Hidden Price Tags

An Eastern Orthodox Look at the Dark Side of Technology and Its Best Use

Volume 3: Socratic Dialogue

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You are invited to visit the author website at https://cjshayward.com, and explore other, related titles on his bookshelf at https://cjshayward.com/books/.

To Robin Munn, Heather Munn, and all my friends from The House at Pooh Corner, friends of decades—

Thank you for all the wide-ranging, philosophical and theological conversations!

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Foreword to the *Hidden Price Tags* series

I gave my heirarch and abbot a copy of *The Luddite's Guide to Technology* for Christmas, and told him, "If I've contributed something to the conversation, it's probably in this book."

This collection is intended to break the contents of that book and a few related works into smaller and more manageable volumes, and give an introduction and discussion questions for individual works.

My life as a whole has been heavy with technology and heavy with theology / patrology, and my distinctive contributions may lie in relation to both. It's very easy to have your life taken over and run by technology; this is about unplugging to an extent, mastering the technologies you use, and using technologies so that they are beneficial instead of draining you. The reality is that without a conscious effort, and perhaps with many kinds of conscious effort, you will be hit by the dark sides of technology.

If this series succeeds, it will be relevant both when it was written, and later on when there are some of the same kinds of forces at play but the list of technologies that are *au courant* has shifted in significant ways.

I do not wish to continue to update this series to

continue to give the impression that it was just written, but there is something timeless even to good books on technology. As regards television, I unhesitatingly draw on Neil Postman's 1985 *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in an Age of Show Business*,[1] Jerry Mander's 1978 *Four Arguments for the **Elimination** of Television*,[2] and Marie Winn's 1977 *The Plug-in Drug*[3] as worth listening to today. None of them anticipate ubiquitous mobile devices, and Jerry Mander is skeptical about whether computers would be of any real use for consumers. I don't mean that Mander was skeptical about whether personal-use computers would be an overall improvement to the picture; I mean that he did not anticipate personally owned computers or computer networks at all, let alone mobile Internet devices. But when you read one of his arguments, the argument of "artificial unusualness,"[4] under "Argument Four: The Inherent Biases of Television,"[5] a relatively light edit could give the impression of an incisive analysis of technology—*today*—whose ink is still wet on its pages. *Artificial unusuality was part of television when he wrote it, it is more a part of television now, it is a feature of social media, and it is a core part to how you make technology addictive today*.[6] It is not just because I have heard people say that television is the future of the Internet that I believe these books about technology are relevant. Much may have changed in the intervening 40-50 years

[1] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (London: Methuen, 2007).

[2] Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Perennial, 2002).

[3] Marie Winn, *The Plug-in Drug* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

[4] Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 299-322.

[5] Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 263-346.

[6] See, for instance, "The Acceleration of Addictiveness," The acceleration of addictiveness, accessed November 18, 2022, http://www.paulgraham.com/addiction.html.

since Mander wrote his title, but *the more some things change, the more some things stay the same*. The principles in these precursors to this series are still relevant, and I believe the principles in this collection will likely be at least partially relevant when smartphones and smartwatches are no longer the cutting edge of mainstream consumer use of technology, and, perhaps, there will seem to be something quaint about the concept of watching porn on a flat and external screen.

When I first wrote " 'Social Antibodies' Needed: A Request of Orthodox Clergy" (in volume 4 of this series)[7] in 2014, I made multiple attempts at a literature search on Amazon found nothing much on some other queries, and "orthodox technology" turned up, among Orthodox Christian works on technology: my own work and nobody else's.

At the time of this writing that is no longer true. The first result for that search is no longer one of my own: *Religion, Science, and Technology*.[8] Jean-Claude Larchet's *The New Media Epidemic: The Undermining of Society, Family, and Our Own Soul*[9] is on Amazon now and eminently worth reading. But my own works represent six of the first page Amazon search results for that query. As I said in " 'Social Antibodies' Needed," about what I found when I searched Amazon, "*Um, **thanks**, I think. I guess I'm an expert, or at least a resource, and even if I didn't want to, I should probably make myself available to Orthodox clergy, with my spiritual father and bishop foremost*." But for the most part, I am a somewhat obscure local expert if I

[7] #Create internal footnote.

[8] Katina Michael, M. G. Michael, and Kallistos, *Religion, Science & Technology: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective ; an Interview with Metropolitan Kallistos Ware* (Wollongong, Australia: University of Wollongong, 2017).

[9] Jean-Claude Larchet and Archibald Andrew Torrance, *The New Media Epidemic: The Undermining of Society, Family, and Our Own Soul* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Publications, The Printshop of St Job of Pochaev, Holy Trinity Monastery, 2019).

am in fact a local subject-matter expert.

There may be a number of things I fail to project about the practical realities of the Internet of Bodies but I suspect this book, an attempt at outlining Orthodox ascesis governing technology use, will be somewhere on the scene then. There are some technologies that I have avoided using at all on overpowering negative intuitions, like SecondWife, er, SecondLife, and recommendations may shift from "Use freely," to "Use carefully," to "Use very cautiously," to "Better not to use," to "Don't use at all." We are having more concentrated versions of earlier precursors today, like eighty proof liquor followed age-old wine in ages past. And the case for abstinence may grow increasingly strong as the list of technologies that are *au courant* grows increasingly strong.

