immediate "affective" attachment (such that it implicitly sees them as "its own"), with the result that they are experienced by consciousness as the concrete, empirical aspects of the self. Since, via protention and retention, they persist over time, the self in its full concreteness persists over time. That is, I see myself as the same person right *now* as I am right *now*, and *now*, and *now*.... Across short time-spans like this, protention and retention are essential to my perception that I remain the same self.

The perception that one remains the same self between *longer* spans of time is explained in much the same way, namely through memory. In *Reasons and Persons* (1984), Derek Parfit distinguishes between "direct memory connections" and "continuity of memory."<sup>167</sup> It is a useful distinction. There are direct memory connections between my present self and me as a fifteen-year-old if I can remember experiences I had then; there is continuity of memory if there has been an "overlapping chain of direct memories" between my past self and my present self. "In the case of most adults, there would be such a chain. In each day...,

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<sup>167</sup> *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 205.

most of these people remember some of their experiences on the previous day.” Both kinds of memory-experiences are relevant to the perception of self-continuity. The reason I think that the I that I experience now is the same one that I experienced then is both that I remember certain experiences I had when I was fifteen and that I know there has been an unbroken continuity of memories between then and now. In addition, I can see from photographs that there was a body then that looks almost identical to mine now, from which I conclude that I “inhabited” (and *was*) that body.

Before proceeding, I should answer a possible objection I postponed considering earlier, namely that “I” cannot be equivalent to “this (self-)consciousness,”<sup>168</sup> as I have been saying it is, because it makes sense to say “*my* consciousness,” which implies that I must be something over and above consciousness. Furthermore, in any ordinary utterance, the words “this consciousness” cannot be substituted for “I” without a significant change in the utterance’s meaning. Therefore, they cannot mean the same thing, and I cannot be (*self-*)consciousness.

My answer to this objection is that, in part because the presence of memories establishes a connection between a past self and the present self such that the latter “appropriates” the former to itself, and hence sees itself as persisting across time, consciousness “reifies” itself, sees itself as a sort of substance, an entity, a unifying principle, a thing-like “I” that is both within and outside consciousness.<sup>169</sup> Human self-consciousness locates itself outside itself and yet within itself. It projects itself beyond itself into a sort

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<sup>168</sup> Partly included in which consciousness, I have noted, is the body, or awareness of the body. Its sensations, feelings, etc. are in consciousness, and so the latter experiences the body as somehow a part of it, though also something external to it.

<sup>169</sup> There are other causes of this self-reification. I’ll note here only that the assigning of a *name* to each person at birth is well-calculated to coax his consciousness eventually into self-reification. He will see himself as something that coheres around his name—“I am Chris. Chris Wright. That is *who I am*, that entity called ‘Chris Wright’”—and will thus see himself as a “substance,” a substantial self.

of “active concept,” namely the concept of oneself—of “Chris Wright,” in my case—which is constant and unchanging amidst all the shifting determinations of bodily and mental states. I, Chris Wright, am always Chris Wright, the same Chris Wright ten years ago as I’ll be ten years from now. Insofar as I am unchanging in this way, I am really nothing but a concept or idea, albeit an “active” one, an idea that has free will and can act. But this is absurd, of course. No idea, as such, can *act*. The only reason it seems as if the idea, the person, that is Chris Wright can act is that *consciousness* is what is doing the acting. Consciousness—a fairly reflective consciousness<sup>170</sup>—conflates itself with the idea, the person-idea, that is Chris Wright (for example in its, i.e. *my*, assent to the statement “I am Chris Wright”). It reifies itself, turns itself (for itself) into an unchanging thing that functions as the bearer and unifier of physical and mental states and acts across a lifetime.

A moment ago I realized that Sartre anticipated these ideas in *The Transcendence of the Ego*. So I’ll quote him:

The ego [i.e., the idea of the “person”] is a virtual locus of unity.... Consciousness projects its own spontaneity into the ego-object in order to confer on the ego the creative power which is absolutely necessary to it. But this spontaneity, *represented* and *hypostatized* in an object, becomes a degraded and bastard spontaneity, which magically preserves its creative power even while becoming passive. Whence the profound irrationality of the notion of an ego.<sup>171</sup>

In other words, when I reflect on myself, implicit in my (self-)consciousness is awareness of myself as something “over and

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<sup>170</sup> “The ego [e.g., ‘Chris Wright’] is an object apprehended, but also an object constituted, by reflective consciousness.” Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), p. 80.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

above” my immediate consciousness, something that remains the same not only between instants but also between minutes and hours and years, something that Sartre called an ego. This thing—in its active aspect<sup>172</sup>—which I see as being *me*, has free will, temporal awareness, self-awareness, is fused with the body but is not merely the body—in short, has all the properties of self-consciousness and would *be* self-consciousness if it didn’t have the additional property that it is self-identical and unchanging. (You are just *you*, the same *you*, in a sense, that you were ten years ago.) Self-consciousness is not. It exists only in the moment, and to say that *this* self-consciousness (in this moment) is identical to the self-consciousness of ten minutes ago is meaningless. It is either truistically false or truistically true: true because self-consciousness as such is *always* the same—it is, after all, just consciousness of consciousness, it is never anything else—and so to say that two instantiations of the concept of “self-consciousness” are the same is tautologous; false because two instantiations are, in being *two*, not one and the same. In other words, two self-consciousnesses are always *qualitatively* identical but never *numerically* identical. However, the “ego” is both qualitatively and numerically identical to itself across spans of time. It must, therefore, be a concept, since a concept is always numerically and qualitatively self-identical. (The concept of 2 has never been anything but the concept of 2.) “The ego, being an object [i.e., a concept], is passive.”<sup>173</sup> But it isn’t *merely* a concept, because I am not merely a concept (much as Dennett would disagree); I am also active. What the ego, or the *person*, is, then, is a fusion of passiveness and activeness, of conceptness and self-consciousness. “The ego is an irrational synthesis of activity and passivity.”<sup>174</sup> This is why I said that (self-)consciousness locates itself both within and without itself. Consciousness, which is the acting self in any given moment, doesn’t see itself as mere consciousness; it sees itself as a *person*, a

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<sup>172</sup> See below on the distinction between its active and passive aspects.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

fusion of activity and passivity. It sees the ego as the self,<sup>175</sup> and since it also sees itself as the self, it sees itself as the ego. Which means it sees itself as not-itself, or rather as more than itself. [....]

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The great difficulty of elucidating the nature of the self arises from the profoundly mysterious nature of human consciousness. Consciousness, in turn, is mysterious to us in part because we're too *close* to it; we can't attain a sufficiently clear, distanced perspective to describe it adequately. Said differently, most of what is "in" a person's consciousness is merely implicit, as any phenomenologist or psychoanalyst can tell you. Despite what Sartre thought, only the *surface* of consciousness is transparent; it requires painstaking work and incredibly subtle powers of introspection and intuition to make explicit what is half-conscious or implicit. And the resulting analysis will often seem incomprehensible to the reader because of the self-referential and just plain *paradoxical* character of consciousness. You can't reasonably deny, after all, that self-consciousness is self-referential: it relates itself to itself, it is aware of itself, it is its own object, and that is something of a paradox. Consciousness incorporates other dualisms too, as I said above: it identifies itself with "its" body, but it also implicitly considers itself something other than its body. There is, in addition, the strange dualism between oneself (one's consciousness) and people with whom one identifies: one internalizes them such that they are somehow a part of one, while at the same time they are *other*. And then there is the dualism, or rather the difference, between consciousness and the "person," this idea with which it identifies. I have been the same person, "Chris Wright," from the day of my birth to the present, and this idea of

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<sup>175</sup> Reflectively, the self takes the form of *oneself*. Which is just to say that it takes the form of the ego. Hence, the sentence "Reflective self-consciousness sees the ego as the self" can be rephrased as "When I explicitly think about myself, I see myself as Chris Wright, an unchanging self (an ego, a person) extended through hours, days, years."

Chris Wright—whatever or “whoever” that is—seems to be implicitly present in my consciousness at all times (as shown by the fact that if someone asked me “Are you Chris?” I would *immediately* and *unthinkingly* reply “Yes”). Indeed, the idea of myself as *one person* largely accounts for the sense of self-possession that is implicit in my consciousness. When I say or think, “This is *my* consciousness, *my* mind,” that is really, of course, just consciousness itself saying or thinking that it is its own. But by identifying itself with an idea called Chris Wright, this consciousness is locating itself outside itself. Insofar as I deny that I am *merely* consciousness, that is consciousness denying it is merely consciousness—a claim that is, in fact, a truism, because of course consciousness is the only thing that can affirm or deny a statement. But it is an interesting and disturbing truism, for it implies that I am not what I think I am. (Or, to say it differently, (human) consciousness is not what it thinks it is, viz. a “person” with an “identity” and so forth.) The notion of personhood is a kind of illusion, a “social construction” that does not really correspond to anything in reality, though we necessarily think it does. We also, necessarily, have to keep talking in the language of “people” and “person,” assuming that a name denotes a person with a single identity and so on—even while recognizing that such talk is mistaken and an illusion—because we can’t function in society without treating others and ourselves as single, particular, “lifelong” selves (the same self throughout its life), “people,” “individuals,” i.e., *ideas* that, paradoxically, can act, that have the “spontaneity” of consciousness, as Sartre says in the quotation above. The idea of personhood is irrational, being a “synthesis of activity and passivity.” But, at least in an “implicit” form, it is necessary to human life.

Incidentally, this analysis is reminiscent of my analysis of values. We tend to think of values in a certain “realist” way; we treat them as inhering in things “objectively,” as though, say, Hitler simply *was evil*, or abortion is *absolutely wrong* (as some people think), when in fact value-judgments are only projections of our attitudes toward some given thing. The realist attitude we tend to



adopt toward values, or when making value-judgments, is mistaken but almost unavoidable. Similarly, the realist attitude we adopt toward the self is mistaken but unavoidable. While there *are* selves just insofar as human consciousness has a sense of self, there are *not* selves if we mean by that term what Sartre means in the above passage by “ego,” namely something that is, like the idea of “a person,” over and above mere consciousness and the body.

How different would life be if we all appreciated (or if it were possible to appreciate, on a “deep” level) that humans are nothing but bodies with consciousness! This abandonment of the idea of a substantial self—or of the *behavior* of treating everyone as such a self—would probably entail a kind of reversion to animality, an escape from the grip of the desire for recognition. For who craves recognition from mere bodies (that are conscious)? We would no longer take life and ourselves seriously. Such an attitude, indeed, is fostered by the only kind of “appreciation of the truth” we are capable of, a purely *intellectual* appreciation. As long as it isn’t taken to absurd extremes, the attitude of not taking life or oneself very seriously is healthy.

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One of the sources of confusion in talking about self-continuity is that selfhood and personhood are not quite the same thing. And both are ambiguous (though “personhood” more so). They both incorporate subjective and objective criteria, “internal” and “external” criteria; but the idea of the self nevertheless relates to one’s subjectivity more closely than the idea of the “person” does. For the self is just one’s *sense* of self, one’s self-consciousness. Consider someone who undergoes electroshock therapy that erases his memories and changes his personality. Because he doesn’t recognize himself in “his” past, we are willing to say that he now has, or is, a different self than before. He has a new self-identity. But is he a different “*person*”? From one perspective, yes: there are major psychological discontinuities between his past and his present. He has changed; “he’s a different person,” as we colloquially say of someone who acts very

differently than he used to. But from another perspective, the answer is no: there are physical continuities and even some mental continuities between his past and his present. So we say, for example, that Robert Pirsig (the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) experienced electroshock therapy and drastically changed as a result of it; i.e., it is *one person* who was depressed, then had electroshock therapy, then emerged very different from before. Pirsig, however, would deny that he is the same person as before the therapy—he even gives the latter a different name, “Phaedrus”—because, from the “inside” (of his consciousness), they seem to have nothing in common. They’re different people. From the “outside,” though, we see his physical continuity and so forth, and we judge that he and Phaedrus are one person whose peculiar psychological history has split him up, “*for himself*,” into two people, or rather two selves, two identities.

The basic meaninglessness of the idea of a person, or rather of “personal identity,” is responsible for many philosophical headaches. Consider a thought-experiment from Derek Parfit.<sup>176</sup> Suppose a teleporter works by disintegrating your original body and reconstituting it in exactly the same form in another location. Your copy is identical to you in every respect, shares your memories, your personality, the precise configuration of the cells in your body, etc. What happens, then, is simply that you step into the teleporter and suddenly appear in a different location. As far as you’re concerned, it is you who appears, not just a copy of you, because you remember being in the teleporter a moment ago. But imagine that one day the machine doesn’t work as it’s supposed to: instead of disintegrating and appearing in a new location, you remain standing in the teleporter. A moment later you see on a video screen a copy of you at the new location, where “you” have been teleported. But this time, obviously, it isn’t you; you are still standing in the machine. It’s just a copy of you. On the other hand, as far as the copy is concerned, he is you: he remembers being you, etc. For him, nothing has changed from previous teleporting

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<sup>176</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 199, 200.

experiences. So it seems that, in a sense, there are now two of you. But that's odd, even nonsensical. It's also odd that intuitively we seem to think that when the teleporter was working properly it was *you* who appeared in the new location, whereas later it was only a clone of you. In both cases, after all, what happened is just that a copy was made of you and transported somewhere else.

Such puzzles and conflicting intuitions result from the contradictory and confused nature of the idea of personal identity. It incorporates both subjective and objective criteria, and both psychological and physical criteria. That is, it has no determinate meaning; its uses are governed by "family resemblances," as Wittgenstein might say. The artificiality and superficiality of the concept—its merely *constructed* nature, its "non-naturalistic," "unreal" character—is shown by the fact that in the above thought-experiment, the teleported copy both *is* and *is not* you. The copy evinces psychological continuities but no direct physical continuities. And even the psychological continuities are problematic: in the second scenario, the copy is quite sure that he has the same consciousness and is the same self, the same *person*, he was a moment ago when standing in the teleporter,<sup>177</sup> but the original you (still standing in the machine) would certainly take issue with that.

We can't dispense with the notions of personal identity and self-continuity, since they are conditions of our experience of ourselves and others; we can, however, intellectually recognize their incoherence. In ordinary contexts, as opposed to thought-experiments, the criteria of self-continuity are physical continuity and memory connections. I look at a picture of myself taken twenty years ago and say, "That's me when I was 12." In other words, that 12-year-old became this 32-year-old, and the latter used to be the former. There are physical and psychological continuities between the two that justify my saying we are the same person. But when you look more carefully at these criteria you see that they break down in certain "borderline" contexts, and thus that the concepts of

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<sup>177</sup> I.e., he isn't a mere "clone" but the real thing.

self-continuity or a personal identity that extends through time are not well-formed (in the way that, say, ‘bachelor’ is). They are socially necessary fictions, fuzzy around their edges. Strictly speaking, even to say that the 12-year-old in the picture is *me* is not wholly meaningful or correct. (There are, after all, very significant differences between us.) It is merely an effective shorthand for saying that that body and consciousness evolved into this body and consciousness, and that in some sense I recognize myself in that earlier self. -The idea of a self-substance that extends across time has no place in a scientific account of the world.

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I have a Buddhist friend who spent a year in a monastery in India. He describes it as a life-changing experience, but says that in the end he had to leave because his awareness of the illusory nature of the self was becoming too frightening. He felt himself disintegrating. So he returned to civilization and its pleasures, of love, play, immersion in daily life.

Think of the implications of abandoning a personal outlook on the world. It isn’t psychologically possible to *completely* abandon it, but you can at least imagine what that would entail. To live in such deep truth would probably mean not feeling emotions anymore, because those grow out of the “personal” mode of experience. “You” would no longer be attached to things, to possessions or even personal desires. There would be a kind of overcoming of the separation between you and others; you would feel an identity with all living things. You’d achieve a profound equanimity, but on the other hand life would cease to be exciting and *fun*. Everything would be impersonal, which, to me, sounds like death or something like it. (Buddhism has a sort of anti-humanistic quality.)

I’m fond of romantic love, for example. But it’s disturbing to know that this person I love is just a social construction, that “she” is little but a mysterious psychological unity among memory-fragments and sense-perceptions and bodily states and desires a few of which periodically well up into consciousness. I have to

ignore this fact, or rather push it to the back of my mind, in order really to live and to love. Luckily, that isn't hard.

It's worth pointing out, too, that, given people's *experience* of self-unity, it does make sense to talk about things like integrity, selfhood, personality, etc. Despite their being "artificial constructions," these concepts are meaningful in our merely human world.

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A paradoxical implication of the idea that the self is bare self-consciousness is that everyone is (or has), in a sense, the same self. We all share the same essence, insofar as we are all self-conscious. It's true that the full empirical character of each person's sense of self in a given moment differs from others', in that we have different thoughts, feelings, memories, bodies, etc. The *core* of the self, however, which is merely an implicit "consciousness of 'this' consciousness in its particularity," is absolutely the same in everyone and can be analytically distinguished from the empirical totality of one's mental states. Without this self-consciousness, after all, we would be unconscious, and so there would be no "I," no self. So we all share it, and in that respect we are identical to each other.

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How can (self-)consciousness be its own other? What are the phenomenological "mechanisms" of that self-separation? There has to be something that "gets between" consciousness and itself, something that injects otherness into it. Since consciousness is what one might call a "concrete particular," the thing that injects otherness into it has to be "abstract" and "universal." And that's what the "abstract other" is (as I've called it), a general diffuse otherness that implicitly permeates self-consciousness. What makes it possible for people to talk to themselves or to have inner dialogues in their heads is that they are always half-conscious, or

implicitly aware, of the general Other,<sup>178</sup> the Other “out there”—people, the world—that is also “abstractly” *in* their own consciousness, and to which they are, in a sense, talking when they have private conversations with themselves. This abstract, internal and external Other comes into existence for each person as he matures from infancy to childhood and adulthood, internalizing other people’s actions, reactions, and perspectives, all of which help form and get merged into a diffuse Other that accompanies each person in solitude and in society.

At the risk of belaboring the point I’ll quote some ideas I jotted down once, which go beyond what I just wrote:

“You see yourself as a particular being, your self-consciousness is particular (individual) and private, only because it exists against the phenomenologically abstract coloring of a ‘general’ other (or Other); its particularity is contrasted with the generality of the Other, and this is precisely how your self-consciousness is able to exist. *Determinatio est negatio*. Determination is negation, differentiation. You would not be the private self you are if there were not in your consciousness a general or ‘universal’ other with which you at all times implicitly contrasted yourself. We’re never really aware of the general Other as we are of ourselves, but it is there all the same. It has to be. Otherwise self-consciousness wouldn’t make sense, since a *contrast* is necessary for it to exist. It presupposes negation; it *is* a negation, namely the particular’s negation of (or opposition to) the general. The meaning of existential restlessness, the undying quest for happiness, the desire for recognition—the meaning of this (or at least *one* of the meanings) is the particular trying to abolish the general in itself, the Other, which prevents consciousness from being identical to itself. We’re always trying to fully incorporate the Other into ourselves, to make it coincide with us by securing its absolute approval. That is the human psyche’s method for reducing

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<sup>178</sup> I capitalize the word to emphasize its abstract character.

the otherness of other people: it seeks recognition of its sense of self, its self-conception.”<sup>179</sup>

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How is it possible for a person to identify with others, be they friends or merely members of an abstract community (say, a religious one) in which the person includes himself? How can one internalize other people like this? The only way is if the individual is his own other. His self-conscious particularity has to be fused with a universality, an internalized generalization of the sort of opposition-to-himself that other people are. As past thinkers have shown, this internal “abstract” other arises in the context of the child’s separation from the mother, and of his increasing use of “verbal gestures” (to quote George Herbert Mead), and of his participation in, first, spontaneous play, and then in organized games in which he internalizes and can anticipate the participants’ reactions to his behavior. Etc. I have nothing new to add to the account of what is empirically involved in the ontogenesis of the internal other, i.e., of self-consciousness. Originally the infant’s world, in particular his mother, is experienced as a part of the infant. There is no other. Then mother and child become less dependent on each other and move towards relative independence. The child becomes aware of himself as a separate being to the extent to which he becomes aware that other people are separate beings. But this evolution proceeds on the basis of—or rather is inextricably connected with—the distancing of the child from himself, which means the internalization of the opposition-to-itself that other people represent. This internalization is not merely “opposed to” but is *included in* the child’s (self-)consciousness. So now when he develops an affective attachment to another person, his experience of this person literally becomes a part of his sense of

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<sup>179</sup> When I reread this and other things I’ve written on the self, they sound very Hegelian. They’re products of my absorption of Hegel’s way of thinking—though I don’t know to what extent Hegel would have assented to any of my ideas.

self, because the person is experienced as a concrete instantiation of the abstract other, which, to repeat, is itself a part of the child's consciousness.<sup>180</sup> So "identification with an other" means that one's experience of the other person is literally a component in one's sense of self. And this phenomenon is made possible through the "mediation" of the internal(ized) general other, because this structure is the essential foundation of one's self-consciousness. (That is, by half-consciously associating a person with it, one is associating that person with one's very self.)

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Today I received a very nasty email from an acquaintance, and it bothered me a bit. But I quickly saw that insofar as her email affected me, it was because I unconsciously thought of its attacks as judgments from the *general* other (in me) rather than simply a single pitiful individual. That is, if we're talking about the restless desire for self-esteem and self-contentment, the opinions of one person *qua* one person—one external being among all external beings—cannot hurt much. Rather, the judgments of one person

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<sup>180</sup> There is an ambiguity in the idea of the "abstract other," or at least in how I use it: sometimes I imply that it is a pure interiorization, a "structure" in consciousness, while other times I imply that it is an objectively oriented projection of this interiorization. The distinction between the two uses is incredibly subtle, virtually imaginary, but it's analytically necessary. For example, in the sentence in the text I have in mind the "projection" when I say that a person is experienced as an instantiation of the Other, while I have the "interiorized" meaning in mind when I say that the Other is a part of self-consciousness. (The importance of the distinction is evident when you consider that a person cannot be experienced as an instantiation of one's own self-consciousness—because I myself am the only instantiation of myself—while he *can* be an instantiation of a "*projection*" of one's self-consciousness.) The reason I said the distinction is virtually imaginary is that, in the individual's immediate experience, there is *no* clear distinction. The only time there is is when a person "focuses" the projection (without knowing he is doing so) into a single abstract entity, like "God" or "mankind."



can hurt your self-esteem only to the extent that that person is unconsciously seen as an instantiation of the general or abstract other, i.e., of you yourself (given that you are your own other). This is, indeed—to say it one more time—how a person makes his way into your psyche, how your psyche “appropriates” him; this is the link between him and you (as well as the source of the separation between you, the otherness that comes between you). He becomes a part of you—i.e., is important to you—insofar as you unconsciously (or half-consciously) identify him with the Other that is directly a part of your consciousness. Again, this Other isn’t so much a mere concept as a fundamental feature of the phenomenology of self-consciousness. It isn’t really “*out there*”; it’s *in you*.

Thus, when you feel the need to defend yourself against someone who has criticized you you’re not, on the most basic level, arguing directly against *him*; you’re arguing against *yourself*. His criticisms have seeped into you, “gotten under your skin” by being associated with the Other in you, as if the Other itself has made these criticisms or might possibly agree with them; and since the Other is a part of you, you’re basically trying to convince *yourself* by defending yourself. After all, it’s likely that you’ll be satisfied simply if you have a good comeback to his insult, whether or not your comeback actually elicits an apology or retraction from him. And this could be the case only if the one you’re trying to convince is you, not him.

Incidentally, I think that one of the reasons why phenomenological discussions like this are so difficult is that concepts are simply not adequate vis-à-vis consciousness. They are clumsy, ill-defined, vague. This inadequacy isn’t something that can be rectified; it is inherent in the nature of concepts. For concepts are hammered out in interactions between people, and so they are appropriate only to the public, shared world. But I’m trying to apply them to the “private” world, the inner essence of consciousness, so they’re bound to be inadequate and confusing.

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It should be clear from all I've said that the self and the internal(ized) abstract other are totally inseparable. Even analytically they cannot really be separated, because self-consciousness is self-otherness, which entails that there is an abstract sort of otherness in consciousness. All this is fine, but it is disconcerting to think about deeply. When you react to something, for example, it isn't simply "you" reacting. It is also the Other in you. You have spent your whole life internalizing people's behavior, such that when you act or react it is partly the internalization of all these people that is acting. You have learned what is appropriate in various situations, so you act in appropriate ways, in ways you think others will appreciate or as they might act themselves. Even in solitude your behavior is conditioned by others', and it is largely the Other in you that is acting, or that is determining *how* you act.

And yet in all your acts there is also a "spontaneous" element, a primitively "authentic" or "purely you" element. There has to be, because you are a concrete being different from others. Maybe this element is what George Herbert Mead meant by the "I," as opposed to the "me." It is only implicit; you cannot be purely aware of it, because your awareness incorporates the Other in you.

On another level, though, your whole self-expression in every moment—every act, feeling, etc.—is genuinely, authentically you. It is, after all, *your* self-expression. If you feel alienated or you feel as though you're always only *acting* and not being yourself, *that* is authentically you, it is an expression of who you are at that time. It is impossible not to be yourself. -But in another sense—or other senses—it is definitely possible not to be yourself. I described one such sense above. In a way, we're never *just* ourselves; we're also others, having internalized people's behavior. Sometimes in social situations you can be so self-conscious, so aware of others and eager to please them, that you actually *feel* like you're not being yourself. You're not being "natural." This happens when the Other in you, as *instantiated in* and *an internalization of* the people you're with, takes over your consciousness to such an extent that the "you" in you, the natural, spontaneous element, cannot express

itself as it normally does but takes distorted, mutated, “nervous,” “self-conscious” forms that probably end up embarrassing you. The *Other* blocks you, so to speak. I think that’s a useful way to conceptualize it, maybe a psychologically or even biologically profound way. (These psychological divisions I’m talking about must after all have biological manifestations, which science will probably never explicate fully.)

But of course all this is confusing, because your experiences with and internalizations of others have *formed* you. And you *are* an other to yourself, as shown by the fact that you can reflect on yourself and are at all times at least implicitly aware of yourself. So you are a self-other....but that formulation itself suggests that there is a “self” aspect in you and an “other” aspect and that they are somehow different—even though in another sense they can’t be, because you encompass both of them! Without the (internal) Other there would be no you, only an animal consciousness. -Ugh, I’m tired of paradoxes.

After a certain point one loses interest in this sort of phenomenology because it is so difficult. Before giving up I’ll just say that it’s important to distinguish between senses of “other,” even of the internal other. There is, first of all, the general abstract other that is always separating you from yourself, so making possible self-consciousness. Then there are the internalizations of specific people, which are really just your experiences of these people in addition to whatever unconscious significances they have for you. These people are for you instantiations of the general abstract other, which is how it is possible for you to be aware of them as *others* at all. Then there is also your half-conscious or unconscious conception of what a “valuable” or “respect-worthy” other is like, what traits he or she has that make him or her (or, more exactly, his or her self-love) more real or confirmed (and so “significant” to you, hence worth getting recognition from) than other people. But this “conception” is not some definite idea but more like tendencies in you to react to certain kinds of people in certain ways. All your reactions are conditioned by this “tendential conception” of a valuable other; for instance, you might not take

certain people seriously because they don't fulfill it, maybe because they seem like fools or buffoons or whatever. The relation between this "tendential conception" and the general abstract other in your consciousness is not entirely clear.... Another kind of internal other is the psychological and biological "legacy" of all your experiences with people, especially in your formative years, experiences that helped shape you into who you are, that helped form your psychological constitution. All these kinds of "others" probably merge into one another in your mind. They are part of you but not all of you.

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*Thoughts on self-love and self-confirmation.*— In a sense, self-love, or self-regard, is the foundation of the self. La Rochefoucauld was right about that, though he expressed the insight in unnecessarily negative and cynical ways. In wanting recognition or self-confirmation, which is the self's essential urge, what you want is objective confirmation of your implicit self-love. This achievement, by definition, has to be mediated by the other, first and foremost by the abstract otherness in your consciousness. Thus, you yourself, "your" (self-)consciousness, is the fundamental mediator of the fulfillment of your own urge to "prove" your self-love (to test it and confirm its truth). You undertake this self-imposed project through self-activity, in every moment of the day. If your self-activity is "successful" (as judged by you, hence by the otherness in your consciousness), your self-love continues or increases (at least momentarily)—though quite possibly only on a half-conscious level, because ordinarily all this stuff is merely implicit. Generally speaking, your constant self-activity is more or less constantly effective to some degree; you achieve your purposes, you act on and in the world, you communicate with other selves, and your reality and effectiveness are proven. To the extent that all this is stable, your self-love is stable.

Because people instantiate the otherness in your mind, your self-otherness, their reactions to you condition your reactions to yourself. What's interesting is that certain people's reactions matter

more to you than others'. That is, these people are relatively "significant" others to you. What determines whether someone is such a "significant other" (not necessarily in the romantic sense)? There are a few obvious causes, such as whether he or she has played or plays an important role in your life, or whether you know each other well. In this case, the time you've spent together has caused you to internalize him to some degree, such that your "idea" of him is closely associated with the Other in your mind. (For instance, you might imagine what he would think of some act you're contemplating, as you consider what you're about to do from the perspective of an other watching you.)

More interesting is the question of what determines whether you *respect* someone. This question is made more difficult by the fact that there are different kinds of respect, for instance the kind that you might spontaneously, half-consciously feel and act on when in the presence of a charismatic person (someone with a "strong presence"), as opposed to the more reflective kind that is a product of your contemplating his virtues and coming to the conclusion that he is admirable. What I find the most psychologically intriguing is the first kind, or more generally the kind that involves your attributing value to someone *such that you want to impress him and thereby bolster your own self-regard*. What this "bolstering" means, again, is that you more deeply sense your own reality, the truth and reality of your self-regard. Your hitherto "imaginary" self-love has become, to some extent, "objective," confirmed through the other's recognition; the implicit divide between the world and your self has thereby, at least momentarily, been partially overcome. You are more a part of the world (in projecting yourself into it) and the world is more a part of you (in its recognizing you, your self-love).

So, one way to achieve this goal is to secure the approval of someone with a strong presence. People tend to ignore the person with a "weak" personality and try to get the attention of him with a "strong" personality. For example, last night I was playing Yahtzee with some acquaintances and was struck by the way they treated their friend Bill. He isn't particularly good-looking and doesn't

have a confident “aura”; he’s merely friendly, kind, self-effacing, intelligent, and quiet but interested in people. So the others mostly ignored him while paying attention to his brother Jim, who is more confident and attractive, with a larger body. Jim seemed rather boring and didn’t impress me much, but whatever inane comment he made elicited appreciative remarks from the others. So I was left being the only one who showed interest in Bill, which I did just because I didn’t want him to feel ignored. Incidentally, this sort of behavior, this cruelty and insensitivity, is very common in group situations; it has always appalled me.

The question, then, is what does it mean to have a strong presence? What does it mean to have charisma (even a small amount)? Such qualities as confidence, intelligence, and wittiness often determine it; things like having a fairly large or muscular body (if you’re a man) or being physically attractive can be important. I’ve noticed that people who project a slight aloofness can have a strong presence, and having a loud voice of course helps. But really the phenomenon is mysterious. The most that can be said is that a charismatic person projects *self-reality* or *self-presence*; in fact, he is implicitly seen as having “*more of a self*” than the uncharismatic person. He appears to have a stronger sense of self, which is to say he has a “stronger presence,” i.e., his self is more *present*. The (sense of) self of a socially awkward nerd is unconsciously perceived as relatively *absent*, and so people don’t care much what he thinks of them. They ignore him, since he doesn’t project *self-certainty*. And why is that quality so important? Because what it really means is that the self, or its self-love, is not *confirmed*; it doesn’t seem “real” in the way that the selfhood of a charismatic person like, say, Bill Clinton does. Whatever you think of Clinton—I despise him—he does have charisma: from testimonies I’ve read, when you’re in his presence you have an impression of an overwhelmingly *real* self, a “heavy” presence, from which you strongly desire recognition. You want him to notice you, etc. Even if consciously you dislike him, unconsciously, it seems, you perceive his implicit self-regard as “justified” or “confirmed” or “objectively true,” *a part of reality* in

some sense. It *imposes* itself on you. Since what you always want—implicitly—is to prove the truth and reality of your own self-love, naturally you’ll seek to achieve this by getting recognition from a self or selves you see as particularly real, i.e. confirmed, “effective,” “self-certain,” etc.

Charisma isn’t everything, though. The broader point is that Hegel was right that people desire recognition only from people they recognize, i.e., whose value or reality or “effectivity” they recognize. This explains the sort of insensitive behavior I mentioned above: in not recognizing someone’s reality or value, you don’t care if he recognizes yours. So you’re free to treat him badly. Of course, things are rarely this extreme: people recognize almost everyone’s reality and value to *some* extent, just insofar as everyone (except vegetative cases like Terri Schiavo) is a person with a self. And so people’s default mode of behavior is at least civility.

All this, to repeat, can be expressed in the language of “internalization.” I haven’t internalized Bill Clinton in any meaningful sense (quite the contrary!), so, despite his charisma, I doubt I’d care very much what he thought of me if we met. I have, however—as you know—internalized Noam Chomsky to a fairly high degree, which is to say he is closely associated with the general other(ness) in my mind. The “idea” I’ve formed of him is a kind of standard of value, and, together with my internalizations of many other people I know and of certain social standards, etc., it implicitly accompanies me as the Other in relation to which I define myself and measure myself. Half-consciously I seek the approval of all these others in my mind, these “real” others *out there* (whom I have internalized and so made, in a sense, “abstract”), by participating in whose reality I become real myself. Through their recognition, whether explicit or implicit, I partially overcome their otherness and my self-otherness, thereby coinciding with myself and the world to a relatively high degree (at least momentarily). That is, I sense the reality and justifiability of my self-regard.

Note, however, that this essential project of the self, taken to its logical conclusion of objective proof of the self's value, is unfulfillable. For the self can never get fully objective proof, because it itself mediates its awareness of the other's supposed recognition of the self's value. The self would have to coincide with the other, fuse with it, in order to get truly objective self-proof. But that's absurd. Hence, the self is always striving for more proof; it is restless, unsatisfied, undertaking self-expressive projects again and again. (Of course there are other reasons for that behavior too, psychological and biological reasons. Everything about the self can be interpreted in multiple ways.)

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*At the risk of repetition....*— If you fail to get recognition from some person or group of people, you respond by denying that person recognition. You get yourself to have contempt for him, or you ignore him or whatever. What exactly is going on here? It's a defense-mechanism, but what does that mean? Well, it's pretty simple: you want to deny that the offending person is important to you, because the more important he is—i.e., the more valuable he is, or the more recognition you give him—the more painful is his lack of respect for you. You want to push him out of your consciousness, out of the *Other*-part of you, the part you want recognition from because you recognize its value, its supposedly *absolute* value, its transcendence relative to you. When you recognize or value someone you are, to that degree, treating him as an instantiation of the (transcendent) Other in you; therefore you want recognition from him in turn (to that degree). If he doesn't give it to you then you withdraw your recognition from him as a way of preventing a lack of recognition towards you from the Other, which is (experienced as) a terrible thing.

There is always a danger in these phenomenological investigations that the language I use can be misleading, arising from the fact that the Other is both transcendent and immanent in you. Obviously you don't want recognition from *your own consciousness*, insofar as your own consciousness is you. What you



want recognition from is the *transcendent* part of your consciousness, or your consciousness insofar as it transcends you. The Other in you is projected out of you, into concrete individuals, abstract ideas such as God, etc. You identify it with these people (and, half-consciously, these ideas); that is, you identify this aspect of your consciousness with them, you invest it in them. You interiorize them by exteriorizing (into them) your self-consciousness, the Other in you.

Nor is any of this idealism in the pejorative sense. All these processes go on unconsciously, half-consciously, “behaviorally,” and without them, human behavior wouldn’t make sense. We would be robots. The choice is either behaviorism or this phenomenological psychology.<sup>181</sup> Either a denial of subjectivity, or subjectivity. There is no in-between. Unless you want to be a behaviorist, which is stupid, you have to take seriously these sorts of phenomenological investigations. (Behavior can also be explained biologically, of course, but that’s on a different level.)

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*The puzzle of self-abasement.*— What explains “the voluptuous pleasure of cringing and self-contempt,” as Marx says in the context of a discussion of Christianity? How can self-contempt be pleasurable? Well, I think it has to do with bringing your self-conception in line with the other’s, or the world’s, supposed perception of you. What the self wants, after all, is harmony between the inner and the outer. If there is a great difference between your sense of self and people’s reactions to you,

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<sup>181</sup> Incidentally, there are other ways of expressing it—other “vocabularies”—for instance in Freudian terms, involving cathexes and whatnot. But Freudian language is more mechanistic, less “subjectivistic,” and thus, for humans, less interesting, less compelling, less “in-our-own-terms,” less of an *explanation*. An explanation of the self and its behavior should be in terms explicable to the self, intuitively graspable, using concepts that can be intuitively related to experience. It shouldn’t use mechanistic concepts.

something will have to give. Such cognitive, or affective, dissonance cannot last forever. Maybe you'll assert yourself, your sense of self-value, by going on a murderous rampage against this world that has contempt for you, to force it to notice you or recognize your power or just to eradicate the thing that causes you so much torment, or something like that. Or maybe you'll become schizophrenic; your self will split up to protect itself, with an inner part that the outer world can't touch. (See R. D. Laing's classic *The Divided Self*.) Or you'll join a fascist movement of some sort, to destroy the part of the world that sees itself as superior to you and keeps you in society's gutter. Or, to eliminate the contradiction that torments you, you might accept the other's negative evaluation of you, though in a different way than the schizophrenic does. That is to say, you'll alleviate the tension in your mind by no longer resisting the other's (or Other's) contempt for you but internalizing it, though not in such a way that you overtly split yourself up. By having explicit self-contempt, you can at least experience the pleasure of having your sense of self be confirmed by the other, even if it isn't the sense of self you'd like to have and originally had. But since the self *has to* value itself on some level, however implicitly, its "chosen" self-contempt is precisely a means to that end, a last desperate refuge of self-love. For by bringing the inner and outer into harmony, the self is asserting its claim to belong in the world. It is saying, "I am one of you, you despisers of me! I agree with you! In loathing myself, I am just like you, you valuable people (or valuable abstract Other(ness)) who despise me. So, *like* me, at least a little!" Thus, a piece of the self is salvaged from the wreckage, viz. the piece that looks down on the self. *This piece* at least has some value.

Or, from another, simpler perspective, the descent into self-contempt can be a way of accepting yourself. No longer do you struggle to be someone you're not; you accept that you're (supposedly) weak and small, and such self-acceptance brings comfort. Maybe not *enough* comfort, since eventually you might end up killing yourself due to insufficient self-love, but it is at least more comforting than constantly having to tell yourself that all

these people who ignore you or laugh at you are wrong, that actually you're strong and valuable. Struggling with yourself, tormenting yourself like that, being full of self-tension due to the contradiction between your desire to love yourself and people's contempt for you—that can be horrible. It's much easier, like a relief, to accept yourself in your shameful little essence. And then you thereby are able to find new pleasures, new vindictive, revengeful pleasures, as by imagining bringing people down to your level, plotting petty tricks on them, thinking malicious thoughts like Dostoyevsky's Underground Man. Imaginary wish-fulfillments, putting you and your enemies on the same level or raising yourself above them, as by physically torturing them (in imagination at least) or provoking them to act in petty ways like you.

Religious self-abnegation or "self-contempt" can be very different from all this, though. It can entail raising yourself up to try to commune with God, to love him and be loved by him. You have scorn for your base physical nature but love your higher self. But what about severe self-flagellation? I.e., outright masochism (emotional and physical). How do you explain that? The starting point for an explanation is that masochism is, or often is, an expression of self-love—self-love perverted into self-violence. In at least some cases, physical self-flagellation is a way of confirming your reality to yourself, a kind of intense self-assertion. Extreme self-affirmation, paradoxically. It takes an extreme form because, at least in comparison to God, you feel extremely dead, empty, nonexistent. Its use in ascetic religious sects is understandable, then, given that these people spend their lives obsessing over their nothingness and worthlessness as compared to God. When they "flagellate" themselves, the contrast between their ordinary sensory deprivation (and self-deprivation, mental deprivation) and sudden over-stimulation, extreme self-activity, might well launch them into some twisted ecstasy. Their sudden perception of self-reality, so real that it's *painful*, can probably approach mystical ecstasy.

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*More masochistic puzzles and paradoxes.*— Ordinarily, of course, moments of self-contempt or self-hatred are unpleasant, something you struggle against. They happen through your temporary internalization of the perspective of an other who hates or has contempt for you. You momentarily understand that other's judgment of you, but probably you overcome it and convince yourself of your worth pretty quickly. In the case of someone like Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, however, his self-contempt is itself mixed up in his self-love, not necessarily opposed to it. In a way, yes, it is, since he probably still resists it in certain moods, etc. But in another way, he loves his self-contempt; it is comforting, it possibly allows him to feel superior to other people (because it proves to him that he has greater sophistication, self-knowledge, self-critical intelligence, etc.), it makes possible malicious pleasures and the pleasures of brooding self-involvement, etc. Someone like Marmeladov, on the other hand,<sup>182</sup> who is weaker, probably thinks on some level that his self-contempt sort of ingratiate him with people because he knows they have contempt for him. They'll like him (he thinks) at least a *little* if he doesn't resist their judgments of him. He's not resisting the world, he's accepting it. So to that extent it should accept him too, as part of it, or as a confirmation of it. To take a more concrete example: when a husband (e.g., Marmeladov) lets his wife beat him out of anger at his drunkenness or uselessness or infidelities or whatever, what is going on in his mind? He is thinking "I deserve it." But what does that really mean? It means he wants to be punished. It makes him feel better. By being beaten, he is atoning, washing away his sin. He is making things better with his wife, showing that he accepts ("confirms") her condemnation (hence her self-love, her desire to assert herself and be proven right) and thereby hoping she will forgive him and accept (confirm) him (his self-love) again. Or, to say it differently, if she can just let out her rage on him she'll feel

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<sup>182</sup> Marmeladov is a character in *Crime and Punishment*, a drunken, self-contemptuous buffoon who lets his wife beat him and insists that he *enjoys* these beatings. In the end he is killed, possibly by suicide.

better, and he'll feel better. There will no longer be the barrier between them of his shame and her resentment; he will no longer have to rebuke himself or feel bad about himself, at least to the same degree, because *she* will no longer hate him (for he has accepted and shown that he agrees with her anger and disgust, which makes her feel better about *herself*). In short, his acceptance of her anger makes her feel better about herself (because, after all, his prior actions seemed to express contempt for her) and restores, to some extent, her fondness or love for him (maybe she "forgives" him), which makes him feel better about himself. Moreover, because he loves her and cares about her happiness, he simply felt guilty about causing her pain. By showing contrition and letting her cause *him* pain, he is equalizing things again, so that she will not have to feel bad about herself (which she did implicitly, if not explicitly).

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Losing yourself in love, love of God or of a person, fully believing in your worthlessness compared to this being, this being that has given you *grace* through no merit of your own—submerging your individuality, your sense of self, in this being, being filled with love and gratitude, exalting the other at your own expense, breaking down the distinction between self and other in a self-humbling way. Certain mystical experiences, states of mystical rapture, are like this; I suspect that ordinary passionate love is related to mystical rapture. Despite appearances, this self-debasing person is glorifying himself, partaking in the glory of the radiant other who has deigned to recognize him. By exalting the other he is exalting himself—he is merging himself with the other—for, in being loved by an exalted other, one is exalted oneself (however much one "doesn't deserve it"). The way to recognition here is, paradoxically, through self-effacement; it is through self-degradation, for the less *you* are, the less self *you* have, the more the *other* is, this other who loves you and in whom you are merged. (And therefore the more *validating* is the other's love.) Moreover, the less self you have, the more you can *lose yourself* in the other,

thus attaining fullness of self. Women are often adepts in this underhanded self-glorification. So are Christians.

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*An embarrassing incident.*— I missed my flight today from Budapest to New York, so now I have to pay \$700 to change to another flight tomorrow. It was a silly mistake: I thought the flight was at 12:55 instead of 11:55, so I lost myself in reading and writing at the airport as I waited for the plane. At 11:45 I realized what time it was, learned that the flight was leaving in ten minutes, ran to the gate, and wasn't allowed on. I suspect my parents won't be happy when I tell them, since they'll have to help bail me out. Stupid, stupid mistake. Now I'm at a cheap hostel in Budapest.

In the aftermath of defeat I half-decided not to stay at any place tonight and instead wander the city or sleep on a bench. I thought I deserved it. It was my way to atone. The prospect even pleased me a little, for some reason. I *wanted* to do it. But how do you explain that? I had no idea why I wanted to experience a sleepless and uncomfortable night; all I knew was that "part of me" had that desire. Its causes were unconscious, like the causes of Marmeladov's desire to be beaten by his wife. The starting-point of an explanation is that obviously I half-consciously expected such a night to make me feel better, to wash away my self-frustration. It would be my way of atoning. By so atoning I would restore things to normal, restore the equilibrium, compensate for and so effectively "erase" my past stupidity. "I made an incredibly stupid and expensive mistake; well, okay, I'll spend tonight on the streets. That will satisfy me." The point, I think, is that by punishing myself I would be "enacting," so to speak, my self-respect, my self-regard. By subjecting myself to a stern justice, or a *compensation*....well, but *how* does that realize my "self-love"? This is a difficult problem.