So you have in your hands something that may turn out to be significant, possibly moreso than my Amazon reviews may reflect. (After I posted a critique of the "Blessed Seraphim Rose" crowd,[10] admirers were not sated by giving that specific work one star reviews. They also follow through to see that positive Amazon ratings and reviews of any of my works continue to be taken down if they can be dislodged. This may also be part of why my works get one star reviews simply alleging, in two words, "Poorly written."[11])

Reading Marie Winn's *The Plug-in Drug*[12] helped me appreciate why my political science professor at Calvin forcefully told a class, "*Playboy* is more Christian than *Sesame Street*![13]" I am writing at a time when technologies

[10] C.J.S. Hayward, *The Seraphinians: "Blessed Seraphim Rose" and His Axe-Wielding Western Converts* (Wheaton, IL: C.J.S. Hayward Publications, 2012).

[11] "Amazon.com: The Luddite's Guide to Technology: The Past Writes Back to Humane Tech!," Amazon, accessed November 18, 2022, https://www.amazon.com/Luddites-Guide-Technology-Writes-Humane/dp/1731439539.

[12] Marie Winn, *The Plug-in Drug* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

[13] I believe his reason this forceful and possibly exaggerated statement is

are addictive and need to be carefully used if they are used at all, and works like "The Acceleration of Addictiveness" (at https://paulgraham.com/addiction.html)[14] suggest that such caution will only be more thoroughly justified as time continues and further modifications of technology unfold before us.

Why Orthodoxy?

One Orthodox community member talked about how he asked people, "I want to understand Orthodoxy. What books should I read?" He got an answer of, "You don't understand Orthodoxy by reading a book. You understand Orthodoxy by attending services." And that is how he answers requests other people make of him for reading recommendations to understand Orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy is an oral culture that uses reading, and monasticism more so. This book is not intended to explain Orthodoxy; you must attend Orthodox services if you want that. But Orthodoxy is how I understand being human and Orthodox theology has "Who are we?" for one of the biggest questions to answer.[15] This big question includes another capitally important question: "What is good for us as human beings?" This in turn includes "What use and abstention from technology is good for us as human

that *Playboy* is an open and undisguised evil that young people are warned about; *Sesame Street* is a whitewashed tomb full of rotten things which masquerades as a messenger of all things good, wholesome, and educational, and that is a bigger mark of the satanic. ("And no marvel; for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light," 2 Corinthians 11:14, *Classic Orthodox Bible*.)

[14] "The Acceleration of Addictiveness," The acceleration of addictiveness, accessed November 18, 2022, http://www.paulgraham.com/addiction.html.

[15] When I was beginning studying theology at Cambridge in 2002, in an early tutorial supervision I was told that the three fundamental questions in theology are "Who is God?", "Who are we?", and "How do we relate to God?"

beings?" That question drives this whole series. I do not write to reason you into being Orthodox, but I would be mistreating you to use anything less than the best resources I know to answer the challenges of technology and using technology without burning yourself.

Electronic technology has perhaps been around for a couple hundred years or less.[16] Our genus *Homo* has been around for millions of years,[17] and our subspecies *Homo sapiens sapiens* has been around for over a hundred thousand years.[18] This means that for well over 99% of the time our human race has been around, electronic technology was simply not part of the picture for anyone. *Maybe the keys to human flourishing and the conditions that the human person are adapted to, are older than electronic technology, and perhaps there are things we need to learn from what was normal human life.*

Let's go!

[16] "History of Technology Timeline," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed November 18, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/story/history-of-technology-timeline.

[17] "Homo," Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, November 7, 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo.

[18] Glenn Elert, "Age of Homo Sapiens," Age of Homo Sapiens - The Physics Factbook, accessed November 18, 2022, https://hypertextbook.com/facts/1997/TroyHolder.shtml.

Foreword to *Socratic Dialogue*

The obvious choice for analysis or ideas today is the article format, but Plato wrote dialogues, and both theology and philosophy include works in a dialogue format.

The format has much to commend itself; it lends itself more easily to bite-sized pieces, and it is easy to have a character speak up for things the reader will not necessarily have pieced together.

This collection is intended to represent Socratic dialogue that will speak today.

Note on Footnotes and Claim to Originality

It has been a thing to want originality, and to footnote debts to other authors but otherwise at least implicitly claim, "Except as I explicitly document otherwise, I was born in a house that I built with my own two hands."

There may be some original content in my writing, even strikingly original and possibly groundbreaking, but the claim I make to originality is nil. I have many debts to many people and more than I can trace (such may be classified as "unintentional plagiarism"), and I do not believe I was born in a house I built with my own two hands. I attempt the renovation and expansion of a mansion whose first roots I cannot trace and which has been touched by many hands before me, and God willing will be touched by many hands after.

When I was an aspiring scholar with an academic library, and I had an essay or assignment, I would do a literature search among the scholarly literature, and document what were often genuine dependencies and my genuine sources. That is not my situation now. *That is not the situation of my readers now*. I made footnotes for the book the first volume in this series was largely drawn from, and what I found was that I was doing five minute

Googlepedia hits that may have documented a claim but generally had nothing to do with where I got my ideas. And today, when in the title of one book I would probably like, we are *Amusing and Informing Ourselves to Death*, people carry cellphones and those who trace a footnote are probably about as capable as I am of a five minute Googlepedia hit.