It reminds me of the fact that sometimes murderers who get away with their crime can't live with their having escaped punishment and finally turn themselves in. It is the Raskolnikov syndrome. (And maybe the Marmeladov syndrome too, come to

think of it. He enjoyed being punished for his crime of being a pitiful alcoholic.) It isn't the murder itself they can't live with—i.e., it isn't that they feel so horrible about having killed a person that they can no longer live with themselves. They want to be *punished*, not *dead*. If granted their wish for a punishment, it is quite possible they'll feel good about themselves again, indeed will be very happy, won't be bothered much anymore by their knowledge of having committed a murder. In my case too, it wasn't merely my *stupidity* that bothered me; it was the feeling that I had committed a *crime*. I really felt like a kind of petty moral criminal—against my parents, I think, or rather against the “law” they have implanted in me that to disrespect money on such a scale is a crime. Even if they were dead or I did not expect them to lend me money or even to find out about what I'd done, I suspect I would have felt the same guilt. It was their *law*, not their actual selves, that weighed heavily on me. Or maybe you could say I was burdened by my internalization of their harsh perspective, which is equivalent to my unconscious or half-conscious desire that they, or my internalization of them, approve of me. I wanted to subject myself to their law, which meant I had to compensate for my transgression. Then I would have their implicit forgiveness; they, or my internalization of them, would be well-disposed toward me again, which would let me be well-disposed toward myself.

Normal people don't want to be wholly “free”; they want to be anchored in some kind of moral order, subject to a moral law that has punishments attached to its violation. In this way they can define themselves, can have standards by which to determine at any given time that they are worthy and self-defined beings. To be totally free, to live a morally unbounded life of whims and hedonism and unaccountable sinning, tends to be an intolerable psychic burden. That is to say, it tends to contradict the fundamental urge for active confirmation of one's value as a self. For one thing, it entails a denial of recognition of your value or self-love by authority-figures from your past or present whom you have internalized and whose judgment at least unconsciously matters to you. Consciously or unconsciously you know what their

attitude is or would be towards you, and this tends to affect your mental health, either reinforcing/stimulating or undermining your self-certainty (self-harmony, etc.). —Actually, the case of the unhappy hedonist or “inveterate sinner” and that of the criminal who wants to be punished are psychologically different, although what I just said about authority-figures is true of both. So let’s ignore the hedonist and focus on the criminal. Aside from the “authority-figures” thing, he is also troubled—this is surely the crux of the matter, at least in many cases—by always having to conceal from others a dreadful *secret* about himself. In such a case, Carl Jung is literally right (in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*) that the secret is “a burden of guilt which cuts off the possessor from communion with his fellow-beings.” The burden of guilt, to repeat, is not necessarily due to the crime itself; it is due to the criminal’s having to *conceal* the crime. He can never feel wholly at home in the company of others (unless they know his secret) because he always has to be careful not to reveal himself. He cannot know true companionship, true loving confirmation of his self-love, until he gives himself up. Through punishment, moreover—compensation—he feels as though he will be submitting himself again to the common moral law, which will signify his reentry into society (even as, perhaps, he physically leaves it, going to prison or Siberia like Raskolnikov). He will be reentering the human community. Realigning himself with his authority-figures, his significant others, etc.

(All kinds of guilt are, I think, implicitly about self-love in some way or other, like most things in the psyche. But in someone with an empathic disposition, guilt can also be about genuine concern for others. What is “genuine” concern, though? Is there a line to be drawn between “egoistic” guilt and “altruistic” guilt? Where do you draw it? I think you could call Raskolnikov’s guilt egoistic,<sup>183</sup> but “empathic” guilt surely exists too.)

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<sup>183</sup> After all, he seemed to lose his burden of guilt after he was exiled to Siberia and had the love of pure devoted Sonia. What he wanted all along was that people and society forgive him, so he could (thereby) forgive



The Marmeladov syndrome is different from the Raskolnikov syndrome in that it doesn't involve a *terrible secret*, but it is similar in that it entails self-contempt due to the violation of the common moral law, i.e., due to the person's implicit knowledge of condemnation from society and his significant others in the form (at least) of condemnation from the Other in his consciousness, or himself. Marmeladov compensates for his crimes by letting his wife beat him, which implies (as he sees it) that he accepts moral norms after all and so is not the outcast he seemed to be. He shows he agrees with his implicit accusers about himself, thus securing the validation of at least *some* of his injured self-love. (He has partially split himself into a "higher" and a "lower" part. A (self-)condemning part and a condemned part.)

My own feeling of guilt in the airport was identical neither with one case nor the other, but it was a milder form of both.

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*On the "abstracting" mind.*— I, like all humane people, have profound pity for the human species. Strictly speaking, though, such pity isn't entirely rational. For in pitying humanity one is pitying an abstract entity, which is senseless. To feel sorry for the species...is to feel sorry for an idea. Humankind doesn't have a Hegelian Spirit; there are only individuals. Some people are happy, some are unhappy. It's the same fallacy as that involved in hating Jews or women, or in obsessively seeking fame: the collective entity that is one's intentional object doesn't exist. It is but a confused projection of the Other in oneself. —Of course, the drive for recognition (or confirmation) itself is based on a confused projection of this Other. It is the self's lifelong quest to reach itself and unite with itself.

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himself. —On the other hand, his compassion and pity for Lizaveta probably did entail an element of "altruism" in his guilt, genuine and profound regret for brutally killing this poor girl. Most guilt must comprise a mixture of egoistic and altruistic elements.

—The socialized body (the self) wants to unsocialize itself, to transcend self-consciousness, the subject-object division in the body; it undertakes this unfulfillable project with the help of art, philosophy, music, love, friendship, sex—in fact, most activities. *Activity* is the self's projecting itself into the world, which also means into *itself* (because it has internalized the world).

Everything that makes us human grows out of our self-separation from the immediate, our mediating of experience, which is simultaneously our universalizing of it. (There is nothing between the particular and the universal. Through abstraction, one universalizes.) But there is an element of falsity in all abstraction, all reification, all mediation and universalization. There is a lack-of-union-with-reality. So, everything distinctively human is deluded. *Untrue* in some sense. The belief in words and concepts is a delusion; so is the substantial self; so is the self's desire for confirmation (of its self-love), in all its permutations—because they are not what they seem and cannot be consummated. All these beliefs and implicit self-conceptions incorporate *abstraction*: concepts *are* abstractions (from experience), which means they don't exist *per se*;<sup>184</sup> the imaginary self-substance is an abstraction from the body's past experiences and interactions with other bodies, and it includes, or presupposes, the abstract Other, which is involved in the desire for recognition and ultimately vitiates it. The very nature of the human mind is abstractive—except in its lower realms, its appetitive and sexual realms. They are governed by concreteness, although of course they come into contact and tension with the higher abstract mental functions. (For instance, while the male sex drive gets “taken up” into the desire for

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<sup>184</sup> The concept ‘shoe’ doesn't literally *exist*, as an actual shoe does. There is not one such thing, some concept, existing in a Fregean “third realm” different from the mental and the physical, though we necessarily implicitly assume there is. We do have to use “concepts,” words, in order to communicate—which is why they're necessary fictions—but their literal existence has no place in a scientific account of the world. “Where” would they exist? Everything that exists has a location in spacetime, unlike concepts.

recognition in such a way that sex becomes, for men at least, another means toward recognition, the drive also *conflicts* with the desire for recognition. Were it not for this desire, after all—which is intimately connected with the inculcation of social norms—most men would grab a pretty woman on the street and have their way with her. But because of the mind's internalization of other people's viewpoints and its desire for approval from people, the sex drive gets frustrated.)

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*“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”*— The question “Why do I exist now and here rather than at a different time and place?”, which bothered Pascal and has bothered me for years, is puzzling precisely because it's unanswerable. This can be seen clearly if you ask the same question of, say, a dog or a plant. Why does this particular plant exist now and here? “Well... It just *does!* There is no *reason*. The seed just happened to produce this plant rather than another.” Same with people.

There is something unsatisfying about that, though. The question is meaningless, but not *completely* meaningless. For example, it surely was possible that my parents' first son would be not me but someone else (say, if a different sperm had reached the egg). Let's suppose for the sake of argument that this other son would have had a personality nearly identical to mine. So if you compare the actual world to this possible world, my parents can't distinguish between the actual me and the other possible son. He could have been me, or I could have been him, without their being any the wiser. In fact, for all they know, I *am* him, and not myself! For *I* might not have existed even as someone with an identical personality did (“in my place”).

This is all very weird. Ultimately this thing called the self will never be fully understood.

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Why do people commonly associate sex and death, or sex and violence? And why are they fascinated by these things? One of the reasons is that in sex, violence, and death, humans are largely reduced to their body. An objectification takes place, an identifying of the self with the body. The self in fact tends to recede from explicit view: blood, bodily fluids, flesh, even bacterial smells (in the case of sex and death) come to the fore and mediate our experience of the other's self. Another way to say it is that our ordinary "ethical" way of acting is suspended in the experiences of sex, death, and violence. Ethics, "human dignity," respect for the other as an autonomous being or an end in himself, a spiritualized entity, more or less disappear. In short, culture recedes from view. After all, culture is just a mesh of norms or roles to which you adhere for the purpose of mediating the other's perception of you so that he confirms your sense of self in the desired way. But in the three experiences I'm talking about, in their body-centered immediacy, mediative roles are in large part cast aside. Hence our fascination. It is significant that the degrees of our respective fascinations with sex, violence, and death (and surgery) are almost equal. (If the fascination is greater in the case of death, that only supports my argument. Death is the complete absence of any vestige of culture, which amounts to the complete absence of the self.)

Said differently, with these experiences there is an unusual *closeness* to people, to the real, the physical nature of people. The mask comes off. The thick mesh of behavioral norms is cut through, so that the body, the *biological*, appears. In archaic societies of paltry "socialization," nudity and sex are not such objects of fascination as they are for us, because there is not such a contrast between the "naked" human being and his everyday roles. It's the *contrast* that grips us.

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Why does the feminine as such seem to be more prone to insecurity about itself and its place in society than the masculine? There are many reasons, of course. One of them is suggested by

this passage from Christine Downing's book *Women's Mysteries: Toward a Poetics of Gender* (2003):

...From a series of letters written to me over the course of years I have culled these reflections:

"I write today as I bleed. The first day and the heaviest flow. I write feeling my weightedness, the drag of my uterus. Feeling my wound, my incapacity. All the changes in my body—my voice flattened, my belly swollen, my clumsiness, a flood of dreams I cannot bring back to consciousness.

"How difficult it is to stay in the body. I get up, get to the bathroom, reach into my vagina for the menstrual sponge—a bloody mess! Squeeze the blood into a cup. It splatters everywhere.

"Can I write this to you? Am I so crazy I don't even know it? Today I feel such self-doubt.

"The knowledge of taboo returns. The blood is not to be touched, let alone saved.

"Even what we value of menstruation—are our bodies there? We value the rhythmic cycle, the feelings, the dreams, the bond. We talk and interpret. Analyze dreams. Theorize. Baroque elaborations. Virginal fluffy clouds. Ascending out of the blood, the mess, the ache, the wound.

"Even this writing. How difficult for me to stay with my body. My feelings of vulnerability. My tears that I had hoped were past, falling again. Fears and doubts.

"Here I am. The ache in my lower spine is sensual, as is the openness of my vulva, my blood slipping in my vagina.

"A wound not to be healed—but attended to—felt, touched, smelled, seen. Received."

Merida's words remind me of how our monthly periods open us to our vulnerability, our tears, our doubts, our fears, to a sense of wounds as not to be fixed but attended to. She encourages us to honor our dreams, the dreams we have that prepare us for our bleeding, the dreams that accompany our bleeding, the dreams that warn us we may cease to bleed...

The body tends to be more "*other*" for women than for men, even as women have a more intimate relationship with it. It asserts itself against their will, it has its own cycles and rhythms, it bleeds and leaks and swells and gets pregnant and determines moods. In general, one can say that women are their bodies more than men are, because their bodies are so much more *insistent*. This, combined with women's relative physical weakness and smallness, causes them to feel, at least implicitly, more "passive" and weak than males as such. Firmness, leanness, muscular tautness, as in young men (but also in certain women, for example female bodybuilders), is experienced as signifying things like fighting against enemies, being active and confident, dominating, being mobile and strong; softness, plumpness, weakness, pregnant immobility, do not foster a dominating self-confidence relative to the opposite sex.

A second obvious answer to the question I posed above is the ubiquity of the "male gaze." It seems to be a biological fact that male sexual arousal operates largely by virtue of the look, the look at a beautiful woman, a naked woman, a scantily clad woman. Women tend to be aroused by touch, emotional intimacy, male assertiveness and strength; men are aroused, in large part, by sex-objecthood in the woman. So there are strong biological tendencies for the male gaze, and hence for some degree of objectification of women, to be an ever-present element in most or all societies. This will, first of all, tend to make women relatively self-conscious. And it will not typically be a healthy, prideful self-consciousness—although it sometimes will—because "the look" is dehumanizing.

The look that says “you’re a sex-object” ignores the subjectivity, the spontaneous and active selfhood, of women in favor of their body. The objectified woman senses that her personhood is being devalued. When this happens to her as often as it does in modern society, which is *saturated* with female objectification, she may internalize the devaluation. She will see herself as the other sees her, as not much more than a sex-object. She’ll lose some of her self-respect; she’ll think she *is* what she is for the other, an object, not a subject (an active, dignified self). She is a *thing*, something to be looked at, not something that does the looking. The fact that the other affirms her insofar as she plays the role of sex-object well will give her an added impetus to play this role, because she desires recognition.

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*The essence of women’s clothing.*— A woman who wears high-heels has already, in a sense, subordinated herself to men. (It’s self-objectification.)

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*From Simone de Beauvoir.*— “The advantage man enjoys....is that his vocation as a human being in no way runs counter to his destiny as a male. Through the identification of phallus and transcendence, it turns out that his social and spiritual successes endow him with a virile presence. He is not divided. Whereas it is required of woman that in order to realize her femininity she must make herself object and prey, which is to say that she must renounce her claims as a sovereign subject.” Well said, and true.<sup>185</sup> To be a fully realized human being means to be active, to be free, to “create” and express oneself, to actively seek recognition by impressing oneself on the world and others. But this is also, in a slightly different way, what it means to be masculine, due to biological tendencies in the sexes.

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<sup>185</sup> The only thing I’d change is to say that women don’t just *make themselves* “object and prey.” Humans, after all, are not self-caused; they are *made* more than they make themselves.

(The sexes naturally define themselves in opposition to each other, and because of biological facts about men and women, men, as such, end up being defined as more active and dominating than women as such.) Many men, of course, don't achieve the ideal, but to that extent they're not considered archetypically masculine. If women, however, fail to be active and self-creating and independent, that doesn't count as a failure in their capacity as *women* but only, in a sense, as *humans* (and as *selves*, which have to be "self-certain," "confirmed," etc. in order to be fully realized). So, yes, full humanity, or "self-sovereignty," and full femininity are in tension.

If, however, you take the *moral* perspective on humanity, according to which the human ideal is to personify the Golden Rule, then there is no particular tension between femininity and humanity. Unfortunately this is not the perspective that people instinctually seem to take. They unconsciously tend to respect dominance and activeness more than kindness and compassion. The former traits are more interpersonally and instinctually *compelling* than the latter. Therefore, the male sex is at an advantage, to some extent.

The only thing that can be done to mitigate this situation is that women be socialized in such a way that they don't feel the need to be exceptionally feminine. There is a time for accentuating femininity, namely in sexually charged interactions with the opposite sex, and there is a time for not accentuating it but just being human, namely in most other contexts. Women have to navigate the tensions between these roles.

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I was watching Conan O'Brien's late-night talk show; his guest was some beautiful actress. She was wearing a dress that exposed her ample bosom, and at one point she caught him looking down. "*Focus*, Conan [on my eyes, not my breasts]," she said with irritation. Then she laughed, as the audience did. While laughing, she brushed some strands of hair off her right breast, thereby giving Conan and the audience a better view of the two lovely things she'd



demanded he ignore a second ago. And it struck me that this was a perfect example of why men, who often don't have much insight, call women irrational. After all, women tend to contradict themselves more than men do, in different kinds of ways. One of the reasons for that is that Simone de Beauvoir was right in the passage I quoted above: womanhood, as such, is slightly in tension with one's vocation as a human being. Womanhood means relative passiveness, objecthood, a partial lack of autonomy or independence.<sup>186</sup> So women want to have those qualities even as they also, as human beings, want to be active subjects, strong, and autonomous. They're torn between the two desires, the two contradictory necessities. Therefore, like the actress on the talk show, they act in contradictory ways, wanting to be treated like sex-objects but not.

This woman's action, by the way, is also revelatory of the "unconscious intentionality" that infuses many of our acts. She wasn't *thinking* "I want people to have a better view of my breasts" when she adjusted her hair, but the intention was there all the same, unconsciously or half-consciously.

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*Against politically correct stupidity.*— According to a scientific study conducted by Heino Meyer-Bahlburg, women with congenital adrenal hyperplasia "as a group have a lower interest in getting married and performing the traditional childcare/housewife role. As children, they show an unusually low interest in engaging in maternal play with baby dolls, and their interest in caring for infants, the frequency of daydreams or fantasies of pregnancy and motherhood, or the expressed wish of experiencing pregnancy and having children of their own appear to be relatively low in all age

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<sup>186</sup> Feminists implicitly acknowledge this truth when they argue that "autonomy" is an impoverished ideal—i.e., that women live fuller lives insofar as they are less "independent" than men—and when they oppose a feminine ethic of care to the masculine Kantian ethic of autonomy and duty.

groups.” In other words, shockingly, adrenal glands and sex steroids play some role in determining the sexually differentiated behavior of men and women, and “socialization” isn’t everything. Humans are not *tabula rasas*. Only someone highly educated, i.e. brainwashed, would have to be told this.

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*A corrective to postmodernism.*— This is from a *New York Times* article:

As my wife and I sat on the couch one night this past winter, reading and half-watching the inevitable HGTV, I started sweating hard and my face got so fevered and flushed that I felt as if I were peering into an oven.

I turned to Deb and said, “Man, I’m having a wicked hot flash.” And she said, “Me, too.” Then we laughed. You laugh a lot—unless your hormones are making you cry—when you’re having menopause with your wife.

I was in the middle of treatment for an aggressive case of prostate cancer last winter, and it included a six-month course of hormone therapy. My Lupron shots suppressed testosterone, which is the fuel for prostate cancer.

When your testosterone is being throttled, there are bound to be side effects. So, with the help of Lupron, I spent a few months aboard the Good Ship Menopause with all the physical baggage that entails. It’s a trip that most men don’t expect to take.

The side effect that surprised me most were the hot flashes—not that I got them, I was expecting that, but by how intense they were. They often woke me in the middle of the night and made me sweat so much that I drenched the sheets. In

midwinter I'd walk our miniature poodle, Bijou, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. I sometimes felt as if Deb could fry eggs on my chest. (It's also a bit disconcerting when your hot flashes are fiercer than your wife's.)

When it comes to hot flashes, ladies, I salute you. After my brief dalliance with that hormonal phenomenon, it seems to me it's an under-reported condition. And it's certainly under-represented in the arts. Where are the great hot flash novels or movies? How come there's not a Web site or magazine called "Hot Flash Monthly"?

Hand in hand with the hot flashes came the food cravings. I lusted after Cheetos and Peanut Butter M&M's, maple-walnut milkshakes, and spaghetti and meatballs buried in a blizzard of Parmesan. Isn't it funny how cravings very rarely involve tofu, bean curd or omega-3 oils?

Then there was the weight issue. During the six months I was on Lupron I gained about 25 pounds. That was partly a byproduct of the cravings, but it also stemmed from the hormonal changes triggered in my body.

And I hated it, hated it, hated it. I had never had to worry about my weight, and I began to understand why media aimed at women and girls obsess over weight so much. It was strange and unsettling not to be able to tell my body, "No," when it wanted to wolf down a fistful of Doritos slathered with scallion cream cheese.

When I wasn't devouring a king-size Italian sub or smoldering from a hot flash, it seemed that I was crying. The tears would usually pour down when I got ambushed by some old tune: "Sweet Baby James" and "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor, "That's the Way I've Always Heard It

Should Be” by Carly Simon and, yes, “It’s My Party” by Lesley Gore. Not only was I temporarily menopausal, but it appeared that I was also turning into a teenage girl from the early 1970s.

There were other side effects, too, like headaches and fatigue. But when I started drinking Diet Coke for the first time in my life, my son Owen couldn’t take it anymore. He said, “Dad, are you turning into a chick?”

So, what else did I learn during my six months of hormone therapy?

Even though I only got to spend a brief time on the outer precincts of menopause, it did confirm my lifelong sense that the world of women is hormonal and mysterious, and that we men don’t have the semblance of a clue.

And, guys, when your significant female other bursts into tears at the drop of a dinner plate or turns on you like a rabid pit bull—whether she’s pregnant, having her period or in the throes of menopause—believe her when she blames it on the hormones.

Biological semi-determinism. I.e., common sense.<sup>187</sup>

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*Female sexuality.*— People who insist that most women are just as interested in sex as men, in fact are usually *more* sexual than men, are right. Because female sexuality is relatively passive, though, its

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<sup>187</sup> Popular expositions of the biological differences between the sexes include Louann Brizendine’s *The Female Brain* (2007) and *The Male Brain* (2011), Anne Moir and David Jessel’s *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men and Women* (1992), and Marianne Legato’s *Why Men Never Remember and Women Never Forget* (2006). These books have flaws, but they are certainly suggestive.

hidden maenadic nature can be overlooked. Few men can be as sexually frenzied as women can. Therein, ironically, lies the relative *activeness* of male sexuality—or, rather, that fact is symptomatic of it, as the sexual frenzy of a woman proves her “passiveness.” For her frenzy is made possible by the fact that the feminine character—which women (and men) possess to varying degrees—tends to have a relative lack of “soberness” or “detachment” in comparison with the masculine.<sup>188</sup> (That is, women tend to throw their entire self into an immediate situation more than men do. A hundred daily observations bear out this claim—for example, the wonderful way a woman tends to laugh, which is less “sober,” more full-bodied and full-spirited, than the way a man laughs. But exceptions abound, of course.) A woman in the throes of ecstasy, screaming as her body contorts, is in a state of relative passivity; the man thrusting himself inside her and gazing with wonder at this spectacle is the active one. He is, in a sense, more “free” and self-controlling than she is.

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<sup>188</sup> Kierkegaard, no idiot, expressed the insight in a sexist 19th-century way: “Woman has neither the selfishly developed conception of the self nor the intellectuality of man, for all that she is his superior in tenderness and fineness of feeling. [Her] nature is devotion, submission, and it is unwomanly if it is not so.... [A] woman who is happy without devotion, that is, without giving herself away (to whatever it may be she gives herself) is unwomanly. A man also devotes himself (gives himself away), and it is a poor sort of a man who does not do it; but his self is not devotion..., nor does he acquire himself by devotion, as in another sense a woman does, he has himself; he gives himself away, but his self still remains behind as a sober consciousness of devotion, whereas woman, with genuine womanliness, plunges her self into that to which she devotes herself...” While qualifications are always necessary when making generalizations, there is much truth to Kierkegaard’s thoughts (from *The Sickness unto Death*).

*An inconvenient truth.*— Feminism ends in the bedroom. (Unless it's French feminism, in which case it begins in the bedroom.<sup>189</sup>)

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Why do many women enjoy “rough” sex? To a being uninitiated into the secrets of the human psyche, this fact might seem paradoxical. After all, what's so great about being treated like a piece of meat? On one level, the explanation is simply that heterosexual women like “masculine strength.” They like watching half-naked muscular male bodies fighting or playing sports; they like touching and caressing their man's muscles, they're fascinated by male assertiveness and physicality. They're attracted to them, to male dominance and the dominant male. So it's not surprising they often like half-violent sex. A deeper explanation, though, is that women's subjection to a frenzy of “powerful masculine desire” irresistibly validates them as women. Far from its being experienced as *degrading*, their reduction to something like an object *affirms* them (in that moment at least), confirms their value and reality, as R. D. Laing might say. Through the man's powerful desire for them, they sense their reality. (Similarly, men are validated through women's desire.)

In addition to all this is the simple ecstatic pleasure of release from self-consciousness, self-control, inhibitions, similar to the pleasure people get from wild partying or indulging in any kind of

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<sup>189</sup> See the writings of, e.g., Luce Irigaray, who might have been a good erotic novelist had she chosen that career path. “Woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to women's pleasure. Among other caresses.... Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on.” (From chapter 2 of *This Sex Which Is Not One*.) This titillating sort of feminism is easy to mock, but insofar as it doesn't ignore the body, it's more sensible than a lot of Anglo-American feminism.

orgiastic ritual. It's Dionysian pleasure, the joy of merging self with other.

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*The coquette.*— I'm reading an eighteenth-century American novel called *The Coquette*, by Hannah Foster. It's a true story about a woman who was seduced by "a libertine of vicious character," like so many women of the time, only *this* one died giving birth to his still-born, illegitimate child.

One problem with modern society is that it gives young women a surfeit of opportunities to indulge their romantic whims. That's unhealthy for everyone. Alexander Pope was not wildly off the mark when he opined, "Every woman is, at heart, a rake," a thought that has been modernized in the song "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun." Giving young women free rein to pursue their crushes, their lusts, their momentary desires, their fetish of the wealthy or the charming libertine, has led to the ruin of millions of them. Freedom is a dangerous thing; some people apparently can't handle it. You might even say that a society of arranged marriage, as long as the two future spouses have *some* choice in the matter, can be preferable to a society obsessed with romantic love. Love is moody, after all; feelings are fleeting, and they lead many women astray. *Respect* can be a surer foundation for marriage than youthful romantic love. Unfortunately, among all the suitors of a pretty woman, it is often the least respectable with whom she falls in love.

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*Why nice guys finish last.*— Being a "nice guy" (in the pejorative sense) to a woman means not projecting sexuality. Politeness doesn't touch the reptilian, sex. If a woman shuns a nice guy it is because a merely good man does not affirm her self-conception, which is as a sexually desirable and desirous female.

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*Joyous women.*— The source of young women's obvious naïveté is no mystery. It is that the feminine, as such, is more personal than objective, more immediately immersed in itself—in the gigglyness and excitability of femininity—than soberly comprehending of the other. This is why masculinity loves it, and why it loves masculinity. (If radical feminists had their druthers and women were socialized to act un-femininely, men would not be attracted to them. It is the perceived relative “weakness,” receptiveness, excitability of women that naturally draws men to them.)

Again, though, I'm inclined to agree with D. W. Winnicott and innumerable other psychoanalysts that everyone has masculine and feminine elements in his or her personality (and that the concepts of the masculine and the feminine are, to a great extent, grounded in biology). Some women are more masculine than some men, and some men more feminine than most women. My point is just that there are *biological tendencies* for women to be a certain way and men to be complementary to that.

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*An old cliché that still rings true.*— Women and children embody the aesthetic virtues as opposed to the moral ones. Innocence, empathy, simple trust, sensitivity to new experiences, an affinity for (and with) beauty, a delight in simple pleasures, an ability to lose themselves in the moment, in laughter, in *love*. Men, on the other hand, are expected to do what is *right*, to follow their *duty*, to soberly guide their lives according to *reason*. This is morality, morality in its strictest, fullest, Kantian sense; the other path is *humanity*, instinctual and beautiful, *caring*. The ancient dichotomy between these two principles still holds true. Doubtless there are exceptions—in fact, as I've said, everyone is both masculine and feminine—and these principles are biologically grounded only in *approximate* ways, but their vaguely “human-natural” validity is shown by the fact of nearly every culture's implicit assent to them as well as the potency of our own intuitions in these matters. As history has progressed and the species has objectified its latent potentialities in ever-diversifying ways, we have deepened our



knowledge of the duality, to the point, indeed, of exaggerating its importance. It will take centuries more to reach a truly nuanced understanding of the differences between the sexes.

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*A politically correct mistake.*— It is not an argument against a belief to call it sexist. Labels are not arguments; neither are value-judgments. There is no reason to think, in any case, that truth is necessarily politically correct.

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*Essentialism, a revolt against postmodernist “cultural imperialism.”*<sup>190</sup>— The difference between social-constructivists and me is that I think there must be some hidden truth in the eons-old essentialist thought of rich cultures, from China to India to Greece to Rome to Europe to Native American tribes and elsewhere. I have reverence for ancient wisdom. More generally, I respect the insights of non-contemporary-Western societies.

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*On sexism.*— Feminists are fond of laying the charge of “sexism!” at society. I agree with them. Society is sexist, intensely so. When a man opens a door for a woman, he is being “sexist.” When he looks at her, he is being sexist. When he hears her voice, he hears it in a sexist way. As soon as he wakes up in the morning, “sexism” is implicit in his consciousness. And the same is true of the woman’s.

It is certainly the case, however, that many manifestations of sexism are deplorable. Nature dictates only that the sexes won’t treat each other identically, that most women will want to be

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<sup>190</sup> (Postmodernists like to argue that the West is culturally imperialist—which it is—but ubiquitous irony is the iron law of history.)

protected, masculinity will tend to be valorized,<sup>191</sup> and so forth; it doesn't dictate the specific *forms* sexism will take.

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*Racism vs. "sexism."*— Chomsky argues in "The View Beyond: Prospects for the Study of Mind" that there is no legitimate scientific reason to be interested in differences between people arising out of their different races or sexes. Suppose it turns out, he says, that "a person of a particular race, on the average, is likely to have a slightly higher IQ than a person of another race. Notice first [he continues] that such a conclusion would have null scientific interest. It is of no interest to discover a correlation between two traits selected at random, and if someone happens to be interested in this odd and pointless question, it would make far more sense to study properties that are much more clearly defined, say, length of fingernails and eye color. But here, it is clear that the discovery is of interest only to people who believe that each individual must be treated not as what he or she is but rather as an example of a certain category (racial, sexual, or whatever). To anyone not afflicted with these disorders, it is of zero interest whether the average value of IQ for some category of persons is such-and-such...." He is perfectly right with regard to race. Even if there are slight differences (say, in athletic ability) between "average" people of different races, that is of essentially no interest.<sup>192</sup> Race shouldn't even really *register* with you in your daily life. It does, unfortunately, with everyone, but the less it does, the better. In any

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<sup>191</sup> The assertiveness, confidence, physical bulk, and physical strength that are (in part) a product of male rather than female hormones have always been taken, half-consciously, to indicate that a person "has value," or rather has a "strong presence" and "commands respect." That socialization is not solely responsible for our valorization of those traits can be seen by the fact that all mammals and all human societies valorize them.

<sup>192</sup> I have to admit, though, that I can imagine an evolutionary biologist speculating on the natural-selective reasons for the average black male's greater athletic ability (if indeed he has it) than the average white's.

case, history has shown it to be such a dangerous area that science should stay far away from it. Sex is another matter, though. No one treats women and men exactly the same, as Chomsky implicitly demands in his argument; everyone is “afflicted with the disorder” of caring about sexual difference. In fact, it would be terrible and immoral *not* to treat women and men somewhat differently. If a man acted around women the way he acted around men—if that were *possible*!—he would probably end up hurting their feelings or making them hate him. Men have to be careful how they act around women, in order to be respectful.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, sexual differences are so much more substantial and evolutionarily meaningful than racial differences that they *are* scientifically interesting—which is why so many scientists study them. Are they all “sexists”? Well, yes, insofar as everyone is.

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*Male: external; female: internal.*— One way to express the differences between how men and women tend to experience sexual attraction is by saying that for men it is usually more “external” than “internal,” while for women it tends to be more internal than external. This corresponds to the fact that masculine minds are externally oriented—observing the world, inquiring into it in an “external” (“intellectual”) capacity, treating it (acting on it) as an object, not primarily feeling or empathizing or identifying-with or appropriating-into-the-self—whereas feminine minds are less objective in this separation-between-self-and-other way. Thus, masculinity wants to have sex with someone who looks beautiful, whereas femininity wants to have sex with someone who provokes certain feelings. External vs. internal, metaphorically speaking.

Moreover: insofar as, or *if*, there is a natural basis for the unevenness in scientific, mathematical, and philosophical achievement between the sexes, it is related to the contrast between the masculine orientation to the objective and the feminine

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<sup>193</sup> It’s unfortunate and ironic, however, that a large proportion of women are attracted to the kind of man who doesn’t treat them respectfully.

orientation to the subjective. Femininity is surely just as cognitively capable as masculinity in the realms of natural science and mathematics, but it tends to have less *interest* in these subjects due to its affective cast of mind. Things having to do with *people* are more interesting to the feminine than things having to do with abstract logic and objective investigation of the non-subjective. Hence, in part, the higher incidence of female psychologists, social workers, artists, musicians, teachers, and lawyers than scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. (No rule without exceptions—which are, however, probably a result of the relatively high “masculinity” of the minds of female scientists, philosophers, etc. For example, in my experience, many women who choose philosophy as a career are lesbians or simply un-feminine. Maybe someday it will be possible to confirm all these ideas by studies of hormone-levels or brain-structures and such.)

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The determination of feminists and other postmodernists to see veiled value-judgments in claims that are strictly factual, and in particular to see attacks on themselves or some group of people with which they identify or sympathize, is indicative of a somewhat totalitarian mindset. To quote Chomsky again (from a different context): “The sign of a truly totalitarian culture is that important truths simply lack cognitive meaning and are interpretable only at the level of ‘Fuck You,’ so they can then elicit a perfectly predictable torrent of abuse in response.” The totalitarianism of radical postmodernists is beautifully ironic, and beautifully predictable. -But these people, after all, are a product of their culture, their paranoid, hypersensitive, suspicious, atomized culture. So their eagerness to be offended at the drop of a pin is humanly understandable, though comical and pitiable.

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*The mind is more attuned to selves than ideas.*— It is psychologically interesting that people tend to argue *ad hominem*—

to assume, for example, that by saying liberals are “condescending,” one effectively refutes their positions. It shows that what people are really arguing against is not an argument but a self. What matter to them most are not pure *ideas* or *arguments* but the fact that a *self* is *putting forward* certain challenging ideas. One wants to deal, first and foremost, with this self, not with the ideas it puts forward. The *opposed self* is what is offensive, its ideas only derivatively. As soon as one has come up with a reason to disregard the self in question, its obnoxious ideas no longer matter, being important not in themselves but only as symptoms of another’s implicit devaluing of oneself (by disagreeing with one’s beliefs). Thus you have the amusing spectacle of adversaries screaming at each other, insulting each other, while completely ignoring each other’s ideas. People who are able to detach ideas from their proponents and, furthermore, be more concerned with the ideas than with the fact that a person is putting them forward, are rare. And even in such people, there is always a basic *ad hominem* consciousness that can be more or less transcended depending on moods, circumstances, etc.

Incidentally, I’m not arguing that beliefs don’t reveal anything about the person who holds them. They often do. It is perfectly reasonable to dislike someone or make inferences about his character on the basis of his holding extremely obnoxious views. But this is separate from the issue I’ve been discussing.

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Why are women sometimes attracted to “innocent” young men, “pure,” “sweet” boys? A 34-year-old friend of mine has a crush on a 24-year-old boy, although she doesn’t want to date him because he’s too young. “For some reason,” she says, “I keep having feelings for him. He is so darling!!! I think the reason I like him is that he’s always very innocent, simple, pure like a crystal.” To say it’s their “mothering instinct” doesn’t explain much. I want to know the phenomenological mechanisms. What exactly is going on in their consciousness? They find “sweet,” “cute” young men irresistible (sometimes)...but what is this “sweetness” and this

“irresistibility”? The former is a childlikeness, a vulnerability, a lack of “hardness” or worldly “cockiness,” a perceived sensitiveness and kindness, an almost feminine immersion in the immediate moment, a perceived lack of the sophistication necessary to dissimulate and manipulate, a simple *sincerity*. This kind of man has no mask (or such is the woman’s impression); his self is *right there*, plain on his face—he has an “open” face, a soulful face of goodness and sincerity, an uncorrupted, childlike self. All this means that she can make a connection with him, she can directly connect with his self, so to speak, more intensely and closely than with a sophisticated and mature man’s self, which is relatively hidden behind the worldly and somewhat cynical exterior. A woman tends to crave such close and immediate connectedness. In addition, she wants to be able to make an impression on her man; she wants to be needed, loved, valued—wants to become a part of the man’s sense of self, and thereby have her own self confirmed in the world. (The man has the same desire with regard to the woman.) Her feminine nurturing of the man is a way of being valued by him and thus of valuing herself (through him), “realizing,” so to speak, her prior implicit self-valuing. (That’s what people want, to *realize* their implicit but so far “imaginary” self-love/self-valorization. They want to *validate* their self-love.) But with the sweet boy, she can not only nurture him but also *protect* him, protect him from the cruel world that threatens to destroy the beautiful openness and transparency of his self, his good-hearted and naive sincerity. Thus she is, or sees herself as, particularly important to him, and so is attracted to him for his being a powerful way of confirming her value. In fact, the sheer direct connection with another self that she craves is itself desired on account of the confirmation (“recognition”) of her self-love that it entails.

Of course, the fact that he’s male is important too. His being male means that he is, for her, the archetypal Other, whose recognition is most valuable. Many of his traits are quite feminine, but the fact of his masculinity hovers above them all and “filters” them. Indeed, another way to explain his appeal to the woman may

be to point out that his quasi-feminine character allows her to half-consciously identify with him or to feel closer to him than to stereotypically masculine men; she senses an affinity between the two of them. But since despite his femininity he remains a man, the affinity coexists with a romantic spark and sexual tension.

Incidentally, a male pedophile's attraction to "innocent," "cute" girls or boys differs fundamentally from a woman's attraction to the "innocent," "sweet" young man. It is really an extension, however pathological, of the masculine love of women (who are loved, at least implicitly, as being relatively innocent, cute, "protectable," etc.). The woman's attraction to the "sweet boy," by contrast, is not an "extension" of her attraction to men but exists almost in tension with it. She is attracted to men, after all, for virtually the opposite reasons, namely their perceived strength and dominance.

And why are men attracted to feminine "sweetness," beauty, excitability? Partly for one of the reasons that women themselves are, and everyone is (as a human being): these qualities signify a receptiveness to the other. This is in fact a very important element in the masculine love of women. Women tend to "receive" men openly, spontaneously, appreciatively, such that the man's self-love is validated/confirmed. Men enjoy being with these receptive, laughing people: the man's sense of, and desire for, self-certainty (-confidence, -value) is being reinforced. But the element of physical beauty is important too. And that's harder to explain, not least because beauty is impossible to define. You know it only when you see it. And what does the pleasure of looking at it come from? It just seems like a brute fact, unexplainable, unanalyzable. Or maybe that's wrong. Maybe it's misleading to refer to the "pleasure" of looking at a woman: the point is that implicit in the male's look is the half-conscious desire to *touch* the woman, and a sort of unconscious *anticipation* of touching her. The look is a sensual act, an implicit touching, or a desire/anticipation/imagining of touching. And to touch a woman is to assert oneself, to act, to confirm one's being in the world, the presence and reality and thus value of one's self. This also explains the frustration implicit in merely looking at

a beautiful woman: the half-conscious desire/imagining of touching her is being thwarted. The same “act,” therefore, is both pleasurable and unpleasurable.

These last few reflections show, by the way, that the philosopher Merleau-Ponty was right that there is such a thing as bodily intentionality, and that much of it is an extension of the *self's* intentions. (Whatever has to do with recognition, interpersonal interactions, etc., has to do with the self.)

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*Pornography.*— Feminists often say that pornography, even the “clean” kind, is misogynistic. If you understand “misogyny” in a broad sense, that’s true. But really it’s a naïve judgment; porn is actually just a reflection of male desire,<sup>194</sup> as a female columnist for Salon.com wrote today. There are pathological, violent, and extra-degrading kinds of pornography, but those aren’t what I’m talking about. Most men naturally want to, and *do*, dominate women in the sex act, so porn usually involves male domination of women. Misogynistic? If so, then nature is misogynistic. And so are women, because most enjoy being dominated during sex. As the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik said, “A woman always likes to be treated with respect by a man except in one place: in bed. When he shows respect for her there, she loses all respect for him.” That statement shouldn’t be taken *too* literally, but there is some truth to it.

It must be said, however, that while pornography as such is a socially conditioned expression of natural desires and need not express misogyny in the strict sense, it does not promote healthy attitudes toward sex or women. It takes the natural masculine objectification of women to an extreme, turning them into little more than vulgar sex-objects. Any sort of denial of humanity is always unhealthy. One can argue that sex itself has a tendency to reduce women momentarily to their bodies (insofar as they are

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<sup>194</sup> And female desire too. According to one study, a third of viewers of porn websites are women.



being acted on, acted in, “*done to*”), but then to that extent it is in tension with recognition of their full humanity and dignity. The same is true with regard to men who enjoy being the submissive partner. To be a self is, ideally, to be active, free, creative, self-determining—not passive, degraded, submissive. Needless to say, life is full of ambiguities and this sort of “liberal idealism” can only be *approximated* in real life; nevertheless, it is the moral ideal. Power dynamics can never be done away with in human relationships, or in humans’ experience of “the other,” but we should always try to return to a recognition of the other as an autonomous person in his or her own right. So, while enjoyment of pornography (depending on the kind) is in itself not unnatural and need not indicate misogyny—for if it did, nearly everyone would be a misogynist—it is best to think of porn as a sort of “temporary escape” or “guilty pleasure” and not let it influence how one treats people.

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There is no question that the vast majority of pornography is degrading to women. What is disturbing—and revealing—is that the vast majority of people enjoy watching it.

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### A LYRICAL INTERLUDE

\*\*\*

#### *The “Death Leap” of Alfred Kubin*

Bullet-rigid, headless as a bolt of lightning,  
lock-kneed, jointless like an iron rod,  
he dives in—voluntarily horribly  
stricken with death-fever life-lustfully,

arrowed-armed as a spear reaching for its prey.  
His hairless body a naked chisel he drills  
for the open gash,  
a miner brandishing his pickaxe  
deep in Mother Earth.

\*

*darkness*

partygoing downtown in the club rousing  
ants from anthill lairs crawling  
backwards through space and time driving  
uphill through space and time thumping  
wildly wildly rumping to death beating  
death pulsing oozing crud of spirit bumping  
against sides of wet sweat fat-plowed sticking  
to sticky palms of sweat-smearred soul-thudding  
sound beating like a mallet your pounding  
head to pulp inside out from soul to body crushing  
bodies in a slimy mass of slippery groping  
under and over and outer and in her quivering  
lips soaked with fat-perspiring  
blood-condensing hip-grinding mouth-salivating  
movement wrecking you in throes of deadening  
ecstasy through screams of banshee-worshipping  
dancers who scream like raping  
raping in thuds of hollow violence killing  
killing in the dark of drunken nausea ripping  
knife-like through the mass of teeming  
congealed shots of liquor

\*

*Madness*

The young man sitting on his once-white  
bedsheets which were now as almost-brown  
as three-day-old slush in the gutter in the street  
clung to his computer like he was still in the  
womb floating with his stubby hands pressed  
tightly against his tumid head because there was  
outside a certain malformed beast called reality  
which screamed like nails scraped down  
a wall of glass leaving long white cuts shrilly  
at him to come and join the crowd before it died.

\*

*A modern 23-year-old.*— Nights are hard for me. All the pain that's repressed during the bustle of the day pushes its way to the surface. And there's nothing I can do. Can't sleep, can't write, can't think except to regret and panic. My problem is neither that life is unbearably light nor that it's unbearably heavy: it's both. It's heavy because it's my only life—every moment is heavy because it's gone—it's irrevocable—and I feel under constant pressure to *live*; but life is light because it's all luck, contingency, it's meaningless; and its lightness makes it even heavier, increases the pressure on me, highlights the burden of time and the necessity but impossibility of triumphing over chance. I have the feeling that no matter what I do after I leave Korea—and I really haven't any idea where I'll be two months from now—I'll regret it. Milan Kundera is right that life is essentially a rehearsal for itself, which is the comedy and the tragedy of it.

My ambitions, which are as boundless as the sky and as undefined, have always conflicted with my knowledge of my own limitations. That adds to the weight I have to bear. Basically my existence is founded on conflicts and schisms—within me, between me and the world, and between the world and itself (I internalize

those conflicts and they're reproduced in my psyche, in my dreams and thoughts and confusions)—but in the absence of these conflicts life would be unbearable, so in a way I'm grateful for them, though I also hate them and am driven to despair by them. My life is one great hunk of metaphysical weight, made heavier by its infinite lightness.

Nevertheless, I'm comforted by Oscar Wilde's claim—made when he was in prison, after two years of soul-crushing isolation—that he'd rather be a prisoner than a businessman. I too would rather experience these moments of intense, painful beauty than go out with everyone and get drunk. I've done that, and I've even enjoyed it, but right now I'd rather be here.

\*

*Hollow*

In cemeteries I have a way  
of being content,  
and sitting on the grass against a gravestone  
finding the melancholy peaceful.  
Not feeling so would seem sacrilegious.  
Sitting in the shade of the junipers,  
I think of the squirrel looking at me  
as he holds his partially eaten acorn.

At parties I have a way  
of being unhappy,  
and in my can of beer is a half-emptiness.  
The cluttered noise around me is strangely measured,  
like a row of gravestones in a park.  
I sip my beer and contemplate  
the woman staring across from me,  
and smile at her  
hollowly.

\*

*The greatest weight.*— I'm listening to the Intermezzo from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. You should listen to it yourself; there will be no reason for you to read the rest of this entry. I'm sitting here in a kind of swoon of nostalgia for my fetal Platonic wisdom. The passivity that suffuses my mind and permeates the air around me, the languorous summer air, the troubled passivity born from incipient spiritlessness. When I turn off the lights and lie down in a restless repose amidst the silence I feel it. I was thinking that the worst thought is knowledge of contingency, and the best is that life's windings are necessary. The second is a comfort and a lie, the first a sorrow and a truth. What happens is contingent, and when you look back on your life at the end you can see only a string of *what-ifs* and *whys*, more a vacuum than a plenum, more a question than an exclamation, not death but not life. And you could look back and regret without end, pile regrets in heaps and stack them into a mountain on the summit of which you perch yourself, but that would be as foolish as asking yourself what it all meant and inventing a significance to tie it all in a bundle. Both are tempting, both are futile. Silence is the answer. When words fail you have silence to fall back on. Renunciation. When your ambitions crumble, as mine are in the process of doing, and you can't ground yourself in anything, and you feel like you've lived a dream, you can take comfort in abandonment and sleep and, as your consciousness is becoming fluid and more fluid, the knowledge that this is what life is—*this is what life is*—and nothing can be done about it, and you've understood it by not understanding it, and there's nowhere else to go. In a way that's comforting. Renounce it all, if only for a moment.