Additionally, this work as it originally stands has a little more than a thousand pages of various kinds of un-footnoted writing. If we say that comes with an average of three footnotes per page and five minutes per footnote, that comes to over fifteen thousand footnotes, taking more than two hundred and fifty hours, or more than six uninterrupted forty hour workweeks. And I hardly have forty hour workweeks to spare.

Footnoting in this collection is essentially as original, meaning half-fledged Googlepedia hits for the first volume, standard scholarly footnoting in originally academic work, and naming of important sources in the remaining five out of seven volumes.

My apologies for readers who want footnotes; I know it's considered a sign of a serious or formal book, but I would rather make this collection available soon than wait indefinitely for all the half-fledged Googlepedia footnotes to be available.

Introduction

G.K. Chesterton wrote,

Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamp-post, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen, "Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If Light be in itself good—" At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmedieval practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamp-post, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he

> strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, to-day, to-morrow, or the next day, there comes back that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark.

G.K. Chesterton might have been writing about woke culture today; perhaps his choice of technology in an example is the biggest clue that betrays that his ink is no longer wet on the page.

No literary format guarantees truth; perhaps some cast a suspicion of untruth. However, for the clean breeze of the centuries, Socratic dialogue was the preferred medium of no less a founder than Plato. Socratic dialogue, which can still be written today, may bear some of the romance of paper.

Let us begin.

Introduction to "Plato: The Allegory of the... *Flickering Screen?*"

Plato's most famous work is "The Allegory of the Cave," in which prisoners in an odd prison mistake shadows cast on a wall for the real thing.

Here, the direction is changed, but with remarkably little editing. Jean-Claude Larchet, in *The New Media Epidemic: The Undermining of Society, Family, and Our Own Soul* envisioned something like this, but did not work it out. (I believe he and I imagined it independently.) It speaks here of deleterious use of technologies that are made for some agenda other than the spiritual benefit of their users.

I invite you to read Larchet's suggestion spelled out.

Plato: The Allegory of the… *Flickering Screen?*

Socrates: And now, let me give an illustration to show how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! a human being in a darkened den, who has a slack jaw towards only source of light in the den; this is where he has gravitated since his childhood, and though his legs and neck are not chained or restrained any way, yet he scarcely turns round his head. In front of him are images from faroff, projected onto a flickering screen. And others whom he cannot see, from behind their walls, control the images like marionette players manipulating puppets. And there are many people in such dens, some isolated one way, some another.

Glaucon: I see.

Socrates: And do you see, I said, the flickering screen showing men, and all sorts of vessels, and statues and collectible animals made of wood and stone and various materials, and all sorts of commercial products which appear on the screen? Some of them are talking, and there is rarely silence.

Glaucon: You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Socrates: Much like us. And they see only their own images, or the images of one another, as they appear on the screen opposite them?

Glaucon: True, he said; how could they see anything but the images if they never chose to look anywhere else?

Socrates: And they would know nothing about a product they buy, except for what brand it is?

Glaucon: Yes.

Socrates: And if they were able to converse with one another, wouldn't they think that they were discussing what mattered?

Glaucon: Very true.

Socrates: And suppose further that the screen had sounds which came from its side, wouldn't they imagine that they were simply hearing what people said?

Glaucon: No question.

Socrates: To them, the truth would be literally nothing but those shadowy things we call the images.

Glaucon: That is certain.

Socrates: And now look again, and see what naturally happens next: the prisoners are released and are shown the truth. At first, when any of them is liberated and required to suddenly stand up and turn his neck around, and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the images; and then imagine someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, -what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is asking him to things, not as they are captured on the screen, but in living color -will he not be perplexed? Won't he imagine that the version which he used to see on the screen are better and more real than the objects which are shown to him in real life?

Glaucon: Far better.

Socrates: And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

Glaucon: True, he now will.

Socrates: And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and hindered in his self-seeking until he's forced to think about someone besides himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? He will find that he cannot simply live

life as he sees fit, and he will not have even the illusion of finding comfort by living for himself.

Glaucon: Not all in a moment, he said.

Socrates: He will require time and practice to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the billboards best, next the product lines he has seen advertised, and then things which are not commodities; then he will talk with adults and children, and will he know greater joy in having services done to him, or will he prefer to do something for someone else?

Glaucon: Certainly.

Socrates: Last of he will be able to search for the One who is greatest, reflected in each person on earth, but he will seek him for himself, and not in another; and he will live to contemplate him.

Glaucon: Certainly.

Socrates: He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and is absolutely the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Glaucon: Clearly, he said, his mind would be on God and his reasoning towards those things that come from him.

Socrates: And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners,

do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Glaucon: Certainly, he would.

Socrates: And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe what was happening in the world of brands and what new features were marketed, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer, "Better to be the poor servant of a poor master" than to reign as king of this Hell, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?

Glaucon: Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Socrates: Imagine once more, I said, such an one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness, and seem simply not to get it?

Glaucon: To be sure.

Socrates: And in conversations, and he had to compete in one-upsmanship of knowing the coolest brands with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable) would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went with his eyes and down he

came without them; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would give him an extremely heavy cross to bear.

Glaucon: No question. Then is the saying, "In the land of the blind, the one eyed man is king," in fact false?

Socrates: In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is crucified. Dear Glaucon, you may now add this entire allegory to the discussion around a matter; the den arranged around a flickering screen is deeply connected to the world of living to serve your pleasures, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the spiritual transformation which alike may happen in the monk keeping vigil or the mother caring for children, the ascent of the soul into the world of spiritual realities according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the Source of goodness appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

Glaucon: I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you.

Discussion questions for "Plato: The Allegory of the... *Flickering Screen?*"

1. If you've read Plato's most famous allegory, how is this allegory like Plato?
2. If you've read Plato's most famous allegory, how is this allegory different from Plato?
3. How does this allegory stand on its own?
4. What do the prisoners stand for?
5. What do the shadowy images stand for?
6. How do we come out of the cave and behold the sun?
7. What are the costs of coming out of the cave and beholding the sun?
8. What are the benefits of coming out of the cave and beholding the sun?
9. What can you do to be one notch less in the world of shadows?

Introduction to “Veni, Vidi, Vomui: A Look at ‘Do You Want to Date my Avatar?’ ”

This dialogue, drawn from email conversation, came after my brother showed me a viral music video and I was struggling to explain why it horrified me. The dialog peels back the surface layer to underlying horror.

Veni, Vidi, Vomi: A Look at "Do You Want to Date My Avatar?"

Author: P.S. My brother showed me the following video as cool. He didn't see why I found it a bit of a horror: "Do You Want to Date My Avatar?"

Visitor: Oh gosh, that's just layers and layers of sad. It's all about the experience, but the message is kept just this side of tolerable ("nerds are the new sexy" – the reversal of a supposed stigmatization) so it can function as an excuse for the experience. At least that's my analysis.

Author: Thanks. I just hotlinked a line of Labyrinth to Avatar…

…and added a tooltip of, "Veni, vidi, vomui".

Visitor: (*Laughs*) You have me completely mystified on this one, sorry.

However, you are welcome. And I'm glad to see that you're cracking jokes. (I think.)

No seriously, laughing out loud. Even though I don't exactly know why.

Is 'vomui' a made-up word? Men… when it comes right down to it you all have the same basic sense of humor. (I think.)

Author: Veni, vidi, vici: I came, I saw, I conquered.

Veni, vidi, vomui: I came, I saw, I puked.

Visitor: Yep… the basic masculine sense of humor, cloaked in Latin. I'm ever so honored you let me in on this. If the world were completely fair, someone would be there right now to punch your shoulder for me… this is my favorite form of discipline for my brother in law when he gets out of line.

But what's Avatar… and hotlink and tooltip?

Author: The link to "Do you want to date my Avatar?" Hotlink is a synonym for link; tooltip, what displays if you leave your mouse hovering over it.

Visitor: Oh dear, I really didn't understand what you were telling me; I was just in good spirits.

OK, I find that funny – and appropriate.

Author: Which do you think works better (i.e. The Labyrinth with or without images):

Visitor: I have some doubts about the video showing up in the text.

Author: Ok; I'll leave it out. Thanks.

Visitor: Welcome.

> I did like the Christ image where you had it. It encouraged a sober pause at the right place in the meditation.

Author: Thank you; I've put it in slightly differently.

Visitor: I like that.

Author: Thank you.

> I've also put the video (link) in a slightly different place than originally. I think it also works better there.

Visitor: Taking a risk of butting in… Would this be a more apropos place?

> The true raison d'etre was known to desert monks,
> Ancient and today,
> And by these fathers is called,
> Temptation, passion, demon,
> Of **escaping the world.**

> Unless I've misunderstood some things and that's always possible. (*laughs*) I never did ask you your analysis of what, in particular, horrified you about the video. But it seems like a perfect illustration not of pornography simple but of the underlying identity between the particular kind of lust expressed in pornography (not the same as wanting a person) and escapism, and that's the place in the poem where you are talking about that identification.

Author: Thank you. I've moved it.

In *That Hideous Strength*, towards the end, Lewis writes:

> "Who is called Sulva? What road does she walk? Why is the womb barren on one side? Where are the cold marriages?"
>
> Ransom replied, "Sulva is she whom mortals call the Moon. She walks in the lowest sphere. The rim of the world that was wasted goes through her. Half of her orb is turned towards us and shares our curse. Her other half looks to Deep Heaven; happy would he be who could cross that frontier and see the fields on her further side. On this side, the womb is barren and the marriages cold. There dwell an accursed people, full of pride and lust. There when a young man takes a maiden in marriage, they do not lie together, but each lies with a cunningly fashioned image of the other, made to move and to be warm by devilish arts, for real flesh will not please them, they are so dainty *(delicati)* in their dreams of lust. Their real children they fabricate by vile arts in a secret place.

Pp. 270/271 are in fantasy imagery what has become quite literally true decades later.

Visitor: Yes, that would be what I was missing… that fantasy banquet at the end of the video feels particularly creepy now.