\*

*Double life*

The sassy walk, saucy as these sultry summer nights,  
hip-swaying entertaining “*your eyes only*”;  
The toss of the head coquettishly, her blond highlights glint  
in “*your eyes only*”;  
The superfluous flirting of new love, like the pink  
feather-tips laid over a lavender dawn;  
The sweet naïve contrast between days and nights, new  
days and new nights,  
with the daytime smiles and the nighttime sighs  
(deep soulful sighs breathed into breasts and arms);  
The dancing naked shy near the edge of the bed,  
young queen dancing for “*your eyes only*”;—  
This is what I miss, miss terribly, though I have never known it.

\*

time  
grimly  
pressing on,  
on, on, on, on,  
mowing down our love  
of love and life and self,  
impersonal, disdainful,  
proud, yet life-uncomprehending,  
lonesome in its omnipotency,  
pitiful in its self-destructive zeal  
fueled by self-hate, rancor, envy  
of unmechanical beings  
who have knowledge of *passion*—  
a lingering moment  
whose memory is  
forever and  
overcomes

deathly  
time

\*

birth  
of love  
turmoiling  
in a death-heart  
bled dry of wet hope  
and tears and all feeling  
pleasure-killed by brutal life  
a u n i v e r s a l m u r d e r e r  
is a violent shocking redemption  
that dissolves the calluses on my soul  
painfully in a deluge of tears  
wetting the face of love's midwife  
holding my new newborn heart  
in her caressing hands  
caressing new life  
from old stale death  
which has died  
in re-  
birth

\*

with a single glance  
into my stunned, frozen eyes,  
or a light caress,  
she gently plucks the worn strings  
of this tired violin-soul

\*

*Salvation*

Before I met you  
    in the transcendent meadow  
    where grass grew tall and concealed us  
I noticed often  
    while looking under rocks  
    and peering through overgrown vines  
That things were empty  
    beneath their shiny shells  
    with colors calculated to deceive  
And threats were empty  
    because their promised poison  
    was less potent than observation  
And there was no flight  
    that weak and injured insects  
    could hope to use as an escape  
From broken wings  
    destroyed in daily life  
    through constant unrelenting probing  
Of broken souls  
    and broken buds of life  
    with nothing of value left to offer  
So I began  
    in this state of fatigue  
    and tired disillusionment  
To doubt my searching  
    which had led me nowhere  
    except to thoughts I longed to forget  
And closed my eyes  
    to stop the inquisition  
    and kill obscure hope of truth  
In loneliness  
    in this withered desert



where I had lived and grown old  
But then I met you  
in the eternal meadow  
where grass grew tall and concealed us  
And I was saved.

\*

*The Blessed*

I wake up happily beside your back,  
Its naked shoulderblades as near as dusk.  
They sway ever so lightly as you breathe—  
A motion imperceptible if I  
Didn't know so well the rhythms of your body.  
You're sleeping; I can hear the whisk of breath  
From out your nose—the quiet rush of warmth  
Warming your upper lip (perhaps a bead  
Of moisture lingers there)—it sounds just like  
The sighing of a distant breeze! So quiet....  
To think that sound could be so quiet, and yet  
Be heard! Or is it my imagination?  
Perhaps I am so rapt that I imagine....  
Your hair is knotted on the pillow, tangled  
In piles tickling my lips, which kiss  
The strands in bunches (since their counterparts  
Upon your face—though longing to be kissed—  
Are turned away and inaccessible).  
Clichéd it is, but....I inhale your hair.  
It is a kind of secret, guilty pleasure,  
Which I permit myself occasionally.  
And then I touch your back, a timid finger  
Afraid to mar the skin, which looks as if  
It's made of fairy-tales solidified.  
How can there be such symmetry in life?

—Except....yes, I see an auburn fleck  
On one side of your back, right near your neck.  
It's almost hidden by the hair; to touch  
It I must move the tousled mass aside  
—Though slowly, carefully. You mustn't wake.  
Who knows what dreams are passing underneath  
Your darting eyes (for surely they are darting,  
Bird-like, as I have seen them do before)?  
Oh, how I'd like to see your face right now!  
A glimpse only....perhaps of just the dimple  
That bunches up the right side of your face  
(It's deeper than the other, prettier).  
Or maybe just your lips—or your eyes,  
Those sapphires that I sometimes dream about.  
But I must lie here restlessly, in rapt  
Anticipation of the moment when  
You'll wake. To look into your droopy eyes,  
To be the being they see first, as sleep  
Still clings to them.... Your sluggish smile will be  
The answer to my expectant grin. And then  
Together we will sit outside, beneath  
The dogwood tree, and watch the setting sun.

\*

*Nature's humaneness.*— When one has been attached to a girl for a long time but not in a relationship with her, but has held out hopes that she might someday change her mind and perhaps give one a hug or a kiss or something and even slip her hand into one's own as one is walking beside her in the park like one does so often—the shaded spot in the park is a good place to be happy, especially in this spring air—and when one has thought about the feel of that dainty hand in one's own with a certain longing, simply because the girl is lovely and talks with a voice that sounds like liquid crystal, but suddenly one realizes that she will never, ever consent

to a kiss because her every thought is not of this girl whose voice sounds like love, or how love must sound.....one is glad that there is such a thing as sleep, and that someday there will be a longer sleep, a very long and happy sleep without dreams....

\*

*Memory*

The purple trails of my sluggish tears,  
streaks to my chin,  
red-faced bursts of burnt flowers in my eyes—  
my lemon-stung eyes cry for you, darling.  
Acid visions blurring; love-stained spring dresses  
twirling,  
hair-twined daisies spinning, air perfumed  
with feminine laughter  
fresh as the dew-scented sun.  
The warm coconut-milk of your feet spills gently  
onto the trampled daisies, which drink it up like  
flowers.  
I want to see you, darling, once more, before you  
leave—but you have left. I left your funeral  
because I heard you talking to me, quietly like  
the drumming rain. And in the shade  
I saw you, a raspberry I wanted to pick,  
to ingest and live warmly forever in your eyes  
—they were blue like sapphire-berries and I  
loved them.  
(More lavender bursts of memory.)  
Picnicking under apple trees,  
pears redolent of lovemaking in apple-strewn  
meadows,  
lips and lips kissing earth-ground blanket  
naked as the clear sky,

NOTES OF AN UNDERGROUND HUMANIST

flushed with cheeks breathless in their hot love  
and desire ripe as female breasts.  
Soft and comfortable your lap like a bed of  
honeysuckle.  
No rain, no sorrow, no regret was there...  
no tears and there was no time.

\*

*In an evil hour.*— You think about this world and you have to laugh, because you have nothing to do with it. You had no part in creating the universe. What *right*—what *right* did the universe have to create me? To violate my individuality like that? To steal from me self-determination? It is beyond disrespectful, beyond presumptuous: it is immoral. To conjure me out of the darkness:—*I did not give my permission!* But it sits up there, out there, laughing at me, at what it did to me, laughing at the little trick it pulled. Nero's sadism was child's play, crude and embarrassing: Nero was no Universe. What fascinating sadism... To create a being and give it just enough insight so that it knows it is worth nothing, it will die and be forgotten, but not enough to understand *why*; and to make this being so that it is obsessed with an unattainable happiness, and an unattainable togetherness, with stifling distaste for the universal isolation in which it must live.

\*

*The Storm*

The earth is black. Sky-waterfalls have drowned  
The day, so that it's night already. Night....  
Cascading roars self-tumble down the night,  
The rolling echoes of cloud-timpani

Careering through the dark, like massive mold-  
Besotted logs that thunder down a hill  
Unstoppably. They quake the earth. It shakes.  
Its shivers, friendless in the deluge, are  
Illumined by the sky's electric rage:—  
The lightning-bullets penetrate the mud!  
They splash the night a bluish glare and then  
Are gone, as if to prove that ghosts exist.  
The sudden frozen sky-dividing flare,  
Night's guillotine—scaffold-skeletal—  
Is echoed in the boom that cracks, ruptures  
The caul of Chaos, all birth-bloody and hideous.  
A branch smashes a window somewhere near,  
Wind-torn from its old socket in a tree—  
Or maybe lightning-severed. The telephone-line  
Outside explodes in sparks, thus cutting off  
Communication and reducing life  
To huddled silence dimly candle-lit.  
Cowering in the corner, far from windows,  
And cringing when the cannons overhead  
Let loose their rounds. There is no sleep tonight.

\*

*The Caterpillar*

I saw a caterpillar today. In the parking lot.  
I had a plastic bag of garbage in my hand—trash  
From my apartment. Carried it at arm's length, from the smell.  
It *overflowed* with stench and waste, degrading human waste—  
Like cardboard cartons for frozen food, and decaying plastic plates,  
And partially eaten store-bought apple pie (now feeding fungi),  
And empty cereal boxes (Frosted Flakes, Cheerios),  
And plastic forks and spoons and cups and cartons of skim milk.  
All rotten, curdled, fly-encrusted. So I approached the dumpster.  
While deftly dodging stationary cars (which wasn't easy:

I had to run while carrying this huge and bulging bag,  
Arms quivering with the strain), I looked down at the crunching  
gravel,  
Just for a second, and saw a tiny spot of green—light green.  
But not just “*green*,” drab green; it looked almost iridescent,  
A little neon light that flashed my mind back to the coral  
Reef off Australia’s coast, where I had scuba-dived one time.  
I dropped the bag. Knelt down to get a closer look. It looked  
So isolated there, atop a mound of pebbles! Squirming,  
Its head high in the air, blindly squirming helplessly  
—Yet hopefully. It hoped for help, apparently. So I  
Lent it my index finger, which it gratefully accepted.  
The pile of trash beside me beckoned with its pungency,  
But I ignored it; the half-inch turquoise avatar of trust  
And steady confidence worming its way across my skin  
Was more deserving of attention. For it made me think....  
I sat upon the grass—it was quiet all around,  
Not even cars passed on the street—and watched the caterpillar  
Contract, expand, contract, expand, so *slowly—patiently—*  
Across my hand. “I could end you,” I whispered, “but I won’t....”

I placed it on a blade of grass. I had to go to class.  
The trash, and its unsavory scent, still beckoned me, so  
I did my duty. My dumpsterial duty. —But the blade  
Of grass I’d favored quivered as the caterpillar crawled....  
And so I left them, quivering in quiet harmony.

\*

*A November day.*— Sitting here in front of my window as it rains  
outside, with the dark clouds overshadowing the day and the  
autumn wind blowing leaves from trees, the warm light in my room  
softly contrasting with the dark outside as I listen to the first  
movement of Schubert’s piano sonata D. 894 (a piece simple in its

beauty)—I feel comfortable and cozy, and I don't remember the last time I was this contented.

\*

*Simple pleasures.*— Headphones—listening to Schubert. Looking out at the cars passing below on the rain-slick road. Grey skies before a storm. Sliding into bed on a cold night. Looking forward to seeing your friend this evening. Cracking open a new book, reading the first sentence. Playing the piano alone in a pensive mood. Thinking of Chopin writing one of his nocturnes. Quietly wondering what the future has in store, mixing apprehension with hope. Remembering your first kiss. The soft haze of emotion after watching *The Shawshank Redemption*. Reflecting that perhaps you are wrong—perhaps there is a heaven after all. Thinking of the pride and joy your mother felt when she watched you take your first steps as a child. Holding your lover's hand, not saying anything. Snow at midnight. Looking at the stars, imagining the immensity of the universe. Writing a good sentence. Stepping under a hot shower. Seeing a familiar face in a crowd of strangers. Air-conditioning. A breeze that is neither too strong nor too flat. Drifting to sleep on your cool pillow.

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## RETURN TO SOBERNESS

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*Sartre's philosophy fifty years later.*— Article in *Rolling Stone* (in 2008) about David Foster Wallace. I see that his whole life was sort of like mine between 18 and 25. In other words, it sucked. Right up to his death he had the same insecurities, the same thoughts, I had. Consider what he wrote in a letter: "I go through a loop in which I

notice all the ways I am self-centered and careerist and not true to standards and values that transcend my own petty interests, and feel like I'm not one of the good ones. But then I countenance the fact that at least here I am worrying about it, noticing all the ways I fall short of integrity, and I imagine that maybe people without any integrity at all don't notice or worry about it; so then I feel better about myself. It's all very confusing. I think I'm very honest and candid, but I'm also proud of how honest and candid I am—so where does that put me?" These sorts of paradoxes, the paradoxes of self-consciousness, I was writing about long ago and finally stopped caring about one or two years ago. Being self-conscious on a second level, then being conscious of *that* level, then being conscious of this *fourth* level, until you lose all sense of yourself and conclude that self-determinations determine a vacuum and hence are vacuous. But then what? Then you stop thinking and go outside and play and know who you are again, unconsciously. Wallace's curse was that he couldn't stop thinking.

Just think: he craved the label "genius" but couldn't accept it when it was conferred on him. He knew it didn't mean anything. His friend Mark Costello called him once: "He was talking," says Costello, "about how hard the writing was. And I said, lightheartedly, 'Dave, you're a genius.' Meaning, people aren't going to forget about you. You're not going to wind up in a Wendy's. He said, 'All that makes me think is that I've fooled you, too.'" An honest person in this age can't accept that he's a genius and then go on with his life in the certainty that he's a genius, comforted eternally by that thought. He knows it's false, even if it's true: he's not an object, not a *brilliant rock* or something like that; he's a person who changes from moment to moment, of whom it's meaningless to predicate the stable, static, *lustrous* quality *genius*. Wallace couldn't believe he instantiated a concept, since his mind had motion (self-consciousness)—and he knew, anyway, that if he *did*, the concept was basically meaningless. He craved self-confirmation but couldn't achieve it because the greater one's self-consciousness, the more quickly and completely one transcends one's objectifications. In the end, therefore, once he stopped taking



his medication he couldn't bear the unfulfillment of his desire to be *thickly valued*, to be *value itself*, and he killed himself.

\*

*Negative freedom.*— An intelligent and self-aware person sometimes finds it hard to know who he “really” is. He feels at times as though he is merely putting on an act—even for himself—and he suspects that he *could* be a very different person than he is. I remember moments in my life when I’ve felt sad or hopeless....but then in that moment I’ve wondered whether I was just entertaining myself and perhaps wanted to feel hopeless, maybe because of how “poetical” or profound it made me feel. Maybe I liked the mood and wallowed in it. But I certainly *seemed* to want to be happy and get out of that mood (which sometimes lasted for weeks), and in a sense I clearly was miserable. But was it not “easy” to remain unhappy, to languish in energylessness? On the other hand, why should I make a supreme effort of will to transcend depression, to force myself out of it—assuming that was even possible!—before my melancholy had spent itself? Maybe it was healthier and more natural just to let the psyche evolve of its own accord. Etc., etc. I didn’t know what was real and what was false.

Debilitating self-consciousness. I could be whatever I wanted to be, do whatever I wanted to do....I just had to choose. Would I continue to live in “miserable ease,” pleasantly having a pleasant life conventionally with everyone else, refusing to confront the dark side that everyone represses, or would I embrace the underworld for a while at least and debauch myself like Jean Genet, “Saint Genet”? To know the truth, the “worm in the heart of being.” Freedom fascinated me, my own nothingness obsessed me before I’d read Sartre....the nothingness of consciousness. The real and the false self? No, there was no real self, it was all false! Everything was a charade.

But see, while there is some truth to this despairing existentialist perspective, it’s exaggerated. It *is* possible to “be oneself”—there is a self to be. There are differences between my character and yours; we have proclivities, attitudes, skills, talents,

tastes. Eventually I decided that a good test to determine who one is is to try out a number of things and see which are the most “sustainable” given your character. Determine the things that make you feel most at home, that you’re most comfortable doing or being associated with, the things that make you proud or that grab your interest. Whom do you admire? What ideals most attract you? What kinds of people stimulate you? Seek out challenges, seek situations that test you; only by pushing against your limits will you find out who you are. Introspection alone will not tell you.

The choice of how to live is not easy, and in a society of atomistic freedom, to be forced to restrict oneself to something *determinate* is frightening, even terrifying. But it need not be false or arbitrary. Humans *are* determinate beings, despite the indeterminateness of modern culture and the seeming indeterminateness of consciousness itself. Each person has limitless potential, but it is not *unbounded* potential.

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*On the meaning of John Brown. (An essay on the concept of authenticity.)*

Defenders and detractors of John Brown may disagree about many things, but few will deny that he was, at the very least, a fascinating character. In his lifetime he was even more famous—more loved and more loathed—than he is now. From the Transcendentalists to the governor who hanged him, from the Union soldiers to Ku Klux Klan members, people have been fascinated by him. Why is this? It isn’t only because of his daring raid on Harpers Ferry, for other men have done daring things without becoming objects of fascination. Rather, the cult of John Brown seems to derive from his single-mindedness of purpose, his unshakeable conviction of righteousness, his willingness to commit violence in pursuit of a noble end (a *holy* end, for him), combined with his intelligence, his eloquence, his courage. In short, what intrigues people, at least implicitly, is the contrast between him and his age. *He* had integrity, he was an old Puritan, an anachronistic

Puritan from the days of Oliver Cromwell, he was “*authentic*”; his age was hypocritical, confused, self-estranged (as evidenced by its Civil War). This is the impression one gets from the outraged literature of the time, and from the testaments of Brown’s character given by Thoreau, Emerson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Henry A. Wise (governor of Virginia), and others.<sup>195</sup> In this paper I will investigate such claims. That is, I will explore the relation between Brown and his age, between Brown and the Transcendentalists in particular, in the hope that doing so will yield insights not only into the phenomena I’m “directly” discussing (namely the Transcendentalists, Brown, and their society) but also into the meaning and nature of “authenticity” itself, this concept that is central to Brown’s mystique.

First I will examine pieces of Thoreau’s writing and compare them to Brown’s, in order to shed light on the former’s relative “inauthenticity.” Then I’ll clarify what I mean by “authenticity,” drawing on Hegel and Dostoyevsky. Last, I’ll speculate on the causes of the character-differences between Brown, on the one hand, and Emerson and Thoreau on the other.

A reasonable place to start is Thoreau’s speech “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” delivered first in Concord on October 30, 1859 and then in other New England towns in the weeks before Brown’s execution. The speech was also published in newspapers. It is a stirring document, full of righteous fury, and it roused Emerson to join the ranks of Brown’s defenders. Brown’s trial was still going on; the country was reeling from the implications of his October 16<sup>th</sup> raid. The national consensus was that Brown was a fanatic, a criminal, a madman, a murderer; the South, however, differed from the North in seeing him as representative of the Republican party, of abolitionists all across the North. Perhaps, thought the South, he was uniquely courageous, but he was

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<sup>195</sup> See David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

symbolic of the North's dangerous individualism, its Puritanism, its evil abolitionism, its determination to attack the South and suppress slavery once and for all. Most Northerners, on the other hand, disowned Brown, viewing him as a freak, an anomaly; and the Republican party certainly had no connection to the Harpers Ferry raid. Even Abolitionists were reluctant to praise him—or at least they tempered their praise with criticism of his methods—for the majority of them were pacifists. William Lloyd Garrison, a founder of Abolitionism, declared the raid to be “a misguided, wild, and apparently insane, though disinterested and well-intended effort”; Horace Greeley called it a “deplorable affair...the work of a madman.”<sup>196</sup>

Meanwhile, however, Brown was giving interviews and writing letters in which he appeared decidedly clear-headed, in fact honorable, principled, full of integrity and intelligence. As his words were published in newspapers everywhere, the nation came to see him, paradoxically, as both an admirable man and a murderer, both humane and treasonous. Governor Wise of Virginia, who talked to Brown in the hours after the raid, said he was “firm, truthful, and intelligent...cool, collected, and indomitable...a man of fortitude and simple ingenuousness”<sup>197</sup>—yet at the same time he called him a criminal and a traitor. The nation was torn between these positive and negative interpretations of the man, with the negative, however, predominating everywhere.

The 1850s were a culturally frenzied time. In his book *Beneath the American Renaissance*, David Reynolds emphasizes the ferment and confusion of antebellum America—the cultural experimentation, the impulse for reform of every variety, the coexistence of every conceivable cultural extreme. It was the age, after all, of Transcendentalism and evangelical reform, of sensationalist literature and Poe's irrationalist fiction, of *Moby Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*, of resurgent Puritanism and atheism and free-love movements, of Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne,

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

and, in general, of battles between conservative ideologies and an emerging radical democracy in both culture and politics. Slavery, though, was arguably the dominant issue, especially after the passage in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Act and in 1854 of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which led to widespread proslavery and antislavery violence in Kansas. (The name “Bleeding Kansas” designated this time.) By the end of the 1850s, Emerson was writing that the country had to be purged through war.

It was in this environment that Thoreau wrote “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” hoping it would help raise Brown’s name from infamy. I will quote a few passages to give the reader a sense of its style (which will be important to my argument). Referring to Brown’s interviews with proslavery men after Harpers Ferry, Thoreau says,

Read his admirable answers to Mason and others. How they are dwarfed and defeated by the contrast! On the one side, half-brutish, half-timid questioning; on the other, truth, clear as lightning, crashing into their obscene temples. They are made to stand with Pilate, and Gessler, and the Inquisition. How ineffectual their speech and action! and what a void their silence!

...[John Brown] was not our representative in any sense. He was too fair a specimen of a man to represent the like of us. Who, then, were his constituents? If you read his words understandingly you will find out. In his case there is no idle eloquence, no made, nor maiden speech, no compliments to the oppressor. Truth is his inspirer, and earnestness the polisher of his sentences. He could afford to lose his Sharpe’s rifles, while he retained his faculty of speech,—a Sharpe’s rifle of infinitely surer and longer range...

...Treason! Where does such treason take its rise? I cannot help thinking of you as you deserve, ye governments. Can you dry up the fountains of thought? High treason, when it is resistance to tyranny here below, has its origin in, and is first committed by, the power that makes and forever recreates man. When you have caught and hung all these human rebels, you have accomplished nothing but your own guilt, for you have not struck at the fountain-head...

The contemporary reader tends to enjoy this Thoreauvian heroic style. One enjoys the imagery, the vigor, the pithiness—but only because one knows that it was written a long time ago. A speech written in the same style *now* would be ridiculed as over-ornate, over-eloquent, absurdly grandiose and magniloquent, stylistically naïve, hopelessly out of touch with the zeitgeist. It would be considered *badly* written. But because it is not a product of our time, we are able to look upon it with admiration, even, perhaps, to lament that such writing has gone out of fashion.

In other words, our reaction is inseparable from *nostalgia*. But what is nostalgia? It is a longing for, or fondness of, an idealized past. Usually the idealization involves the perception that the past was simple, certain, “whole,” full of an authenticity that has been lost. The appeal of Thoreau’s writing for us is not purely literary, since it contains literary flaws (such as exaggeration and excessive romanticism). The appeal consists also in its perceived *authenticity*,<sup>198</sup> its being an upsurge from a more authentic, naïve time than our self-conscious present. It contains almost no hint of a divided consciousness such as characterizes postmodernity; it is pervaded by a spirit of relative certainty, an almost religious

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<sup>198</sup> Throughout this paper I am using the word “authenticity” in a non-moral sense. I don’t mean to imply that “inauthentic” people or cultures are thereby inferior or somehow immoral; the term is purely descriptive, not evaluative.

devotion to *principles*. The pithy, forceful language expresses a sort of *certainly of self*. Thus, Thoreau's culture, while riven by internecine conflicts and full of collective doubt, was yet more authentic, less "self-conscious," than ours, a fact that made possible the appreciative reception of Thoreau's speech.

Emerson's language is equally revelatory: he refers to Brown as "that new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death,—the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross."<sup>199</sup>

The Transcendentalists' enthusiasm for John Brown parallels our appreciation of the Transcendentalists' writings and our nostalgia for a culture that could produce such writing. The Northern intellectuals who supported Brown, such as Thomas Higginson, Wendell Phillips, Frank Sanborn, Emerson, Thoreau, and others, seem to have viewed him as an evolutionary throwback, a reincarnation of Oliver Cromwell. The degree of his religiousness is well-known: like every good Puritan from the 1600s, he "possessed a most unusual memory of [the Bible's] entire contents" and considered himself an instrument of God.<sup>200</sup> He was certain that slavery was "the mother of all abominations";<sup>201</sup> he therefore devoted his life (especially his last ten years) to its abolition. So little does he appear to have doubted himself or his cause that he never even *considered* compromise with "evil"; compromise would have been a betrayal of God and of Brown's mission on Earth. This complete integrity and self-certainty is evident in the final speech he gave to the court that sentenced him to death:

...This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed,

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<sup>199</sup> From Emerson's lecture "Courage," delivered on November 8, 1859.

<sup>200</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), p. 12. The quotation is from an autobiographical letter Brown wrote to Henry Stearns in 1857.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.<sup>202</sup>

Upon comparing this speech with Thoreau's, one begins to see what it is that the Transcendentalists found so magnetic about Brown. Thoreau speaks, writes and thinks in literary terms, which is to say in terms of the effect he wants to have on his audience. He is a self-conscious intellectual, a man perfectly familiar with self-doubt and the feeling of inadequacy, who is "aware of himself as an object of someone else's observation"<sup>203</sup> and is thus *critically* aware of himself, a fact that comes across in his carefully constructed, inflated sentences. Brown, on the other hand, simply states his convictions clearly and without ulterior motive. Without literary embellishments. He is too self-certain for inessential embellishments, for artificial devices that come from the writer's desire for applause. As Thoreau says, "Truth is [Brown's] inspirer, and earnestness the polisher of his sentences." Moreover, this

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<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, p. 354.

<sup>203</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), p. 113.



observation is expressly intended to contrast with Thoreau himself, for in the prior sentence he has stated with a hint of self-disapproval, "In [Brown's] case there is no idle eloquence, no made, nor maiden speech"—which is precisely what Thoreau is giving, a "made speech" characterized by "idle eloquence."

Thoreau has already made the point explicitly when he says, "[Brown] was too fair a specimen of a man to represent the like of us." And earlier in the speech he has gone so far as to say, "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all."

For Thoreau and Emerson, therefore, as for most of the Transcendentalists, Brown is the ideal man not only because he guides his actions by his conscience and devotes himself to fighting for a higher principle (which, in his case, is the eradication of slavery), but also because he does so in the most "manly" of ways, viz. by *knowing himself for a man*. In the eyes of his admirers he suffers from no "divided consciousness," and in this sense differs both from New England intellectuals and from American culture as a whole in the 1850s. He symbolizes the ideal of authenticity. He is Emerson's "hero," the man whose essence is "self-trust," who "speaks the truth and is just, generous, hospitable, temperate, scornful of petty calculations and scornful of being scorned."<sup>204</sup>

In short, Brown "knew himself for a man" more fully than Thoreau and Emerson knew themselves as such: they were well aware that, while Brown *acted*, they merely *wrote*. However, what does the word "authentic" really mean? And what causes a person or a culture to be inauthentic? In thus contrasting the Transcendentalists with Brown, what exactly are we doing?

In a sense, the first question is not hard to answer. Inauthenticity can mean various things: self-deception; "playing a role" or "wearing a mask"; being compulsively self-conscious to the extent that you don't have a clear sense of who you are; failing,

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<sup>204</sup> From Emerson's essay "Heroism."

for whatever reason, to “realize” (or *real-ize*) yourself (i.e., your potential), for example by watching TV all day every day; immersing yourself in superficial, commonplace pastimes that don’t touch your “inner self,” for instance by living like a New Yorker who rushes from place to place day after day, shopping, eating, drinking, watching movies, meeting friends, without ever pausing and self-reflecting for the sake of “staying in touch with” himself. What these modes of inauthenticity have in common is that they are ways of *not being oneself*. They imply a dichotomy between the “real self” and the “false self,” between reality and appearance. The truly authentic person lives in a “fullness of being”; he suffers from no self-suppression or self-stuntedness or insecurity.

There are other ways to express the meaning of inauthenticity. For instance, one could use Hegelian language and say that inauthenticity at its most extreme is characterized by a “disintegrated consciousness.” The example that Hegel chooses to illustrate what he means by this term is the Nephew in Diderot’s dialogue *Rameau’s Nephew*, the character who is so confused about his identity that he can be anyone and everyone, he can adopt whatever mask it pleases him to adopt in a given moment.<sup>205</sup> This character effectively has no self: his “self” is merely a series of masks floating in air, masks on top of masks all the way down to the “core”—but there is no core. There is only an infinite floating in a vacuum-of-identity. Dostoyevsky provides an even more extreme example of the disintegrated consciousness in *Notes from the Underground*, which comprises a series of self-reflections by the “Underground Man.” The Underground Man’s paradox is that he knows nothing about himself precisely because he knows everything. He is compulsively self-conscious, which means he never stops questioning himself, never stops wondering who he “truly” is, to the point that he considers himself to lack an identity:

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<sup>205</sup> See Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the chapter entitled “Self-alienated Spirit.” See also Lionel Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity*, which is an illuminating discussion of all these themes.

...I did not know how to become anything; neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect... [A] man in the nineteenth century must and morally ought to be pre-eminently a characterless creature; a man of character, an active man is pre-eminently a limited creature...<sup>206</sup>

In other words, the disintegrated consciousness, which is the most alienated, least “authentic,” of all consciousnesses, is obsessed, tortured, by its consciousness of freedom in relation to itself. According to the famous psychoanalyst R. D. Laing, schizophrenia is the (patho)logical conclusion of this disintegration of consciousness.

What does all this have to do with John Brown and the Transcendentalists? First of all, it clarifies what we mean by saying that Brown is comparatively “authentic”: we mean that his consciousness and behavior are farther away from the extreme of “dis-integration” than Emerson’s and Thoreau’s are. In other words, his actions are simple extensions of his sense of self to a relatively high degree. Emerson and Thoreau (I’ll call them “ET” for short, and treat them as instantiations of a single mode of consciousness) are characterized by a greater division between their “inner,” “true,” “ideal” self and the self they present to the world, the self that determines much of their behavior. The division is reflected also in their writing, for as they write they are continuously, of necessity, making compromises between what they believe and would *like* to say and what they think will be acceptable and most effective in light of their audience.<sup>207</sup> That is, they are adjusting their behavior in the light of social norms and

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<sup>206</sup> *Notes from the Underground*, chapter 1.

<sup>207</sup> Comparisons between Thoreau’s journal and his “Plea for Captain John Brown” support that point. In the journal his wording was often stronger than in his speech, evidently because he thought his audience wouldn’t appreciate his more strongly worded sentiments.

people's expectations, which presupposes and reinforces a separation in their consciousness between what is "false" (in their behavior and writing) and what is "true." Their sense of self, therefore, suffers from a partial lack of integration with itself, a lack of un-mediated "wholeness" and self-certainty, corresponding to the split between their inner self/behavior and the self/behavior they present to others.

Freud believed that the pathological is a clue to the "ordinary," the "healthy." They exist on a continuum; there is no radical separation between mental health and mental ill-health. This Freudian belief supports my claim that John Brown and ET represent different places in a continuum from complete authenticity or self-certainty—as manifested, for instance, in an infant's consciousness, in which there is no self-awareness, no self-other division—to, perhaps, schizophrenia, if R. D. Laing's interpretation of schizophrenia is right. One could also say that ET is more authentic, less mediated by critical self-consciousness, less intensely "aware of [itself] as an object of someone else's observation," than many postmodern intellectuals, whose writings are saturated with compulsive self-consciousness. The writer David Foster Wallace is a good example of such an intellectual; so is Samuel Beckett, even Sylvia Plath—writers whose works testify to the cultural and personal insecurity that exists in this age.

The question arises, then, as to the *causes* of these various degrees of self-insecurity and inauthenticity. What factors caused Brown to be more self-certain than the Transcendentalists, and why were they more self-certain than many contemporary intellectuals are? To answer this question we have to look at the social environments in which these people grew up, the environments that formed them.

John Brown matured in the wilderness, on the frontier. Much of his youth was spent in Ohio, working at his father's tannery, living in the log cabin his father had built. These were rough conditions; his family never—throughout his life, in fact—transcended its poverty. Moreover, Brown's parents were severe with him, readily punishing and whipping him for his wild

behavior.<sup>208</sup> He did not feel unloved, though. Quite the contrary. His mother died when he was eight, but he cherished her memory. His parents were also extremely devout Calvinists, a characteristic that they would pass on to their son. He grew up to be a stern, self-confident, commanding figure who disliked “‘vain and frivolous’ conversation and people.”<sup>209</sup> Almost the entirety of his life would be lived in outposts in the wilderness, be they in Kansas, Ohio, or upstate New York.

Emerson and Thoreau, by contrast, spent most of their lives in or around Boston, Massachusetts. They both studied at Harvard and taught school briefly afterwards. Their continuous contact with civilization is reflected in their writings, which preach a return to nature, a rejection of laws and institutions that conflict with one’s conscience, a reliance on *intuition* rather than established religion or anything predominantly social in character. The individual should, in a sense, have priority over society. In short, they were firmly convinced that society was corrupting, that it was false, sometimes evil, and that if the individual was not careful, *its* falsity could become *his* falsity.

The main reasons they had such an adverse reaction to “society” are also the main causes of their inauthenticity relative to Brown. Quite simply, modern society imposes *roles* on people, modes of behavior they have to adopt if they are to survive the hustle and bustle and not become social outcasts. Social structures constrain one’s freedom. Moreover, they fragment the populace, atomize people, make them strangers to one another, which ultimately makes them mutually suspicious. The end-result is mass insecurity and self-consciousness. The necessity of spending most of one’s time playing various roles, worrying about people’s reactions to one’s behavior, worrying if one is fulfilling the designated roles properly, and so on, can have destructive implications with respect to one’s sense of self. An individual may even *lose* his sense of himself, which is to say he no longer knows

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<sup>208</sup> Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, p. 32.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

who he is. Emerson and Thoreau probably did not suffer from this pathology, but their emphasis on the individual's need to "trust himself" shows at least that they were not strangers to the modern problem of a loss of identity.

Brown, however, *was* a stranger to this problem because he was not formed by the social structures of American city-life. His identity was forged on the frontier, where it was unnecessary to adopt a plethora of identity-confusing "roles." He was raised by strict Calvinists and he became a single-minded Calvinist. His world was not ambiguous.

To be sure, his innate psychological endowment obviously had a lot to do with his character. But so did his background. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the differences between his background and Emerson's (and Thoreau's) partly determined the differences between their characters.

The foregoing reflections have a number of implications that might stimulate further thought. For instance, it would seem that societies, at least as "ideal-types," necessarily evolve in the direction of encouraging greater and greater inauthenticity among their denizens, inasmuch as they tend to proceed from a relatively primitive, "natural" state of little social differentiation or "role-playing" to an increasingly "civilized" state of economic and social coercion in the form of interwoven norms and roles—roles that emerge from the evolving state of technology, of the division of labor, of urban centers, of social structures. It would make sense, then, to call a society "self-conscious" or "inauthentic" to the degree that its institutions and social relations are such as to promote these traits in its inhabitants, i.e., to encourage the latter to adjust their behavior in the light of how they see themselves and think they are seen by others (which is just to put on an *act*<sup>210</sup>).

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<sup>210</sup> The act may deceive the actor himself, but it nevertheless retains some of its 'act-ive' character as long as the actor adjusts his behavior—perhaps involuntarily—in response to a discrepancy between how he perceives himself and how he wants to be perceived (by himself and others).

Alternatively, one might approach the Transcendentalists' writings in terms of what they reveal about, e.g., the self-consciousness of certain sectors of American culture at certain times, and how that self-consciousness evolved towards greater self-doubt and despair—as well as the social causes that might have led to such an evolution in the 1840s, '50s, and '60s. Similarly, one might examine John Brown's writings as clues to how a relatively "authentic" person thinks and acts in given social conditions. They are clues to the mental structure of a certain kind of person.

Such investigations, however, lie beyond the purview of this paper. My purpose has been only to sketch a few telling differences between the characters of John Brown and his Transcendentalist admirers, and to speculate on why they so admired him. It appears, in the end, that their admiration was evoked by one thing above all: their sense that he was a more "genuine man" than they. —The cult of masculinity and the cult of authenticity overlap.

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*How is mass inhumanity possible?*— When I ask myself how it's possible that so many white Southerners used to support slavery even on *moral* grounds, as having a "civilizing" influence on blacks, I'm led to the conclusion that it is very easy for humans to invent and believe in ideologies which justify activities that bring material benefit and social recognition to them. Arguments can always be thought of for both sides of an issue, even moral arguments. Most of the time you're going to subscribe to philosophies and values that permit you to affirm yourself in the way you're accustomed to, because your most *fundamental* values are relative material comfort and social recognition. Given your environment, whatever values are consistent with these deepest values are probably the ones you'll subscribe to. It's not just intellectual laziness, either. It's also the fact that the way you live structures your perception of the world, even determines the *data* that enter your consciousness. Living amidst a certain class of people in certain physical and economic conditions, not being exposed to other conditions, will naturally lead to your adoption of

the views of this social group. You'll see certain things happening and not other things; you'll encounter certain types of behavior and not others, which may well cause you to make unsound generalizations about human behavior or the behavior of particular ethnicities. Your social circumstances may end up distorting or suppressing your *innate human* commitment to kindness, fairness, compassion, solidarity. Other people, due largely to their different social conditions, may more nearly approach a realization of these human values than you; they may have a clearer understanding of the nature of society's present configuration and of its (in)compatibility with human values. Certain types of social organization are relatively conducive to prejudice; other types are relatively conducive to rationality.

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*An immoral morality.*— Oh the *stupidity* of condemning people like John Brown and accepting "righteous wars" or cheering them on! The nonsense morality! Neutrality, inaction, is far more morally repugnant in extreme cases than violence is. The disinterested reasoning and distant action of a McNamara or a Dick Cheney or every State in history offends the moral sense far more than immediate and violent insurrection against oppression does. The latter is *human*, the former not. (Bureaucratized violence—impersonal violence—is not far removed from totalitarianism, the superfluity of the individual.) The morality of *The Wretched of the Earth* makes more sense to me than the morality of "following rules."

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*Homo economicus.*— Today I was eating a sandwich on the edge of a pleasant stone courtyard in front of an office-building downtown. Standing there harmlessly, next to the sidewalk, eating a sandwich. A guy wearing a suit, maybe coming back from lunch, passed by me but stopped to ask if I was waiting for someone. "No." "Okay, this is private property," he said. I looked at him,



took another bite of my sandwich, and slowly walked away. Furious inside. It occurred to me then that *homo economicus* is the only *despicable* creature in the animal kingdom. That man's act, that petty little bureaucratic act, is the origin of all wickedness.

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*The modern slave.*— A good test of a person's worth—that is, of his humanity, his free-spiritedness, his kindness and mental independence—is whether he is willing and able to examine rules critically in the light of reason and either obey them or not obey them based on their reasonableness. The modern slave is the one who does what he is told by authorities, who accepts their rules and orders unquestioningly even if they are irrational or they hurt people. The typical bureaucrat is the perfect slave. Only a liberated, humane person picks and chooses his rules for himself, guided by reason and compassion. Genetically speaking, everyone or almost everyone has the capacity to be a mere bureaucrat, a consistent follower of orders. It does seem, however, that some people are more comfortable with playing such a role than others. Remember the Milgram experiments in the 1960s? Most of the participants were willing to obey orders and inflict the maximum amount of pain on the victim, blindly trusting the authority-figure's reassurances—but some did refuse. For whatever reason, obedience (a terrible thing) came less naturally for them than for the others.

One of the most important goals of a *humane* system of education and socialization would be to teach people *not to obey automatically*. This is the opposite of what our current educational system teaches, though, because of the necessity of universal obedience in a capitalist society.

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After reading about Thomas Thistlewood and Jamaican slavery in the eighteenth century—reading alone in a dark and empty apartment at night—one has to clean oneself with the slow movement from Beethoven's Archduke piano trio. Thistlewood the

slave master who kept a diary of his practices but didn't comment on them, didn't reflect on his feelings or those of his slaves, just matter-of-factly recorded daily events without self-consciousness. Considered himself a man of the Enlightenment, was interested in botany and horticulture, read books. But the punishments he meted to his slaves—no different from the punishments other plantation-owners visited upon their slaves in this probably most brutal of societies in history—are not light reading. Of course the daily floggings and the sexual predations on his female slaves and all that. But also his invented tortures, like having a slave defecate into another's mouth and then wiring the mouth shut for hours. How do you reconcile these practices with Thistlewood's self-conception, his civilized Britishness, his intelligent ordinariness? The answer is obvious, but it says a lot about humanity. It's all about *categorizing* people. One feels sympathy, compassion, empathy to the extent that one *identifies* with another, categorizes him as an extension of one's self. Blacks were seen as not fully human, etc. The human capacity for *abstraction*, for *mediation*—that most lethal and magnificent capacity, which has led to humanity's villainies and glories—allowed whites to mediate their experiences/"internalizations" of blacks with the ideas of inferiority, filthiness, semi-subhumanity, *dirty otherness*. Hence, no self-identification of whites with blacks occurred, and so no pity or compassion. Blacks, while acknowledged to be human, became for whites effectively objects (of a nasty sort), like Jews in Nazi Germany. Whites could do whatever they wanted to them while still retaining in their own eyes a civilized humanity.

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*The authoritarian personality.*— One problem with the average political "conservative" (or neoconservative; the distinction is no longer as clear as it once was) in the U.S. is that he has an emotional attachment to the idea of America, its greatness, so that if anything is said that might be interpreted as critical of his country he feels the need to disagree with it and defend America. He is more committed to his belief in the greatness of his country, a

nonexistent abstract entity, than to action on behalf of people's well-being (action that he often thinks takes "anti-American" forms). He is vigilantly on the lookout for "anti-Americanism," his antennae hyper-attuned to the faintest whiff of it. He won't accept criticisms, for example, of American foreign policy unless they're premised on the belief that America is great, noble, a force for democracy and freedom in the world. His outlook, hyper-patriotic, is basically totalitarian. So he can't think clearly about the world: the fog of patriotism is always obscuring his vision and putting blinders on him, like on a horse. It's a mental pathology, not unlike the pathology of fundamentalist Christianity (which is one reason the two pathologies are often seen in the same person). A profound emotional commitment to an abstract entity is almost always pathological, which is to say unnatural, arising out of societal alienation.

My pseudo-debates on Facebook with an old acquaintance enlighten me as to how the conservative, or rather the "authoritarian," mind works. (Authoritarian minds exist across the political spectrum, but they seem more common on the right.) Its political side revolves around an ideological core immune to argument. You can amass all the evidence in the world, but this guy is never going to change his opinion on issues like "big government" (bad) or "law and order" (good). The best thing you can do with such people is to push them aside and get on with productive work.

Here's a better way of saying it: once a person like my acquaintance places you in a certain mental category that he considers beyond the pale, such as "radical" or "socialist" or "anti-American," his mind is more or less shut off to your arguments. You can say as much as you want, point to any number of facts or empirical studies, but because you've been locked away in this box none of it has to be taken seriously. The box is a defense-mechanism by which the conservative prevents your arguments from undermining his own convictions too radically. The fact, then, that conservatives are very prone to name-calling is significant: by labeling their opponents "liberals" they give themselves permission

to disregard their arguments, which is the best possible reaction because if they actually tried to engage with arguments on their merits they'd fail. Liberals don't need the name-calling so much because they can usually beat their opponents through logic.

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The notion of “stupidity” seems purely polemical and without substance, but that’s wrong. It is a necessary concept in order to explain things about people that would otherwise be inexplicable. Lack of (self-)critical intelligence, lack of talent for abstract thinking, lack of social awareness or empathic understanding of people and situations—these are what is usually meant by “stupidity.” Everyone exhibits stupidity sometimes, but in some people it is more common than others. A disproportionate number of political conservatives, for example, are more or less stupid, as you’ll see if you talk to them. They have trouble understanding arguments, the rules of logic; they’re less open-minded than liberals tend to be, less able to understand opposing arguments or consider facts relatively disinterestedly. Scientific research confirms this.<sup>211</sup> It has to do with the old idea of the authoritarian personality (which exhibits more stupidity than a relatively “open” personality does). Another way to say it is that the average conservative is less objective, rational, empathetic, etc. than the average liberal. Again, that’s a scientifically demonstrated fact, not just an insult.

As for radical leftists, they often fall into one of two categories: the left version of arch-conservatives with whom you can’t argue, and something that approximates the open-mindedness

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<sup>211</sup> See, for example, the website <http://2012election.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=004818> (accessed October 10, 2012), which has links to twelve peer-reviewed articles. From the perspective of conservatives, one of the less insulting findings was that “In general, liberals are more open-minded, creative, curious, and novelty seeking, whereas conservatives are more orderly, conventional, and better organized.”

and intellectual disinterestedness of Chomsky or Zinn. Mainstream liberals tend to be more objective than the former but less objective than the latter.

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*Film criticism.*— However talented filmmakers are, film itself is inherently an inferior art form—like photography, though for mostly different reasons. Theodor Adorno said that “Every visit to the cinema, despite the utmost watchfulness, leaves me dumber and worse than before.” In part that was directed against the shallowness of “sociability,” but it applies to film itself too. In a word, the problem is that when one sits in the dark watching images and sounds flit by, one is forced to be relatively passive. And there is something “instantly gratifying” in a vulgar way about fleeting sounds and images. Even the best movies are....*unreal*, separated from the viewer—a flat screen of *stuff happening* as you sit there looking at it. There is something more interactive and more *real* about theater than film. Also, film is by necessity more *atomizing* than other art forms. People sitting in the dark, each in his own world, looking at electronic images and having noise blared at them, no performers present, no watching the art *enacted right in front of one*, an inorganic-ness....a “splicing together,” an artificiality about the situation and the art itself. And then the experience is over and you rub your eyes and try to become active and whole again. It’s different from watching plays.