However the girl I was telling you about had among other things watched a show where a "doctor" talked about giving seminars where women learn to experience the full physical effects of intercourse, using their minds only. (Gets into feminism, no?)

That's why I was trying to tell her that "richter scale" measurements aren't everything…

In this hatred of the body, in putting unhealthy barriers between genders, and in seeing the body as basically a tool for sexual experience, fundamentalist Christianity and cutting edge worldliness are really alike. (I had a pastor once who forbade the girls in the church school to wear sandals because they might tempt the boys with their "toe cleavage.")

Author: I would be wary of discounting monastic experience; I as a single man, prudish by American standards, probably have more interaction with women than most married men in the patristic era.

But in the image… "eating" is not just eating. In the initial still image in the embedded version of "Do You Want to Date My Avatar?", I made a connection. The sword is meant as a phallic symbol, and not just as half of a large category of items are a phallic symbol in some very elastic sense. It's very direct. Queer sex and orgy are implied, even though everything directly portrayed seems "straight", or at least straight as defined against the gender rainbow (as opposed, perhaps, to a "technology rainbow").

Visitor: Yes, I see what you are saying. I suppose the opening shots in the video would also imply self-abuse. I was seeing those images and the ones you

mention as just icky in themselves without thinking about them implying something else.

Author: P.S. My brother who introduced it to me, as something cool, explained to me that this is part of the main performer's effort to work her way into mainstream television. She demonstrates, in terms of a prospect for work in television, that she can look beautiful, act, sing, dance, and be enticing while in a video that is demure in its surface effect as far as music videos go. (And she has carefully chosen a viral video to prove herself as talent.)

Not sure if that makes it even more disturbing; I didn't mention it with any conscious intent to be as disturbing as I could, just wanted to give you a concrete snapshot of the culture and context for why I put what I put in The Labyrinth.

Visitor: It's making a lot more sense now.

I'm not remembering the significance of the technology rainbow.

Author: As far as "technology rainbow":

In contrast to "hetero-centrism" is advocated a gender rainbow where one live person may have any kind of arrangement with other live people, as long as everyone's of age, and a binary "male and female" is replaced by a rainbow of variety that is beyond shades of gray.

I was speaking by analogy: a "technology rainbow", in contrast to "face-to-face-centrism", would seek as normative any creative possibility, again excluding child pornography, where face-to-face relationships are only one part of a "technology rainbow".

It might also help make the point that internet-enabled expressions of sexuality, for most of the men, aren't exactly straight. They do not involve same-sex attraction, nor animals or anything like that, but they depart from being straight in a slightly different trajectory from face-to-face relationships where heterosexuality is only one option.

Neither member of this conversation had anything more to say.

Discussion questions for “Veni, Vidi, Vomui: A Look at ‘Do You Want to Date my Avatar?’ “

1. Can a viral music video be creepy under the surface?
2. What in this video creeps some people out?
3. What other mass communications are doing something disturbing?
4. Do MMO’s show the glory human life can reach?
5. What can you do to avoid media contact that erodes sensibility?

Introduction to "Singularity"

This dialogue looks at characters putatively from the "silent majority" of the 99% of the time humans have been on the earth before civilization, and looks at the present time as an increasing singularity.

I'm not sure I was right to make one of the characters Merlin, even a chrismated Merlin under the name of John, named after the Theologian whose emblem is the soaring eagle. I did so in the wake of C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, where Merlin does not so much furnish feats of amazing magic as furnish feats of amazing perspective. He represents in that story a perspective that looks on our present day with amazement and puzzlement, and he underscores our present singularity with the same in this piece.

The other character, Herodotus, is named after the figure of the founder of history.

Singularity

Herodotus: And what say thee of these people? Why callest thou them the Singularity, Merlin?

John: Mine illumined name is John, and John shall ye call me each and every one.

Herodotus: But the Singularity is such as only a Merlin could have unravelled.

John: Perchance: but the world is one of which only an illumined one may speak aright. Call thou me as one illumined, if thou wouldst hear me speak.

Herodotus: Of illumination speakest thou. Thou sawest with the eye of the hawk: now seest thou with the eye of the eagle.

John: If that be, speak thou me as an eagle?

Herodotus: A point well taken, excellent John, excellent John. What speakest thou of the Singularity?

John: A realm untold, to speak is hard. But of an icon will I speak: inscribed were words:

> 'Waitress, is this coffee or tea?'
>
> 'What does it taste like?'
>
> 'IT TASTES LIKE DIESEL FUEL.'
>
> 'That's the coffee. The tea tastes like transmission fluid.'

Herodotus: Upon what manner of veneration were this icon worshipped?

John: That were a matter right subtle, too far to tell.

Herodotus: And of the inscription? That too be subtle to grasp.

John: Like as a plant hath sap, so a subtle engine by their philosophy wrought which needeth diesel fuel and transmission fluid.

Herodotus: [*laughs*] Then 'twere a joke, a jape! 'Tis well enough told!

John: You perceive it yet?

Herodotus: A joke, a jape indeed, of a fool who could not tell, two different plants were he not to taste of their sap! Well spoke! Well spoke!

John: Thou hast grasped it afault, my fair lord. For the subtle engine hath many different saps, no two alike.

Herodotus: And what ambrosia be in their saps?

John: Heaven save us! The saps be a right unnatural fare; their substance from rotted carcasses of monsters from aeons past, then by the wisdom of their philosophy transmogrified, of the subtle engine.

Herodotus: Then they are masters of Alchemy?

John: Masters of an offscouring of all Alchemy, of the lowest toe of that depravÃ¨d ascetical enterprise, chopped off, severed from even the limb, made hollow, and then growen beyond all reason, into the head of reason.

Herodotus: Let us leave off this and speak of the icon. The icon were for veneration of such subtle philosophy?

John: No wonder, no awe, greeteth he who regardest this icon and receive it as is wont.

Herodotus: As is wont?

John: As is wanton. For veneration and icons are forcÃ¨d secrets; so there is an antithesis of the *sacra pagina*, and upon its light pages the greatest pages come upon the most filled with lightness, the icons of a world that knoweth icons not.

Let me make another essay.

The phrase ‘harmony with nature’ is of popular use, yet a deep slice of the Singularity, or what those

inside the Singularity can see of it, might be called, 'harmony with technology'.

Herodotus: These be mystics of technology.

John: They live in an artificial jungle of technology, or rather an artificial not-jungle of technology, an artificial anti-jungle of technology. For one example, what do you call the natural use of wood?

Herodotus: A bundle of wood is of course for burning.

John: And they know of using wood for burning, but it is an exotic, rare case to them; say 'wood' and precious few will think of gathering wood to burn.

Herodotus: Then what on earth *do* they use wood for? Do they eat it when food is scarce or something like that?

John: Say 'wood' and not exotic 'firewood', and they will think of building a house.

Herodotus: So then they are right dexterous, if they can build out of a bundle of gathered sticks instead of burning it.

John: They do not gather sticks such as you imagine. They fell great trees, and cut the heartwood into rectangular box shapes, which they fit together in geometrical fashion. And when it is done, they make a box, or many boxes, and take rectangles hotly fused sand to fill a window. And they add other philosophy on top of that, so that if the house is well-built, the air inside will be pleasant and still, unless they take a philosophical machine to push air, and whatever

temperature the people please, and it will remain dry though the heavens be opened in rain. And most of their time is spent in houses, or other 'buildings' like a house in this respect.

Herodotus: What a fantastical enterprise! When do they enter such buildings?

John: When do they rather go out of them? They consider it normal to spend less than an hour a day outside of such shelters; the subtle machine mentioned earlier moves but it is like a house built out of metal in that it is an environment entirely contrived by philosophy and artifice to, in this case, convey people from one place to another.

Herodotus: How large is this machine? It would seem to have to be very big to convey all their people.

John: But this is a point where their 'technology' departs from the art that is implicit in Ï„ÎµÏ‡Î½Î·: it is in fact not a lovingly crafted work of art, shaped out of the spirit of that position ye call 'inventor' or 'artist', but poured out by the thousands by gigantical machines yet more subtle, and in the wealth of the Singularity, well nigh unto each hath his own machine.

Herodotus: And how many can each machine can convey? Perchance a thousand?

John: Five, or six, or two peradventure, but the question is what they would call 'academical': the most common use is to convey *one*.

Herodotus: They must be grateful for such property and such philosophy!

John: A few are very grateful, but the prayer, 'Let us remember those less fortunate than ourselves' breathes an odor that sounds truly archaical. It sounds old, old enough to perhaps make half the span of a man's life. And such basic technology, though they should be very much upset to lose them, never presents itself to their mind's eye when they hear the word 'technology'. And indeed, why should it present itself to the mind his eye?

Herodotus: I strain to grasp thy thread.

John: To be thought of under the heading of 'technology', two things must hold. First, it must be possessed of an artificial unlife, not unlike the unlife of their folklore's ghouls and vampires and zombies. And second, it must be of recent vintage, something not to be had until a time that is barely past. Most of the technologies they imagine provide artificially processed moving images, some of which are extremely old—again, by something like half the span of a man's life—while some are new. Each newer version seemeth yet more potent. To those not satisfied with the artificial environment of an up-to-date building, regarded by them as something from time immemorial, there are unlife images of a completely imaginary artificial world where their saying 'when pigs can fly' meaning never is in fact one of innumerable things that happen in the imaginary world portrayed by the technology. 'SecondLife' offers a second alternative to human life, or so it would seem, until 'something better comes along.'

Herodotus: My mind, it reeleth.

John: Well it reeleth. But this be but a sliver.

For life to them is keeping one's balance on shifting sand; they have great museums of different products, as many as the herbs of the field. But herein lies a difference: we know the herbs of the field, which have virtues, and what the right use is. They know as many items produced by philosophy, but they are scarce worse for the deal when they encounter an item they have never met before. For while the herbs of the field be steady across generations and generations, the items belched forth by their subtle philosophy change not only within the span of a man's life; they change year to year; perchance moon to moon.

Herodotus: Thou sayest that they can navigate a field they know not?

John: Aye, and more. The goal at which their catechism aims is to 'learn how to learn'; the appearance and disappearance of kinds of items is a commonplace to them. And indeed this is not only for the items we use as the elements of our habitat: catechists attempt to prepare people for roles that exist not yet even as the students are being taught.