More generally, a society saturated by electronic interactions tends to produce a population of less-than-high intelligence. The atomism, passiveness, instantaneous absorption of sound-bites, neglect of *sustained reading* and of genuine interpersonal interaction, churns out people who suffer from mental stuntedness. The increasing incidence of ADD, autism, Asperger syndrome, etc. is evidence of this, as is the epidemic of shallow, stupid thinking (especially as regards politics) that seems to get worse year by year.

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*The vulgar art form.*— Even movies that are supposed to be “real,” “cool,” “realistic,” like, say, *High Fidelity*, have little in common with reality. It’s something about the nature of movies, even unglamorous ones: they glamorize life. They make it seem better and more exciting than it is, even if they explicitly set out to show its gloomy, grimy side. They make you think you’re missing out on life. After watching *High Fidelity* right now I feel strangely depleted and estranged from things, because life just isn’t that *special*. That glossy camera-film with the cinematic sheen on it that Hollywood uses, that special kind of film or those special kinds of cameras that make everything look so much more glamorous than homemade videos—it estranges the viewer from his own decidedly unglossy life. And women and men....women and men are not the way they are in movies, nor is sex movie-sex (even if the moves are the same). And seeing how irrational and ordinary real life is makes you hate it; the idiocy and randomness of who gets whom or who’s attracted to whom, based as it is on moods, circumstances, lighting, clothing, timing, drinking... Real life is chance and mundanity; movie life is, usually, “necessity,” narrative, a *telos*, fun meaningfulness, beautiful women, excitement. One wants to escape one’s life and enter the movie world.

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*The cynic speaks.*— This life is not worth a potato, as Byron said (and Plato, Solomon, Dante, Cervantes, Luther, Rochefoucauld, Swift, Wesley, Rousseau, and countless others). Think of the professions, for example. To become (and then to be) a medical doctor or a lawyer you have to be not “intellectual” but an obedient drudge. To be a politician you have to be a liar, a panderer, and driven by power-hunger. To be a successful academic you cannot challenge institutional conventions—as is true of every other job. To be a corporate executive you have to be obsessed with cost-cutting and money-making, and you have to be able to turn your back on humanity in a hundred different ways. To be a soldier you have to give up independent-mindedness and let yourself become a killing machine for hire. To be a scientist you have to be willing to

spend your life immersed in tedious minutiae of theoretical or experimental research. To be a bus driver or janitor or fast-food employee or waiter or cleaning lady or secretary or receptionist or factory worker or clerk you have to tolerate exquisite boredom and subordination and the emptying of your mind. It's a wonderful world.

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*The silliness of ordinary life. (From 2005.)*— Today was an “adventure,” if you understand that word in a loose sense. It's a good story. A long story....

Nancy Goldstein is the head of my internship program. She's the one who found me my job at the newspaper. She lives across the street, though we interns don't see her often. The first time I ever saw her was on Hanukkah. She's Jewish, as are many of my housemates, and we had a quiet Hanukkah celebration together. From our phone-conversations I'd expected Goldstein to be a dominating, confident, modern businesswoman who wears a suit all the time. I couldn't have been more wrong. She's a short, frumpy, pudgy, unattractive bohemian type, socially unperceptive, an incessant talker. That was my first impression. Today I was able to fill out the portrait. Rebecca works for her; two days ago she asked me if I wanted to pretend to be a Washington Internship Program staffer for an afternoon. “Uhh... Huh?” She said that Goldstein had to make a presentation to representatives from the Korean government who were thinking about sending two hundred interns to her program. It was a very big deal. Goldstein wanted to give the best impression possible, which involved renting office space downtown for the day, pretending it was hers and showing it off, and hiring fake staffers. Yes. That was her plan. (It's like something out of *The Sting*!) She judged rightly that the Koreans wouldn't be impressed with her real headquarters way out in the suburbs, in her house where dog-stench clings to the furniture. So she hired John and me to be her accomplices, in addition to Rebecca and a few other real employees. I went to her house at around 1:00 today. Her presentation was set to begin at 2:00. She

wasn't even dressed. She and another woman were frantically running around stuffing boxes with diplomas, pictures, books, and anything else that could be used to decorate offices. At the same time there was some problem involving an extension cord that wouldn't work. At the same time, Goldstein learned that Kate, the Korean in our house, who was supposed to describe her internship experiences at the meeting, was too sick to go. So Goldstein called another Korean and asked her to substitute. But it turned out that this girl had some unfinished business with Goldstein, having to do with money that was still owed to her for recruiting someone to the program, and so Goldstein had to listen to her explain all the details—which went *on* and *on*—even as she was rushing around barking orders to us fake staffers about what to do with the extension cord and where to take the boxes and when to let the dog into the house.

Now, to appreciate the humor in the situation you'll have to picture to yourself a comically accurate personification of a control freak. Place this image in the most disorganized setting you can imagine. Keep in mind that today is not just any day; it is the most important day of the year for this panic-prone control freak. Who isn't even dressed, though her meeting is in forty minutes. And add the following: the inherent absurdity of the undertaking; the over-the-topness of it all (—large boxes overflowing with diplomas from Harvard and every other college attended by her and her children, photographs of family and weddings, copies of books she'd written, artifacts from African countries she'd visited, Christmas cards, a letter from Laura Bush, an autographed picture of Al Gore, reams of informational pamphlets); a young Israeli woman who works there part-time, obsequiously following the boss and occasionally hinting delicately that maybe it isn't necessary to take the bongo drums; a girl on the phone complaining about a totally unrelated problem; a young man wearing the Washington Internship Program t-shirt he was given standing quietly observing the scene, ready to help should his assistance be requested but firmly convinced that the best policy for now is to get out of the way and not contribute to the mayhem; another young man



(John)—a real piece of work, absolutely imbecilic in social situations, possessing a degree of intelligence but psychologically unbalanced, off in his own zone most of the time, muttering incoherently, who has full-body nervous twitches and likes to stuff his hands down the front of his pants—entering and exiting the house repeatedly because he keeps forgetting things in his room, pacing and mumbling to himself detached phrases—“I don’t know...” “you’re awake now...” “and then I said...”—oblivious of the goings-on.

The Korean girl wasn’t shutting up, so Goldstein thrust the phone into my hand, saying “She’s telling a long story. I can’t get her to stop. Find out how much money she wants and make sure she knows where to meet us in an hour”—meanwhile I could hear the voice in the receiver continuing its tirade unfazed by the fact that no one was listening to it. I put the phone to my ear and let the voice wear itself out. When the girl heard a strange masculine voice speaking she changed her tone, so that it was gentler, and started her story from the beginning;—I periodically murmured assent (having no idea what she was talking about)—but soon she thought better of it and said she’d discuss it later. Then she asked about the meeting, said she didn’t know how to get to the place, so I ran upstairs to Goldstein (trying not to breathe through my nostrils: her room smelled of rank dog-sweat) and asked what was the closest metro-stop, etc. Eventually Dan came, a middle-aged guy who provided the only voice of reason but whose lungs were no match for Goldstein’s, with the result that he could only timidly offer a word here and there as she paused for breath in her rants. He didn’t think all the boxes were necessary, but she overruled him, so we lugged them out to the car and finally got underway, having waited an extra ten minutes for her to slather a coat of Elizabethan-style makeup on her now-glowing face. The twenty-minute trip was another source of delight for me, as I listened to Goldstein nag and worry and plan and give orders in that clueless, hard-to-take-seriously way of hers. You had to submit to her not because she had a commanding presence but because, in fact, she just *didn’t take breaths* as she talked!

We arrived. Called Rebecca, who was already upstairs in the office, to find out if the Koreans had arrived yet. If they had, we were in trouble: we were carrying boxes full of African totems, which might have aroused suspicion. Fortunately they hadn't. We raced upstairs—it was an impressively professional and phallically imposing building—and learned from the receptionist in the lobby that the Koreans were waiting in the conference room. Uh-oh. We snuck past, walked down the corridor to the two offices and unloaded everything. Goldstein was in her frantic mode again, entreating us to hurry up so the meeting could begin. I was given papers to pass out to the two Koreans currently being entertained by Rebecca. We entered the conference room en masse...and I had the pleasure of witnessing my first boardroom meeting. It was awesome. With the introductions over, Dan launched into his Goldstein-boosting speech: "Dr. Goldstein's reputation certainly precedes her. She studied at Harvard, she was a strategic analyst on the staff of the Clinton administration, she's done this and she's done that..." It was indeed hard to believe that this small neurotic Jewish woman had accomplished so much. She spoke next—spoke very well, did a great job—"deserved an Academy Award," as John said. Nevertheless, the tension in the room was at a dangerously high level. The stiffness and formality of the whole charade were terrifying. With the exception of John, who was yawning, rolling his eyes, and fidgeting—and, to an extent, the Koreans, who sat there mutely and listened—we were robots programmed to smile on cue and nod gravely and grunt in agreement and raise eyebrows in admiration. It was all I could do not to leap onto the table and rip off my shirt and beat my chest while screaming Tarzanishly "Ohahohahohahohahhh!!!"

Four of us were allowed to leave; we hung out in the offices. Rebecca, John, the Israeli, and I. Poor John. Made a fool of himself, as usual. But worse than usual. To give only one example: we were discussing Rebecca's study-abroad in Costa Rica and the Israeli's plans to teach English in Ecuador, commenting on various cultural differences, and John blurted out:

"Yeah, I was raised by penguins in Antarctica. So just imagine what a huge cultural shock it was to come to America!"

"What?" the Israeli said.

"I was raised by...penguins. In Antarctica. It was really cold. So...coming here..."

Silence. "That wasn't funny," she said, brutally. But then she laughed and apologized for her bluntness. To make the sudden awkwardness even worse, John acknowledged it. "That moment wouldn't have been so awkward if I hadn't said the joke twice."

Two hours later the meeting was over. The final joke of the day was that the Koreans never asked to see the offices, which made all our work meaningless.

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*Cosmic insects.*— Yesterday as I was walking through a suburban neighborhood I heard a chorus of cicadas. It started off slow and quiet, then crescendoed to an almost deafening roar while quickening its tempo, and finally sank to a whimper and stopped. It was an unintelligible noise, insistent and annoying, but brief. Suddenly I realized that the furious sounds of man's own history must seem like the cicadas' chorus to Earth.

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*The big picture.*— Someday, many millennia from now, people will not distinguish between what we call antiquity and what we call the modern world; they will both be called "ancient," as we call both the Sumerian and the Roman civilizations ancient. The modern world-system will be the subject of archaeological excavations. Future historians will write, "Around the time of the birth of what was called 'capitalism,' there were two massive wars that affected the whole world. Millions of people died. During the second war, it seems that there was even some sort of elaborate genocidal system set up to exterminate a group of people called 'Jews.'" —How vain life seems in the face of time!

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*The human tragedy.*— In trying to raise himself above nature, man has lowered himself beneath it.

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*God as Shakespeare.*— My love for humanity is not admiration of beauty; it is pity for a tragic hero.

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*The prerequisite for lovingkindness.*— Nothing assuages unhappiness like the thought that others are unhappy too. Conversely, nothing more delights the happy person than the thought of others' happiness.

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*Existentialism as therapy.*— It's ironic that understanding life's absurdity can actually *ease* your pain if you have a lot of it. Knowing that everyone is in the same metaphysical position as I, and that time steals everything, helps me tolerate somehow the emotional pain in which my sense of self is grounded.

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*The origin of hypocrisy.*— It's very easy to judge someone. It's very hard to do so and not be a hypocrite.

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*The lament of the ADD-sufferer.*— A mere pebble on the tracks can derail my train of thought.

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*Don't "love life for its own sake."*— Every great achievement has its origin in a lack of love for mere *life*.

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Death. Dreadful, horrifying death. "Everything I do, I do it for you." Death. The ultimate imbalance between humans and their world. The reason death is so disturbing is that it signifies a great and necessary lack of confirmation of the self, a lack of recognition of the self's desires and self-image. Death is the ultimate insult, the ultimate disconfirmation of one's being. It is the original cause and symptom of man's not-being-at-home in the world, man's alienation. Are chimpanzees obscurely aware of death? Then they too are to that extent alienated from their world. There is no way around it: even the most archaic religions are symptoms of alienation, in large part direct or indirect reactions to the knowledge of death. Think of the Iroquois's animism, forests in the night being the home of dead spirits that hunt prey and disappear in the day. No society has ever considered death to be wholly unproblematic, perfectly acceptable. It is so disconfirmatory that comfort has always been sought and will always be sought. The unbelievable conclusion is that nature has implanted in humans *unavoidable alienation*. It can be assuaged through religion, but it exists underneath the lies and gives rise to them.

Death symbolizes the foreignness of the world—the world that created man, this world is nonetheless *foreign* to him! How is that possible?! He is *part of* nature, yet he is not at home in it!

On the other hand, I may be making a big deal out of nothing. People rarely think about death, after all. The pleasure, the immediacy, of being alive shuts out thoughts of death. Mother Nature, then, wise as always, has done what she could to reconcile us to a disturbing but necessary condition of life.

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*Return to an earlier theme.*— The Nietzschean, Heideggerian worry that everything will become unbearably light in the modern world is only partly right. In a sense, yes, things are "lighter" now than they were four hundred years ago, which is to say that nihilism has crept up on us behind our backs. Moreover, this is an essential component in the unhappiness of the modern person. But this sort of thing doesn't last forever; mankind rebounds, it always has. And

the anguished individual too will rebound if he can find a project to throw himself into.

Besides, "great men," the people Nietzsche was concerned with, have usually sensed the shadow of nihilism looming over them; they have spent their lives trying to escape it. In that respect nothing has changed.

Actually, there is a way to ward off the shadow: simply devote oneself to the betterment of the species. Ultimately what makes people act and feel as if life has no meaning is atomization, or certain kinds of atomization. In an atomized world, then, working against atomism can give you the self-satisfaction you crave. Nihilism is a problem only for people who dwell on it.

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*On existentialism.*— The existentialist emphasis on "anguish over the inevitability of death" as a cause of humanity's malaise is mistaken. Most people feel little anguish at the thought of death. As for the ones who think they do: they misinterpret their anguish. While the thought of death no doubt disturbs them, perhaps even to the point of obsession, their fixation on it is just a symptom of their fixation on themselves. This is the real problem. This is the real source of their anguish. A person thoroughly integrated in a community, so that he is not preoccupied with death. At most, he occasionally contemplates it and becomes sad for a moment. But his communal activities ensure that he is mentally healthy, confident and happy.

Likewise, the emphasis on humans' knowledge of the absurdity of existence, of its contingency, is misguided. This knowledge is not what causes neuroses or any other psychological ailments. A preoccupation with what may, admittedly, be an "objective truth" of contingency and "absurdity" is symptomatic of a deeper sickness: the loss of community. The preoccupation with absurdity does not *cause* this loss, as many people think; it *results* from it. Goethe was right that too-deep thinking betokens a kind of sickness;—it is the *dwelling* on absurdity, not the absurdity itself,

that is the problem. The healthy psyche does not “dwell” on *anything*, least of all itself or its absurd conditions of existence.

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*Insights from literature on how to live.*— *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is unlike other novels I’ve read. I like the philosophical digressions that aren’t really digressions because they fit so well into the self-consciousness of the book and its being a “novel of ideas” rather than characters and plot—or characters only insofar as they illustrate ideas. And the end is touching. The two main characters find happiness—they wish for repetition,<sup>212</sup> which (wish) is how Kundera defines happiness—wish for the repetition of their life in the countryside, its eternal repetition, because they’re together and away from the vagaries of chance and they’ve finally found peace. So Kundera says that although we cannot live again and again eternally and thereby have a “weighty” life, if we *desire* this situation forever we’ll escape from unbearable lightness and find meaningful happiness. (Cf. Nietzsche.) And he says also that although the path our lives take is horribly contingent, contingency can lead us to happiness, as it did Tomas and Tereza, even if it forces us to abandon what seems to be the “*Es muss sein!*” of our fate, as Tomas was forced to give up his destiny of practicing medicine by a series of chances that started with Tereza’s arrival in his life. Indeed, such chances can conceivably make us happier than following our inner imperatives can—as Tomas was unhappy being an “epic womanizer,” even if he was addicted to it. But T. and T.’s life together was governed not only by lightness but also weight, by constant doubts about each other’s love, by unbearable pain (in Tereza) and unbearable compassion (in Tomas)—and hence both lightness and weight were essential in guiding them to happiness. On the other hand, Sabina the coquette was forever unhappy with her “light” life, her betrayals and lack of lasting attachments—and Franz, her lover, was unhappy with the weight of his loyalty to Sabina’s memory, the weight of his love, and in the

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<sup>212</sup> That’s the meaning of the butterfly flying in circles around their room.

end it caused his death. So Kundera's answer to the question that opens the book—"Is lightness better than weight or vice versa?"—is that neither is better: both can be bad and both good, both are risky, and both are necessary in order for us to achieve happiness. But happiness itself is more like heaviness than lightness—meaning than meaninglessness<sup>213</sup>—and so the two happy lovers die "under the sign of weight" (by being crushed under a truck).

No, literature is not dead.

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*On Viktor Frankl's book **Man's Search for Meaning**.*— Frankl (the founder of logotherapy) writes that when he lost the manuscript of his nearly completed book in Auschwitz he asked himself if his life was thereby rendered meaningless. After all, if he died in the camp, which he thought he would, he would leave no mark on the world—no books, no children. But he realized that the remainder of his life could still be meaningful if he treated his imprisonment as a chance to *live* his thoughts instead of merely writing them down. Auschwitz became for him a *challenge*, a way to test himself, and that's how he reconciled himself to it. When I read that I thought about my own desire to leave something behind me after death and understood for the thousandth time how pointless it is. To seek any kind of immortality through recognition (which is the only way humans can achieve "immortality") is misguided;—or, rather, to think that only *thereby* is one's life meaningful is misguided. It doesn't matter if one's achievements are lost when one dies or if they endure for millennia, influencing all of history; the point is that, no matter what, they will eventually be forgotten. *When* that happens is irrelevant. Whether right away or in a million years, the event means the end of immortality; and when it happens, all the fame one has already achieved means

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<sup>213</sup> But it's a "light" meaning, not a heavy one. A simple acceptance and love of the way things are. Living according to a "mission" (such as Tomas's medical vocation) would be a heavy meaning, and Tomas condemns the idea.



nothing (because, in this context, the past means nothing: it's gone). Where is the sense in trying to conquer one's mortality by means of beings who are themselves—and whose species is—mortal? A better goal to strive for is simply the realization of one's potential, or the achievement of something worthwhile for its own sake, or love of another person—anything but immortality, which is, indeed, also *irrelevant*. —To attain peace of mind you have to live well, whatever that means for you; the prospect of being forgotten after you've died—which eventually you *will* be, *inevitably* (and that knowledge should itself be comforting, in a way)—has nothing to do with any of this. At the end of my life I'll be happy if I've made the most of it because I'll be *recognizing myself*, and *that's* ultimately the root of happiness—not recognition by others, which is only a means to that end—and if I foresee that I'll be quickly forgotten it won't affect me because I'll have done all I can do and I'll understand the value of my existence and *that's all that matters*.

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*A final thought.*—As a result of last night's entry [directly above] (which meant more to me than to you because I *intuited* it), I've realized that I crave understanding not primarily for the sake of communicating it (i.e., for fame or out of altruism) but for my own sake. If I were alone in the world I would in fact work *harder* to understand it than I do now, rather than give up from my awareness of death and futility. —That's the test of the true Yes-sayer to life: that he try to achieve as much as possible despite knowing that upon his death all he has done will be forgotten. For then he's living his whole life *in life*, not comforting himself by imagining a Beyond (whether in Heaven or on an Earth that will continue to be occupied by people in whose memories he hopes to live). *Nietzsche's* test—viz., that one desire eternal recurrence—has more of the precision of a categorical imperative, but it's also impossible to live up to—so that *no one* (including himself) is a Yes-sayer by his standards, except in certain moments. Moreover, it creates the debilitating burden of feeling the need to affirm everything, and to

ask oneself in every instant “Do I will this eternally?” *Amor fati*—*amor fati* has nothing to do with eternity. It has to do with self-respect, compassion, love, and living life to the fullest.

## Chapter 4

### On Christianity

*Dear God*

*It's said you're full of love for us  
And wish us all the best;  
—Okay, supposing that is true,  
I have just one request.*

*To help us humans have good lives,  
Please **break religion's spell**;  
In other words, please kill yourself!  
—And send yourself to hell!*

As the reader knows, atheism has had some illustrious defenders lately, people like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. In fact, one might say that atheism is on the offensive.

As a staunch atheist, though, I'm not sure whether to applaud the new movement or to view it with disdain. I incline towards the latter position, for several reasons. First of all, I have encountered very few new ideas among these aggressive atheists. Most of their books and articles are uninteresting, at least to anyone who has historical perspective. It is infinitely more rewarding to read Nietzsche than to read a media-whore like Christopher Hitchens. More generally, the "new atheists" don't seem to realize that the world faces much greater problems than the widespread belief in God. Notwithstanding the little poem I put at the head of this chapter, the horrors caused by religious belief are of little significance compared to the horrors caused by corporate and state power. Capitalism has become so destructive that species survival is threatened, and the wars and violence waged on behalf of private and public power destroy thousands of lives every day. In a few fundamentalist states, yes, there is great value in anti-religious

activism; but in most of the world, public intellectuals would be well-advised to follow the examples of Glenn Greenwald, Naomi Klein, Norman Finkelstein, and other such leftists if they want to have beneficent influence on society.

Instead you get superfluous books like Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*, an unreadable embarrassment. Arguing against religious dogmas is easy, too easy. To expose the silliness of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism is no more difficult than to expose the silliness of ancient polytheism, medieval Norse religion, and Scientology. It is all stunningly irrational and childish. There are, however, other modern religions that are perhaps even more stupid and certainly more dangerous, religions like the Free Market theology that has in the past thirty years destroyed millions of lives around the world and is threatening to destroy the species. Indeed, religions such as Christianity can be used in the service of extirpating these truly pernicious ideologies and power-structures, these modern murderous misadventures of the mind and of politics, as Christianity was used in Latin America's liberation theology movement from the 1960s to the 1980s. Whether religion is a positive or a negative force depends not only on its doctrines but on its social and political context. Doubtless it is best not to delude oneself, but if doing so gives one the strength and inspiration to fight oppression or simply to persevere, then I say: there are worse things than self-delusion.

In the end, though, I am definitely on the side of atheism, i.e. reason, and I deplore the quietism that religion has tended to foster among oppressed populations (with a few notable exceptions). "Console yourself in the thought of the Beyond," people are counseled, "and resign yourself to a sinful, hateful world." It is ironic that religion has so often had the effect of making the world an even more sinful and hateful place than it already is. In any case, there are other ways to "spiritually" bond with people than through religion, and there are other ways to steep oneself in cosmic wonder. It will not be a sad day when the three great Western religions vanish from the earth.

In the knowledge of this, I used to dabble in the diverting art of Christian mockery. I've put some of those thoughts below and added a few of more substance.

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*"God is dead."*— Anyone who disagrees with Nietzsche has one foot in the Middle Ages. (Religion is residual.)

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*Nietzsche said it best.*— "When we hear the ancient bells growling on a Sunday morning we ask ourselves: Is it really possible! This, for a Jew, crucified 2000 years ago, who said he was God's son? The proof of such a claim is lacking. Certainly the Christian religion is an antiquity projected into our times from remote prehistory; and the fact that the claim is believed—whereas one is otherwise so strict in examining pretensions—is perhaps the most ancient piece of this heritage. A god who begets children with a mortal woman; a sage who bids men work no more, have no more courts, but look for the signs of the impending end of the world; a justice that accepts the innocent as a vicarious sacrifice; someone who orders his disciples to drink his blood; prayers for miraculous interventions; sins perpetrated against a god, atoned for by a god; fear of a beyond to which death is the portal; the form of the cross as a symbol in a time that no longer knows the function and ignominy of the cross—how ghoulishly all this touches us, as if from the tomb of a primeval past! Can one believe that such things are still believed?"

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*A very strange idea.*— I'd like to know who first conceived this notion.— Science and religion are compatible: one is concerned with reason, the other with faith. They have two separate mental "spheres" that are unrelated, and hence their claims can be believed at the same time without the believer's being embroiled in contradictions. It is consistent to believe both that the world was

created six thousand years ago and that it was created fourteen billion years ago—that a man named Jesus Christ was once resurrected and that resurrection is impossible—that a woman named Mary gave birth to a child without having had sex first and that sex is necessary for a woman to give birth to a child—that there is a place where we reside after death called “heaven” and that such an idea is senseless. Reason rejects ideas that faith salvages merely by virtue of naming them “objects of faith.” If they’re “objects of faith”...then it is inconceivable for anything to be wrong with them! By applying the magical phrase “object of faith” to any idea, one can raise it to such a level of intellectual respectability that even to *argue* against it is futile. —Even some scientists and philosophers subscribe to the belief!

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*Remarks overheard in the subway.*— Two men sat down next to me, clearly of the blue-collar class—probably from a slummy part of the city—one of them holding a copy of a newspaper on which was printed a giant, unflattering photograph of Joe Ratzinger. The man looked at it. “That the new pope?” “Yup.” “He ain’t gonna last long.” “They keep picking these dudes that ain’t gonna last long.” Then they talked about basketball. —I realized that, sometimes, the less education one has, the more sensible one is.

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*On Christian irrationality.*— Once in a while I read a blog post or a letter-to-the-editor by Richard Dawkins. He takes it upon himself to use rational argumentation to try to convince Christians that they’re wrong. I would suggest to him that he give it up. Let history deal with Christians; philosophers and scientists will get nowhere with them. How can you argue with people the premise of whose belief-system (insofar as they really believe it) is that evidence counts for nothing and blind devotion is the highest virtue? The “blindness” part is absolutely essential to Christianity—not because one has to be blind in order to believe in it, but because faith is supposed to be

an act of “infinite trust,” based not on logic but on a *leap of love*. The more one *argues* for Christianity (in the mode of science or rationalism), the less one understands it. This is why people who fall back on the stock answer (to rational queries) “God works in mysterious ways” are right to answer so. The spirit of their religion demands that they not take part in philosophical cerebration, lest they disrespect their god, who expects infinite love. At the core of Christ’s teaching is the implicit precept, “Have faith in me for the sole reason that it is for your own good”—though this may be expressed in loftier-sounding ways (for example, by saying that since God loves you, you should love him back). In other words, being a Christian means, by definition, suspending rational/scientific thought, such as the search for evidence—which indeed helps explain why not a single verse in the Gospels praises intelligence. (Intelligence is dangerous to Christianity! This belief-system is intended only for people who need comfort, i.e. for the “meek.”) The difficulty of fulfilling the Christian project to suspend reasoned thought has made inevitable the many rationalistic and “scientific” defenses of it that have been proposed over the centuries. (One of the few philosophers who really understood it was Kierkegaard. Hence his never arguing for it except from an anti-scientific perspective.)

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*On women’s affinity for religion.*— In *The Rise of Christianity* (1997), Rodney Stark notes that “women in many different times and places seem to be far more responsive than men to religion.” For example, in early Christian times women were more likely than men to convert to the new religion. In modern times, it has been reported that two-thirds of the Shakers were women, 75 percent of Christian Scientists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were women, 60 percent of Theosophists, Swedenborgians and Spiritualists were women, and the majority of new Protestants in Latin America are women. So, why is this the case?

The answer isn’t hard to think of. First of all, new religions, especially the religions that succeed, tend to promote equality, in

particular sexual equality. Since they usually arise in social conditions of relative inequality, women will favor these alternative belief-systems. (Christianity was born in the sexually unequal pagan world, and the sexual relations it promoted were extremely progressive. The same was true of Islam.) Secondly, most women are naturally more attracted than men to the strong social networks that religions create, since they tend to be more emotional and “communal” than men. Religions, of course, appeal to emotional, communal, instinctual impulses over purely intellectual ones. And women will therefore be disproportionately attracted to *new* religious movements, since such movements, being full of renewed religious fervor, are usually revitalizing vis-à-vis communities. They bring people together, something that women crave even more than men do. Also, one of the major functions of religions is to alleviate real suffering, and it’s hard to deny that women tend to suffer more than men. (Loneliness, insecurity, physical and emotional abuse, a lack of respect from society, poverty, physical ailments, the miseries of women’s old age, etc.)

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In the Piazza of San Marco in Florence is a church in which lies the dried-out corpse of Saint Antonino from the fifteenth century, his hands folded on his chest in a well-lit glass tomb. The sight is macabre. Above and behind him and all over the church are models of Jesus’s crucifixion, this man being tortured to death on a wooden cross with blood pouring from his hands and his pierced ribs. The church is cavernous and dark, with heavenly art and stained glass windows lulling the beholder into a state of awe intensified by the enforced silence, the whispering, the candles, the pews for praying on your knees with your head lowered and your hands clasped, and the “*mass-iveness*” of it all. And there are the rituals, the imbibing of wine (Christ’s blood) and the wafer (Christ’s flesh), and numerous such otherworldly, morbid rituals. And you realize that Catholicism is a religion of death. It is immersion in the past, preservation of the past and the dead, worship of the sphere of after-death, rejection of the worldly and



the living. The five-hundred-year-old withered corpse of St. Antonino is an emblem of Catholicism. A religion so death-focused could not have triumphed in a dynamic civilization such as that before the late Roman Empire; and after a reemergence of dynamism in the 1400s, an epochal reformation was necessary. Dynamism, individuality, *life* had to be reintroduced into religion, which had become rigid and cadaverous. And yet even Protestantism is in general a sort of compromise between life and death, this-worldly affirmation and negation. Some forms of Catholicism can even be more this-worldly than some kinds of Protestantism—for example, liberation theology versus, perhaps, primitive Methodism. The forms that religion takes depend on the social context, but Catholicism has a definite tendency to oppress and *weigh down* the human spirit with death and its conceptual offshoots. The scent of decay, of a decaying antiquity, lingers about it.

It is ironic, then, that Catholicism would have inspired so much more great art (though not music) than Protestantism. Or perhaps not so ironic. An obsession with the transcendent, after all, has often characterized the artistic temperament, as has a peculiar morbidity. On the other side, the Church has always used art as a means to intoxicate and entrance the human spirit, to raise its vision from ordinary life to eternal life-in-death. And to direct it from the present to the past, which is also supposed to be the posthumous future.

One might defend Catholicism by arguing that it “affirms” one side of man, the “transcendent” side, the wonder-full side, the side that looks toward the universe and craves divinity and immortality, as well as the *communal* side, which goes together with the Catholic emphasis on tradition, ritual, memory, the past. In some sense, this may be true. Nonetheless, Catholicism remains, or tends to remain (depending on the social context), a religion of anti-individuality, non-presence—the non-present, the mythical past and post-deathly future—death-in-life and life-in-death, which as such is opposed to a society immersed in a dynamic and forward-looking present.

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*Religion and wonder.*— I don't understand the popular belief that religion encourages a state of wonder in the believer. If I thought there were a God I would *lose* my wonder, or most of it. I'd think, "Oh well, an intelligent being designed all this, so it isn't that amazing after all." God himself would remain something of a mystery, but not a very exciting one. His status as an intelligent being would mean that he is just *me*, on a grander scale. My awe of him would be little more than glorified respect. Moreover, knowing that someone else understood the universe—that he had *created* the universe—would sap my wonder of grandeur. It would no longer implicitly glorify me, because I would know that I was absolutely inferior to someone. (Part of the excitement of feeling wonder is that it half-consciously places the wonderer on a pedestal in his own mind, as someone capable of a rarefied intellectual emotion. If he knows that his object of wonder has been *intentionally designed*, there is not an implicit contrast between him and an inferior brute force called "chance," and so he cannot implicitly respect himself by virtue of this contrast.) My place in the cosmos would be demoted to that of a little being who was too insignificant to understand his Master: my awe would amount to the plea, "Tell me, please, Excellency, how you did all this! I'm exceedingly curious and very impressed." In general, everything would be less miraculous than it really is: it would be explainable in terms of intelligence and design and other such mundane concepts.

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*Religion as a hypothesis.*— Atheists may, after all, be wrong. God may be laughing at me even as I write this. "Ha!" he chuckles. "Guess where *you're* going in sixty years!" But I laugh right back at him, "Even if you exist, we don't need you! At this stage of history you're an afterthought. We're doing a fine job of understanding the world without having to invoke a Divine Paradox. Science has proven its power; religion has no arguments

in its favor, being indeed by its nature opposed to the search for evidence. We might as well ignore it.”

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*Religion as a Platonic “Noble Lie.”*— People sometimes say that religion is necessary to ground morality. Without it, anarchy would reign. People would have no reason to behave morally; everyone would be selfish, and life would be nasty, brutish, and short. —Now, in the strict sense of “morality”—as consisting of *duties* or *imperatives* (“It’s *absolutely wrong* to lie, *wrong* to kill,” not merely “bad”)—they’re right that morality cannot have a granite foundation without God or some such concept. Imperatives are half-meaningless if they don’t have some sort of categorical or metaphysical necessity. (The only two alternatives to God as a solid foundation of morality are Kant’s categorical imperative and the idea that morality consists of “objective truths” about the world, but they fail for reasons I won’t go into.) Without such necessity, it makes perfect rational sense for moral imperatives to be debated endlessly and qualified and modified so much that in the end morality deteriorates into a morass of conflicting intuitions and over-subtle arguments of the kind that fill thousands of volumes of philosophical literature. So we do need God, or something similarly compelling, in order for there to be obvious, absolutely binding, *true* moral imperatives. But we don’t need him for social order. Only someone with no knowledge of anthropology could think otherwise. There are such things as *communal* sanctions on actions, communal rewards and punishments. Do you really think most people are so desperate for God’s approval that they live morally only for his sake? Do you think that if, by some miracle, Americans suddenly acquired the capacity for reason and realized they shouldn’t believe in God, they would all start dancing around the streets vandalizing and murdering and—sin of all sins!—having sex? I think not. Most people care infinitely less about abstract metaphysical concepts than social approval. They’ll always basically pay heed to social norms, if only because they don’t want to spend their lives in literal or metaphorical solitary confinement.

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*The “God gene”; or, religion as biologically innate.*— Idiocy. Hundreds of millions of people around the world profess not to have a religion. The ones who *do* are mostly hypocrites who pay lip-service to God for the sake of social acceptance or money and power. (Politicians come to mind.) It may be that there is a kind of “spiritual” consciousness or hope ingrained in us—something like the need for “existential meaning”—but this can be manifested in a variety of ways, many of them irreligious. In fact, I think that what this spiritual desire amounts to is the need for community. Life seems meaningless when one has insufficient recognition from others; it seems meaningful when one is sated with love and respect. The human need for community (*belongingness*) often goes unfulfilled in “civilized” society, which is why substitute *transcendent* communities were born in religions like Christianity and Islam.

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*The greatest country in history.*— Americans fetishize all seven of the deadly sins. Greed: look at Wall Street and the rest of corporate America and politics. Sloth: television is no longer just the masses’ opiate; it is, in a sense, reality. Gluttony: Americans are fatter than any people in history. Vanity: women have become nothing but creatures of their bodies, and the cult of appearance is corrupting men too. (The obsession with “working out.”) Lust: pop culture revolves around sex. Envy: movies, magazines, individualistic ideologies all encourage interpersonal comparisons and dissatisfaction. Pride: Americans as such are at least as arrogant as Romans were in their day. —No wonder Christians have their persecution-complex! They can see that their religion has become irrelevant.

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*A misadventure.*— At lunch in the campus center I saw a flyer advertising an event tonight having something to do with dating

and sex. I thought ‘Sure, why not’ and went to it. Maybe I’d meet somebody. Turns out it was a meeting for members of some weird underground cult that does nothing but preach about how inferior we all are to some guy named “Jesus Christ.” I felt like Indiana Jones in that scene in *The Temple of Doom* when he observes the ritual of the Thugee cult—the zombies intoning meaningless sounds as a human is sacrificed into the fire pit. “No one’s seen anything like this for a hundred years!” That’s what I was thinking.

It began innocently enough. I walked into the large room, which was absurdly empty (evidently the cult isn’t very popular), and stood there wondering what I’d got myself into. I didn’t yet know it was a Christian Conference, but I could tell I was about to be underwhelmed. Some girl involved with the show came up to me and started a conversation. Quite pleasant. We were both friendly; I was starting to think that maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all—when, in answer to my question about what all the musical instruments on the stage were for, she said “We’re going to start out with some worship music.” A single thought flashed through my mind: ‘Uh-oh.’ “Worship music?” I asked. “Well, no....” she said, “just some music.” Hm. A few minutes later another guy came over and introduced himself—very friendly again—and then two other guys—very friendly. I was getting suspicious. After I’d heard a few references to Christianity, my suspicions were confirmed. “So....this is sort of a religious thing?” I asked. “Yes!”, with an amused smile. Then it took off. I was told all about this little group that goes around spreading the Word, and I was told to go to Bible study tomorrow at noon, and there’s a fancy dinner tomorrow night, and etc. Then the pastor came over and we talked. Finally the production began—with half an hour of songs and prayers about how unworthy we are of God’s love. It was a sing-along; we stood up and clapped along and sang to the lyrics on the video screen in front of us. (It was a Powerpoint presentation.) Guitar, synthesizer, bongo drums, accompanists with microphones. Ugh. Those songs lasted forever! Each was at least eight minutes long. And there were only about two verses to each song, so we sang each verse about ten times. Audience members

were closing their eyes, raising their hands to the heavens and keeping them suspended in air for minutes at a time, bowing their heads and saying “In Jesus name! In Jesus name!” as the rest of us kept the melody going. Twenty-five minutes into it I got to thinking that it wouldn’t be so hard after all to come to believe in this stuff if it was regularly pounded into you like this. Still, I could see that they meant well, and that they were good people. ‘These are the *good* Christians,’ I thought, ‘the ones it’s easy to forget about.’ - That was a rather naïve opinion, as I came to realize.

It all stayed innocent and somewhat charming for a while longer. There was a mimed drama that portrayed Jesus (dressed in white with a red paper-heart stuck on his chest and paper hearts taped to his palms that you could see when he raised his arms in that expansive “I love all of you”-way) saving four tormented souls (dressed in black with masks on their faces;—I didn’t catch the symbolism)—by slapping hearts onto their chests, which caused them to jump up and down with glee and whisk their masks off and dance around the stage. ‘At least their intentions are good,’ I thought again.

Then it was time for the entrée. Our guest speaker was going to talk about sex and love in our sinful society—“Is true love still possible?” etc. (I’ll spare you the suspense: yes.) Skilled speechifier that he was, he started off with jokes to lighten the mood. Here’s a sample: There were two brooms in a closet. They were getting married. So there was a bride broom and a groom broom. (That drew laughs.) They went to a party shortly before their wedding; the groom broom made some remark that I’ve forgotten (it had something to do with asking his betrothed if he could “whisk her away”), to which the bride broom responded with “Are you kidding?! We haven’t even swept together yet!” Har-har. That provoked the universally accepted reaction to bad-pun jokes: a collective good-natured “Awwwhh!” (like: “Oh *man* that was bad, ha ha, but it was funny too, ha ha”), a few chuckles, and a lot of turning-of-heads-to-neighbors-and-shaking-of-heads while smiling;—“Aww, that mischievous ol’ guest speaker with his bad-pun jokes!”

Okay; now it was time to get down to business. The speech began poignantly: he described his near-suicide in college, after his fiancée had broken up with him. For a week he'd planned it out, down to the last detail; but one night in a park, while he was trying to make the final decision for or against death, God spoke to him. That was his rebirth, etc. Now he was a marriage counselor and a preacher (or pastor or reverend or one of those things). The rest of his speech was about the greatness of love—and abstinence until marriage—and the sinfulness of flesh-pleasures—and the inadequacy of evolution (“We’re all descended from muck, just by chance?! That doesn’t account for *love*! Science can’t account for love!”)—and the sinfulness of society. It turns out that the cause of all the world’s ills is sex before marriage. The speaker himself had had sex with his fiancée before she’d dumped him; *this* was the reason for his suicidal pain. Satan had possessed him, and the result was despair. (Lust, you may know, is the work of Satan. Love is the work of God.) We have to love Jesus. If we love Jesus with our heart and soul, etc. etc. Besides, if we abstain from sex until marriage we’ll enjoy it a lot more when it finally happens. (He emphasized this pragmatic concern quite a bit.) “Is love temporal or eternal?” Well, according to him, lust is temporal, but love is eternal. And the precondition for love is that women save their “precious jewel” for marriage. The speaker threw out all sorts of statistics that drew oohs and ahhs from the audience—like, for the last five years, 100 Japanese young people have killed themselves every day (often during big internet “suicide parties”), and 80% of people who have sex before marriage end up divorcing, and one out of five women is sexually abused in childhood, and one out of five pastors is addicted to pornography.

An hour of this. This palaver. By the end I couldn’t stop thinking about *Inherit the Wind*, which I’d seen the previous night. All these people sitting here absorbing this stuff and nodding and shaking their heads—this stuff that was becoming more ignorant and bigoted by the minute—these people had been so kind and pleasant just two hours ago, but now they were haters of evolution, of science, of gays, of the irreligious. They would have denied that,

but obviously missionary zeal was not foreign to them. And what else is missionary zeal but intolerance of dissent? That's clearly the motivation behind it most of the time—the desire to impose oneself on the other. In the 1920s these people would have lived in Heavenly Hillsboro and happily thrown the free-thinking heretic into jail. All because of their infinite love, their eternal love. It was all right there below the surface. This absolute faith in their own rightness.... And yet they were so agreeable as conversationalists, and I could see they were fundamentally kind! This is the paradox that has always disturbed me. The intermixture of good and bad, a mixture so perfect that there's really no distinguishing between the good and the bad. The bad exists in the good and vice versa.

Equally frightening: I can sense the rudiments of hateful missionary zeal within myself. As I walked home tonight, feeling so corrupted—almost *physiologically* corrupted—that I could think of little else but the Mozart I'd be listening to in a moment, I could tell that I had the potential for atheistic fanaticism. I knew that the only reason I'd never succumb to fanaticism is that I'm *aware* of my fanaticism. My self-consciousness is what prevents me from sliding into the pit of disguised jihadism.

Incidentally, the obvious insight again occurred to me that historically the role of “confessors” has been to function as therapists in an age that didn't recognize psychology. Conversely, therapists are just confessors for the modern age. *Talking* about problems (like guilt; hence “Have you sinned recently, my child?”)<sup>214</sup> in itself somehow relieves their burden.

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<sup>214</sup> One reason Christianity is so powerful is that it first burdens people with guilt and then gives them the means to overcome it. It *separates* them from the community (with God, etc.) only to draw them more closely into it. (Guilt is just a form of isolation, of self-fixation.) That is, it creates a community by promising that only through this community can one reach the *ideal, eternal* community—by at least partially transcending one's original guilt (“sin”), which is essentially one's original *individuality* or *isolation*. For sin is just the stain of original separateness.



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*The true “anti-Christ.”*— It’s ironic that Christians, who pride themselves on being the most righteous people in the world, think that the existence of God is a necessary postulate for there to be morality. For what they’re saying is: “I live morally only for the sake of God, i.e., because I want to go to heaven.” Atheists, on the other hand, don’t think that God is necessary for morality. So, what *they’re* saying is: “I live morally not for the sake of going to heaven but because it’s the right thing to do.” –And Christians think they’re more “righteous” than atheists!

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*Christianity updated.*— One of the many ironies about contemporary Christians is that they tend to be supportive of capitalism. This isn’t surprising: from the time of Emperor Constantine, the Church has been allied with established power-structures, which have found it useful as a way to keep the masses obedient. So Christianity accommodated itself to the Roman Empire, then to feudalism, then to royal absolutism in early modern Europe, and then to modern capitalism. Nothing surprising in this; ideologies adapt themselves to material realities. It is, however, strictly absurd for a Christian to ally himself with business or “the market” and loathe the ideas of socialism and communism. On the one hand you have a society that valorizes greed, ruthlessness, profit-making at the expense of human welfare, exploitation of billions, and the accumulation of wealth, none of which is particularly consistent with Jesus’s love of the poor, of the cast-off, and his admonition that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to heaven. On the other hand you have socialism, the idea of economic democracy, a society in which working people control their own economic activity. Or communism, a society organized by the slogan “From

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The stain of *personality*, of concrete, bodily existence. Salvation means overcoming the particularities of concrete existence.

each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Socialism and, especially, communism are little else but the *politicization of compassion*, of love and the idea of human dignity, which is to say they are the politicization of Jesus’s version of Christianity. Whether they’ll ever be realized on a large scale is an open question; it can scarcely be doubted, however, that they are both the ideals toward which we must strive and the proper modern incarnations of original Christianity. Of its *spirit*, its poor-loving, moral-revolutionary spirit. Indeed, early Christian communities were often organized in a decidedly “communitistic” way, as attested by the Bible itself, specifically Acts 4:32-35:

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.

....Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

Again, the predictable historical irony: true socialists and communists are more Christian than most Christians.

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*A moment of charity to Christianity.*—Karl Marx once said, “After all, we can forgive Christianity much because it taught us to love children.” Almost unbelievably, the factual part of that statement is right. Christianity did have such an effect on the Western world. Throughout antiquity, children had been thought to have little or no value. In Rome, fathers had absolute authority over their children: they were legally permitted to kill them for any reason, even on a whim. Infanticides were rife all over the Mediterranean. Children were regularly sold into slavery. I can’t think of any references in

classical literature to the value of children. That's far from true, though, of Buddhist and of Christian literature. From the Gospels on, Christians held children up as an earthly ideal. This attitude has been revealed in Christians' charitable endeavors throughout the centuries.