Though this be sinking sand they live in, they keep balance, of a sort, and do not find this strange. And they adapt to the changes they are given.

Herodotus: It beseemeth me that thou speakest as of a race of Gods.

John: A race of Gods? Forsooth! Thou knowest not half of the whole if thou speakest thus.

Herodotus: What remaineth?

John: They no longer think of making love as an action that in particular must needeth include an other.

Herodotus: I am stunned.

John: And the same is true writ large or writ small. A storyteller of a faintly smaller degree, living to them in ages past, placed me in an icon:

> The Stranger mused for a few seconds, then, speaking in a slightly singsong voice, as though he repeated an old lesson, he asked, in two Latin hexameters, the following question:
>
> 'Who is called Sulva? What road does she walk? Why is the womb barren on one side? Where are the cold marriages?'
>
> Ransom replied, 'Sulva is she whom mortals call the Moon. She walks in the lowest sphere. The rim of the world that was wasted goes through her. Half of her orb is turned towards us and shares our curse. Her other half looks to Deep Heaven; happy would he be who could cross that frontier and see the fields on her further side. On this side, the womb is barren and the marriages cold. There dwell an accursed people, full of pride and lust. There when a young man takes a maiden in marriage, they do not lie together, but each lies with a cunningly fashioned image of the other, made to move and to be warm by devilish arts, for real flesh will not please them, they

are so dainty in their dreams of lust.
Their real children they fabricate by vile
arts in a secret place.'

The storyteller saw and saw not his future. 'Tis rare in the Singularity to fabricate children 'by vile arts in a secret place'. But the storyteller plays us false when he assumes their interest would be in a 'cunningly fashioned image of the other'. Truer it would be to say that the men, by the fruits of philosophy, jump from one libidinous dream to another whilest awake.

Herodotus: *Forsooth!*

John: A prophet told them, the end will come when no man maketh a road to his neighbors. And what has happened to marriage has happened, by different means but by the same spirit, to friendship. Your most distant acquaintanceship to a fellow member is more permanent than their marriage; it is routine before the breakable God-created covenant of marriage to make unbreakable man-made covenants about what to do if, as planned for, the marriage ends in divorce. And if that is to be said of divorce, still less is the bond of friendship. Their own people have talked about how 'permanent relationships', including marriage and friendship, being replaced by 'disposable relationships' which can be dissolved for any and every reason, and by 'disposable relationships' to 'transactional relationships', which indeed have not even the pretension of being something that can be kept beyond a short transaction for any and every reason.

And the visits have been eviscerated, from a conversation where voice is delivered and vision is stripped out, to a conversation where words alone are

> transmitted without even hand writing; from a conversation where mental presence is normative to a conversation where split attention is expected. 'Tis yet rarely worth the bother to make a physical trail, though they yet visit. And their philosophy, as it groweth yet more subtle, groweth yet more delicate. 'Twould scarcely require much to 'unplug' it. And then, perhaps, the end will come?

Herodotus: Then there be a tragic beauty to these people.

John: A tragic beauty indeed.

Herodotus: What else hast thou to tell of them?

John: Let me give a little vignette:

> Several men and women are in a room; all are fulfilling the same role, and they are swathed with clothing that covers much of their skin. And the differences between what the men wear, and what most of the women wear, are subtle enough that most of them do not perceive a difference.

Herodotus: Can they not perceive the difference between a man and a woman?

John: The sensitivity is dulled in some, but it is something they try to overlook. But I have not gotten to the core of this vignette:

> One of them indicateth that had they be living several thousand years ago they would not have had need of clothing, not for modesty at least, and there are nods of agreement to her. And they all imagine

such tribal times to be times of freedom, and their own to be of artificial restriction.

And they fail to see, by quite some measure, that prolonged time in mixed company is much more significant than being without clothing; or that their buildings deaden all of a million sources of natural awareness: the breeze blowing and the herbs waving in the wind; scents and odours as they appear; song of crickets' kin chirping and song of bird, the sun as it shines through cloud; animals as they move about, and the subtleties and differences in the forest as one passes through it. They deaden all of these sensitivities and variations, until there is only one form of life that provides stimulation: the others who are working in one's office. Small wonder, then, that to a man one woman demurely covered in an office has an effect that a dozen women wearing vines in a jungle would never have. But the libertines see themselves as repressed, and those they compare themselves to as, persay, emancipated.

Herodotus: At least they have the option of dressing modestly. What else hast thou?

John: There is infinitely more, and there is nothing more. Marriage is not thought of as open to children; it can be dissolved in divorce; it need not be intrinsically exclusive; a further installment in the package, played something like a pawn in a game of theirs, is that marriage need not be between a man and a woman. And if it is going to be dismantled to the previous portion, why not? They try to have a world without marriage, by their changes to marriage. The Singularity is a disintegration; it grows more and more, and what is said for marriage could be said for each of the eight devils: intertwined with this is

pride, and it is only a peripheral point that those who further undefine marriage speak of 'gay pride'. A generation before, not mavericks but the baseline of people were told they needed a 'high self-esteem', and religious leaders who warned about pride as a sin, perhaps as the sin by which the Devil fell from Heaven, raised no hue and cry that children were being raised to embrace pride as a necessary ascesis. And religion itself is officially permitted some role, but a private role: not that which fulfills the definition of *religare* in binding a society together. It is in some measure like saying, 'You can speak any language you want, as long as you utter not a word in public discourse': the true religion of the Singularity is such ersatz religion as the Singularity provides. Real religion is expected to wither in private.