More generally, Christianity's great contribution to Western civilization was the preaching of *love*. The ideal of love was foreign to Plato, to Aristotle, to the Stoics, the Cynics, the Epicureans; at most, these schools praised virtue. The old classicist W. W. Tarn said it well in his book *Hellenistic Civilisation* (1927):

....And of all the Hellenistic creeds, none was based on love of humanity; none had any message for the poor and the wretched, the publican and the sinner. Stoicism came nearest; it did transvaluate some earthly values, and Zeno, at least, gave offense by not repelling the poor and the squalid who came to him; but it had no place for love, and it scarcely met the misery of the world to tell the slave in the mines that if he would only think aright he would be happy. Those who labored and were heavy laden were to welcome a different hope from any which Hellenism could offer.

This is the Christianity that should be honored, the Christianity of St. Francis, of Jesus, and in our own times of liberation theology (which, arguably, was a return to the original essence). Thomas Jefferson thought that the only part of the religion worth keeping was the Sermon on the Mount.

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I attended my first Episcopalian service last night. It was Maundy Thursday, so we did the whole foot-washing thing and then the Eucharist, etc. Endless singing and antiphonal rituals, responses, prayers. A certain pungent beauty in the foot-washing, beautiful symbolism. But how foreign it all is to the spirit of the

times! A relic of antiquity, as Nietzsche said. The Greek chorus, for instance. Submersing ourselves in ritual, in self-forgetfulness and community. Love, the incredible and constantly repeated emphasis on love. Admirable. But it seems that in order so to escape ourselves in love we have to fall back on the expedient of inventing a God who loves us and enjoins us to love each other, and pray to him, direct our love first to him and thereby to each other. It is through the mediating idea of a God that people are best able to achieve love of mankind. Nor is this surprising. Mankind is just an abstraction, the most abstract of abstractions, and as such is not easy to love passionately. God is a kind of abstraction too, but, paradoxically, a concrete and self-conscious one. He is something like Hegel's "concrete universal." A sublimation of the idea of mankind, or rather of all its noble aspects (love, power, goodness, omniscient self-consciousness) as personified in a self, which is the sort of thing that can most readily be loved (as opposed to "mankind," which is not a self). God is the bridge between the concrete self and the abstraction of humanity: he is a concrete abstraction, or an abstract concreteness. And the idea of him provides people with a half-conscious sense of being-respected or being-recognized/confirmed for loving everyone. It inspires them to make the effort to "love thy neighbor," since if they do, they know they'll in turn be loved by the Absolute Self, and thus be objectively confirmed as (objectively) valuable. Certainly this motivation isn't conscious, but it's there all the same.

As I've said before, God is a particularly suitable "objective correlative" of the abstract other in consciousness. By securing his recognition you're securing the recognition of the abstract other, and so, effectively, of your self. Putting to rest (potentially) your self-doubt.

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*Civilization and the Jews.*— Monotheism is the predominant form of religion today. Aside from Zoroastrianism, which basically died out long ago, Judaism is the oldest form of monotheism. Christianity was conceived by Jews, and Islam was inspired by the

prophets of the Old Testament. So the hegemonic modern moralities and belief-systems were created or inspired by Jews. With respect to intellectual life, three Jews did more than anyone else to carve modernity: Marx, Freud, and Einstein. We're still living in their shadows. —Someone should write a book called *The Creative Genius of Jewry*.

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*Anti-Comte.*— Polytheism is, in some ways, more civilized than monotheism. Egypt, Rome, Greece, and the other polytheistic civilizations never fought wars for the sake of religion, as Christians, Muslims, and Jews have. Instead they fought for the more sensible motive of acquiring territory and wealth. They lacked the moralistic fanaticism of the Judaic tradition, probably because, first, it is hard to associate a single morality with a heterogeneous community of gods and, second, these gods, perpetually misbehaving, are not great role-models, as are Allah and YHWH and Jesus Christ. They are reflections of humanity and its weaknesses, and so to fight for the sake of spreading their creeds would be senseless. Polytheism is therefore, in some ways, more humanistic, life-affirming, and—ironically—peaceful than monotheism.

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*India, birthplace of philosophy.*— I have great respect for the Hindu tradition in religion. It is far more profound than the Judaic tradition. Reading the Vedas, especially the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad-Gita and other such works is intrinsically ennobling; one feels as if one is communicating with the ineffable. All the grandness and mystery of man's origins are printed right there on the page. The Ganges flows under one's eyes, the Himalayas are created anew. A magnificent naïveté somehow stretches the sentences into infinity, to a comparable vastness with the universe (read the books yourself and you'll see I'm not exaggerating)—a perception attributable to the poetic refrains, the pithiness of the

thoughts, the lack of self-consciousness, the reader's self-conscious remoteness from antiquity, the vagueness of the concepts discussed, the strangeness (to us) of the divine myths, the liberal use of paradox, etc.

Their lack of self-consciousness helps make the older books of the Old Testament the literary peer of the Vedas and other Hindu texts, but philosophically—spiritually—they are comparatively barren. The Indian tradition confronts the quandaries posed by life from a universal perspective, proceeding mainly on the basis of wonder, addressing honestly the question of how to live well in a world of suffering—offering its insights to anyone who chooses to accept them. The Judaic tradition, on the other hand, (which includes, of course, Christianity and Islam) is premised on parochialism. A group of people get together and declare that their way is best and that whoever rejects it or is not “one of us” is outcast, destined to live in hell for eternity. Holy crusades become justifiable as necessary for the salvation of souls, though the theological rationalizations are merely masks for hatred and the will to dominate. Christian morality is indeed excellent (most of it, anyway), especially as preached by Jesus himself. But as formulated and justified by the early disciples and the Church Fathers (Peter, John, Paul, Tertullian, Augustine, etc.), it lends itself to fanaticism, since it implies such segregations as “Christians vs. heretics.”

Even the actual doctrines of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and so forth are more rational than those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A determined reader can even detect anticipations of Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, existentialism, and the phenomenologists' insights into the nature of the self. The ideas are of the kinds that people keep rediscovering throughout history, due to their universal validity.

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*When East first met West.*— It is well-known that Christianity was not a particularly unique thing in Hellenistic times, that it was just one of the many mystery religions that proliferated in the time of

Jesus. Less well-known is what Jerry Bentley notes in *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (1993), that the Judaic tradition was profoundly influenced by Zoroastrianism. “Zoroastrian doctrine promised personal salvation and eternal life to individuals who observed the commandments to think good thoughts, speak good words, and perform good acts.” “Zoroastrianism was more a national or ethnic faith than a missionary religion. Even without benefit of active proselytization, though, Zoroastrian beliefs and values exercised a remarkably wide influence. Post-exilic Jews adopted and adapted many elements of Zoroastrian belief—including notions that a savior would arrive and aid mortal humans in their struggle against evil; that individual souls would survive death, experience resurrection, and face judgment and assignment to heaven or hell; and that the end of time would bring a monumental struggle between the supreme creator god and the forces of evil, culminating in the establishment of the kingdom of god on earth and the entry of the righteous into paradise. Many of these elements appear clearly in the Book of Daniel, composed about the middle of the second century B.C.E., and they all influenced the thought of the Jewish Pharisees. Indeed, in its original usage, the term *Pharisee* very likely meant ‘Persian’—that is, a Jew of the sect most open to Persian influence. It goes without saying that early Christians also reflected the influence of these same Zoroastrian beliefs. Some scholars hold that Zoroastrian appeal extended even into India, where the notion of personal salvation would have influenced the early development of the Mahayana school of Buddhism.” Fascinating! Zoroastrianism lives on through Judaism, Mahayana Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam! The “Judeo-Christian tradition” is really, in some respects, the “Zoroastrian-Judeo-Christian tradition.” More broadly, the “West” derives largely from the “East”—although lately the East has been remade by its contact with the West.

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*The 'philosophy of consolation.'*— The idea of karma is rather offensive. Or at least morally and logically problematic. It amounts to the claim that everyone gets his just deserts. The real is the rational, and the rational is the real. Or, this is the best of all possible worlds. "One truth is clear," as Alexander Pope writes in his *Essay on Man*; "whatever is, is right." But we all know that this Spinozistic, Leibnizian, and Hegelian doctrine is not only ethically dubious but downright dangerous: it can be used to justify any sort of injustice. Stalinism? Hitlerism? Pol Pot? The real is rational! Progress works in mysterious ways! Everything is determined, everything is necessary! Inevitable, like logic itself! Quietism, conservatism, is the logical conclusion of this attitude of *amor fati*. It is a quintessentially *religious* attitude: faith in the eternal, in the beyond, in historical logic or evolution, as if it is God, with the result that you accept the world as it is. Great faith = great equanimity, great love for the natural unfolding of fate. If you vigorously throw yourself into action it's because you don't have faith that everything is as it should be: the world could be different, the world as it is is flawed, which means that people *don't* get their just deserts, we're not all wholly responsible for our destinies, the idea of karma is at best only partly true, much of reality is irrational, and God is not perfectly good or worthy of blind faith. His work has to be corrected.

In other words, there are such things as chance and free will. This fact is what logically justifies social activism. (Is it any wonder that power-structures throughout the world and history have propagated the same deterministic, necessitarian, consoling dogmas about the justice of fate, everyone's essential place in the hierarchical social order—"duties," as in the *Bhagavad-Gita*—and eternal rewards, compensations for present hardship? Look at any metaphysically minded regime from ancient India to the Soviet Union. Secular regimes like America's have different versions of the same "philosophy of consolation.")

On the other hand, there is something compelling about the idea of karma. To an extent each person does create his own reality. But only to an extent.



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In the light of history, it seems downright immoral to believe in God. In order to honor the memory of the billions who have lived and died horribly, the least we can do is to give up the idea of a just and merciful God. —The Holocaust happened and people still believe in God! It's appalling.

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The danger of religious faith is that it's supposed to be—or it can be seen as—above morality. Witness the story of Abraham. Faith justifies anything: "I have faith that it's all for the best. I have faith in God and eternity." The road to hell...

Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical." "Faith is the paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal." According to his *Fear and Trembling*, the ethical has to do with the common good; faith has to do with the individual's salvation, which is so little related to ethics that it can prescribe absolutely unethical courses of action. But if this is faith, then Osama bin Laden is an exemplar of faith, like Abraham. He is the logical conclusion of Abraham's philosophy of faith. (Or, if not bin Laden, since there are differences between his situation and Abraham's, then someone who murders his family and all his friends for the sake of God and his own eternal salvation.) Contrary to *Fear and Trembling*, I think that true faith, the good kind, does not involve a suspension of the ethical. On the contrary, it is little else but a transcendently motivated consummation of the ethical. Abraham's faith is not Jesus's (as *Fear and Trembling* seems to imply); it is a degrading, submissive, slavish faith. A philosophy not of love but of submission.

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*Nietzsche was right. Again.*— Anyone who is strong enough to accept suffering should not accept Buddhism, or any other religion.

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*Wright contra Nietzsche.*— I try not to let myself be contemptuous of the religious despite everything that conspires against my resolve because I know, with Gandhi, that I too am flawed, that we're all humans, that we're united in a brotherhood of weakness and imperfection, and that I have little right to be self-righteous. Religion is less a sign of a particular *individual's* "weakness" than of *humanity's* weakness. Our species is in a cosmically precarious position, suspended between the animal and the rational, confronted by a vast impersonal absurd world in which we live for a few decades and then are banished from forever, full of loneliness and pain and doubt. Is it so deplorable to seek comfort? Atheists do too, in different ways than the religious; everyone needs illusions of some sort or other. Whatever "strength" someone manifests is grounded in weakness and illusion, whether the illusion of one's own importance or of posthumous fame or immortality or the nobility of one's deepest motives or one's comprehensive grasp of objective truth—and human life itself consists in illusions, of the substantial self above all. Insofar as something is contrary to reason or has destructive consequences it should be criticized....but religious faith is certainly not alone in being thus worthy of criticism, nor are the religious alone in being sometimes immune to rational considerations. The fundamental condition of life is community and primordial sameness, and the fundamental value is sympathy.

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*A whisper from the divine.*— People sometimes wonder why God is silent. They devote themselves to him, they supplicate tearfully for the sake of a beloved one, but he doesn't answer. In their agony, in their loneliness, they may come to doubt his existence. But I say, "Take heart, faithless one. Listen to the Adagietto from Mahler's fifth symphony. God will be speaking to you. And he will heal you."

## Chapter 5

### On Music

Music is important to me. Especially classical. (*Old* classical.) I want to describe what this music means to me, but in our unmusical era it's hard to do that without sounding pretentious. I could say, perhaps, that music has helped me get through some hard times—that in college, when feeling blue I would go to the practice rooms in the music building and play Chopin's Nocturnes. (I found his Opus 27, No. 1, in C-sharp minor, particularly cathartic. Liszt's *Liebstraum* No. 3 was also effective.) But that doesn't *express* anything. It doesn't communicate an emotion; it just states a bare fact. So instead I'm going to rely, again, on parts of my journal. A lot of what follows refers to specific pieces of music; I apologize for that. But I encourage you to seek them out.

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*On orchestras.*— The image of an orchestra playing the third movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony brings tears to one's eyes. Imagine a multitude of musicians playing in such exquisite synchronicity that they are *one being, one supra-human being*, composed of sounds as humans are composed of cells, a being that exists only in its self-expression, that vanishes when the instruments are put down but is vitally alive when they are picked up, that is the pure movement of a divine mind externalized. Imagine the *cooperation*, the *sensitivity*, the *feeling for the sublime* without which this being could not exist. Imagine the *discipline* necessary to submerge oneself so completely in collective harmony....

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*Ode to joy.*—Johann Sebastian Bach<sup>215</sup> is first among the gods in the shrine of music. He is so imposing a figure that not even Beethoven, not even the Ninth Symphony, overshadows him. Nothing can. If God pointed to the Creation and said, “You didn’t do *that!*”, Bach could retort, “But I recreated it and made it intelligible—and I *never rested*, unlike you!” He’s *perfect*, if only by virtue of his power. He stands at the head of the most remarkable two centuries in the history of music—and I can’t think of a better herald of the Golden Age than a man who was more modern than modernity itself<sup>216</sup> yet more ancient than antiquity. His oeuvre is not only immortal; it is timeless.

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*No joy without sorrow.*—The heights appear as such only when you look at them from the depths. To test the truth of that hypothesis, I suggest you listen to pop music (in the ‘Britney Spears’ sense) for a few minutes; then listen to Franz Liszt’s piece *Les Préludes*. If you have a poetic soul, the sudden change from ingesting dirt to imbibing a vintage wine will intoxicate you. Your appetite for life will grow tremendously. You may not be able to contain your enthusiasm; your heart will leap to your throat and you’ll start shouting senseless noises of jubilation. The finale of Liszt’s piece may give you a heart attack: the notes rushing to their climax, pounding on your ears like drums, and then the single horn that blares a single note (—that note which is both a call to battle and a signal of victory!—) as the rest of the orchestra continues its climb to the final triumphant chords... You’ll realize that pop music is redeemed by virtue of its function as a reminder of the muck that humans can and must rise above in order to achieve moments of immortality.

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<sup>215</sup> His monumental human dignity demands that he be called by his whole name.

<sup>216</sup> He even has something for heavy metal, not to mention jazz.

*My gratitude to music.*— Music has allowed me to maintain the illusion that my pain is beautiful.

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*Pop vs. classical.*— The problem with most popular music is that once you hear it...you've heard it. It's all *right there*, in the open, buck-naked, indiscreet and immodest, lacking all subterranean methods of persuasion. It says, "Here I am! Take me or leave me, but be quick about it!" With the best classical music, on the other hand, when you hear it you've only *just begun* to hear it. There is a world beneath the sound. Secrets compounded on secrets, a tormented and profligate past, a creation of order out of chaos, an instinctive knowledge of mathematics that's tastefully hidden, rhetorical devices unknown to the listener but dominating him—all of which are concealed behind a simple and spontaneous idealism. In a sense it's more life-affirming than popular music.

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*A prerequisite for aesthetic appreciation.*— Why do most people not like classical music? I've never understood it. I've even tried to imagine being another person just to imagine not liking Chopin. People say it's because such music is "boring," or because it's "too quiet." But this is precisely what I don't understand. Much of it, I admit, is indeed ponderous—Wagner comes to mind, and Richard Strauss, and some Brahms—but how can such pieces as Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto not thrill the listener, or such pieces as Chopin's Nocturne in D-flat (Op. 27, No. 2) not transport him to a realm of aristocratic delicacy of feeling, or such pieces as the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony not make him want to dance around the room? I suppose part of the answer is that, regarding *any* kind of music, you must first become "acclimated" to it through repeated contact before you know how to interpret it—before you're "open" enough to it to allow it to govern the way you feel while listening. You have to have assimilated it. This is why I truly enjoy a piece of music only after

I've heard it at least twice. I have to "orient" myself in it first; I have to have a vague idea of what's coming next, and where it's headed. During the first exposure I always feel "guarded" against it, as if I'm challenging it to impress me. "Do your best!" my mind says. "I'll find flaws! I'll find passages that feel forced." Only after it has convinced the skeptic inside me can I let down my defenses. Then, even the passages that I thought initially were awkward feel more and more natural, until finally the whole piece takes on an air of necessity. To change a single note would damage it. —The appreciation of *styles* of music operates by much the same principle. Currently I have an aversion to traditional Chinese music, but if I listened to it day after day for weeks I'd probably learn to enjoy it.

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*From a YouTube comment on Bach's "Art of the Fugue."*— "It's amazing that one man could write this, another perform it, and yet a third could design cluster bombs disguised as children's toys to be dropped by the USAF in Iraq."

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Ferruccio Busoni's piano transcriptions of Bach are magnificent, but Glenn Gould may have been right that they also represent corruptions of the original pristine structures, the musical-logical structures. They romanticize the music, sentimentalize it, aggrandize it, *exaggerate* it, thus depriving it of its pristine classical quality. I love Hélène Grimaud's version of the Chaconne (you can watch it on YouTube), but I almost feel as if I shouldn't love it. For what exactly do I love about it? The epicness, the emotionalness, the sublime besottedness—intoxicating. And the *loudness*. The dynamic contrasts; it's all about the dynamics. But that ain't Bach. Bach wasn't all about the dynamics, or thick, lush sound. The Chaconne is for solo violin! It's melodic, contrapuntal; but with Busoni, everything's harmonic. It's "Wagner meets Bach." Insofar as there is anguish in Bach's Chaconne, it is subtle

and dignified. It's infinite anguish, which is to say it doesn't enjoy itself. (No self-reflection, no self-consciousness.) And then later there is infinite forgiveness and hope, which doesn't congratulate itself on its beauty. It simply expresses pure, elevated, melodic joy. There is no need for filling out its bare-boned structure with lush sound, with chords and arpeggios and huge crescendos and diminuendos to make everything *pretty* and *embellished*—and *obvious*. Nor is there any virtuosity for its own sake. It's just a clear voice from heaven.

In his most serious compositions, Bach always wants to transcend sonority. Gould was right: Bach doesn't care about sonority, he cares about structure. He is reaching beyond, trying to communicate with God, literally. His works are about *transcendence*, transcendence of the immediate (emotions, matter, even sound-for-its-own-sake). Not so with Busoni and much romantic music. Busoni is "pianistic," as Gould would say. He is completely immersed in the piano, doesn't try to reach beyond it. Ultimately this attitude is a sort of musical temptation (in the sense of sin), like the temptation to wallow in sorrow of which Dante and Oscar Wilde speak. Wallow in the immediate—aestheticism, which is a kind of hedonism, which is weakness.

It's possible I'm being slightly unfair to Busoni. There are indeed otherworldly passages in his transcription(s). He was a genius, of course. But I still get the sense that he vulgarizes Bach a little by going for the *effect*. I don't get this sense, for example, with Rachmaninoff's transcription of the third partita or with Liszt's transcriptions. But it's true that, from a Bachian or Gouldian perspective, the piano is an inherently risky instrument, since it's so easy to lose oneself in its beautiful, textured sound.

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*Bach vs. Beethoven.*— Glenn Gould was probably right that Bachian polyphony and contrapuntalism is on a higher spiritual (and intellectual) plane than later homophony, be it in Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, or whomever. It's more pure, less emotional—less tainted by association with the earthly.

Interweaving of melodic lines enjoyed for its own sake. “*Absolute*” music. “God’s thinking before he created the world,” to quote Goethe. Ethereal, *transparent* in some inexplicable way, *diaphanous*, it exercises your intellect and raises you above yourself. Beethoven is comparatively human. With his music you’re more uplifted, but you’re less *lifted up*.

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*On the proper way to listen to music.*— The second movement of Beethoven’s Pastoral symphony, the passage from measures 86 to 90.<sup>217</sup> It makes me think of Matthew 26: 36-46 and 75—not of the words but of the situation. The mortality of beauty. The sorrow of love, and the long sighs; yet the serenity—the serenity of forgiveness. But only if my headphones are of good quality: I’m pressing them hard against my ears, the volume on maximum; my teeth are clenched because I have never encountered anything quite so painful as this music. Repeating it ten times, twenty times. Crying, of course. The violins descending in broken thirds, the violas sympathizing with them, and the flutes and oboes agreeing pithily, and then the gentle pluck of the bass after its silence, conscious that the resonance of its contribution consists in its laconic authority; but the oboes and flutes are swept up in the current and, satisfied no longer with passive assent, converse together lyrically, the violins too murmuring trills, sweet and light; the bassoons and clarinets are aroused to song, exhorting their companions with their poetry, and as the bass is carried away by this love for all that is, all is submerged in a purple cloud of harmony. A melody would disrupt the balance; harmony is everything, and there are no individuals.

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<sup>217</sup> Pierre Monteux’s interpretation.



999  
the Prelude to  
a minor sadness  
guitar-strummed Bachishly  
in my wraith-like, waif-like soul  
that shudders on the major third  
after minutes of minor sadness  
and thinks of the virgin's quiver in her  
expectant naked lover's silent arms,  
the soundlessness of Venice at dawn,  
the flap of the butterfly's wing,  
the dying gasp of Jesus,  
the sweet surcease of strife  
and we are at one  
in the forlorn  
999

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*Aufschwung*

Schumann,  
like Icarus,  
flew too close to the sun;  
his sanity melted and he  
died young.

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*The death of a magnificent human being.*— From a book of reminiscences on Tchaikovsky: “*Tolstoy says, ‘Tchaikovsky’s dead’—and two huge tears rolled down his great cheeks.*” (My italics.) I just listened to the Sixth Symphony, which was Tchaikovsky’s farewell to the world. Without exaggeration, it’s the most devastating piece I’ve ever heard. (Even on my miserable little headphones.) When I first heard it years ago I didn’t like it, and it’s taken me awhile to get used to it, but now that I have I love

it. The first movement in particular affects me. The passage in the middle that starts with the epic crescendo on the timpani and continues on to the furious trombones and/or tubas—*dum duuuuum, dadaaaa!*—that passage is colossal. Paralyzing. I want to buy a stereo-system just to listen to it. It sounds like the end of the world. And then the romantic melody with the glissando in the strings, after the world has ended.... And finally the plucked diatonic descent under the cadence in the brass and woodwinds, capacious as joy in sorrow....

The end of the last movement is quite shattering too. The dead pulses in the double bass, and the dark stabblings of life's last flickers, and the final four heartbeats, and then death. Those pulses sound like time, the tickings of mortality—death calling you.... "*bump bump, bump bump, bump bump....*" The two lines in the music, the underworld tickings and the descending melody, are death and life, inevitability and the final hopeless succumbing to it. Those ticks really do sound like inevitability. They just keep going, undisturbed by the drama playing out above them, patiently waiting to claim their own.

Tchaikovsky knew life, and he knew death.

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*A note for historians.*— The music of each era characterizes that era's attitude toward life. (Think of Baroque music, the most virile ever written. Handel's "Arrival of the Queen of the Sheba." The magnificent vitality of the age is reflected in its music.)

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*Criteria for musical worth.*— Just as I judge, broadly speaking, the degree of worthlessness of a pop song by the degree to which I can hear "Money!" (or "Kitsch!") shouted through the music, so I consider the spiritual worth of a piece of classical music to be inversely proportional to the music's expression of boredom and aimlessness. There is no boredom in Beethoven; impressionism, by contrast, is saturated with it. The whole-tone scale is musical

boredom, the lack of a *goal* toward which one strives. Anomie, ennui, a musical yawn. Satie's "Gymnopédie No. 1" is the listlessness of a Sunday afternoon in the middle of summer. In most Debussy you can hear the lassitude of fin-de-siècle France. Same with a lot of polytonality—the decadence—and, in different ways, serialism, neoclassicism, indeterminism *definitely*, and some Mahler and Strauss, and even a lot of Brahms and Liszt. The spirit of a society is expressed in its music.

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*Leonard Bernstein on the history of modern music.*— Watching videos on YouTube of Bernstein's Norton Lectures in 1973. Excursions into music theory, history, and appreciation. He makes a lot of good points in the first lecture—for example, that the reason for *twelve* notes in the chromatic scale is that the circle of fifths, which arises out of the harmonic series (overtones—you play C, there's a G overtone, etc.), gives you twelve tones. (C, F, B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, D-flat, G-flat, B, E, A, D, G.) It's fascinating that both the diachronic and the chromatic—and of course the pentatonic—scales have their source in the nature of the harmonic series. Bernstein is right that, just as humans have a Universal Grammar, so they have something like a Universal Musical Grammar, so to speak, which can be expressed in different "languages" (different types of music, types of scales, modes, harmonies). Obviously the parallel with language isn't perfect, but it's suggestive.

In the succeeding lectures, Bernstein takes the analogy with language too far. Goes into Chomskyan linguistics, tries to apply it to music, and things get a little silly. And it goes on with his incredibly extensive application of literary devices—metaphor, alliteration, anaphora, repetition, etc.—to music. Everywhere he sees "transformations," as in deletions, augmentations, inversions, and so on—and those certainly do exist, indeed are of the essence of good music, but to call them "Chomskyan" transformations is a stretch. He is right, though, to place repetition at the foundation of music.

He gives a fascinating and probably true explanation of why minor modes sound sad or disturbing. You know that when you play the tonic, implicit in the note are its overtones—the fifth, the major third, etc. The *minor* third is also an overtone, but a distant one: the eighteenth. So when you explicitly play the minor third, thus changing the mode from major to minor, you’re introducing an “interference” (of frequencies), or a sort of nearly imperceptible dissonance, since the major third, being one of the first overtones, is strongly (implicitly) present (in the tonic) as well. You’re playing the major and minor thirds at the same time, as it were. The human brain hears this interference, this dissonance, as expressing an unsettled, unsettling mood. Major modes sound “happy” because there is no interference of frequencies; there is relative harmony. That is, the implicit first few overtones are also being *explicitly* played, pleasantly “reinforcing” the already present. (That last part is me, not Bernstein.)

Bernstein also makes much of the “delights and dangers of ambiguity.” He sees *ambiguity* as key to *expressivity*. Syntactic, semantic, and phonological ambiguity. Reads from “The Leaden Echo” by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poem with sublime ambiguities that delights in gorgeous sounds for their own sake. E.g.: “How to keep—is there any any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or / brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep / Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty....from vanishing away?” Etc. Syntactically and somewhat semantically ambiguous. Hence extremely expressive (although that isn’t the only reason). Music, too, he thinks can be “syntactically,” “semantically,” and “phonologically” ambiguous—and, to an extent, the more it is, the more expressive it is. Think of Chopin’s ambiguous and wonderfully expressive chromaticism, his playing around with tonality so that sometimes you don’t know what key you’re in, you’re “suspended.” Or Schumann’s rhythmic ambiguities, his syncopations and the like. Or the ambiguities of certain transitions in Beethoven, such as the transition between the third and fourth movements in the fifth symphony and that between the third and fourth movements in the Hammerklavier sonata. All

intensely expressive. And the opening of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, even more ambiguous<sup>218</sup> and hence expressive. So ambiguous in its chromaticism as to stretch tonality to its limits—thus making itself the “crisis work of the nineteenth century,” pointing directly to the musical crisis of the early twentieth.

After his performance of the beginning and end of *Tristan*, Bernstein eloquently sums up the history: “And so music can never be the same again [after *Tristan und Isolde*]. The gates of chromaticism have been flung open, those golden gates of the golden age, which were the outer limits of ambiguity, standing firm in diatonic majesty. But now that they're open, now that Berlioz and Chopin and Schumann and Wagner have pushed them open, we're in new tonal fields that are apparently limitless. We're bounding and leaping from one ambiguity to the other—from Berlioz to Wagner to Bruckner and Mahler to Debussy and Scriabin and Stravinsky. It's a dizzying adventure, this romantic romp, shedding one inhibition after another, indulging in newer and ever more illicit ambiguities, piling them on, stringing them out, daring them to take over for nearly a whole century. But how ambiguous can you get before the clarity of musical meaning is lost altogether? How far can music romp through these new chromatic fields without finding itself in uncharted terrain, in a wild forest of sharps and flats? Are there no further gates of containment? Perhaps not ‘golden’ ones, perhaps only dry stone walls or rude fences? Well of course there are, or rather were, until they began to crumble under the attack of the new century. These tonal fences, these walls of formality, somehow managed to contain the rampage of chromaticism even through the crises of *Tristan und Isolde* and of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and of *The Rite of Spring*. But ultimately a supreme crisis did arrive, a crisis that remains unresolved to this day and is over half a century old....” He leaves us guessing at this

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<sup>218</sup> “Phonologically”—“What key are we in?”—and “syntact-ically”—“What's the meter? Where's the first beat?” And “semantically” too, I guess. But I wouldn't take these linguistic terms too seriously.

point, dallying instead in the dreamlike chromaticism of Debussy. Thoughtful analysis of *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*.

He's right about how *ambiguous* art became in the late nineteenth century, profoundly expressive in its profound ambiguity. Baudelaire, Mallarmé, the Impressionists in painting and music, Symbolism.... So much of it became *spiritual, dreamlike, extra-terrestrial. Abstract*. Things tend to get abstract, you know, when a culture is approaching its demise. Think of Plato's idealism and the even greater sophistication of Aristotle, near the end of classical Athens. In its youth, as in that of an individual, a culture is directed to the concrete and immediate, the naïve and spontaneous; as it proceeds into adulthood and old age, intellectualism sets in, symbolism sets in, the gaze turns toward the transcendent, irony and cynicism and boredom appear as the individual is made more aware of himself in opposition to others. Chromaticism can express all this wonderfully; hence its widespread use in the late nineteenth century.

Art became more ambiguous then because *life* was becoming more ambiguous. Culture, like society, was on the road to nihilism. Finally in the one came Dadaism and the like (I'd say atonalism too, which is supremely "ambiguous"), while in the other came World War I. And on into the 1920s, various literary, musical, and artistic expressions of decadence, of ennui, experimentation everywhere. *Then*, finally, a sort of rupture: the Great Depression, fascism, and World War II. Afterwards the mature, liberal democratic consolidation of corporate capitalism and mass consumerism, a more stable order—but still despair and alienation in much high art and philosophy, such as existentialism. New expressions of old alienated impulses, because, in effect, a semi-new society. Then a new eruption against middle-class alienation in the 1960s, a real social idealism throughout much of the world (in most countries, incidentally, not merely "middle-class" but more elemental)...but inevitable failure, and again a partial renewal of individualism, materialism, ennui (drug-taking, hedonism), and more "nihilistic" art in the 1970s and '80s. And so it goes.

To return. Bernstein observes that Debussy's whole-tone scale is in fact atonal, since it lacks a dominant and subdominant. No circle of fifths is possible, and no traditional modulations are possible. Thus, Debussy's invention was "the first organized atonal material ever to appear in musical history." It was also, perforce, the most "ambiguous." In the *Faun* he followed the old masters in containing his chromaticism and ambiguity with at least *some* diatonicism, but it was clear by that time that the diatonic containment of ambiguity (or of chromaticism and/or near-atonality) was about ready to burst.

It did so in 1908, with Schoenberg's Opus 11—and even more, later, with Opus 21 (or 23; I forget)—the atonality of which was no longer at all contained by any vestiges of tonality. So a divide opened up in the succeeding years and decades between composers, led by Stravinsky, who still tried to remain in the framework of tonality and others, led by Schoenberg, who abandoned it. Both camps, however, had the same motivation: to increase expressive power. Schoenberg eventually invented his serial method because, having abandoned tonality, he needed a new framework by which to structure music. Otherwise atonal compositions would simply be too *free*, unconstrained by anything. Certain composers seized on his new method, and it (has) lasted for many decades. —It's revealing, however, that Schoenberg himself said he had continually been pulled back toward tonality, and late in life he even wrote a tonal work for orchestra. This shows the power of tonality, its greater *human* significance (and *physical, nature-al* significance) than something as formalistic, forced, "external," "intellectual," and "artificial" as serialism.

Bernstein observes tellingly that no matter what a composer does with music, as long as he is using the twelve notes of the chromatic scale he cannot totally escape tonality. Schoenberg himself said that—he repudiated the word "atonality" because he thought it was impossible. Tonality is implicitly present in the notes, such that even serialist composers are semi-rooted in it, despite themselves. And of course they weren't the first to assay non-tonality; Bach sometimes did, Beethoven, even Mozart, and

Liszt, and many others. They would play around the edges of tonality, bring rootlessness to bear on rootedness.

Of all the serialist composers, Alban Berg was the most successful at writing music that could appeal to people. He sometimes managed, unlike Schoenberg and the others, to reconcile or fuse the twelve-tone system with tonality (tonal intervals, regular rhythms, etc.) in such a way that his music could be emotionally compelling to at least a fraction of the public. It helped that he had a greater dramatic sense than other composers, as manifested in *Wozzeck* and his violin concerto.

Bernstein's thoughts on Mahler are typically illuminating. I'll quote only a few. "...I had hoped to reach the essence of the tonal crisis through examining [Mahler's] non-resolution of tensions [in the 9th symphony], his reluctant attempts to let go of tonality—all of which does shed further light on the inevitable split that was to occur between Schoenberg and Stravinsky. And so I picked up the score again after some years away from it, filled with the sense of Mahler's torture at knowing he was the end of the line, the last point in the great symphonic arc that began with Haydn and Mozart and finished with him.... But while re-studying this work, especially the final movement, I found more answers than I'd expected, as we always do when we return to the study of a great work. And the most startling answer, the most important one because it illuminates our whole century from then to now, is this—that ours is the *century of death*, and Mahler is its musical prophet...." Great eloquence follows on the tragedy of the 20th century. And Mahler, he thinks, hypersensitive Mahler, instinctively foresaw it all.

But to return to Schoenberg vs. Stravinsky. "While Schoenberg was dedicating himself to saving music by continuing that great subjective tradition, the chromatic, romantic tradition, Stravinsky was presiding over a wholly new movement heralding a brilliant new group of composers.... What the great Igor did over that forty-some-year period was to keep tonality fresh by one means or another." In particular, he reacted against the "almost morbid subjectivism" of German romantic music from Wagner to



Schoenberg by embracing a sort of classical “objectivism,” “a cleaner, cooler, slightly refrigerated kind of expression which was the result of placing the creative self at a respectful distance from the created object, taking a more removed perspective on music.” This objective expressivity was already “in the air” when Stravinsky took up his pen, being a reaction, again, to German romanticism. Paris, not Vienna, was the central locus of this new music. For example, already in 1898 Erik Satie was “purposefully avoiding what was then known as self-expression” in his simple, *detached* pieces. This sort of “anti-art” attitude—“anti-sincere,” anti-subjective—was also emerging in painting (Picasso, etc.) and literature. Eventually it would culminate in Dada. But Stravinsky managed to use it to produce beautiful music. Instead of projecting his own feelings and inner conflicts into music, he imagined, for example, “the dreamworld of a pagan Russia” and recorded in *The Rite of Spring* what it expressed to *him*. This, incidentally, is why Theodor Adorno, whom Bernstein discusses briefly, detested Stravinsky—because a sincere artist, a sincere composer, “should express his emotions directly, subjectively,” like Schubert, Wagner, and Schoenberg. (Schoenberg? Atonalism?? Expressing *emotions*?? Maybe in some sense—but usually not effectively, since it only alienates audiences.) Stravinsky was the great artificer; hence Adorno’s aversion. But, as Bernstein says, all art involves artifice to some degree, and it isn’t necessarily insincere or inauthentic on that account. Actually, Adorno’s perspective on modern music was as absolutist and half-simpleminded as his perspectives often were. And you know he was such a crazy elitist, hating popular music, hating film, hating almost anything most people liked.

What were these artifices that Stravinsky used? How did he succeed in reinvigorating tonality? Through such means as extending triads into sevenths, ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths, thus producing a new sort of dissonance, and through the new concepts of bitonality and polytonality (using two or more tonalities at once). Also, extreme *rhythmic* ambiguities, irregular meters, rhythmic “dissonances.” He even used *polyrhythms*, two or more rhythms at once. And all sorts of musical vernaculars from

ancient and modern cultures—all to inject “fresh air” into a “stuffy post-Victorian room.” All tools for revivifying tonality. And of course they all caught on, spreading like wildfire across the West.

But all this rampant modernist exuberance, all this vitality and humor and irony and folkloric borrowings that spread musically across continents to Milhaud and Kurt Weiss and Copland and innumerable others, was sort of chaotic. How could it be contained? How could it be structured so as not to degenerate into real musical chaos? Stravinsky’s answer: neoclassicism. There had already been a revival of interest in such classical figures as Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, as manifested for instance in Busoni’s transcriptions (which were really rather romantic) and in some Strauss and Prokofiev and others. But Stravinsky tied it all together. Bernstein compares him to T.S. Eliot, the master in whom preceding (and succeeding) developments in poetry, anti-romantic, anti-“sincere” and -“subjective” developments (E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, etc.), found their culmination. The 20th century *had* to turn away from direct emotional expression because it was so *insecure*. It had to hide itself, its true feelings, because it was embarrassed by too much sincerity. It was too self-conscious and self-doubting. The new century had to speak through a mask, “a more elegant and disguising mask than any previous age has ever used. And it’s the *obliquity* of expression that is now semantically paramount. Aesthetic perceptions are registered at a remove; they are, so to speak, heard around a corner.” *Objective expression*, in short, became necessary. Neoclassicism (as in Eliot) was a “security blanket for the whole literary [and musical] world to clutch at in its sudden death-ridden distress.”

“Hiding behind the mask of *once* directly expressed emotion—that is the beginning and essential meaning of neoclassicism.” Emotion once directly expressed by John Donne or Mozart or Shakespeare; now we adopt their forms and make allusions to them, to their (comparatively) directly expressed emotions—we hide ourselves behind them, and indirectly express ourselves through them. Example: “The Love Song of J. Alfred

Prufrock.” And Ezra Pound, and W. H. Auden, and *Ulysses*, and a whole galaxy of poets using classical forms. “They speak for all of us frightened children grasping for security in the past.” “But doesn’t it betoken an impoverishment of our resources,” Bernstein asks, “that we must have recourse to the past? On the contrary, it reaffirms our links with the past, our traditions and roots; only we disguise that relationship by coating it in our tough, cool vernacular. But it’s a thin veneer. And when the underlying emotion does shine through, then it hits us with *double* force, precisely because of our shy, frightened attempts to hide it. — Again we’re faced with the ultimate ambiguity: living and partly living, rooted and partly rooted. Remember, just as we found in the last lecture with Schoenberg [i.e., his partial rootedness in tonality]? And so it is with Stravinsky too, in his utterly different way. The one, Schoenberg, tried to control the tonal chaos of modernism through his twelve-tone method; the other, Stravinsky, through the decorum of neoclassicism, exactly like Eliot.” Decorum, yes; but also, like a lot of modern poets, incessant borrowings from the past. In Stravinsky—to simplify—“the personal statement is made via quotes from the past, by alluding to the classics, by a limitless new *eclecticism*. This is the essence of Stravinsky’s neoclassicism. He is now the great eclectic, the thieving magpie....unashamedly borrowing and stealing from every musical museum.” Not always *direct quotes*, but at least stylistic references to past figures.

Throughout all this, of necessity, there is also *humor*. All this semi-plagiarism, it’s all *funny* too. But humor, of course, can “bite deep” and doesn’t have to be frivolous. All of Stravinsky’s mismatchings and incongruities are funny, but many of them are also intensely serious and poignant. “In the most serious sense, humor in one form or another is the lifeblood of his neoclassicism.” *Irony* is frequently present in Stravinsky, in all his crazy incongruities.

It’s true that eclecticism is usually considered a cardinal sin in artists. But Bernstein defends Stravinsky’s use of it. Adorno “refused to acknowledge the extraordinary power of dramatic irony that could be generated by those egregiously ill-matched

components [in Stravinsky, such as his setting a sublime Latin text to machine-like music].... We are *grabbed* by [Stravinsky's] music, there's no *escape* from it. As for Adorno, he simply failed to perceive it at all, seeing it only as cleverness, showbiz, theatrical know-how—which was also true, in a way—but not seeing the *real* meaning, which is the amazing proximity of comedy to tragedy in our time. He completely missed the joke!—the big existentialist joke which is at the center of most major 20th-century works of art, namely *the sense of the absurd*.”

Having watched these lectures, I understand Schoenberg a little better than before. And Stravinsky too, and all modern music. I still maintain, however, that extreme elitism is a flaw in art. I don't need “prettiness,” but I do ask for something that can *compel* me without requiring that I first devote years of study to it just to understand it and to *partially* reconcile myself to it. Music in particular should....among other things, should be the “quicken art,” as Kant said, should quicken the heartbeat, quicken life, quicken the emotions and the self's loss of itself. It's fine for it to shock, but, after all, you have to draw the line somewhere. When does “ugliness” (etc.) in music become a flaw? Some people draw the line before aleatory music, others before serialism; I'm more of a traditionalist, attached to relatively traditional tonality, and so have more restrictive standards. It's fine to express “absurdity” in music, or to pursue one's personal path of self-expression at the expense of popular approbation, but that doesn't have to be done in *really ugly, boring, almost wholly intellectual* ways. When it isn't only “much of the public” but *almost everyone* who rejects one's art even fifty years after its introduction, something is wrong. (I'm referring first of all to Schoenberg and those inspired by him, but also to any artist to the extent that his work, fifty or a hundred years later, remains an object of general disdain or revulsion even among the intelligent, educated public.)<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> To sum up, art should not be *alienating*. It should, to a great extent, be democratic—as should everything in life, because “democratic” means “human.” The elitism of most 20th-century classical composers was

Nor do I think it would have been terribly “inauthentic” or inexcusably plagiaristic or hopelessly naïve to write works in styles similar to those of Beethoven or Bach or Schubert or Chopin or Tchaikovsky or even the late Mozart in the 20th century. (Slightly modernized, of course.) Such art is timeless and can express whatever thoughts and feelings you want it to express.

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*Art and beauty.*— Franz Schubert, the melodist *par excellence*, was incredible for another reason besides his melodies: his later pieces change keys more often than those of any other composer. He was, indeed, an ancestor of the atonalists. The difference between him and them is that his concern throughout was to create beauty, while theirs was to create something intellectually interesting. He was guided by instinct; they were guided, to a great extent, by self-consciousness. Ironically, this fact in itself makes their music less interesting than his. For in his we hear something unconscious speaking to us: phrases are organically interconnected, growing out of one another almost as steps in a mathematical proof grow out of one another. (Bach’s music is an even better example.) A world beyond our ken speaks to us, a mathematical and physical world. With atonalism, on the other hand, there is not the same inner order; there is instead a stitching-together, a self-conscious patching of phrases onto one another. We hear a composer trying to rouse us from musical complacency, to expand our musical horizons. We *don’t* hear a composer’s subconscious instinctively following the dictates of beauty, of profound and rewarding sound.

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related to the elitism of modern bourgeois society, the economic, social, political, cultural, and intellectual schisms and fragmentation. “Bubbles,” such as the academic bubble, the political bubble, the Wall Street bubble....all sorts of elitist bubbles, including in cultural life. Whereas Beethoven’s music tended to be democratic due to the relative *integration* of his society, modern artists have tended to be elitist due to their society’s relative disintegration.

Beauty is instinctual, ugliness is self-conscious. Music, like life, should be beautiful and instinctual.

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*A soldier speaks on Schubert.*— Under a YouTube video of the Andante from Schubert's Piano Trio D. 898 is this comment (from a Scandinavian): "i suffer from post traumatic stress disorder and the only thing that calmes me is schuberts music, no joke it's... yes it's the best. it's my medication... my friends would die laughing seeing this comment but God bless you and may you rest in 'piece' you chuppy little austrian fella!" I can well imagine that this piece, this piece of divinity, would soothe someone with PTSD. One of the most soothing pieces in music caressing away a soldier's pain.

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Listening, for example, to the 4th movement of Beethoven's 5th symphony, it occurs to you that what makes Beethoven Beethoven is the *naïveté* of his enthusiasm for life. The *childlike sincerity*, the *directness*, of his enthusiasm for life. It is this that speaks to billions of people. It is this that keeps the music perpetually fresh. Or, rather, the music's freshness is synonymous with its childlike sincerity; and Beethoven's whole art consists in the attempt never to let anything hackneyed or didactic or formulaic get in the way of the direct and spontaneous expression of emotion and thought. Most timeless art, in fact, has this "naïve" and "spontaneous" quality, but none more so than Beethoven's. How he managed to convey it through the manipulation of sounds is a mystery, because music itself is a mystery. But it is clear that even the music's "flaws," such as its occasional coarseness, vulgarity, and orchestral imbalances, contribute to its childlike vitality and hence its power.

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Zerlina's aria "Vedrai, carino" is one of my favorites in *Don Giovanni*. For most of the song she sings coquettishly about her

magical salve for Masetto's pains, a medicine that will surely cure him, hinting at its power and effectiveness, and you're *convinced* she's referring to sex. Thus, you listen to the enchanting music with an amused grin, charmed by its translation of a lover's flirtatiousness into the most sublime beauty. Yet there remains a *slight* doubt in your mind as to whether you've guessed the remedy correctly, and you wait for the libretto to confirm it somehow. But suddenly there's a pause in the music, followed by a pulsating cello (?) that heralds an event of excruciating serenity. A flute is fused with it, *pianissimo* and *legatissimo*, whetting your anticipation. Gently Zerlina places Masetto's hand on her chest and says to him "Feel it [i.e., the medicine] beating"—and you realize you were wrong; she was referring not to sex but to her love, her heart. In an instant the aria has been transformed from a fetching exercise in innuendo to a pure expression of undying love.

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*Against postmodernism.*— If you want a simple criterion for artistic greatness, here it is: the artist who manifests longevity in both popular and critical approbation is truly great. -That excludes most postmodernists, who don't appeal even to *educated* popular audiences, only to super-educated, or super-indoctrinated, "critical" ones.

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*After hearing Berio's "Sinfonia."*— The problem with much (not all) postmodern art, whether in music, drama, literature or the plastic arts, is that its self-consciousness doesn't extend far enough. This is all the more artistically damaging in that its chief merit, its most distinctive feature, is supposed to be its self-consciousness. From Beckett to Berio to Cage and beyond, postmodern artists have set themselves in opposition to un-selfconscious artistic dogmas, to every un-selfconscious commonplace about art—such as the exaltation of naïve "beauty," the idea that artists should work within certain boundaries, even the idea that art itself constitutes a

separate and lofty category of experience. These artists have taken as their starting-point the self-consciousness of modern society, its universal doubt and relativism, and have explored all its permutations through art. They have, therefore, prided themselves on two qualities: their artistic freedom (adventurousness) and their artistic self-consciousness.

It's interesting to note that Romantic artists were, like their later antipodes the postmodernists, very self-conscious and concerned with artistic freedom. Art is self-expression, they thought, heroic and beautiful self-expression. Let the artistic genius go his own way, forge a path for others to follow! Life is tragic, full of suffering; the artist, though, *creates* out of his suffering, creates new worlds freely and spontaneously! He is the vanguard of humanity! —The problem with this creed was that it focused on the *pathos* in life and ignored the *comic*. It *forgot* the comic; life consisted only of pathos and tragedy. The Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean critiques of Romanticism can be distilled into that claim: the self-consciousness of the Romantics was not self-conscious enough, for it exaggerated one side of life at the expense of another equally important side. In other words, it criticized life but not itself.

Years ago I wrote this:

I read Chateaubriand's *Atala* and *René* for my class. They were gorgeously written but exhausting to read. In fact, they were annoying. Such a shameless profusion of sentiment, such intemperate milking-of-sorrow-for-all-it's-worth, such enraptured pessimism—yes, life is suffering, now get over it! I grew deadened to feeling, immune to all but impatience. Romanticism is self-defeating, self-caricaturing.

Postmodernism tends to be guilty of the same lack of self-consciousness and self-criticism, though in a different way. Rather than exaggerating the tragic in life, it exaggerates the absurd—the



senseless and the commonplace, and the solipsistic. It rejects old aesthetic standards because of their supposed artificiality; it embraces life's inherent contingency, the absolute freedom at its core. (It's significant that existentialism was virtually contemporaneous with the beginnings of postmodernism.) And absolute freedom amounts, in this context, to absolute absurdity—chaos—and ordinariness, to the irrelevance of norms of reason and beauty. Hence: Duchamp's *Fountain*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Cage's *4'33''*, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, and Berio's *Sinfonia*. The logical conclusion of this philosophy is something like Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which was a 120-foot-long, 12-foot-high slab of rusted steel that reached across a popular plaza in Manhattan in the 1980s, obstructing the entrance to the federal building next to it and wrecking the public's enjoyment of the plaza. Serra, like many other contemporary artists, wanted to *challenge* his audience, to make a philosophical statement. In this case, as he explained during the hearings that ended in the removal of his sculpture, he wanted to "create a behavioral space in which the viewer interacts with the sculpture in its context... The arc divides space against itself... We can learn more about ourselves, about the nature of our social relations, and about the nature of the spaces we inhabit and depend upon by keeping *Tilted Arc*." A certain kind of artist has always tried to justify the ugliness or aesthetic unimpressiveness of his creations by means of such pseudo-philosophical arguments.

But the art is flawed in that it emphasizes one side of life—the nihilistic side—at the expense of another side, namely the rational and beautiful side. Franz Kafka's art suffers from the same deficiency (though it is also more profound and finely crafted than the typical postmodernist creation). Rather than portraying life's richness and thereby *affirming* life, it exaggerates the absurd and thereby *denies* life. Therefore, it is neither spiritually uplifting nor true to life.

Before I elaborate on that I want to point out another manifestation of postmodernism's lack of self-consciousness: like Romanticism, it under-appreciates the comic element in life. This isn't to say that it doesn't laugh at life or make fun of it—for,

indeed, this form of mockery is part of its *raison d'être*! However, it is far less adept at applying this mockery to itself—at recognizing that it itself is sometimes comical. It doesn't see that it's supremely pretentious, that, most of the time, it is a ridiculous self-parody. It takes itself *far too seriously*. For, in being defined by a rejection of conventional norms of beauty and rationality yet justifying itself through abstruse philosophical ideas (examples of which I gave above)—i.e., highly “rational” ideas—it contradicts itself. It justifies itself through reason, i.e., *norms* of reason, even as it rebels against all norms—i.e., as it proclaims its total freedom to do as it pleases. In short, there is a contradiction between its apparent simplicity, childishness, and its claims to sophistication (that is, its sophisticated self-justifications). This contradiction is essentially and necessarily comical, which is why people often laugh at postmodernism. They are laughing at its pretensions to sophistication, which are in such contrast to its often primitive or absurd appearance. By its very nature, such art cannot overcome this contradiction at its heart, and so it can never achieve the artistic dignity and merit of, say, Eugene O'Neill's greatest plays, or Tolstoy's novels, or Thomas Mann's works.

So, like much Romantic art, though in a different way, postmodernism tends to be a self-parody.<sup>220</sup> In rebelling against what it considers the pretentiousness of traditional art, it succumbs to an even greater and more comical pretentiousness. This fact is damning enough, but, as I said above, postmodernism also tends to be guilty of exalting one aspect of experience (freedom, chaos, despair, confusion) and ignoring another aspect (reason, beauty, order, self-restraint). *Unlike* Romantic art, though, the aspect it ignores is the noble, uplifting, redeeming side of life, the humanistic side. So, while the Romantic artist is able to affirm life

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<sup>220</sup> Notice I wrote “*tends to...*” At its best, postmodernism can be extremely thought-provoking. Duchamp's *Fountain*, which at least *anticipated* postmodernism, is profound—not “in itself” but because of the social context in which it was produced. However, Minimalism in the 1970s or 1980s was not profound, because the social context had changed.

in spite of its tragedy, the postmodernist artist basically rejects life—mocks it, caricatures it, rebels against it (against the claims of taste, beauty, proportionality, reason, humanity, which are the most important and redeeming elements of life).

Another way of saying this is to say that postmodernism, especially in its later manifestations, appeals overwhelmingly to the *cognitive* mode of experience, while neglecting the *affective* mode. Atonalism, for example, doesn't "caress the emotions," doesn't soothe sadness or stimulate joy; it is mainly an intellectual exercise—an exalting of the intellect at the expense of the affective mode, which shudders and turns away from it. But an art that has contempt for the affective response in humans rejects one of the main functions of art—arguably *the* main function. We have philosophy and science to satisfy the cognitive sphere; if art, too, concerns itself mainly with the cognitive, then what is left for the affective? This side of life will shrivel, and the human being will become stunted. The situation is all the more lamentable in that the affective mode has far more to do with mental health than the cognitive mode does. Life is about affection more than cognition.

It's ironic that, while the postmodern artist tends to pride himself on his appeal to the intellect over the emotions, his work is usually intellectually sterile. It is supposed to be a commentary on society or life or whatever, but its commentative value is nugatory. The commentary usually consists of vague, pseudo-philosophical trivialities, like Serra's argument quoted above. Berio, for example, might say that the nonsensical, fragmentary verbal texts spoken simultaneously (in different languages) by the singers in his *Sinfonia* have a thematic significance, perhaps as a commentary on the social divisions during the '60s, perhaps as implying that authentic communication between humans is impossible, perhaps as illustrating the fragmentary nature of the postmodern self. There is an indefinite number of possible "meanings." But each of these meanings is a platitude, uninteresting and uninformative. So what the audience is confronted with is an incoherent mass of ugly sound and senseless verbal utterances with no redeeming thematic significance. The listener, therefore, is impatient, annoyed, bored,

and the art fails to connect with its audience. In the end, it is merely a testament to the composer's solipsistic self-indulgence.

In the third movement of the *Sinfonia* there are echoes of the scherzo from Mahler's second symphony. "If I were asked to explain the presence of Mahler's scherzo in *Sinfonia*," Berio has said, "the image that would naturally spring to mind would be that of a river running through a constantly changing landscape, disappearing from time to time underground, only to emerge later totally transformed. Its course is at times perfectly transparent, at others hard to perceive, sometimes it takes on a totally recognizable form, at others it is made up of a multitude of tiny details lost in the surrounding forest of musical presences." –Wow, that all sounds very lofty and philosophical. However, especially in contrast with the incoherent surface-structure of the piece, it is unbearably pretentious. And comical. An art that is in this way a self-parody fails as art.

In short, there are (or were) many problems with postmodernism. While it is indeed "art," it is rarely great art, for great art appeals to both the affective and the cognitive modes, and doesn't rely on philosophical clichés to justify its existence, and is true to life—it resonates with the average intelligent person's experience, with his spiritual strivings and doubts—and it isn't self-contradictory in such a way that it deteriorates into self-parody.

Nevertheless, it's good that art went through its postmodernist period, for now it can return to its earlier grandeur but on a higher, more self-conscious level. For there is a kernel of truth in every historical movement, as Hegel saw. Modernism and postmodernism freed art from the naïve and dogmatic emphasis on beauty, pleasantness, conventionality. Postmodernism in particular remade art in the image of modern life, with its chaos, ugliness, self-doubt, exaggerations, thereby performing an invaluable historical service. That it amounted to a denial of most things that are good in life does not mitigate its importance. What is left to us now, though, is to transcend its implicit negativity—to synthesize (i.e., reconcile) the awareness of life's absurdity with love of life,

with *affirmation*.<sup>221</sup> This synthesis is indeed possible: just look at the ancient Greeks, who carried it out on a more naïve level. (They reconciled the affirmative attitude with awareness of life's *tragedy* rather than *absurdity*. Admittedly, tragedy is, in a sense, less "tragic" than absurdity, for it still maintains the dignity of man, his worth, while absurdity denies even this. Still, it *is* possible both to appreciate absurdity and to affirm life.)

So it's time we left creative impotence behind and started loving life again. It's time we became humanists—by adhering to a *self-conscious* and *rich* humanism, richer than that of the Enlightenment.

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*An artist who isn't.*— The typical postmodern artist (and critic) confuses greatness with the fostering of controversy. He seems to think that the purpose of art is to produce controversy—to be "original." Originality, no matter how it's manifested, is seen as an end in itself. In reality, though, it is only a means. Great artists have always understood this.

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*Susan Sontag against herself.*— It's significant that even someone like Susan Sontag, who for a while was adamant in her support of postmodernism and formalism, finally admitted that the postmodernist attitude contains the seeds of cultural destruction. In her famous book *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, published originally in the 1960s, she defended contemporary art

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<sup>221</sup> Some postmodern artists might object that that is exactly what they saw themselves as doing. Many of them, after all, *rejoiced* in casting off old rules and denying life's meaningfulness. The nature of their work, however, belies their optimistic self-interpretation: insofar, e.g., as it exalts controversy for controversy's sake, or is intentionally puerile and ridiculous, or is impenetrably solipsistic, the essence of their work is negative rather than positive. It bespeaks the despairing fragmentedness of its society.

against criticisms by Marxist, humanistic critics like Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. But when she published a new edition of her book in 1996, she added an Afterword in which she admitted that the humanists were partly right after all. She had scolded them for being “insensitive to most of the interesting and creative features of contemporary culture in non-socialist countries”: they criticized most modern art as decadent, alienated, un-historical, allegorical, unrealistic, shallow, consumerist. They thought it was symptomatic of a culture in decline, while earlier realism was strong and vibrant, and morally uplifting. She argued, on the other hand, that they overemphasized the importance of “content” at the expense of “form.” But in the 1996 Afterword she admitted that “we live in a time which is experienced as the end—more exactly, just past the end—of every ideal. (And therefore of culture: there is no possibility of true culture without altruism.)... [Back in the Sixties, even, something was happening,] something that it would not be an exaggeration to call a sea-change in the whole culture, a transvaluation of values—for which there are many names. Barbarism is one name for what was taking over. Let’s use Nietzsche’s term: we had entered, really entered, the age of nihilism.” So in the end she agreed with the Marxist critics, who evidently had a keener sense of what was happening than she did. She even adopted their moralistic language, in direct opposition to her earlier self: “there is no possibility of true culture without altruism.”

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*The significance of art.*— The overture to *Fidelio* would violate artistic principles in its shamelessly unsubtle glorification of life were such glorification not the most important principle of all.

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*The significance of music.*— On the way home from work today, while I was on the subway, an Asian man standing near me broke into song. He just...started singing. A nicely dressed, normal-

looking fellow. He was reading the words from a book; they were in a different language. It was weird at first. A man sitting next to him, a crotchety old guy with a surly expression seared onto his face, instantly covered his ears. His reaction, in fact, may have been stranger than the actual singing: he didn't look surprised, he didn't look puzzled, he didn't look disgusted; after the first two notes he simply put his fingers into his ears and kept them there. Later he walked away. No one said anything for the duration of the (long) song; I observed everyone's reaction, and it was, almost without exception, blank. The situation struck me as surreal. But after the first two minutes, in which my one thought was "What the hell?", I started to enjoy it. The fellow had a good voice. This *a capella* performance on a subway where everyone else was silent, everyone in his own world, thinking his own thoughts—steered by music into a virtually preordained vein:—it was moving. We were all the same distant atoms as usual, but we were drawn together. I sensed the walls between us dissolving; I sensed my own quietness dissolving; and I wanted to sing myself, or at least speak to everyone as a brother. I realized... 'We're just people...they're just people...what's the point of all this isolation?' The meaning of the song was appropriate: in answer to a question, the man said it was a prayer, and that each day he prays as often as he can.

## Chapter 6

### Dusk in Vietnam

Sleepfalling from the Milky Way through pearl-gray mist and periwinkle sky, floating as clouds in currents of wind, brightshining down upon mountain-peaks star-yearning, glow of the gloaming reflected in mountain-snow golden as sun-kissed ocean sheen to the horizon, undulating twilight horizon comforting sleep on the rocking waves like a lullabye, an eternal pendulum swaying back on waves of time in the water of the azure sky coursing toward land to sail in cerulean meadows, wade through waves of grain, walk through harvests of sunlight, drift on rippling tides of wheat moon-begotten in the silvery bloom of night, swimming motionlessly through clouds of dew yet to descend upon blades of grass in the pre-dawn stillness blanketing the land like a dream of womb-enfolded immortality or cosmic stasis in the spaces between stars where nothing hovers but three atoms of spacetime fused with a universal symphony of echoes of echoes of light spraying out to infinity in purple splashed on a canvas of clouds which are soaked in the crimson-flecked dreams of Earth's origins...

The phone rang. Stabbing him. He picked up the receiver, "It's eight o'clock sir, you wanted a wake-up call, time to get up, your tour starts at nine, breakfast is..." His eyes closed and he drifted into his pillow but not before turning it over to the cool side...

It was a chilly morning and the valley was shrouded in mist. Steam collected between the hillcrests, sank to the river, evaporated in the sky. It was mysterious, legendary. The sun did not warm him. He had forgotten his jacket. He stood with two Japanese girls and an American man waiting for their tour guide in front of the hotel on the edge of the town overlooking the valley.



"It's a cold one," the American said. The two girls whispered. "But what a view." The girls giggled. "What's your name? I'm Clyde."

"Martin," he said.

"My name is Midori," said one girl, "and she is Hiroko."

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you."

"Are you from Japan?"

"Hai. Yes. Konnichi wa." She giggled.

"Konnichi wa."

"How long have you been in Vietnam?"

"Only one week."

"It's beautiful here."

"Yes very pretty."

"But too cold."

"I hope it warms up."

"Hanoi was warm, but up here I guess we're higher up."

"Yes."

"Are you girls in college?"

"Yes."

"What do you study?"

"Drawing. She study painting."

"I bet you'd like to paint this scene, wouldn't you?"

"Oh yes. So beautiful."

"I wonder where our guide is."

Tribal children from tiny villages in the valleys congregated around them, dressed in handmade and hand-dyed indigo cloth, speaking English, offering handmade necklaces and bracelets to anyone who would pay one dollar. The friendly ones shook hands with the Westerners, their small Vietnamese hands and dark Vietnamese skin callused from years of inclemency pressing against the cold white skin of the tourists. The weather didn't seem to touch them. They ran happily along the streets in the drizzle, into and out of internet cafés and restaurants and hotel lobbies without self-consciousness, banging their palms against the windows of buses arriving with fresh loads of tourists, yelling "Hello! Where

you from?” through the glass. Upon receiving no answer from heads turned self-consciously away they redoubled their efforts. Perhaps the diffident Westerners were put off by the irreverence, the mischievous delight that sparkled in the eyes of these children who seemed to be laughing not sympathetically with the excited newcomers but a trifle maliciously, as if they were looking at ugly foreign objects of contempt. —Probably, though, that was only a fabrication of the Western imagination, which felt at once superior to this backward place and beneath the people who lived here, who had never known modern comforts and thus were made of sterner stuff than overfed tourists. Even so, their enthusiasm proved infectious: skeptics found themselves being won over, rolling down their windows to say hi, making a few polite comments and being bombarded with questions in return.

Even at this early hour the town was full of movement. Dozens of motorbikes weaved around clusters of tourists—motorbikes being the preferred Vietnamese mode of transportation. The streets were too narrow for more than an occasional bus or jeep. Natives driving by paused to shout at tourists “Hello! Motorbike?”, hoping someone wanted a taxi. If a pedestrian on the sidewalk briefly stopped walking, whether to stare at a beautiful Vietnamese girl or to admire the scenery, motorcyclists shot over to him. “Hello! Motorbike?” Two minutes later, if he was lucky, he might have succeeded in prying himself from them. His destination was in all likelihood the town square, which was edged by rows of weather-stained colonial houses adopted by the Vietnamese for their own purposes, whether as stores or as homes. These colorful, artificial, geometrically shaped relics of the European past might have struck visitors as out-of-place in a land so untamed, primordial, where myths still seemed to reside in the heaven-descended vapor—a land where the world was perpetually being reborn—if everything else did not contribute to the eclecticism of the environment. People wearing tribal costumes they had woven themselves talked to people dressed as gangsta rappers; concrete high-rise hotels towered above wooden huts; SUVs drove over

paved streets as young children carrying logs hiked barefoot up mountain passes.

The buses pulled past an old church from the colonial period, still intact but beginning to deteriorate, its Corinthian columns marred by chipped curlicues and severed acanthus leaves, its gargoyles noseless or headless, its steps worn blunt by generations of feet. In the shadow of the ruins was a small marketplace composed of a dozen wooden stalls each with a makeshift roof sheltering an old woman from the heavy mist. Here and there a person dressed in American clothing pulled a bill from his wallet and handed it with a smile to the shopkeeper, placing papayas into his bag at the same time. She barely acknowledged him. He walked away with the same smile stuck on his face. He turned around and gazed up at the church. "Wow," he said. He took out his camera and took a picture of it; then he looked over his shoulder towards the old woman, gestured at the church and shouted "Very beautiful!" This time she granted him a smile.

The buses drove down the main road in the small town that served as the base for foreigners trekking through the mountains. Tourism was the main source of revenue for the area. Three hotels had been built in the last ten years; with the resultant influx of travelers, stores had sprung up quickly along the main road. Two internet cafés, several souvenir shops that also sold umbrellas, a pharmacy, five small restaurants, and three bars. Their owners spoke minimal English and the employees only a little more, but in the rare cases when gestures were not enough, children could be called in from the streets to translate. They had learned English not from books or in school, but from the visitors themselves. Since toddlerhood they had lived in the presence of the pale strangers, taking weekly or biweekly trips from their villages in the wilderness to the town. Over the years they had absorbed the foreign language, even some Japanese, with relative ease. This also partly accounted for their startling friendliness, more pronounced even than that of Western children, as the friendliness of the adults was greater than that of Western adults.

As Martin waited for his tour guide, one of the children engaged him in conversation. A young girl, not pretty, with splotches on her skin, but charismatic and excitable. She walked over to him and said "What your name?"

"Martin. What's yours?"

"Lê."

"Lê? What does that mean?"

"It mean...shy."

"That's not a good name for you!"

"Not good name? Why?"

"You're not shy, are you?"

"No, I not shy. I talk a lot. My friend say I talk too much. 'Shut up!' she say."

"Ha!"

"Where you from?"

"America."

"Oh! Where?"

"Near New York."

"New York! Big city. You big city boy."

"No no, small town boy. I'm from a small town."

"You like it here?"

"Yes, very much. You're lucky to live here."

"How long you stay here?"

"Only three days."

"O too bad. I wish you stay forever."

"Yeah, me too. We don't have places like this near New York."

"You live wit me in village."

"Would you let me live with you?"

"Yeh of court. My mom like American. Very handsome she say."

He laughed. "No, most of us aren't particularly attractive. We're a bit overweight. Vietnamese look better."

"Am I pretty?"

"Of course! I like your hair."

"You marry me?" She was having fun teasing him.

“Marry you?! Aren’t you a little young?”  
“No, I old.”  
“How old?”  
“Thirteen.”  
“Hmm. Well okay, I’ll marry you. When?”  
“Now.”  
“I have to go on a tour now. Maybe later?”  
“Okay later. But first you buy bracelet from me.”  
“How much does it cost?”  
“60,000 dong.”  
“That’s expensive!”  
“Then you buy three bracelet from me. 40,000 dong.”  
“But I don’t need three bracelets. And I can’t spend 120,000 dong.”  
“You must buy from me.”  
“Oh, must I?”  
“Yes.”  
“Why?”  
“Because I nice to you.”  
“That’s true, you’re very friendly. How about two bracelets?”  
“No three.”  
“No, only two.”  
“Okay 50,000 dong.”  
“40,000 each.”  
“50,” she repeated.  
“40.”  
“You very hard.”  
“No, I very cheap. I’m poor.”  
“Me too.”  
“Not as poor as me.”  
“What! You American!”  
“So?”  
“You rich.”  
“No way, I’m far from rich. Not all Americans are rich, you know.”  
“You come to Vietnam.”

“And that cost all my money!”

“No you have more. 100,000 dong for two bratelet.”

“Jeez! You’re a hard bargainer. Okay, I’ll buy them when I come back.”

“Buy now.”

“No, I don’t have money now. You’ll be here later, right?”

“Yeh.”

“Good.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.” He shivered and rubbed his arms.

“You look cold,” she said.

“I’m freezing! I left my coat in Hanoi.”

“Stupid.”

“You’re right. But Hanoi was hot. I thought I wouldn’t need it here.”

“I not cold. Warm.”

“How?”

“Becaut my tough skin.”

“You’re outside a lot, aren’t you?”

“Alway. Helping mother.”

“What does she do?”

“She make bratelet. And clothe.”

“You help her dye your clothes?”

“Yes. Hand very blue. And she keep animal.”

“Farm animals? Chickens?”

“Yeh.”

“How often do you come up here?”

“Every weekend. To sell bratelet. Then go back to village.”

“Is it a long walk?”

“Many hour. Maybe eight.”

“Why is everyone wearing the same blue clothes?”

“Color of Black Hmong. My people.”

“Oh, your ethnicity! I forgot, this whole area is Black Hmong, isn’t it? I love those big silver earrings all you girls are wearing.”

The guide arrived. “So sorry, so sorry!” he said. “Ma name it Duong. Sorry for late.”

"I have to go now," Martin said to Lê. "It was nice to meet you."

"Bye." Lê started a conversation with another American.

The four travelers and Duong set off. They walked for twenty minutes on a dirt road where their view of the surroundings was obstructed not only by the fog but also by large European houses, as it had been earlier by the three hotels located side-by-side on the edge of a cliff. The guide did not talk much, and when he did, it was hard to understand him: his Vietnamese twang was unusually thick, and he clipped words that ended in 's.' Midori and Hiroko whispered and giggled to themselves, too shy to approach the Americans. Martin was absorbed in his own thoughts, most of which revolved around his forgotten coat in Hanoi. Clyde was the only one who talked continuously, alternately with the girls and with Martin. His pattern of conversation was to ask a question, such as "What countries have you been to?", and then to follow it up with a long discourse on himself. The girls were perfectly happy to listen and laugh after every sentence, but Martin found him tiresome and merely grunted during pauses. "I just came from Laos," Clyde said, "but I like Vietnam better because Laotian women are tiny." "Huh," Martin said. "I mean," continued Clyde, "Vietnamese women are small too, but differently. They're like petite. Lao girls are short and not so pretty." "Mmm." "But I remember—this is funny—I remember a time when I was taking a bus in Laos in the middle of nowhere, a long bus trip, like a day, over dirt roads and stuff, cliffs, and we got stuck in mud, a huge puddle of mud, and the driver just couldn't get us out for the life of him, and we were stuck there for like nine hours just standing in the road waiting for someone to come..." "Wow, that sucks." Martin wanted to talk to the girls, whom he found adorable, but whenever he tried to speak to them Clyde hijacked the conversation, his voice drowning out Martin's. So Martin contented himself with contemplating their features. Midori resembled a doll, with airbrushed cheeks and unwrinkled skin. Hiroko had a more mature look, as well as a more approachable, with a friendly smile always playing about her lips. She was tall and buxom; she wore tight

clothes to accentuate her curves, a habit that seemed to contradict her shy personality. Midori had less to show off but followed her friend's example anyway, wearing skin-tight jeans and a tanktop that exposed her midriff. Martin couldn't help appreciating their wardrobe, though at the same time he thought it incongruous for such girls to adopt the attire of Britney Spears.

He remembered seeing them for the first time the previous night, a few minutes prior to his first real insight into Vietnam's tribal culture. They were dressed then for the chilly evening, wearing jeans and sweaters. He was sitting at a small table in the basement of his hotel, which served as a bar and restaurant and was decorated with oriental rugs and furniture. On this particular evening the rugs had been rolled up and the tables moved so that a large space in the center of the room was bare. Dim lighting created a sedate atmosphere, which was lost, however, on the young villagers scampering about the room, running outside and dashing in, laughing as they played games in disregard of the adults' solemnity. Twenty or thirty tourists and some Vietnamese were seated, sipping wine, waiting for the concert to begin. The two Japanese girls hesitated in the doorway as all eyes were momentarily fixed on them. They smiled nervously. Martin loved this Asian trait of modesty, this remnant of Confucianism, which was so becoming in women. The two regained their composure and walked to a nearby table.

Meanwhile the first performer had taken his place in the center of the room. He was a small, dark man, wearing the clothes of the Black Hmong; in his hand was a flute-like instrument made of bamboo. His leathery face bespoke a life lived in the wilderness, unaccustomed to recitals before American tourists. With no words he raised the instrument to his lips and began to play. A hush descended over the audience, even the children. At first, Martin heard only harsh exhalations, random, unmelodic and unmusical. They were crude and senseless, not beautiful. In some kind of ugly minorish mode. Neither legato nor staccato. Hollow, airy, lacking the liquid pith of the flute's tone. He looked around at other people's expressions; they were as blank as his. The performer



himself looked blank: his eyes staring sightlessly ahead of him, his fingers the only part of his body that moved. He was just standing there mechanically. Martin continued to watch his fingers for want of anything else to do.

Suddenly he realized that those wiry fingers were the real music behind the notes. They were the theme, the melody. If they and the man himself were ignored, the sound could not be understood. It did not exist in a vacuum, unfolding impersonally through a mathematical logic that determined the proper chord-progressions and the nature of the climactic moments and the resolutions in the cadences; it was an expression inseparable from what was being expressed. In a flash, as he listened to the whispers rasping sweetly from the carved piece of bamboo, Martin saw that this music was not supposed to be “pretty.” It was supposed to be a way of life. It was how the peasant conversed with nature, how he sublimated and humanized the forces he confronted daily. These tones that sounded so artificial and dissonant in a bar would have sounded harmonious if played among rice paddies beneath a starry sky.

Martin sat back and closed his eyes. He still did not really enjoy the music, but if he imagined it under the night sky it calmed him. Its very unpredictability and dissonance settled him. A moment ago he had been acutely conscious of his surroundings. He had scrutinized people’s faces, he had wondered if the performer was nervous, he had wondered if the children were bored, he had ogled the two young women. He had told himself he needed a few shots of vodka to appreciate this music. Now, it seemed, none of those things mattered. He felt quiet not having to follow a melody. There was nothing in the world except darkness and rustic harmonies...

A minute later the man picked up something that looked like a banjo and placed a green leafy thing into his mouth. Without waiting for the applause to die down he started strumming the banjo and blowing into the leaf. The result was a noise that, under normal circumstances, would have so offended Martin’s aesthetic sensibilities as to make him flee the room. The whistle shrieking

from the leaf tried to follow the pitches being plucked on the banjo—successfully, most of the time, at least to the indiscriminating ear. The strings seemed out of tune, though: some were flat, some were sharp, and when their tones lingered a moment they sank. The melody sounded improvised. It wasn't even much of a melody, more like a repetitive series of notes in an exotic minor mode. The ensemble struck Martin as amateurish and childish, more than the preceding had.

When the man finished his song, another performer joined him in front of the audience. A young woman. She was holding a long bamboo flute, longer than the first one. No one noticed, however; all eyes were riveted to the girl herself. Something about her was transcendent. She was petite, probably just over five feet, frail, her skin opaquely translucent. Her body, while not emaciated, was unnaturally thin. Her bony arms were lined with shadows of her veins. Smiling, she nodded to her companion, who nodded back respectfully. The audience waited. Then, as the girl raised the flute to her lips, Martin realized what it was that gave her such an ethereal look: she was deathly pale! Her face was wan and sickly beneath its beauty. The angular cheekbones, which may have been visible due to malnutrition, gave her sharp, defined features that seemed to express a strong character. Yet she looked sickly, undoubtedly: the contrast between her dark costume and her skin color was appalling. It made her luminous, however; he felt as if he were in the presence of an otherworldly being. The impression was strengthened when he heard the first sounds emanate from her flute.

They were in a high register, the range of the piccolo—but with a full tone, reflective of the instrument's size. Not shrill, not harsh, but soft and gentle. Fluttering, from frequent tremolos. Feathery. They seemed to mimic a bird-call, though one with an exquisite timbre and an exceptional range. The melodic thread they spun was bright and pleasant, neither major nor minor. Again Martin felt that he was listening to something being played in a milieu alien to it, before an audience spectating stony-faced, approaching it with a critical Western eye; it belonged outside in

daylight in a field of dandelions, with children dancing around it. Perhaps as men harvested crops nearby. Soon the male performer joined with his banjo and the solo became a duet. It was a contrapuntal interlacing of two lines borrowing motifs from each other, spontaneous but too harmonious not to have been thought-out beforehand. As the song meandered along, increasing in complexity but not thereby losing its charm, Martin saw that the people around him were beginning to enjoy it. There was still the same collective sense of 'I'm listening to this only because I'm in Vietnam and it's something that as a tourist I'm obligated to do,' but beneath this veneer of otherness was an instinctive reaction against it. The foreigners were engrossed in the primitive pastoral strains—and in the mystery of this small young woman standing in a halo of light as she conjured nature in the basement of a high-rise hotel...

"Look out!" Clyde shouted. "What are you doing, man?!" Martin raised his eyes from the ground just in time to see a jeep rumbling towards him. He ran to the side of the road. The jeep rolled past, bucking and lurching over the bumps and craters in the dirt. "Were you day-dreaming, dude?"

"I guess so," Martin mumbled.

"You gotta be careful."

"You okay?" Duong asked. "Very clote—clote call!"

"Sorry."

"When are we gonna be able to see the valley?" Clyde asked. "I'm tired of these houses and trees."

"Soon," said Duong. "After that bend ahead. Very clote."

Martin separated himself from the two men and walked over to the women. They were chattering in Japanese but stopped abruptly to smile at him.

"How are you?" asked Midori.

"Excellent! It's starting to warm up a little, don't you think?"

The girls looked at each other as they vigorously rubbed their arms. "No. It's cold!"

"Well, when you're wearing that! You look like you're going clubbing!"

"So sorry...clubbing?"

"I mean, like you're going to dance in a nightclub in Tokyo."

"Oh!" Hiroko laughed. "Yes. It was bad choice."

"You look like Britney Spears!" he said. They giggled, interpreting it as a compliment. "Do you like Britney Spears?"

"Oh yes. Very sexy. She so good dancer. I like American stars."

"Me too," interjected Midori.

"Ah. Yes," Martin said, "American music is popular everywhere."

"So, many Japanese listen to it. And try to play like them."

"Japanese people watch MTV?"

"Oh yes! Very much. Very cool!"

"You actually like it?" he asked, skeptical.

"Of course," said Hiroko.

"You're not just saying that to be polite?"

The girls laughed. "No! Very cool."

Martin stared at them. He was about to follow up with more questions when a clearing appeared in front of them. No more trees, no more houses obstructed their view of the valley. They were silent as they contemplated the scene.

It was like New Zealand, Martin thought, but on a larger scale. The terraces on the hills covered in amber stalks of rice added a human element to the grandeur. They were geometrically regular, as if God had hired an architect to build a stairway to heaven, who had soon quit for lack of materials. The golden carpet of rice-stalks on the surface of each step lay at a hundred-degree angle to the green grass growing vertically, so that a color sequence of gold-green-gold-green undulated its way around the hillsides up to the summit. "Earth-waves," Martin whispered to himself. "Frozen waves undulating upwards." Periodic human figures waded through the gold fields to harvest the rice, which was then carried to the base of the valley, near a narrow river, and placed in shallow baskets that were shaken in the wind to separate the chaff from the grains. The whole scene, thought Martin, was from a different time, an epic time, though rumblings of tractor-trailers and jeeps and

dynamite explosions in the cliffs where a road was being built proved to him that modernity reaches even into the bowels of the wilderness.

Soon they began to descend into the valley. They followed a winding dirt road of steep decline past half-naked children who stared at them curiously and endearingly. The Japanese girls took pictures constantly. After a while Duong told the four of them that they were about to see a family's house on the side of the road, where they could buy souvenirs or just look around.

"We'll stay there short time," he said. "We have many plates to go."

"Plates?" said Clyde. "Whadya mean?"

Martin translated. "He means places. We have to see a lot today, in only seven hours."

The house in question was a small hut, wood with thatched roofing. The four tourists walked onto the porch, where a young mother was holding her baby and a grandmother and five other people were sitting. Martin thought it inappropriate to invade their home like this, with Duong explaining to him their customs and how they lived as if they were exhibits in a zoo, but they didn't show the slightest embarrassment or irritation. Indeed, they appreciated the foreigners' presence: it was a chance for them to sell the bracelets and necklaces they had made. Martin and the others walked inside the hut to look at its two rooms, which were bare and comfortless, as the natives followed them and repeated robotically the one English phrase they knew but could barely pronounce: "Hello you want this, hello you want this, hello you want this..." "No thanks," said Martin, trying to turn away—but they grabbed him again and out came "Helloyouwantthis" as bracelets were thrust in his face. His buying one only encouraged the others to descend on him. He looked over at Duong for help, but Duong just stood in the corner oblivious to Martin's desperation.

The hut, which was similar to all the huts in all the little villages that speckled the landscape, had a floor of hard dirt, a few wooden stools around two small fires, and two beds (or rather,

platforms) with hard bamboo mats on which everyone slept. There was no chimney: the smoke seeped through the thatched roof. The guests found it a surprisingly cozy, if uncomfortable, home, providing adequate shelter from the wet cold outside. Duong told them that the women usually sat around one of the fires preparing food, while the men sat around the other fire and talked as they smoked tobacco and marijuana from long bamboo pipes.

At length the visitors succeeded in prying themselves from the natives, who were saying “Hello you want this” as enthusiastically as they had been ten minutes before. The Japanese girls waved goodbye as they descended farther into the valley...

Clyde became less talkative as the morning wore on; he complained of aching muscles, fatigue, chills, a runny nose, nausea. “I wonder if I have malaria!” he said. “I haven’t taken my pills in a few days, and I was bitten by a big mosquito yesterday! It’s the mosquitoes that carry malaria, right?” Staggering along absorbed all his energy, which was perfectly fine with Martin. The group became quiet, sunk in the rhythm of the hike, as the sunlight warmed them.

They followed a path along the floor of the valley through fields of tall grass and hemp, which the villagers used to make their clothes. There were also wide swaths of green grassy land next to the river and ponds, where they rested periodically (sitting on large stones in the water or along the shore), watching men thresh and winnow the harvested rice nearby. As the baskets were shaken the husks floated away in the breeze; only the seed remained. A closer look was now possible, too, of the terraced paddies up above: men were cutting the stalks with scythes, then bundling them into sheaves. Duong told Martin that these sheaves had to be thrashed to get the rice out of them, after which it would be spread out on the ground to dry in the sun. The threshing and winnowing was the final step in the process.

“What are the earlier steps,” asked Martin, “before the harvesting? What is the work like?”

“Hard. Many part. Make paddy, put water in, clean it...then make dry...use animal—buffalo—make it flat and wet, make ready for rice, put seed...and many other part. Difficult to tell.”

“It sounds like back-breaking work.”

“Very hard and long time.”

They continued walking. Hmong women passed them with baskets on their backs full of hemp or indigo plants or stalks of rice. They all wore the same dark blue clothes, the same large silver earrings, and some had colorful, intricately woven armbands. Midori took pictures of them, picture after picture, pictures of the male children bent low under stacks of wood, of the female children carrying infants on their backs, of elderly women hunchbacked like question-marks. Hiroko, too, was an appendage of her camera, pointing it at every plant and every person she saw. When they walked by a dilapidated school-building near an open field she ran inside to take a picture of the dark and empty interior.

Martin, for his part, was lost in thought, wondering what it would be like to live here where life was seasonal and cyclical and nature was a spirit to be worshiped. A place where the rhythms of life were the rhythms of nature and had been so for hundreds, thousands, of years, changing not with the centuries but with the seasons. What would winter be like here? What would it be like to construct terraced paddies year after year and plow them with buffalo and tend them for months until it looked as if they had been created not for one's sustenance but for purely aesthetic reasons, being as beautiful as anything Martin had ever seen? What would a sunset look like here, with warmth shining on warmth, gold on waves of gold, as vermilion streaks stretched across the sky from the sun low over the mountains? It would be a hard life, yes, and he did not envy these people; but it would have a simple beauty, a Tolstoyan simplicity. To the Western mind, in any case, the thought of being one with nature in the shadow of mountains had shades of sublimity.

And what was the mindset of these distant villagers? How did they experience life? Having lived in the pure air of the mountains in northwest Vietnam all their lives, closer by miles to the clouds

than most of humanity—every morning breathing in thick white clouds that hung low until midday—their very consciousness must have had little in common with Martin's. Until recently their world had been a natural autarky, complete unto itself; the pale strangers who besieged them more and more each year and brought them plastic and electricity must appear to be aliens of some friendly species. How would an animistic mind orient itself toward cameras and jeeps? Probably it would be fascinated and frightened at first but would become bored as the novelty wore off. Eventually it would just try to take what it could from the newcomers to make its life more comfortable—as the natives wore plastic sandals now and some Western clothing. In many ways, Martin knew, these people were not much different from him, for instance in their ordinary desires and motivations, their love of love and friendliness, their fondness for bright colors and leisurely play; yet in other ways they inhabited a different universe, infinitely parochial and repetitive, but peaceful. To what extent did they understand sarcasm and cynicism? Did they experience adolescent existential doubts? Did they know the agony of unrequited love, or the spiritual pain of ennui? Were they still capable of being thrilled by pink feather-tips in a lavender dawn, or the gentle sunburn of a twilit sky?—or, indeed, the majesty of the very ground beneath and around them? Surely not as Martin was.

The travelers came to a village of six huts spread over seventy or eighty yards. Chickens, pigs, dogs, and naked children ambled aimlessly; a wizened old man sat on a wooden stool; an elderly woman sewed underneath six or seven pieces of indigo cloth hanging from beams attached to her hut; younger women welcomed the travelers with smiles and friendly questions. The huts here were larger than others they had passed and more sturdily constructed, with wooden, not thatched, roofs. Martin looked inside one of them and even saw a small television; middle-aged men sat around it in silence looking at the white images. He was amused that they had a TV but no bathroom: a hole in the ground behind the hut, not at all private, served as the bathroom. The kitchen (or



what functioned as a kitchen) was only a few feet away, on the other side of some wooden planks.

He was struck by a thought, a question that demanded an immediate answer. He walked over to Duong, who was trying to comfort Clyde as he rested in the grass complaining about his condition.

"Duong," said Martin, "where do people have sex around here? There's no privacy! And what are relationships like? Do men and women get married?"

"Yeh. Married. Girl fifteen or sixteen, young."

"How do marriages happen?"

"Girl and boy come town, meet."

"What?"

"Love market in town on weekend."

"Love market? How does that work?"

"Boy see girl, if he like, sing to her and she sing. Next week see again—if parent say yes."

"So, girls and boys gather in the market and look at each other?"

"Yeh."

"And if a boy sees a girl he likes, he goes up and sings to her?"

"Sing and talk."

"And if they like each other they'll come back and meet again later, if they get their parents' approval."

"Yeh."

"Interesting. That's a lot simpler than in America! But where do couples have sex? There's no privacy here."

"Sex very quiet, in house."

"So a married couple has sex in the house where their children and parents live?"

"Yeah."

"Wow." Clearly these people did not have Western self-consciousness about their bodies.

In fact, the more Martin saw of them, the more he liked them. As he ate lunch in the village with Midori and Hiroko he had to

answer dozens of questions from eager children and young women, questions about America, about his love life, about his impressions of this place. Occasionally the natives' imperfect English led to some amusing misunderstandings. At one point, a girl named Anh asked, "How old can you drink in America?" "Twenty-one," Martin said. She was shocked. "You can't have asshole until you're twenty-one?!" When Martin burst out laughing she realized her mistake, and everyone around them teased her about it. Anh was very outgoing, but she was merely an extreme version of all the young people, who all projected curiosity and wide-eyed friendliness—including the shy ones. The little ones were simply adorable, staring and smiling at him with as little self-consciousness as their older siblings. Even the adults, the elderly, the men—almost all were welcoming and cheerful.

Martin found it strange, indeed, that many of the adults seemed nearly as happy and bubbly as the children despite their shrunken size and premature agedness. Thirty-year-olds looked like fifty-year-olds, wrinkled, crooked, diminutive, half-toothless. Yet their smiles beamed like an eight-year-old's. Despite all the hardships of life up here in the mountains they seemed happy, childlike as Hindu sages. Martin called to mind, randomly, Maxim Gorky's autobiography—he had read it recently—which described the wretchedness of Russia's proletariat during the Industrial Revolution, and he realized that there were in fact two kinds of poverty: the humanizing and the dehumanizing. Gorky had grown up in a factory-culture for which humans were fodder like in a war, less valuable than a hunk of metal; Anh and Duong and Lê lived in a society that was poor, very poor, but was centered around a community of relative equals who lived in the lap of nature's luxury.

The sun had passed its zenith in the sky now and the day had gone from cold to almost-warm. The travelers pressed on, over fields and hills, up onto the terraces where men were working. There was a footpath beside the crops which they walked on. Martin took some pictures of the area from this vantage-point because he thought it looked like a three-dimensional painting, or a

visual transcription of the second movement of Beethoven's fifth piano concerto. (That comparison seemed odd to him, but it surfaced in his mind so he wrote it down later in his journal.) He heard the noise of heavy machinery somewhere in the distance.

Later in the afternoon, when everyone was getting tired and the hike was almost over, they came to another village (the fourth they had seen). It offered the same sights and smells they had grown accustomed to, the not unpleasant earthy smells of old weather-exposed wood, fires in firepits and smoke soaked up by thatched roofs, mud and wet grass and autumn. Martin was about to rest on a stool when a young woman emerged from a hut and walked in his direction. He stood up. 'She looks familiar,' he thought. 'Have I seen her somewhere?' Then it came to him: she was the one who had performed in the concert last night! Her white face with its vaguely sad expression was unmistakable. Evidently she lived in this village. For a minute he stood there dumbly; she disappeared into a hut and reemerged seconds later. He was disturbed, again, by her wraith-like, ethereal beauty. She walked slowly with her bare feet barely making an imprint on the earth; she stopped and adjusted her black hair slowly, loosened it from its bun so that it fell over her shoulders. Just before she was about to reenter her hut Martin coughed and walked toward her.

"Excuse me," he said gently, "do you speak English?"

She turned around and smiled. "A little."

"I think I saw you last night in a concert. You were playing a flute or something."

"Yes, that was me." Her accent, surprisingly, was not very noticeable.

"You did a great job. That was the best part of the concert."

"Thank you."

"How did you learn to speak English so well?"

"I learned it from Americans like you. In the market. My parents helped me too."

"That was wise of them. They knew English would be a useful skill to have."

"Yes, it is more useful every year because of travelers."

Martin liked watching her talk. But he didn't know what else to say.

"How often do you go to the town?" he asked.

"Every weekend. I sell blankets that my mom weaves and I play music for people."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Yes, I do." She smiled with her eyebrows wrinkled in puzzlement. Martin was starting to feel foolish and self-conscious. Why was he talking to her? What had he hoped to accomplish?

He looked around. Duong and the Japanese girls were off behind a hut talking to some women; Clyde was lying on the grass with his face exhausted from the strain of the hike. Men were still threshing rice hundreds of yards away even though dusk was approaching; some were singing, the wind carrying their voices to the village. Their songs had no recognizable melody and seemed to interfere with each other, but somehow that was perfect. Any other way of singing would have seemed out of place. This was mountain-music, Martin thought—the spirituals of North Vietnamese peasants. Neither plaintive nor uplifting, they were a musical expression of the harvest.

Martin felt the rice wine he had been offered a few minutes ago swimming in his head. He hadn't had much but it was strong, stronger than Western wine. He turned to the girl again and looked at her thin face. That's why he had wanted to talk to her, he remembered: he wanted to say, for some reason, that she looked different from everyone here.

"What's your name?"

"Dào," she said.

He paused. He couldn't tell why he was so curious about her.

"You live in a very beautiful place, Dào," he said. "You're lucky."

"I think so."

"Is this your village?"

"Yes, I live here with my parents."

He was attracted to her, to her aura of separateness and aloofness. Suddenly he was sick of the pleasantries, the fakeness;

he wanted to talk to her like a friend, a real human being. She looked at him expectantly, clearly wondering where this conversation was going.

"Sorry, I'm a little tired from the hike," he said. "I just wanted to say hi because I recognized you. And also, I can't help saying that you look—pretty, and...interesting."

"Thank you..." She smiled.

"I'd like to talk to you longer, but I have to go. Can I just ask... The reason I recognized you is because you look different from other people I've seen here. You're whiter...even whiter than me...and, I don't know, you have an unusual brightness and beauty."

Her smile slowly dissolved. She looked at him intently with sad eyes. "You're different from most people too," she said. "Most people don't talk about how I look."

"I'm sorry if..."

"No, it's okay." She looked away for a moment. It seemed to Martin that this girl was very self-possessed for having lived in the countryside all her life. "I look this way because I am sick. Very sick." She sighed and looked up at the layers of amber grass to her left, the terraces on the hillside. "I will die soon, I think."

Martin gaped at her. "What? You will die?"

"Yes. I am sick." She lowered her eyes as Martin stared in disbelief. Her words echoed in his mind: "I will die soon, I think." What? This situation had become suddenly surreal. Maybe the alcohol was influencing his thoughts too. But he felt inexpressible sadness as he absorbed what she had said.

"You...you..."

"I'm sorry, I have to go," she said. "I must help my parents." And she turned around and disappeared into her home.

"What just happened?" Martin asked himself. 'She's going to die? When will she die? Can she be helped somehow?' It was so unreal he didn't know what to think. Instead he just gazed at the mountains in the distance and listened to jeeps driving on dirt roads above, and dynamite explosions in the cliffs.

## Chapter 7

### The Book of Joe

I<sup>222</sup> -

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<sup>222</sup> I feel compelled to write a brief apology for having written this ambitious work. To write something that has the structure of the Book of Job but is a complete reversal of its spirit is brazen enough; but to attempt to write it in a style similar to that of the original, yet sufficiently different from it so as not to invite charges of “derivativeness” or (even worse) “plagiarism,” is downright foolhardy. Of course, had it even been my intention, I would have been unable to write in a style adhering consistently to the miraculous prose poetry of the Book of Job and the Psalms; I have not the talent. Nor, indeed, has any person alive, or any person in the last five or ten centuries. –But “talent” may be the wrong word here (although, in *my* case, it is also the right one): circumstances have so changed since “Job” was written that, even if, say, the author had been reincarnated in a more

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modern age, he could not have written it. And it certainly would not have been read with pleasure by anyone. They would have considered it absurd. The time has long passed in which something like “Job” could have been written: the epic era of marvelous Hebraic naïveté has irrevocably vanished. Nowadays, satire is the only purpose for which this most “sincere” and un-self-conscious of literary styles can be used. And even then it is a risk, for the style in question is essentially tragic, while satire is comical. The satirist must dispense with lofty sentiments and their lofty expressions except when they are meant to contrast with mediocrity, and in such a way that the latter is emphasized. (Incidentally, it will be evident to the reader that “The Book of Joe” is not a pure satire, in that it has thematic overtones that aren’t comedic.) Therefore, even had I the talent, I could but rarely have afforded to rise to the tragic grandeur and style of “Job,” for fear of adulterating the satirical element more than I already had by the inclusion of philosophy, idealism, and, in short, *sincerity*.

To give an example of the latter: while Joe’s interlocutors remain self-parodies

There was a man in the land of Uzi, whose name was Joe; and in his own eyes this man was perfect and upright, and one that held Mammon in awe, and eschewed Justitia.

And there were born unto him seventeen sons and thirteen daughters, for his ex-wives and ex-concubines had been fruitful and multiplied copiously.

His substance also was a billion dollars, and three mansions, and a thousand employees, and a sprawling search-engine website, and great political clout; so that this man was among the

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throughout, Joe's suffering progressively teaches him lessons about the human condition, and he rises to wisdom step by step (until in the end he reaches the pinnacle and renounces Mammon). One of the points of the "satire," therefore, is to answer Job's original question of "*Why suffering?*" (or "Why do good people suffer?"); and the answer is that suffering propels us to universal wisdom. It is an integral part of the good life.

greatest of the children of the West.

And though he was unable to attend his children's birthdays or to remember their names, being a pious lover of work whose mind was uncluttered with soft sentiments, he sent them greeting cards on occasion.

But when they invited him to feasts, Joe would do his fatherly duty and gorge himself on food and wine, and personify his epicurean ideal; for he had a taste for debauchery and gluttony and other refined pleasures.

And it was so, in the midst of such revels, his mind made selfless through drink, that Joe sank to the ground and prostrated himself before Almighty Mammon, and offered prayers unto Him according to the number of his children;

For Joe said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and renounced Mammon in their hearts, and embraced charity or socialism, or become

spendthrifts scornful of the Protestant ethic.

Thus thought Joe continually, when not contemplating the stock market and price-fluctuations and hostile takeovers and the prospects of his wealth.

¶ Now there was a day when the sons of God (whose name is Mammon) came to present themselves before him, and Justitia came also among them.

And Mammon said, Whence comest thou? And Justitia answered, From walking to and fro in the earth, amongst men and their follies.

And Mammon said unto Justitia, Hast thou considered my servant Joe, a perfect and upright man, who feareth God and escheweth inefficiency?

And Justitia answered, It is not for nought that he feareth God: thou hast blessed him with wealth and power and whores galore. Withdraw thy favor from him and he will curse thee to thy face.

And Mammon said, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power. Only upon himself put not forth thy hand. So Justitia went forth from the presence of God.

Now Justitia, unbeknownst to Mammon, had her own reason for heaping misfortune on Joe's unsuspecting head, to wit, her duty to punish iniquity and avenge injury.

For Joe was guilty not merely of gluttony, greed, lust, vanity, pride, and hypocrisy, but also of theft from company funds, insider trading, bribery, and callousness to human suffering.

Often had he beheld with an unseeing eye the travails of the wretched of the earth; he had not stretched forth his opulent hand bedecked with diamond rings to give so much as a nickel to a beggar; neither had he scrupled to destroy his hirelings' lives by depriving them of their livelihood.



True it is that Mammon knew of this; but he saw not the need for vengeance, as Joe's sins, named such by Justitia, were named rather virtues by Mammon, consistent with his teachings.

Thus he had surpassing love for Joe, exceeding that for all his other creatures, and would not harm him, unless it were to appease his own vanity (as in this case).

And so it was that Justitia gathered the reins of retribution in her own hands and whipped them upon the crown of Joe's bald head.

Ordinarily, when her wrath was not inflamed, she would conjure a whirlwind of legal wrangling and due process of law;

And she would place her victim in its navel, and he would bow down his head as his fate was decided by pettifoggers and sophists.

Well knew Justitia that justice was often aborted in such cases; but Mammon bound

her not to tamper with the law, its current state being friendly to his world dominion;

and when she assayed to defy him, the wrath of Heaven was upon her.

Thus, had she set in motion the gears of legal machinery to grind Joe into poverty and disrepute, her designs would have been frustrated by involute legal machinations.

Wherefore Justitia chose to deceive God, the better to know victory over injustice.

## II

It fell on a day when he was eating and drinking wine in his favorite harlot's house,

That there came a messenger unto Joe, and said, Thine employees were managing thy business for thee, as thou frolicked with yonder maiden (yea, I applaud thy taste);

And the fire of heaven fell upon them, and consumed them in a blast that shook the foundations and collapsed the

pillars of thy corporation's home;

And I bethought me to have seen Arabs across the street, gazing with sinister mirth on the wreckage of thy life and thine employees'; peradventure they were Al Qaeda terrorists; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The price of thy company's shares hath plummeted, and thy wealth hath dissolved like the fabric of a vision, and thy days as a prosperous plutocrat are numbered.

While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons, informed of thy calamity, have judged thou hast incurred the displeasure of Justitia;

And to expiate their own sins they have forsworn Mammon, and deemed him a foul pollutant of civilization;

And, repentant, they have set forth on a life of charity and

devotion to the principles of compassion and loving-kindness.

Then Joe arose, and rent the robes of his messengers, and flailed his fists on the oaken table before him, and fell down upon the ground, unsteady from the wine:

And he said, Naked came I out of my lover's loins, and naked shall I return thither: God loveth not him whose knees buckle beneath adversity, who embraceth an insincere apostasy or letteth hardship slay his spirit;

Fortune smileth not on him who forsaketh his principles under the burden of appalling vicissitudes;

Therefore shall I not renounce mine avarice or dissolute ways, nor my work ethic; neither shall I follow my sons' treachery by disavowing Mammon, though He abandon me who have ever served Him faithfully.

Thus Joe bade his messengers depart and returned to the

pleasures from whence they had distracted him; for he needed inspiration to plot the resurrection of his corporate empire.

III

Now it came to pass that the sons of God were again summoned to his presence, as his almighty lust for power would brook no secrecy amongst his subalterns; for that they might conspire to cast off his yoke and usurp his throne.

And Justitia came also among them to present herself before Mammon.

And Mammon said unto Justitia, Behold, my servant Joe hath shunned the path of perfidy to which thou temptedst him by the example of his sons, fearful lest he be blighted by mine ire;

Neither hath he weakened in resolve, though thou assayed to destroy his will;

And in all things hath he not wavered from the ranks of the holy.

And Justitia answered God, and said, Joe's faith is indeed mighty; but let him taste the bitterness of penury, and feel the pains of plague, and he shall renounce thee to thy face.

And Mammon said unto Justitia, Do with him as thou list; only spare his life.

So Justitia went forth from the presence of Mammon, and smote Joe's mansions with fire from the vaults of Al Qaeda, and smote his bank accounts with the malign deeds of computer hackers, and smote his body with venereal diseases;

and his privy member she smote with prolonged flaccidity.

Her fell designs prospered: Joe's hopes were slain, his spirit crippled; he bewailed shrilly his loss of manly prowess.

And his wife took offense at the noise, and said, Thou hast never had integrity; thou hast thyself reaped this evil,

polluting the land with thy whoredoms;<sup>223</sup> wherefore cease thy ululations.

Whereupon Joe answered, Thou sayest what thou knowest not. The market is a fickle god: today it doles out privation, tomorrow prosperity.

And the market is a vengeful god: if treated not with respect, it will repudiate erstwhile bonds.

I must have offended it; only *that* can explain my present ills.

Yet Joe's acts belied his feigned equanimity, for his wailings persisted through the night: and he supplicated to Mammon, that He might restore the vigor to his privy member.

His myriad wenches forsook him; the media thronged about him; and his friends scorned him.

Three alone remained loyal, whom he had known from childhood. When they heard of all the evil that was come upon him, they came from their homes to mourn with him: Jim the Politician, and Bob the Academic, and Jon the Preacher.

They sat down among the ashes with Joe as he wept.

#### IV

After seven days and seven nights, wherein each friend feared to speak lest he be blasted by Joe's anger, Jim the Politician spake, and said,

Lo, Joe, we friends of thine have sat upon the cinders of this hearth these seven days and seven nights;

Not a word have we spoken, respecting thy grief and thy right to enjoy it in silence, despite the discomfort engendered by our sitting upon cinders for a week.

Yea, we have respected thy rights, as befitteth good citizens of this our great republic, the mightiest in the

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<sup>223</sup> Jeremiah 3:2.

earth, which quelleth dissent  
as the lion's roaring quelleth  
the whelp's yelpings;

As the sun's rays drain the  
desert of its rivers; as the  
demagogue casteth a spear  
through the heart of the free  
thinker;—

Verily, said Bob the Academic,  
thine analogies are not  
to thy purpose: for in  
comparing our nation to a star  
which reduceth rivers to their  
beds, thou dost not honor our  
nation;

And in drawing a parallel  
between our republic and a  
demagogue, thou impugnst  
the good intentions of our  
government;—

Jim! said Joe, Say thou thy  
point; and Bob, hold thy  
peace.

Joe, said Jim, we have sat  
with thee for seven days, and  
our minds wax restless; our  
stomachs rumble with  
hunger's void; and we weary  
of thine interminable sobs.

Wherefore, tell us thy complaints,  
that we might comfort thee,  
and thou mightst take pity on us.

So Joe recited the litany of his  
griefs.

V

Let the fool perish in whom  
the thought is born, I shall  
devote my life to the glory of  
Capital.

Let that man's rash faith in  
the cash-nexus blind him; let  
it fuse scales to his eyes, so  
that his vision is clouded, his  
mind murky, his life's aspect  
overcast.

Let his hopes be dashed  
against the rock of misfortune  
and shivered to pieces;

Let them be broken and  
shattered upon collision with  
the iron dictates of the market.

Let not his lust for lucre be  
slaked; neither let his greed  
for power suffer consummation;  
but let his demon consume him.

Let his obdurate will guide  
him to the brink of destruction;

Let his petty wants strip him  
of foresight, that he not see  
the abyss in his way.

Let not his commerce with  
men prosper; neither let his  
assays of women thrive.

Let him know the depths of  
stygian woe as he cowereth in  
his den of shame.<sup>224</sup>

For I was that man: I was that  
fool; and for that have I been  
punished: and for that I curse  
myself.

And lo, if I must suffer, then  
must all men! It were unjust  
otherwise. Wherefore I say,  
Let calamities befall the  
wealth-monger, equal in  
number and greater in  
intensity than mine own!

Let his children be fetters unto  
him; let his wife persecute  
him hourly, and give him no  
peace;

Let his creditors hound him,  
as the lamb is hounded by the  
wolf;

Let my troubles be trebled on  
him, that I may look upon his  
disasters and laugh, and  
thereby have relief from mine  
own.

Oh, why died I not from mine  
embrace with my concubine?  
Why did I not give up the  
ghost when I gave up my  
seed?

Why were the loins that I  
enjoyed full of crabs? Why  
the breasts that I kissed not  
full at all?

(For then might I have had  
ample memories to succor me  
in my wretchedness.)

Howbeit, my lot then outdid  
my lot now; for I am denied  
the touch of woman, who  
despiseth me.

Alas, that fruit was sweet! its  
nectar nourishing, its scent  
ambrosial! Dearly I miss it.  
My days are as years without  
it.

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<sup>224</sup> "den of shame": John Milton,  
*Paradise Lost*, Book 2, line 58.

As dearly miss I the cold  
metallic feel of specie in mine  
hand, coursing through my  
fingers, like to a waterfall  
cascading through a crevasse.

In bygone days I might have  
*bought* that waterfall, where-  
with to seduce a woman;

In bygone days I might have  
bought the river that is its  
source, wherewith to charm a  
woman,

Or perchance to gaze at my  
wavering likeness on the  
waters, smitten with the  
beauty thereof.

In bygone days, life was an  
oyster and I a fisherman, and  
my dreams were so many  
pearls stuck in the flesh of  
life.

Whatsoever mine eyes desired  
I kept not from them;<sup>225</sup> I  
withheld not mine avarice  
from any object;

Ambition was my idol,<sup>226</sup> and  
I was a god among men.

Alas, it is all come to nought!  
Ashes only remain of my  
former radiant glory.

Curse the fool that I was, not  
to cherish what I had! Curse  
my callousness to the feelings  
of the market (verily, a  
*sensitive* God)!

Curse all men who yet are  
happy as I despair!

VI

Then Bob the Academic  
answered and said,

I have assayed to understand  
thee; but thou speakest as the  
Sphinx.

Thou indictest the rapacity of  
the “big Bourse wolves,” as  
Karl Marx called them (*vide*  
*The Class Struggles in*  
*France*, 1850, Part IV),  
though thou art thyself such a  
one.

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<sup>225</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:10.

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<sup>226</sup> Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto  
1, stanza 217.

Thou decriest faith in the "cash-nexus," though it hath ever been thine own (and, I think, still is).

Moreover, thou prayest that such faith may blind the believer; yet surely thy denunciation were of greater pith hadst thou said that such faith doth blind the believer, and not that thou wouldst like it to.

Lo, what meanest thou by "fool"? That word hath manifold connotations. E.g., Erasmus of Rotterdam *praised* it. (*Vide In Praise of Folly*.) It would strengthen thine argument wert thou to be more precise.

Again, what meanest thou by "assays of women"? Denoteth that phrase sexual endeavors? Or merely *romantic* ones, or friendly ones?

"Commerce with men" is, likewise, ambiguous. Intendest thou *business*, or only social interaction?

Thine entire speech was plagued with obscurity. It is

my contention that thou wouldst be well-advised to revise it; yea, to make it more precise.

Howbeit, I was impressed with thy quoting of Ecclesiastes (*vide* Ecclesiastes, chap. 2).

And I noticed that thou borrowedst a phrase of Byron's (*vide Don Juan*) and of Milton's (*vide Paradise Lost*), wherefore I congratulate thee.

The import of thy speech was suitable to the occasion: poignant, possessing enough pathos to pluck the heart-strings but not so much that it sank to bathos;

Somewhat malicious, as was appropriate, yet duly self-condemnatory;

Full of the anguish to be expected from one whose life is in ruins: yea, whose sole remaining task is but to lament his lost greatness.

Thus, on the whole, with the aforementioned qualifications,



thy threnody excelled in  
virtue, and I approved of it.

VII

Then Jim the Politician spake  
and said,

Joe, my pity for thee gusheth  
as a fountain from mine eyes;

I look upon thee huddled in  
the dirt, shaking in thy limbs,  
and I feel my hair age in  
color.

My soul, made heavy and a  
burden to me, trembleth  
beneath its own weight.

Behold, the dew-drop palpi-  
tates when the leaf is shaken;  
my heart doth the same, when  
thou art as a frail leaf.

Like Atlas, I am bent under  
the world's weight; for the  
sight of thee humbled is more  
than I can bear.

Such a king, mighty in deeds  
and spirit, reduced to such a  
beggar! The sight thereof  
trieth my strength, and maketh  
me to question my—  
hypocrisy.

Lo, I must be thy ballast: I  
fear lest the temptation, in  
thine affliction, to harm  
thyslf may prove too great.

Wherefore heed thou my  
words, that thou mayst be  
comforted.

¶ Blame not thyslf for thy  
torments: they are not  
punishments; they spring not  
from thy misdeeds.

They are accidents, with the  
significance of a feather's  
path in the wind, or the  
thunder of a stormy sea.

Lo, the world is an iniquitous  
place, wherein good reapeth  
evil and the wicked vanquish  
the wise; sins go unpunished,  
while virtue cometh to  
nought.

Thou art blameless: it is the  
world which is damnable.

Yet remember, thou livest in  
the one country wherein  
justice prevaieth, and the  
meek are blessed!

God loveth democracy; God  
loveth capitalism; God loveth

the poor in spirit (like thee);  
above all, God loveth our  
republic and its citizens;

And so I say, our country is  
great! and thou shalt not long  
be forsaken, for thou livest in  
a great country.

Other nations are as jackals  
scavenging our waste, or  
barnacles feeding from the  
whale; we alone govern the  
world and the universe.

And we abandon not our  
friends, if they be powerful;  
so shall we not abandon thee.

Thy troubles have surely  
blinded thee, for thou seest  
not these truths. If the Market  
doth not right thy wrongs,  
then shall I:

Yea, I shall write a bill to  
remedy thy poverty and  
subsidize thy recovery, like to  
the laws passed in support of  
Terri Schiavo;

(Oh, that their effect had been  
as intended, and her glorious  
life had been prolonged  
fifteen years more!)

But this time, I promise thee,  
it will achieve its object; even  
thy rehabilitation.

Thou shalt be as a sultan, with  
palaces greater in number than  
an emperor's; with hirelings  
greater in servility than the  
American masses; with  
harlots greater in skill than  
Japan's geishas!

Thou shalt be more than an  
internet mogul: thy works  
shall reach across the earth,  
into the jungles of Congo and  
the deserts of Persia;

Thy real estate shall raze the  
rainforests of the Amazon and  
tame the wildness of the Alps:  
it shall dwarf the grandeur of  
the Pyramids!

Then shalt thou turn thine eye  
to the past, which is now the  
present, and survey thy recent  
trials, and remember the  
darkness of thy descent, so  
distant from the brilliance of  
thy rebirth;

And thou shalt reflect that the  
sun riseth only after setting;  
that the rainbow appeareth  
only after the rain; that spring

blossometh out of winter, and  
the young life is borne from  
the bloody womb;

And thou shalt then give  
thanks for thy fall into the  
valley of desolation.

Lo, I shall bring all this to  
pass, be it through bribery or  
extortion or the granting of  
political favors or the  
arranging of high-minded,  
productive compromises.

I ask for nought in recom-  
pense but thy sublime  
friendship, which giveth me  
pure joy.

(Howbeit, if I undertake thy  
salvation thou shalt contract  
certain pecuniary obligations.)

### VIII

Joe answered thus:

I thank thee, Jim, for thine  
unselfish devotion, but it  
availeth not.

Thy legislative brethren have  
personated Mammon and  
forgotten me: I bring them no  
profit, and they bring me no  
sympathy.

They shall submerse thy  
project in the swamp of  
committees and subcomm-  
ittees and sub-subcommittees.

Moreover, orators like thee  
speak with a golden tongue  
and act with leaden limbs; I  
shall be dead ere thy promise  
come to fruition.

(And lo, I doubt not but thy  
demanded guerdon will be in  
excess of reason: I am no  
Midas, though thou take me  
for one.)

Nay, Mammon hath deserted  
me, and thou hast the power  
of an ant.

I am now but a worm  
burrowing in the dark of  
memory; the livid past  
haunteth me and maketh my  
countenance as a ghost's.

Memories paralyze me,  
reduce me to an avatar of  
regret; *even* so my soul is like  
the cinders whereon I sit.

Solitary images crowd in the  
eye of my mind, beclouded  
not by my tears: I perceive  
them in the lucency of sorrow.

Lo, my grief defieth expression.

The roseate cheek of youth smileth no more on me; the freshness of the virgin recoileth from one so aged as I.

The glittering chimeras of youth have dulled into the dun banality of truth;

Melancholy and its mask, cynicism, have supplanted boyish elation.

My life, mine achievements, are dust;—whither (let it be so!) my body shall shortly return.

Behold, such pleasures have I known as could fill an eternity of recollection; such satiety have they reached as would fill Solomon himself with envy:

The frosted crystal glass, etchings of Bacchus thereon, brimmeth with champagne, bubbly and tingly on the tongue; this have I experienced.

The Pinot Noir, enthroned in a translucent chalice, is a liquid velvet waiting to warm the palate; this have I experienced.

The tender steak, juicy as a ripe pomegranate, sprinkled with crisp cooked onion-shreds, placed beside a steaming potato still covered by its skin, its innards buttery and creamy, maketh the salivary glands to leak in torrents; this have I experienced.

A lively conversation, without malice or competition, wherein two minds commune unhampered by dissemblance, displaying wit and wisdom, is a pleasure equaled by few; this have I experienced.

A friendship, that rarest of commodities, that ennobling affection between mutual minds,<sup>227</sup> without which life is a miasma through which one gropeth blindly, choking: this is rather a necessity than a

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<sup>227</sup> “mutual minds”: *ibid.*, stanza 216.

pleasure; and this have I experienced.

The comely maiden whom one embraceth in love, inhaling her moist breath, kissing her milky breasts; the panting of bosoms sweating together; the soul's love-exalting martyrdom!: this, too, have I experienced.

Alas, but I knew it not! These were all *little* to me, and trite.

Foolish is the heart of man! which taketh for littleness all things that are great, and for greatness all things that are little.

Would that I could converse with my youthful self, though he heed me not: I would tell him, Savor thou thy diversions;

*Dally* as thou treadest thy primrose path; for thou shalt miss it ere long.

Howbeit, he would reck not my rede:<sup>228</sup> his spirit would

remain in the carnal state of his body, wherein pleasure is instinct and instinct is mindless.

Yea, mine appetites were sated, so that I wearied of them; but my happiness was sickly, for I knew not whereof I wearied.

I knew not the meaning of my discontent.

Indeed, I bethought myself rather blessed than discontented; but I knew not what blessedness is: and therein lay my discontent.

—Alas, the heart of man is an enigma: I can discern no coherence therein, but chaos only;

All is tumult and contradiction, beside which nature's violence is weak.

An eternity would not suffice for understanding: how much less seventy years! Seventy brief years!

Yea, time's pinions are swift. All my happiness was brief as

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<sup>228</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, scene iii.

a zephyr, which caresses the  
cheek and is gone.

And now even the memories  
thereof are poisoned.

IX

Lo, though my soul crieth out  
for pleasures, they are mere  
ornaments; erewhile, my  
substance was my *money*.

But for money, my life would  
have been as a yawl tossed in  
a tempest, anchored by  
nothing.

But for mine acquisitive  
passion, my diffuse urges  
would have had no rallying  
cry.

I would have been an  
orderless assemblage of appe-  
tites, conscious of no self, like  
to an infant.

And mine enterprises would  
have been infantile.

Behold, I was no *idle* votarist  
of Mammon:<sup>229</sup> I built shrines

in His honor, wherein I  
prostrated myself in prayer;

I proselytized and converted  
thousands; I gave sacrificial  
offerings unto Him.

For I loved money as the  
philosopher loveth truth; even  
as Narcissus loved his  
reflection, so I loved money.

Though I am ugly, money  
made me beautiful; though  
my soul was leprous, I was  
adored.

Though I defiled Hymen's  
bed, money made it consens-  
ual; though I was a whore,  
money made me a pimp.

Money and I cohabited as  
wife and husband: when I  
spent sleepless nights  
studying my bank accounts, I  
sent Money to the opera,  
where her luster outshone the  
music;

And when I regaled party-  
goers with tales of my  
success, Money played the

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<sup>229</sup> See Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, Act IV, scene iii. This

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scene also inspired a few of the  
following lines.

anchorite and secluded herself  
in my den, minding my  
finances.

Our mutual devotion rivaled  
Antony and Cleopatra's; our  
loyalty inspired entrepreneurs  
everywhere.

Alas! what would I not have  
done for thee, Money, hadst  
thou not betrayed me!

And why? Did I not court thee  
with greater deference than  
thine other suitors?

Did I not anticipate thy needs?  
Was I not sensitive to thy  
fluctuations?

Thou hast cruelly wronged  
me. Thou hast acted without  
justice or judgment. Even as  
grim Saturn acted, so hast  
thou, Mammon.<sup>230</sup>

Behold, moreover, the issue  
of thy malice: my friends,  
base flatterers all, have  
forgotten me.

They have left me in this  
Hades, with three non-entities  
for companions; yea, though  
my boils run pus and I grovel  
in mud, they have left me.

Thou strumpet friendship!  
Verily I despise thee and thine  
emissaries.

Alas, too late have I learned  
the lesson of Timon of  
Athens: Mammon is fickle,  
and friends are the same.

X

Then Jon the Preacher answered and said,

Ye unbelieving pagans! Ye  
impious freethinkers! Ye deny  
the true Lord and set up idols  
in His stead.

Whereas the Jews under  
Moses worshipped the golden  
calf, which Aaron molded for  
them, ye worship gold!—  
which ye call Mammon, and  
the Market.

Ye ascribe Laws thereto  
(though ye say, falsely, that  
the Market is the *Lawgiver*,  
and ye are the receivers); and

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<sup>230</sup> Saturn, the father of Jupiter in the pantheon of Roman gods, ate his children (not including Jupiter).

ye believe they are manifest in  
the rest of Creation;

Yea, ye add the sin of pan-  
theism to the sin of idolatry.

Behold, Jehovah forged the  
world in the smithy of His  
soul:<sup>231</sup> ye are therefore made  
in His image; yet ye are  
ungrateful.

Indeed, it seemeth that your  
conscience He left uncreated.

Howbeit, all that passeth  
before your eyes is His work;  
*even* the earth, ministering  
munificently to our needs: the  
central orb in the universe  
(and we its central inhab-  
itants);

Yea, and the waters thereon,  
and the skies thereof;

The great Sequoia, with its  
celestial ambition; the tulip  
and the hyacinth, which  
embroider the ground;

The leviathan that churneth  
the ocean's brine; the wingèd  
sprites that slice the air.

Verily, I say unto you, His  
omnipotence is matched by  
His infinite goodness, the  
which is evident from  
society's perfect benignity.

He hath further shown it by  
infusing me with the divine  
craving for little boys: when I  
play with them, my soul  
climbeth to pinnacles of pious  
fervor.

(He shall surely smite into  
oblivion the pending law-  
suits.)

Lo, all who doubt me doubt  
Him; and all who doubt Him  
are doomed to endure fire and  
brimstone for eternity.

He is merciful, yes; but He  
*really hateth* people who do  
not believe in Him.

All ye evolutionists, all ye  
atheists, all ye gays, all ye  
non-Christians, all ye dis-  
believers in the Gospel of Jon:  
woe betide you!

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<sup>231</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the  
Artist as a Young Man*, the end of  
the last chapter.



Verily, verily, I say unto thee,  
Joe, Jehovah is wroth with  
thee, for thou deniest Him:  
thence come thy tribulations.

Yet despair not: thou wert  
once my friend, and I will  
give thee advice;

(I heard a small boy whisper it  
to himself as we cavorted in  
my church:)

Affliction is a treasure!<sup>232</sup> Till  
thou art matured by it, thou  
hast not affliction enough.

Till thou hast shriven unto  
God, thou art surely not riven  
enough.

Yea, he whose nature is  
catholic knoweth pain; he  
who is small-minded hath not  
lived.

Thou wert once small-  
minded, Joe; yet as thy body  
rotteth from inanition, thy  
spirit ripeneth inside its own  
womb: it shall shortly be  
reborn.

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<sup>232</sup> John Donne, Meditation  
XVII.

Thou art now as a camel,  
burdened in the desert of thy  
loneliness; thou shalt soon  
become a lion, and wax  
free.<sup>233</sup>

For the rest of you, who know  
not pain and live in the citadel  
of complacency: ye have no  
future, as ye have no past.

Your disdain for the Lord hath  
erased your names from the  
annals of history: ye are  
shadows, cast by beings that  
reside in Hell.<sup>234</sup>

Alas, such folly! Ye sharpen  
your wants on the whetstone  
of wickedness; ye assuage  
them in the tabernacle of the  
profligate.

Ye broadcast your sins in the  
voice of pride; ye multiply  
them with the avidity of lust.

Ye are verily destroyed.

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<sup>233</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part 1, chapter 1, "The Three Metamorphoses."

<sup>234</sup> An allusion to the Neoplatonic doctrine that evil has no real existence; it is merely the absence of good.

(Howbeit, if ye donate to me a portion of your money, your fate will palpably improve.)

XI

Western Devil!

The cry was from afar: a dark figure was running toward the pile of ash whereon the four men sat.

Western Devil!

Sticks of dynamite were strapped to his body; in his left hand was a remote control, and in his right a copy of the Koran.

Western Devil!

He stopped a short distance from them, glared at them with the frightened but frightening eyes of a trapped wolf, and spake thus:

Are ye Joe, and Jim, and Bob, and Jon?

The men nodded.

Praise Allah! The Day of Judgment hath arrived, Great

Satans! I am Abd, your nemesis.

In a few hours (depending on the length of the trip), ye shall be in Hell.

Wherein have we sinned? asked Jon.

Your sins are numberless. I shall name but a few.

Ye do not worship the religion of truth, and ye do not pay the poll-tax in recognition of inferiority;

Allah therefore commandeth (in the Koran) that His people make jihad against you.<sup>235</sup>

Moreover, ye have subjugated Muslims and humiliated us: yea, ye have vastly more power than we, which is very unholy.

Moreover, ye corrupt Muslim youth with your fashionable raiment and your addictive music; and your women do not wear the veil, but have rights equal to men's!

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<sup>235</sup> The Koran, 9:29.

Moreover, ye spread evil democratic ideals throughout the holy land, thereby lowering Muslims from blessed ignorance to pernicious open-mindedness.

Moreover, ye do not flog the adulterer and the adulteress a hundred times, as Allah commandeth in the Koran,<sup>236</sup>

Yea, Christ even *forgave* the adulteress and told her to sin no more,<sup>237</sup> whereas Mohammed had the adulteress stoned to death,<sup>238</sup> and was thus holier than Christ.

Moreover, your laws do not decree that the hands of thieves be cut off, as is decreed in the Koran.<sup>239</sup>

Wherefore ye are evil and will suffer a grievous chastisement in the hereafter; howbeit, Allah hath commanded me to

anticipate your chastisement by killing you.

I will kill myself also, for seventy virgins have been promised me in Paradise, and I am impatient.

Verily, never have I lain with a virgin: yea, women do not like me; but Allah loveth me, and I will have my revenge!

I will make slaves of mine Houris and beat them, as Allah permitteth in the Koran.<sup>240</sup>

I will finally lie with women and not have to pay for it, and they will heed mine every whim!

Whereupon he blew himself up.

## XII

After the blood and dust had settled, and the charred remains of the Koran had floated to the dirt, Joe, Jim, Jon and Bob looked at each other quizzically.

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 24:2.

<sup>237</sup> See John, chapter 8.

<sup>238</sup> See *Sahih Muslim*, Book 17, Hadith Number 4206. There are many similar examples of Mohammed's righteousness.

<sup>239</sup> The Koran, 5:38.

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 4:34.

It seemeth, said Bob the Academic, that he pressed the trigger unintentionally, perhaps due to his excitement.

He deserved to die, though, for he did not cite his references.

Verily, verily, said Jon, Bob is probably right.

Yet this Muslim's death was God's will, for he named the Lord Allah rather than Jehovah, which is His true name.

Behold, said Jim, the fate of one who opposeth our country!

Joe alone was silent.

### XIII

Soon a stranger advanced thither, arrayed in splendid raiment; his gait was as a king's.

He beheld the scene with thinking eyes; then he spake, and said,

Whereas, my name is Dan the Attorney, of Dan, Ron, Sue & Partners; and

Whereas, I must state, ab initio, that I never work pro bono, as my conscience doth not accord its imprimatur to said type of work, nor is it the modus operandi of the majority of attorneys-at-law (hereinafter "lawyers"); and

Whereas, notwithstanding the fact that the predilection, ab ovo, towards self-interest and financial covetousness is the sine qua non of the lawyer's existence, my fiduciary duty to my client ensureth that mine efforts on his behalf are bona fide; and

Whereas, concerning the matter of my professional expertise, at the present time I am not afforded numerous opportunities to exhibit it, for the reason that I am having difficulty procuring clients, such that I am de facto, though not de jure, bankrupt, and am for that reason compelled to chase potential clients down the street; and

Whereas, pursuant to my self-imposed directive to modify my methodology in such a way that it coincide with what is colloquially referred to as “ambulance chasing,” I was conducting said chasing a moment ago, during which time I was made cognizant of an explosion and ipso facto determined that a heretofore unacknowledged entity had violated a provision of federal law; and

Whereas, in light of this probability I approached the (alleged) locus delicti forthwith, albeit in a dilatory manner, so as not to chance upon the alleged malefactor in flagrante delicto, since I would be acting ultra vires if I behaved in the manner of a courageous upholder of the law and apprehender of accused persons; and

Whereas, prima facie it would appear, from the presence of severed human limbs adjacent to the locus delicti, that the corpus delicti hath been scattered abroad and is unavailable for autopsy; and

Whereas, the significance of said unavailability is likely rendered null and void by the fact that the cause of death is unproblematic, in addition to the presence of four eye-witnesses (though I must confess that ye appear non compos mentis), as well as the circumstance that evidential material, such as fragments of dynamite and pages of the Koran, is strewn everywhere; and

Whereas, nevertheless, in the event that ye are prosecuted ye shall require representation sufficiently competent to prove that the charges brought against you cannot be substantiated; and

Whereas, ex abundantia of my good will I should be pleased to render assistance to you in this matter and utilize the full range of capacities wherewith nature has endowed me;

NOW,  
THEREFORE...therefore...I forget what my intended conclusion was... Nay, I remember: therefore, ye would be remiss not to

employ my services. What say ye?

The men stared at him.

What? said Jim.

Whereas, the preponderance of evidence in this instance—

Stop! said Jon. I beseech thee, in the Lord's name, restrain thyself! Leave Latin to the mass, and tediousness to the academic.

We do not want thy services; get thee to a nunnery.

Nay, said Dan, I see that ye are in trouble, for your home is a pile of ash. What hath transpired here?

Erewhile, said Jim, this man, named Joe, had no equal, but was sovereign upon the earth. Yet his house, and his wealth, and his life have been utterly destroyed, blameless though he is.

Jon declareth it the work of a wrathful Jehovah—

Heathen! said Jon. He is merciful! Merciful!

—Howbeit, I believe thou art right, Dan: he is “non compos mentis.”

Dan, however, seemed as if suffused with sudden beatitude: his mouth and eyes were contorted in an avaricious grin.

He stood transfixed in silence, in thrall to an epiphany; a minute passed ere he was able to speak.

Nay, he said, Jon may be right. Such malice is consistent with Jehovah's modus operandi.

For years I have watched Him operate with impunity, terrorizing the innocent; His crimes have ranged from petty theft to mass murder.

He is the Godfather of Godfathers; His minions never know for Whom they work. He liveth in the shadows; only His “angels” ever see Him.

Lo, He is clever: never hath a trace of Him been found at a crime scene; and no one will testify against Him.

Alas! it hath been a trial for me to suffer His mockery, knowing I could be celebrated forever if I brought Him to justice!

And now, at last, an opportunity hath arisen!

Thou hast nought to lose, Joe; thou must testify against Him. And thou as well, Jon: thou art our expert witness.

Behold, the damages are material; we have four witnesses; we have a strong case. So we shall bring litigation against Jehovah.

With luck, His reign of fear will end, and, more importantly, we shall become rich men!

Fools! said Bob. Jehovah doth not exist. Christianity is but a slave morality, born of *ressentiment*. (*Vide* Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*.)

That is what He wanteth you to believe, said Dan. When He is subpoenaed, thou shalt have proof of His nefarious existence.

But the men looked at Dan askance and were silent.

#### XIV

Joe's head was bowed; he raised it sadly and spake thus:

Ye are liars and knaves and hypocrites; yet ye are self-deemed gods, and your sayings are songs of self-worship.

Lo, ye are no better than this zealot who hath slain himself; for prejudice hath manifold guises, and self-murder need not be violent.

Yea, ye are like unto the man who revileth that which he is, and becometh what he feareth most.<sup>241</sup>

Yet ye are exalted among men: for fools esteem the foolish, and liken them to the wise.

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<sup>241</sup> See Job 3:25.

The world loveth flatterers  
and sycophants, and the mob  
loveth only itself.

The good man is outcast; the  
truthful is slandered; but the  
charlatan is celebrated:

For vain motives move men.  
Yea, vanity is the star which  
guideth man's orbit:

History is but a spiral around  
vanity, ceaseless and without  
meaning; vanity alone is its  
lodestar.

Lo, I have lost my taste for  
the company of man, for it is  
insipid; I avert mine eyes  
from his face, for it is ugly:

(Yea, my spotted flesh, pallid  
and lice-ridden, is pure by  
comparison;)

and I will hearken not unto his  
misery, for he hath himself  
planted the seeds thereof.

—Sorrow hath hardened me  
to sympathy: I perceive man  
in his foul nakedness, and I  
abhor him.

He is both the vulture and the  
carrion whereon it feedeth; for  
he preyeth upon himself.

He is both the fly and the  
mantid which consumeth it;  
for he prayeth as he partaketh  
in filth.<sup>242</sup>

He is a contemptible thing,  
useless and vain, rough-hewn  
from animate dirt.

Behold, in these seven days  
have I unlearned the notions  
of the rabble; in their stead I  
have been filled with truth:

Truly, all is vanity! Men  
trouble themselves over  
trifles, and life is empty strife.

Earth is an atom of clay  
illumined by an atom of fire;  
the two wander through  
infinite space till they are  
extinguished.

The cosmos is a void encom-  
passed by itself, wherein  
galaxies span oblivion in their  
random excursions.

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<sup>242</sup> The praying mantis is so  
named from the posture it adopts  
while hunting.



Life hath no reason, all is chance; and death is the portal to nothing.

The world is a hateful farce, full of bombast and gesticulation, acted by its spectators.

I am sick unto death.

XV

Know ye not the vanity of your ambitions?

Ye consult your petty whims religiously, as if ye hope to find therein supernal truth.

Ye spin your little webs like the three Fates,<sup>243</sup> as if destiny itself lay in the balance.

Ye revolve about yourselves like self-turned suns; truly, ye are solipsists, and self-interest is your horizon.

Ye desire fame, and wealth, and power, and love, but ye question not the reason; neither do ye foresee the end:

Time shall devour you, and death shall overtake you; and it shall be as if ye had never been.

Your joys shall dissipate; the fountain of your youth shall wax desiccate: and the wellspring of your happiness shall dry up.

As ye die ye shall sigh, "Alas! it is ended! Nay, it hath never been! It was a dream; who dreamt it? And wherefore? — Swiftly as the peasant's scythe hath time mown my life."

Not a shadow shall remain of you; not a memory of your exploits, nor a marker of your death:

For time shall no more be recorded, and man shall perish from the earth.

There is no hope for you. All is vanity.

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<sup>243</sup> In Greek mythology, the three Fates (daughters of Themis, the goddess of necessity) determined everyone's destiny. Klotho spun the thread of (an individual's) life, Lakheis determined its length, and Atropos cut it to bring death.

Have ye not beheld my disasters? I have fallen from heights ye approach not in your dreams, to depths ye conceive not in your fears.

I am metaphysics made flesh: the universal in the part. I am the despair of man.

What hath befallen me awaiteth you; and my fate belongeth to mankind.

Wherefore strive not; care not; live not, and die. All else is vain.

—Alas, my daughter Jen approacheth. Harken unto her words if ye will hear mine own borne out, or plug your ears if ye will keep your sanity.

XVI

Jen was a maiden (or perhaps not) of seventeen years; she had emerged from a car parked on the street.

As she sauntered towards them, the men gaped at her body with drooling eyes; for her breasts were inflated with implants.

They might have mistaken her clothes for her skin, so tight were they. Her face was hidden beneath sundry hues and layers of makeup.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, said Jon, this damsel doth tempt the flesh.

Howbeit, she is too old for me.

Upon seeing her father she spake, and said, Dad, why dost thou philosophize? Thou art, like, not a philosopher.

I heard thee say something about “medi-physics”; what is that? Is it, like, some theory doctors have?

Nay, I care not. I am here to discuss mine allowance, which I would fain have; for thou hast not given it me in three weeks.

Yea, three weeks! My God, I am not a monk! Thinkest thou I live in like a convent, or that I eat twigs and berries?

How can I go shopping every day if mine allowance is once

a month? How can I follow  
the commandments of  
*Cosmo*?

How can I be beautiful  
without the appurtenances of  
beauty?

Wouldst thou have me  
spurned by all the hot boys?  
And by all the cool girls?

Thou art like so rich! Why so  
niggardly?! Give me some of  
thy money!

Quiet! said Joe. Hast thou not  
eyes? Seest thou prosperity  
here? Or seest thou not  
poverty?

Seest thou not thy father  
reduced with grief, that he is  
scarce a man?

Alas, thine eyes are fixed  
steadfast on thyself.

Nay, said Jen, I am not  
selfish! I have like so many  
friends, and a boyfriend, and  
he loveth me!

He buyeth me earrings and  
bracelets and satin lingerie,  
and we are happy!

Howbeit, I need mine own  
money, for he cannot buy me  
everything: he might resent  
that.

Moreover, I am poor compar-  
ed to Paris Hilton and Lindsay  
Lohan and many others; and  
despite my plastic surgery,  
they are still prettier!

Truly, *thou* art selfish: thou  
sharest not thy money with  
thine own daughter! Like,  
what a miser!

I hate thee!

## XVII

A young man came forth from  
the car and approached the  
group.

He took Jen's hand in his,  
kissed her, and sang unto the  
men his Song of Songs:

Is she not delightful? Is she  
not a thing of beauty, ever full  
of joy?<sup>244</sup>

She is the rose of Sharon,  
rougèd with the flush of love:

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<sup>244</sup> See Keats, *Endymion*, Book 1,  
line 1.

the petal's hue upon her cheek, the pistil's spire that of her hair, the inmost blush within her eye.

She is the downy dusk, pillowing the sun; soft as tufts of cloud, deep as sky-thick crimson.

She is the mist that is dawn's sister, hanging betwixt two worlds: floating over earthly tears and under pale infinity;

Lost in waning moon-cast shadows and gauzy clouds of light.

The shaded alcove sheltered by the silky myrtle is her home; the mossy bank beside the murmuring river is her bed;

Ivy-tendrils and flower-canopies serve as her coverlets; and stridulating crickets sing her lullabye.

She is a nymph, a Naiad, who dwelleth 'midst the tarns on Mount Parnassus.<sup>245</sup> for

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<sup>245</sup> In Greek mythology, Mount Parnassus was sacred to Apollo

Apollo stole her from her native Arcady, smitten with a beauty that out-Daphned Daphne.<sup>246</sup>

Her presence maketh the mundane to wax mirage-like, as a fog of heat distorteth desert air:

All that is unloved, unlovely, and unlovable is melted out of mind, and only iridescent shards of love remain.

What need of Cupid's shafts when one's beloved hath eyes that pierce the heart? What need of artifices, base manipulations, aphrodisiac contrivances, like those employed by the Olympians?

Indeed, what need of myths and gods when one's beloved is a demi-god herself?

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and was the home of the Muses (daughters of Zeus).

<sup>246</sup> Daphne was "the first and fairest of [Apollo's] loves," a nymph who spurned his advances. See the story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 1.

I need nought but her. The world could end—a flood could overwhelm mankind, drowning all but us, as happened to Deucalion and Pyrrha.<sup>247</sup>

I would not care, if I had her. For love is stronger than reason.

Yea, though the world is a waste land, cruel as the bone-cold rain of April, love hath the power to renew it—to bring lilacs out of the dead land.<sup>248</sup>

O love, I love thee! Truest and purest of intoxicants! Condition of the soul's full nakedness! All joys are due to thee!<sup>249</sup>

Thou art the music of the spheres: thy strain is woven through the universe, its arrangement ever a duet.

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<sup>247</sup> Deucalion was the Greek counterpart of Noah; Pyrrha was his wife. See *ibid*, Book 1.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land."

<sup>249</sup> See Donne's "Elegy XX: To His Mistress Going to Bed," line 33.

Dulcet as the nightingale's warble is the tremor in my heart...

—Alas! it craveth song, my darling; wherefore, hear this paltry song in unaffected language, which I wrote for thee yesterday:

*Night-feelings*

I can't stop thinking of you, love. You're like

The rain tonight, which makes me think of you.

O what a night to write a poem for you!

It's raining just for you, only for you;

The sweet nostalgia pours down from the sky.

I can't help crying looking out there. Why?

Why should there be these tears? I'm so happy.

I'll let them come, though. If the sky can cry,

Then so can I. And I can sky-cry too,

With my whole body shaking like a cloud.

There is such rain in me—though only you

Can bring it out. Only a thought of you.

NOTES OF AN UNDERGROUND HUMANIST

What are you doing now?  
Painting some street

Somewhere with dancing-  
in-the-night? Singing

Your sunny soul from off  
some night-drenched rooftop?

Or are you laughing with  
your sister like

A butterfly, a monarch  
sipping life's nectar?

Perhaps you're looking at  
the rain like me,

Quiet like me, thinking of  
me... We

Are all there is, we and this  
lonesome night

(Scented like an autumn  
fog). –And when

I think of all my past, and  
all I've suffered,

And all those years I longed  
for rest or death,

I listen to the calming rain,  
drumming

Like a massage, and I  
contemplate

The window-rivulets, which  
move and melt

Together, and I sit here  
silently

And think only of you, only  
of you.

XVIII

Shut thy noise-hole, Rob!

The voice was that of Dud,  
Jen's brother. He also had  
come forth from the car.

As thou spewest thy mawkish  
slobber, he said, we are  
missing "Fear Factor" on TV.

(Tonight they shall eat  
spiders, I verily believe!)

We have already missed "The  
Simpsons," but behold, it was  
a rerun, thank God.

Later is a new episode of  
"Trading Spouses"; though it  
is an infantile show, I enjoy it,  
for I like passing judgment on  
pathetic losers.

Yea, for this reason do I  
cherish all reality television.

We also must see "Law &  
Order"; and afterwards we  
shall rent a movie, perhaps  
*Dude, where's my car?*

Lo, I nearly forgot! The  
Knicks are playing the Bulls  
tonight! That hath priority  
over all else!

I cannot savor the spectating  
experience without beer,

wherefore we must buy some  
on the way home.

And when the game is over,  
thou and I, Rob, can play  
“Grand Theft Auto.” (I bought  
Playstation 3 yesterday.)

Jen shook her head and  
laughed, and said, Dud, thou  
art like the epitome of like  
childishness.

How is it possible thou art my  
brother?

Video games and TV are thy  
life! Daily thou sittest on the  
sofa with thy tongue hanging  
from thy mouth, and thine  
eyes as a dead man’s.

Nay! said Dud; video games  
are tools of learning! They  
improve hand-eye coord-  
ination!

And TV is interactive! It is  
like unto a book: as poetry is  
to Rob, so TV is to me.

It speaketh to me; it giveth me  
knowledge; it maketh me to  
think; and if it wax boring, I  
can change the channel!

Yea, it is a dream-world,  
wherein all women are  
beautiful, all life is thrilling,  
and all conflicts are brief.  
Would that it were reality!

How *pleasant* would life then  
be!

Still, I am content to live upon  
the couch and drink beer, and  
idle away mine hours in  
fantasies, as a poet.

XIX

While he was thus speaking, a  
congregation had come unto  
the place where sat the four  
men, even unto the rubble  
whereon they sat.

The sound of the Muslim’s  
death had drawn them; as they  
beheld the blood and entrails,  
they were well-pleased and  
happy.

And Joe looked upon them  
and was silent, his face  
thoughtful; he forebore to  
speak, for that he was  
thinking:

His brows were knitted  
closely, like to those of a man

who knoweth not himself, and  
is in doubt.

The murmurings of the  
congregation waxed louder;  
clamor rose for a speaker,  
whom the rest might emulate:

Yea, what the speaker  
commanded would the mass  
gladly do, as a muscle hearkeneth  
to the brain's command.

Dan the Attorney said he  
would summon the police;

I shall sue you all, said he, for  
disruption of the peace and for  
harrassment.

But they heard him not, for  
their voices were raised in  
prayer to the skies:

Lord, we thank Thee for Thy  
bounty, and for the body Thou  
hast given us draped in  
death's mantle;

We thank Thee for its blood  
and charred bones, and its  
severed head;

We thank Thee for the ruined  
house, which showeth Thou

art indeed mighty and merciful;

Yet we long for a man to  
declaim unto us, to shape our  
thoughts and cloud our senses,  
that we might forsake reason  
and complete Thy work.

Suddenly a voice was heard to  
say, I am that man! Make  
way!

The congregation parted and a  
young woman walked forward:

Her hair was short, her clothes  
torn, her face unsightly; but  
her posture was proud.

XX

I am Meg the Activist, she  
said, and I will give you the  
thing ye ask for.

For behold this man here: his  
name is Joe and he is wicked  
as the serpent.

(The people gasped.)

I know his works, for they  
have oppressed me; I know  
his evil, for it is plain on his  
face;



And I loathe him, for he hath  
lived a life of venality.

He despiseth the claims of the  
multitude; he loveth nought  
but his greed.

He hath funded tyranny,  
founded new kinds of  
exploitation, played friend to  
the vilest of men.

The earth seethes, battles rage,  
solely on his account!

Children in Thailand sweat  
their lives from their pores for  
a dime a day because of this  
man!

He is responsible for the  
destruction of rainforests, the  
pollution in the air, the  
corruption in politics!

Global warming is his fault  
alone, and he hath caused it  
with malice aforethought.

Moreover, despite his wealth,  
he hath not tried to stop the  
spread of diseases like AIDS,  
nor given of himself in any  
way to charity.

(A man in the crowd said, Lo!  
He is not *God*! He is but the  
creator of an internet search-  
engine; blame not the world's  
ills on him!

No one listened, however, for  
all were lost in thought of  
their rage.)

Yea, when the poor have  
cried, Joe hath not wept, for  
he is ambitious: he heedeth  
only his morality of power.

It is also due to him (and his  
conspirators) that my girl-  
friend and I may not marry,  
for he hateth gays and plotteth  
against us.

In short: we must expropriate  
him, who hath expropriated  
mankind! Only then shall  
there be peace on Earth.

Man shall be brother to man,  
and woman wife to woman;  
and we shall make love, not  
war.

The innate goodness of man  
shall flourish, as it did ere  
civilization was born.

Wherefore let us tear this  
devil's limbs from him!

XXI

The people knew not whereof  
she spoke, for her words were  
long: howbeit, the sight of the  
Muslim had filled them with  
sanguinary lust;

And their wrath had been  
kindled against Joe, wherefore  
they approached him menacingly.

He stood up: yea, he stood for  
the first time in seven days,  
sturdy on his feet despite his  
hunger.

And his sudden height made  
the crowd hesitate in its  
advance, bethinking itself  
whether its righteousness  
outdid its fear.

Yet Joe raised his hand in  
peace, and looked upon the  
people in gentleness; and his  
face was peaceful.

Good people, he said, noble  
and kind; what Meg hath  
spoken is true.

In erstwhile days I was  
iniquitous, and rotten as a  
disappearing corpse.

I was as a dead pharaoh  
imprisoned in his bejeweled  
sarcophagus.

I knew not joys in life but that  
they were dreams of pyra-  
mids; and I cared not whereon  
my pyramids were built, nor  
what they destroyed.

Neither saw I beauty in the  
earth: for I trusted nothing and  
mistrusted all, and yet beauty  
*is* trust.

Yea, and trust beauty, for it  
hath not the ugliness of deceit.

Now I look around me and  
see beauty where once was  
suspicion, and light where  
once was shadow;

And though my regret runneth  
out mine eyes, and I am full  
of regret, yet I begin to see  
peace.

My friend is no more mine  
adversary, my daughter no  
more my shame: and my life  
is no longer un-lived.

I bethink me on my former enemies, whom once I wished dead: but now I pray for their prosperity.

My mind casteth a net of forgiveness, and all whom I see are forgiven; and all I see is beauty.

Yea, and love! Even in the brows of the angry, and the eyes of the wicked—I see inner love:

love like to the moon's love for Earth, and the lion's love for her cub, and the tulip's love for the bee.

I see that I have lived in vain, for not till now—yea, not till this moment, forged in pain—do I know what it meaneth to live.

And verily, I have thee to thank, Rob! Thy love-song turned mine eye from sorrow:

For in the weakness of despair, and in the chaos of despair, I clutched at the beauty of thy words,

And I saw them addressed to my daughter, and as I considered them they were a help to me.

I know well my daughter's weaknesses; I know her soul is shallow as the Caribbean shore, nor hath its limpid beauty.

I know her mind is opaque, reft by pop culture of understanding;

Yet I see, Rob, thou lovest her not the less for that. Thou art generous of thy love, as I was never generous of my wealth.

Thou art even as a saint who loveth man in all his spottedness, and hath compassion for all the world below.

And truly thou hast shamed me, as love must ever shame sick despair.

I say to me now, Look upon this boy's cloudless brow, serene like the dawn; look at his full eyes, placid like the dawn:

Seest thou his peaceful mind?  
Seest thou not his tranquility,  
oceanic and fresh? He loves:  
he knoweth truth.

For truth is compassion, and  
cosmic suffering; and we are  
one in compassion and  
suffering.

We are one in truth; and if  
thou rend the veil of Maya,  
thou shalt see we are one.  
There is no two, there is but  
one.

There is but vasty love and  
cosmic pain—life and death,  
river-running time, rest and  
restlessness, time cascading  
over pools of time.

And shimmering through the  
world are endless beads of  
time, death-engendering.

Yet time doth hide the  
Dionysian oneness which we  
are:<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> See Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, as well as Schopenhauer's treatise *The World as Will and Representation*.

Wherefore I say, Let us leave  
time; let us leave small self-  
intoxication to the beasts:

And let us drown ourselves in  
timeless love.

## XXII

Erewhile I despised life and  
sought pleasure only, time-  
bound pleasure and self-  
advantage;

I shunned sorrow and suffer-  
ing of every kind, and chased  
ambition's tale for its  
immortality.

I withdrew from time and shut  
mine eyes to death, as a child  
afraid of the dark.

I saw not that death is  
inescapable, that fame and  
wealth are flaming comets in  
the sky; and death is in every  
moment.

Neither knew I the value of  
anguish, nor its necessity: for  
pain is man's mirror, wherein  
he seeth his soul.

Insofar as he knoweth him-  
self, he knoweth pain: for

death is life's substance, and  
man is time.

Yea, he who would shield his  
eye from time would shield  
his eye from light, and live in  
a cave:

And shadows would he  
inherit, and illusions, and  
endless mitigable suffering.<sup>251</sup>

Wherefore let us not shun  
time, neither sorrow; let us  
know ourselves and be  
ourselves.

Let us accept life, as this poet  
hath accepted my daughter:  
and let us love all, all that  
suffereth and wasteth away,

All that beareth the burden of  
living, which is dying; all that  
is born to die.

Only *then* shall we transcend  
time and space, which splinter  
life so that it pierceth the heart  
of man, and maketh his heart  
to bleed.

Yea, only then shall we know  
the calm of peace, and truth.

Be calm, I say, be constant in  
thy love and love all equally,  
for all is involved in all: and  
nothing there is which  
needeth not the whole.

And if a man love himself, he  
loveth therein the world; for  
the world hath formed him,  
*even* all its elements.

And if a man hate another  
man, he hateth therein  
himself; for his essence is of a  
piece with that man's.

Individuality, I say, is mere  
appearance, as are time and  
space: for time and space are  
as the petals of the flower of  
individuality, making it what  
it is.<sup>252</sup>

—Lo, all this knowledge fell  
into my lap, plump and ripe,  
as I gnashed my soul in  
despondency;

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<sup>251</sup> An allusion to Plato's myth of the cave. This whole passage, by the way, echoes Buddhism and Taoism.

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<sup>252</sup> Schopenhauer called time and space "the principle of individuation."

But these strange gems of philosophy gleam all the more radiant for their alien origins, far from Western lands.

The West, I think, is overfond of the earthly trappings of life; we immerse ourselves in life's tumult and seek ephemeral consolations.

And so happiness is like an eel, slithering from our desperate grasp: for the world is too much with us.

We are too attached to things; yea, we are barnacles stuck on our possessions, which buoy us even as we drown.

We must detach ourselves from things, and from our selves. We must look past appearances, peer into the hidden essence of nature:

For only then shall life's vicissitudes affect us not.

XXIII

Lo, man's table of values<sup>253</sup> is corrupt, rotted through from termites and maggots.

It supporteth not the weight of the world's banquet, but sinketh and falleth under the weight.

Wherefore we need a new carpenter, who shall build a new table: and this table shall have integrity.

And behold, its integrity shall consist in *authenticity*: for their authenticity is the value of values, and authenticity is the highest value.

Truth is the highest value: self-truth, self-realization, and cosmic understanding.

Being one with oneself, one with nature, not at war with one's fellows: such is the gospel I preach.

And listen not to the music of your possessions, for it is

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<sup>253</sup> A Nietzschean term. See section 9 of the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

dissonant, and it maketh you  
dissonant within yourselves.

But listen to the melody of  
your soul, and hearken to it:  
thus shall ye be at harmony  
with yourselves.

¶ Now, formerly I thought life  
absurd. I said in mine heart  
that time and chance are life's  
substance, and man is  
nothing.

Life hath no meaning, I said;  
death happeneth to all, and  
Earth is an atom in the  
universe.

Man is out of joint in his  
world: he is as Sisyphus,  
condemned to push his  
boulder to no end.

Wherefore is the world, and  
wherefore man? To what end  
suffer we, who are mortal?

But such questions, I see now,  
cannot be answered, and  
should not be asked.

If life is a mystery, we ought  
to celebrate this and not  
bewail it. It is a blessing, for it  
holdeth man's interest.

Life is a miracle, never to be  
understood. We can but  
imbibe Wonder until we are  
drunk on it.

And in the meantime we  
ought to live well, not in  
despair: we ought to live as  
we see fit, staying true to  
ourselves joyously.

We ought to embrace life as a  
lover, and love its sorrows, its  
joys, its mysteries: for then  
shall we know fewer sorrows,  
more joys, and more wonder-  
ful mysteries.

Think not that the world is  
terrifying and vast: but know  
that ye are a part of the world,  
as a spot of paint is part of the  
mosaic,

And know that ye are bright  
as a supernova, and as  
beautiful; and that ye shall  
never die, being a part of life.

For in death there is life, even  
as in life there is death. The  
two are inseparable, one and  
the same.

Ye are miracles, people. Be like children, and commune with the ineffable.

XXIV

But Joe's words fell upon ears of stone, and no man understood him: but all stood still in dumb astonishment, as though a wall had fallen from the sky and stopped them in their path.

They were not angry or impatient, but only non-plussed: their blood-wrath having been blocked, a vacuum filled their souls.<sup>254</sup>

Howbeit, Joe's gentleness of temper, his warm lustrous presence (like unto the crimson-textured sun in purple twilight), his soft-cajoling words, the time-deceiving wisdom which echoed in his speech—all these things had made the people suspicious of him:

They saw he was not one of them, wherefore they loathed

his speech and wished him dead.

A man came forward from this mass, sure of step and dim of eye; his raiment was of mottled greens and browns, drab like the dirt, the hue of death itself;

And he stepped in front of Joe and, bloated with pride, spake unto the gathering.

XXV

Fellow Americans! he said, I am Rod the Soldier! Hear my name and bow down before me!

And the people bowed and prayed before the neon(derthal) god they'd made.

Thou art our Savior! they cried; for thou comest not to bring peace but a sword, and to spread the American Way of Life!

Hallelujah, and praise be to Imperialism!

I have come from Iraq, said Rod; from the just and

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<sup>254</sup> See Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, the first paragraph of section 3.



necessary war in Iraq, where I slew inhabitants in scores (much aided by my machine-gun).

Verily, video games are a poor substitute for the real thing.

And as I beheld the ruins I had wrought, the collapsed buildings and the muddy blood-puddles, I was moved in my soul.

For the blood was real, the bullets were real: and the death-shrieks in the dark were real.

And when I stabbed those men in the battle of Fallujah, I saw the life pass from them with the blood, spurting like the blood.

Yea, there was chaos all around, everywhere! And the noise was deafening, as if Armageddon had come!

(The crowd stared at him tensely, suddenly full of doubt—but clinging to his words like a leech.)

And in the war-sown chaos, I looked around me in a silent moment—like unto the moment in *Saving Private Ryan* when Tom Hanks scans the beach in astonishment—

and in that moment I felt like God surveying his creation, and, like God, I saw that it was good!

(The people cheered, full of relief.)

Yea, it was good, it was noble—but most of all, it was exhilarating! I felt *alive*, surrounded by death!

Moreover, each man I slew knew the wrath of the United States, and felt the hammer-blow of justice!

Each severed head redounded to the glory of our nation; each explosion proved its greatness.

Wherefore I echo the old truth, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori!*<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> “It is sweet and dignified to die for one’s country.” Cf.

This man here, though, called Joe, is of a different mind. He preacheth peace and love, harmony and brotherly love!

He esteemeth not glory or country; he esteemeth only temperance, lovingkindness, and other soft virtues—anti-American traits!

He is indeed a traitor: his words dilute the patriot's ardor, and corrode the foundations of the state.

His highest good is a tepid love for all living creatures; but my highest good is to follow orders:

And that is the highest good of all patriots.

It is ours not to make reply, nor to reason why; ours but to do and die.<sup>256</sup> For the true American doth not think for himself,

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Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est."

<sup>256</sup> From Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

But he knoweth by instinct that America is glorious, and that to die and kill for what is glorious is itself glorious!

And he will gladly slay all enemies of the state, first among which is this philosopher Joe!

## XXVI

But Joe answered and said, Friends, this man's speech hath made plain to me mine errors.

Peacefulness and equanimity are not enough, for ignorance is an ever-growing mountain, which hath a planet's inertia.

Its movement cannot be halted without fierce determination, and the might of many Samsons.

Now, verily, this worship of the State is a detestable idolatry, which profiteth no men but those in power.

What is the State, indeed? Effectively, the government. But what is the government? The rich and powerful.

Democracy, like God, is dead, at least for now: government is neither *for* nor *by* nor *of* the people, but only of the rich.

Think ye the rich care aught for you, or for your troubles? They do not. They heed only their morality of power: they do what flattereth their power.

For I once belonged in their ranks: I once swam in riches as in a sea, and drank of money as of water.<sup>257</sup>

I floated above the people's daily cares in my silver bubble; and my bubble's prismatic surface bent life's rays so as to dim the truth.

Why then flatter ye the rich with your nation-worship? The nation is a fiction: there is no such entity with singleness of interest,

But only discord, class war, mutual distrust, and lives that are solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish.

Verily, there are a thousand Americas, not one; and each person is, for now, an atom, which striketh others but doth not bond with them.

Our enemy is not a man or group of men; it is the social order itself, which maketh all of us each other's enemies.

Indeed, a man hath become his own enemy: for he scorneth his fellows' brotherhood, which his deeper soul doth covet devoutly.

And so he ensnareth himself in himself, and maketh of himself a fetish.

—Behold: as the young man hath a hero, beside whom he despiseth himself, so the modern person is a golden fetish to himself.

He is his other, a self-hateful Narcissus: whence overfloweth discord into the world.

Conquer self-estrangement, then, and its social causes: therein shall ye conquer your enemy.

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<sup>257</sup> Cf. Job 15:16.

And nation-worship, God-worship, money-worship shall cease: man shall not lower himself and raise his creations:

Neither shall he be slave to his property, nor wolf to his fellows, but he shall master his transparent fate.

He shall, that is, be *authentic*, undivided in himself, nor divided from his fellows.

## XXVII

But we must battle the acquisitive spirit and the preachers of acquisitiveness: we must war on capitalism.

This society is inauthentic, self-divided, a slave to itself and its laws of economic movement.

No man steereth his life, but he is steered by fortune's invisible hand; and his world is strange to him, and unjust.

For the wicked person prospereth, and his works increase his renown; but the righteous man prospereth not,

For he is locked in a stockade and mocked.

Yea, he is handcuffed to the bars of bitter solitude, and mocked by his peers.

For righteousness hath not a home in capitalism. It is an anachronism, not only superfluous but counterproductive.

And democracy, too, like righteousness, is dangerous, unnecessary, and nearly impossible: the people, the wage-laborers, must have less power than the élite.

¶ Behold, in capitalism the multitudes toil in poverty and hunger. For Capital is a cruel taskmaster.

The West hath for centuries enslaved the world and murdered its people for the sake of one more dollar; and things do not change.

Injustice cannot remedy itself, but its nature is to worsen with time and the centralization of power.

Its reforms through the years have been cosmetic: behold the state of Africa, South America, most of Asia, and the multitudes within *all* lands.

They sweat and toil and bleed for food, as their masters lay waste their lands; and “democracy” availeth not.

Wherefore we must overturn the system. We must change the world, so that money is superfluous and greed hath no dominion,

And man is no longer lashed to his possessions and broken thereon, like a prisoner lashed to the wheel.

We must, therefore, deliver mankind from economic scarcity, which breedeth money and greed, and war.

Only material abundance can deliver us from evil; only science and reason can deliver us from scarcity.

Not until the springs of cooperative wealth flow

abundantly<sup>258</sup> shall humanity fulfill its destiny;

Not until society inscribeth on its banners, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”<sup>259</sup> shall there be peace on earth.

For then money and the State shall wither away, and democracy shall flourish.

And machines shall no more erect walls between men; and wealth shall no more be the touchstone of worth.

And possessions shall no more be as persons, and persons shall no more be possessions. But people shall be free.

## XXVIII

Then Mammon answered Joe out of the whirlwind, and said,

Who is this that gainsaith greed through words with knowledge?

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<sup>258</sup> From Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

Fondle now thy loins like an investor in the throes of speculation; for I will depict the power of Mammon.

Where wast thou when I planted empires across the earth? Truly, thou wert not a speck in nature's eye.

Where wast thou when Sumer sprang forth from an economic surplus, like Athena from Zeus's head?

Who built the pyramid of Giza, or the Great Sphinx? No pharaoh, no slave, but I alone.

For whose sake are wars waged, or dynasties founded; and who breathed inspiration into great Alexander?

My stage is world history, from the nomads of Asia to the oligarchs of America: thou art brief like an insect.

Thy works have the weight of dust in the wind, and they contend with a grain of sand for insignificance.

Canst thou with thy breath plant railways, or grow cities?

and can thy breath level empires?

Hath love for thee alone made men blast granite quarries, and bridge Alaska with an oil pipeline?

Did love-of-Joe create the St. Lawrence Seaway, or impel the conquistadores to heights of heroic cruelty?

No! Love of money, love of power, is alone responsible for everything.

For my sake only do men subjugate the earth and slaughter their fellows; and I give them strength to subdue their own humanity.

I can give a mouse the power of a lion, wherewith to bend men to his will: behold Rupert Murdoch, and Donald Trump, and other such mice-become-lions.

I can alter hierarchies of nature, and make great what is small; I can reverse the order of things, and make order from chaos.

Behold: in the beginning was  
scarcity, and hunger; and from  
those wretched seedlings I  
have remade the world in  
mine image,

With the commodity as the  
foundation of society, and  
money as its pure form—the  
lubricant of social intercourse.

And though thou thinkest  
history is over, and my  
dominion at an end: verily, it  
has hardly begun!

The past is not long, the future  
is eternal; and my kingdom on  
earth is in its infancy.

My highest glories await me:  
and theirs shall rival the  
majesty of all creation.

XXIX

Lo, I shall shortly re-carve the  
face of the earth, and re-draw  
the lines of the continents:

For my minions have polluted  
the earth, and warmed its  
climate, which shall wreak  
revolution on man's little  
cosmos.

Millions shall perish, as in  
Noah's flood; your beloved  
"new world order" shall  
become a second Atlantis.

And then shall begin the reign  
of war, of global war: and it  
shall be my finest hour!

I will make the earth my  
mirror: anarchy and power-  
struggles shall be the naked  
law,

And each man will guard his  
plot of land as a tigress  
guardeth her young.

Then from the rubble shall  
rise another Rome, another  
Caesar, and Huns, Goths,  
Gauls, Franks, Vandals;

And Charlemagnes, and  
Tamburlaines, and Genghis  
Khans, and Suleimans; and  
civil wars, and genocides, and  
slaveries, and holocausts.

And thinly veiled capitalisms,  
and socialisms, and tribalisms,  
and globalisms: all, all shall  
go on, forever, until the sun  
swalloweth the earth!

For I am the one god, the sole  
god men believe in: I,  
Mammon, the Eternal One—  
the Will to Possess.

Thou wert indeed right, Joe:  
life is absurd, and history is  
absurd: it hath no meaning but  
me.

Ye are blades of grass, ye  
humans, and I am the wind  
which stirreth you; and I am  
the foot which trampleth you;

And I am the sunlight which  
sustaineth you, and the soil  
wherein ye are planted.

There is no telos of history, as  
there is no rest from me: for I  
am the way, the truth, and the  
life;

And behold, the truth shall  
make you free, should ye  
follow it as Rupert Murdoch  
hath done (in whom I am well  
pleased).

He who walketh in my  
footsteps, with will and  
knowledge, shall be as the  
mighty eagle, which owns the  
heavens in its solitary  
grandeur.

And I ask for nought in return  
but that he shun idols, be they  
named Compassion, Love,  
Generosity, or whatever.

Then the fate of mankind shall  
not burden him; the deathless  
cycles of pain shall not  
oppress him: for he shall have  
bought his happiness.

And as the walls of civiliza-  
tion fall around him, and the  
bleatings of the downtrodden  
rain as from the heavens, he  
shall be unencumbered:

In his stately pleasure-dome  
in Xanadu he shall perch  
himself, aloof from the tears  
of the blighted.

XXX

But thou, Joe, thou trafficker  
in pity, thou hast cursed me to  
my face, and transgressed  
against me.

Flightless insect, thou hadst  
temerity to mock my law,  
which is hoary as Hammur-  
abi's Code.

My law is as durable as  
Stonehenge; thinkest thou it



can be undone, or forgotten  
like the wind?

I make the earth tremble, and  
I revise its lineaments; I  
hasten geological change.

I place my footprint on the  
dust of the moon, and plant a  
flag therein; and my fingers  
reach through the solar  
system.

I am as the black hole at the  
heart of the Milky Way: for  
life turneth around me, and I  
am the gravity of civilization.

Moreover, all thy modern  
comforts, thy sumptuous  
American lifestyle, the  
miracles of technology that  
prop up American power,

And the inexorable whirlwind  
of science which hath blasted  
every nation in the world,  
shivering every monolith of  
ignorance and religious  
illusion,

Subverting every authoritarian  
ideology, scattering abroad  
the roots of democracy, which  
sprout as luxuriant weeds;

And the thought-patterns of  
individualism and equality, so  
cherished by you Americans,  
with their progeny feminism,  
socialism, multiculturalism;—

In short, everything people  
esteem in the modern world:

It all hath its origin in the  
power of the profit-motive,  
and of the capitalist mode of  
production, with its relentless  
expansion of the productive  
forces.

For, as capitalist enterprise  
spreadeth its dominion, the  
multitudes flock to cities,  
seeking employment;

And since they inhabit slums  
together, they develop a class  
consciousness and begin to  
fight for equality;

And intellectual spokesmen  
appear, both bourgeois and  
proletarian, who trumpet the  
millennium: *rights*, universal  
*rights*, equality and liberty!

(*Bourgeois* rights at first—  
political equality of the  
propertied classes, freedom to

have property, an inviolable right—and then *socialist*.)

Liberalism and democracy spread like conflagrations, even as capital and political power centralize, thus propelling technological and scientific conquests;

And the movement for equality spilleth into sex- and race-relations; and religion waxeth ever more impotent (notwithstanding fanatics), since it is superfluous to economic life;

And the world is created anew—solely because men crave profit and power.

So thy mind, Joe, and thy body, and thy newfound species-conscience, and thy very being hath grown in my fertile soil.

—Verily, Joe, I am thy father. Wouldst thou kill thy father? Thou needest me.

Nature hath decreed scarcity for all time, wherefore ye humans must ration your goods; and so I am immortal.

Resistance is futile: embrace yourselves, love yourselves, and so make permanent war.

XXXI

Then Joe answered the Lord, and said,

Ere now I did not know, Mammon, thou wert an actual being, like unto a god; but it surpriseth me not, for thy power is awesome.

I know that thou rivalest the sun in thy power, especially in modern times, and that thy power passeth understanding.

If thou smite billions of people and destroy their lives, it is not my place to question thee;

But I should rather rejoice for the few men upon whom thou bestowest all thy gifts: for they have truly inherited the earth.

Behold, I am vile; thou hast made me abhor myself, as thou makest mankind abhor itself (and rightly so).

Men arise and pass away like leaves, but greed and selfishness have no end.

¶ And it was so, that after Joe had spoken these words, the Lord said to Jim the Politician, Bob the Intellectual, and Jon the Preacher,

I have contempt for you, because ye have neither knowledge nor dignity;

And while Joe, too, hath not dignity (for that he is a man), at least he hath knowledge.

Therefore ye shall be the servants of Joe the Capitalist, like all your brethren, and offer up your minds to him.

And if ye stray from your appointed paths and disobey my commandments, ye shall be exiled from society and forced to live in a bathtub, like Diogenes the Stoic.

So Jim the Politician and Bob the Intellectual and Jon the Preacher did as Mammon commanded them.

And Mammon restored Joe to the oligarchy, giving him twice as much as he had before.

Then came unto him all his brethren, and all his concubines, and all his former friends: and they secretly bemoaned his good fortune, but comforted themselves that he had been miserable for a time: everyone also bribed him, which sealed their friendships.

After this lived Joe a hundred years, due to the wonderful healthcare his riches bought, and he saw his sons and his sons' sons be raised up like their forebear. One of them even became president of America, although by then the country was a province of China.

So Joe died, being old and full of vice.

## Coda

I'm writing this the day after the shooting massacre on December 14, 2012 at a school in Newtown, Connecticut. On a day like this one isn't in a particularly "humanistic" mood. The satirical newspaper *The Onion* sums it up in an article entitled "Fuck Everything, Nation Reports. Just Fuck It All To Hell." Obama, the president who hasn't lifted a finger to promote gun control, tears up in a press conference in which he suggests that "meaningful action" is necessary. One isn't holding out hope.

A society of isolated, bitter, angry, and frustrated people is the natural consequence of government's being taken over by special interests such as the NRA, the military industry, the insurance industry, and the financial sector. More generally, a system that values profits over people is not going to take "meaningful action" to make society healthy. What's going to happen, instead, is that the current privatization crusade will continue; government programs that help people but not corporations—including, in the U.S., Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security—will continue to be dismantled ostensibly in order to address the manufactured "fiscal crisis";<sup>260</sup> mass economic insecurity and assaults on workers' rights will escalate as more wealth is siphoned to the top; society, in short, will be torn apart, and atrocities of every sort (including political atrocities like the expansion of right-wing militias) will become more frequent. All this is nearly inevitable, unfortunately. It grows out of the logic of contemporary history, the logic of unfolding social dynamics. Current trends cannot be halted in their tracks; history's "dialectic" doesn't work that way. Malign

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<sup>260</sup> The crisis is real in some respects (not as regards Social Security, though), but elites have planned it since the 1980s—by lowering tax rates, increasing military spending, and so forth—in the anticipation that eventually a fiscal crisis would provide an excellent excuse to slash popular New Deal-era programs. The economist Dean Baker has good entries on the crisis at his blog "Beat The Press," at <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/beat-the-press/>.

systemic developments on the colossal scale of neoliberalism cannot be stopped just by a few social movements, a few Occupy Wall Streets or some counter-organizing by labor unions. On small scales the damage they cause can be mitigated by such progressive resistance, but on the global level they must proceed to their logical conclusions. In the case of neoliberalism—which is just capitalism to a horrifying extreme—the obvious *telos* is *massive societal collapse*.

Unions in their traditional form, for example, are done for.<sup>261</sup> Collective bargaining is off the historical agenda in the West, though it will linger on for decades. Of course workers should continue to fight for it and to unionize, not least because in some cases they'll succeed. In the long run, though, the main value of such fights is that they radicalize, they educate, they bring people together, so preparing them for more radical actions in the future. From the failure of reform, people learn that revolution is necessary. And so, little by little, revolutionary movements coalesce, some to organize systemic alternatives outside the mainstream and others to confront capitalism in a directly political way. Both approaches are necessary.

Neoliberalism, i.e., the political economy of advanced capitalism on a *transnational* (not merely *international*) scale,<sup>262</sup> cannot be “reformed” out of existence; what it does, though, is to “produce its own grave-diggers” by concentrating wealth and power in a minuscule global minority and depriving most others of both. From a purely economic perspective, such a distribution of income/wealth is extremely dysfunctional, since a lack of

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<sup>261</sup> The unionization rate in the U.S.'s private sector is less than 7 percent, having declined from a peak of about 35 percent in 1954. In Europe, too, unions are under savage attack.

<sup>262</sup> “Trans” means *through*; “inter” means *between*. A hundred years ago capitalism was international: nation-states were entities of great vitality, and there were innumerable economic links between them. Nowadays, capitalism has much less respect for, and much more power than, the nation-state as such, operating through it and around it. The nation no longer has the vitality it once did.

purchasing power (effective demand) among the masses entails disincentives for business to invest, which means slower economic growth and reductions in workforces and wages, which means even less effective demand, etc. (For many decades, governments in the West have stepped in to boost demand and so keep the system running, but in the long term that isn't sustainable. Given economic stagnation, government and consumer debt must finally become overwhelming, as it is now.) So the system, from its own logic, descends into crisis. Meanwhile, the disenfranchised billions cannot just languish in misery forever; during the protracted crisis they form movements, political parties, eventually a "movement of movements." The global diversity of these, already, is mind-boggling. This is all the more impressive in that the movement of movements is yet in its infancy.

Even if no economic crisis were happening, it is hard to imagine how governments could maintain relative social stability while confronted, as they will be in the coming decades, by exponential growth-rates of populations and by extreme weather-patterns that decimate areas of high population density. In an era of government privatization (especially in the West), this is a recipe for something like social chaos. What will probably happen, indeed already is happening, is that centrifugal pressures will fragment societies, "decentralize" them—although national governments will do what they can to halt this, often resorting to military force and heavy-handed repression. This will reinforce more localized, municipal repression of minorities, radical dissidents, etc. I expect that the state's violence against its domestic population will become quite horrifying (power centers, after all, do not relinquish power happily), but in the long run it will be unable to stop the disintegration of the nation-state. The problems facing national governments, and the plethora of conflicting demands from innumerable interest groups with abundant resources, will just be too overwhelming.

In the midst of violent repression, however, will be creative and progressive initiatives both on the level of government (municipal, provincial, national) and among the grassroots.

Massive popular pressure will ensure that this is the case. Governments will take both reactionary and progressive steps to try to maintain control over a changing society, as Europe's *ancien régime* did between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. For example, "municipal enterprise," a kind of municipal socialism, will become common as a way for governments to "raise revenue and promote local jobs and economic stability by developing a more diversified base of locally controlled wealth."<sup>263</sup> Publicly owned banks will spread; in the U.S., only North Dakota has a state bank (which is one reason why it has been the only state to be in continuous budget surplus since 2008<sup>264</sup>), but twenty other states are currently considering establishing one and the movement is growing.<sup>265</sup> A new kind of corporation is spreading too: the benefit corporation, for which at least eight states have passed legislation in the last two years. (Maryland was the first to do so, in 2010.) Benefit corporations differ from traditional ones in that they are legally allowed, in fact required, to sacrifice profits in order to promote the interests of employees, communities, or the environment.<sup>266</sup>

What's happening on the grassroots is even more exciting. A number of websites and publications showcase the fascinating, creative ways people are coming together to build up the foundations of a new, cooperative mode of production, websites such as <http://www.geo.coop/>, <http://www.commondreams.org/>, [www.yesmagazine.org](http://www.yesmagazine.org/), <http://www.shareable.net/>,

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<sup>263</sup> "Overview: Municipal Enterprise," *Community-Wealth.org*, <http://www.community-wealth.org/strategies/panel/municipal/index.html> (accessed December 15, 2012).

<sup>264</sup> Ellen Brown, "Banking for California's Future," *Yes! Magazine*, September 14, 2011. She observes that "The bank has contributed over \$300 million in revenues over the last decade to state coffers, a substantial sum for a state with a population less than one-tenth the size of Los Angeles County."

<sup>265</sup> See <http://www.publicbankinginstitute.org/>.

<sup>266</sup> Jamie Raskin, "The Rise of Benefit Corporations," *The Nation*, June 27, 2011.

<http://www.community-wealth.org/>, and <http://trustcurrency.blogspot.com/>. Worker and consumer cooperatives, savings and credit associations, fair trade organizations, housing cooperatives, collective kitchens, local currencies, community banks, and self-help organizations of all kinds are spreading across the world. For now, governments are not necessarily hostile to these developments, since they don't seem to *directly* threaten political power. In 2003, for example, Brazil's President Lula established a National Secretary of the Solidarity Economy under the Labor Ministry, and cooperatives receive financial support from Brazil's ministries of Agricultural and Social Development. In addition, the Brazilian government funds university programs that provide local groups with training and support to set up cooperatives or other social enterprises, "similar to business incubators in the U.S."<sup>267</sup> (Cooperative business programs are starting to appear in North American universities too.) For the first time in over a hundred years, U.S. unions, too, are funding and organizing worker cooperatives, because they're beginning to comprehend the necessity of a *new paradigm*. The United Steelworkers announced in October 2009 that it was collaborating with Mondragon, "the global worker industrial cooperative leader," to establish manufacturing cooperatives in the U.S. and Canada, an agreement that USW president Leo Gerard called "a historic first step towards

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<sup>267</sup> Emily Kawano, "Report from the 1st Solidarity Economy Social Forum & World Fair, Santa Maria and Porto Alegre, Brazil—Jan 22-29, 2010," *SolidarityEconomy.net*, <http://www.solidarityeconomy.net/2010/03/15/solidarity-economy-vision-blossoms-in-brazil/> (accessed May, 2010).



making union co-ops a viable business model.”<sup>268</sup> The Service Employees International Union is following the USW’s example.<sup>269</sup>

One can anticipate in the next, say, hundred or two hundred years accelerating growth of worldwide activist networks, “alternative-economy” federations such as Via Campesina and the many smaller worker cooperative federations that are being formed even in the conservative United States,<sup>270</sup> public spaces for revolutionary change such as the World Social Forum, transnational networking and structural transformation of labor unions to embrace a more radical agenda, the growth of radical political parties like Syriza in Greece or the Green Party in the U.S., and communal self-help institutions (perhaps sanctioned and aided by government) to confront such grim realities as climate change and mass unemployment. Reactionary, semi-fascist movements will grow too—this is a predictable consequence of the decay of an earlier paradigm of civil society and of the middle class’s perception that it is under existential threat—but it is unlikely that such movements will attain the power they had in the 1930s, because the nation-state is in terminal decline. Eighty years ago it was in its heyday, and the political apparatus of reactionary ultra-nationalism was easier to assemble than it is in an era of advanced globalization, unparalleled access to information from global sources, and corporations whose transnational nature militates against parochial ultra-nationalism. Worldwide, far more

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<sup>268</sup> Carl Davidson, “‘One Worker, One Vote.’ US Steelworkers to Experiment with Factory Ownership, Mondragon-Style,” *SolidarityEconomy.net*, October 27, 2009, <http://www.zcommunications.org/steelworkers-plan-job-creation-via-worker-coops-by-carl-davidson> (accessed May, 2010).

<sup>269</sup> Gar Alperovitz, “A New Era of Employee Ownership?,” *Yes! Magazine*, July 11, 2012. See also Gar Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005) and Chris Wright, *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States*, AK Press, forthcoming.

<sup>270</sup> For example, the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives was founded in 2004, and other such organizations have been formed since then.

people will join progressive or revolutionary movements—anti-corporate, anti-imperialist movements—than reactionary ones.

The more significant threat is from old-fashioned state and corporate power, state violence. The global elite has a common interest in suppressing popular democracy and anti-capitalist movements; it will cooperate to try to destroy popular resistance. At the same time, as I have said, it will, of necessity, tolerate and even facilitate popular initiatives that seem relatively unthreatening to the global elite's power—thereby aiding, unwittingly, in the buildup of a new mode of production and civil society that in the long run will undermine the basis of that elite's own power. But what will this long process look like in its details? The question is made even more difficult by the fact that inter-imperialist rivalries will persist, so complicating elite cooperation. For example, recently the U.S. has been engaged in a "Pacific Pivot," "a major initiative announced late in 2011 to counter a rising China. According to separate statements by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, 60 percent of US military resources are swiftly shifting from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>271</sup> New military bases are being added to the 219 that the U.S. already has on foreign soil in the Asia-Pacific, and new "free-trade" agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which excludes China) are being negotiated. One wonders if imperialist competition will cause yet a third World War. America's National Intelligence Council considers that scenario implausible, but its 2012 report does acknowledge that by 2030 we will live in a multipolar world—which is something that, historically, has not entailed political and economic stability.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Koohan Paik and Jerry Mander, "On the Front Lines of a New Pacific War," *The Nation*, December 14, 2012.

<sup>272</sup> See the National Intelligence Council's report *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (December 2012), at [www.dni.gov/nic/globaltrends](http://www.dni.gov/nic/globaltrends). As for the dangers of multipolarity, consider that when Britain was the hegemonic power in the nineteenth century, relative peace prevailed in

It's entirely possible that the sheer chaos (economic, political, social, and climatic) of the next fifty years will result in a societal collapse even more dramatic than a drawn-out evolution of "localization," economic crisis, and confrontation between state power and people's power. Nuclear war, whether precipitated by state or by non-state actors, may ravage the globe, and climate change may cause the deaths and/or forced migrations of a billion people or more. But even, or especially, in this worst-case scenario, capitalism will not prove sustainable. People will have to cooperate in order to survive; they will have to form "post-apocalyptic" communities and wide-ranging networks of resource distribution. A new economy, politics, and civil society will thus emerge from the wreckage of an imploded world-system.

Clearly there is a point at which further speculation about the future is futile. All that can be said with certainty is that the long, tortured collapse of the old world will coincide with the slow evolution in society's interstices of the new, as happened during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. At certain points in that earlier process, massive political clashes took place between the old regime and the popular and bourgeois forces to which it denied representation; the main beneficiary of these political revolutions was ultimately the bourgeoisie and its economic order. Similarly, at various points in the next hundred or two hundred years there will be titanic political collisions between the decaying old regime and new popular institutions that will have accumulated, through decades of interstitial colonization of society, sufficient resources

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Europe. This came to an end when Britain became merely first among equals from the 1880s onwards: destructive imperialism and two world wars were the result (in particular of Germany's efforts to be the next hegemonic power). After World War II the U.S. was the supreme superpower, and there was a Pax Americana. Now that the U.S. is about to become merely first among equals, we are in danger, again, of catastrophic imperialist competition. (Nikolai Bukharin's *Imperialism and World Economy* (1915) is a classic analysis of the dynamics that still govern the world economy. J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study* (1902) is also excellent.)

to wage effectual fights against the remnants of corporate and state power. And this time there will be no usurping class, no future bourgeoisie, to co-opt the revolution and twist it to its own ends. The clash will simply be between people fighting for a decent life and a corporate-statist system determined to deprive them of that life. No “utopia” will come about, but, one can hope, a more humane world will.

Thinking about the pain of the parents who lost their children in Connecticut, or the pain of families who lose loved ones everyday to the violence of a system that knows no humanity, one doesn't feel like “affirming life.” One is only stricken. The horrors that lie ahead for our poor species....it is almost too much to bear. But then one remembers there are things that redeem life: music, creativity, freedom, love, hope. “*Humanism*.” One looks around and sees strong people persevering, embracing life despite terrible hardship. Karl Marx once said that “life is struggle”; but the other side of that truth is that life is hope. We must keep fighting, keep living, keep hoping, and never give up on humanity.