The Singularity sings a song of progress, and it was giving new and different kinds of property; even now it continues. But its heart of ice showeth yet. For the march of new technologies continues, and with them poverty: cracks begin to appear, and the writing on the wall be harder to ignore. What is given with one hand is not-so-subtly taken away with the other. The Singularity is as needful to its dwellers as forest or plain to its dwellers, and if it crumbles, precious few will become new tribal clans taking all necessities from the land.

Herodotus: Then it beseemeth the tragedy outweigheth the beauty, or rather there is a shell of beauty under a heart of ice.

John: *But there are weeds.*

Herodotus: What is a weed?

John: It is a plant.

Herodotus: What kind of plant is a weed? Are the plants around us weeds?

John: They are not.

Herodotus: Then what kinds of plants are weeds?

John: In the Singularity, there is a distinction between 'rural', 'suburban', and 'urban': the 'rural' has deliberately set plants covering great tracts of land, the 'suburban' has fewer plants, if still perhaps green all around, and the 'urban' has but the scattered ensconced tree. But in all of them are weeds, in an urban area plants growing where the artificial stone has cracked. And among the natural philosophers there are some who study the life that cannot be extinguished even in an urban city; their specialty is called 'urban ecology'. The definition of a weed is simply, 'A plant I do not want.' We do not have weeds because we do not seek an artificial envionment with plants only present when we have put them there. But when people seek to conform the environment to wishes and plans, even in the tight discipline of planned urban areas, weeds are remarkably persistent.

And in that regard, weeds are a tiny sliver of something magnificent.

Herodotus: What would that be?

John: The durability of Life that is writ small in a weed here in the urban, there in the suburban is but a shadow of the durability of Life that lives on in the sons of men. Mothers still sing lullabyes to their dear

little children; friendships form and believers pray at church far more than happened in the age where my story was told, a story dwarfed by what was called the 'age of faith'. The intensity of the attacks on the Church in a cruel social witness are compelled to bear unwilling witness to the vitality of the Church whose death has been greatly exaggerated: and indeed that Church is surging with vitality after surviving the attacks. The story told seems to tell of Life being, in their idiom, 'dealt a card off every side of the deck'—and answering, 'Checkmate, I win.' I have told of the differences, but there are excellent similarities, and excellent differences. For a knight whoso commandeth a wild and unbridled horse receiveth greater commendation than a knight whoso commandeth a well-bred and gentle steed.

Herodotus: The wind bloweth where it listeth. The shall live by his faith. Your cell, *though it be wholly artificial*, will teach you everything you need to know.

John: Thou hast eagerly grasped it; beyond beauty, tragedy, and beyond tragedy, beauty. Thou hast grasped it true.

Discussion questions for “Singlarity”

1. Do you see how much of a singularity we live in?
2. What things in your life represent a singularity?
3. How much of your day-to-day life would have been unimaginable a thousand years ago?
4. How much of your day-to-day life would have been unimaginable a century ago?
5. How much of your day-to-day life would have been unimaginable a decade ago?
6. How much of your day-to-day life would have been unimaginable a scant year ago?

Introduction to "The Damned Backswing"

This dialogue is about a historical phenomenon where people seem to get much more of some good thing, but when the logic unfolds they are impoverished and lose even what of that some good things they had. So, for instance, the Enlightenment enthroned Reason, but postmodernism has had so much taken away that it is considered almost an atrocity to speak of absolute Truth.

Other examples might include the Digital Dark Ages. We have already gotten decades past the point where museums possess computer media that are believed to be intact but that remain more incomprehensible than even strong encryption. We have reached and passed the point where people have said that now is already the time to get valuable memories, photographs, books, etc. in a hardcopy format that will survive the Digital Dark Ages.

The Damned Backswing

Kaine: What do you mean and what is the "damned backswing"?

Vetus: Where to start? Are you familiar with category theory?

Kaine: I have heard the term; explain.

Vetus: Category theory is the name of a branch of mathematics, but on a meta level, so to speak. Algebraists study the things of algebra, and number theorists study the things of number theory—an arrangement that holds almost completely. But category theory studies common patterns in other branches of mathematics, and it is the atypical, rare branch of mathematics that studies all branches of mathematics. And, though this is not to my point exactly, it is abstract and difficult: one list of insults to give to pet languages is that you must understand category theory to write even the simplest of all programs.

> The achievements of category theory should ideally be juxtaposed with Bourbaki, the pseudonym of a mathematician or group of mathematicians who tried to systamatize all of mathematics. What came out of their efforts is that trying to systematize mathematics is like trying to step on a water balloon and pin it down; mathematicians consider their discipline perhaps the most systematic of disciplines in academia, but the discipline itself cannot be systematized.
>
> But the fact that Bourbaki's work engendered a realization that you cannot completely systematize even the most systematic of disciplines does not mean that there are patterns and trends that one can observe, and the basic insight in category theory is that patterns recur and these patterns are not limited to any one branch of mathematics. Even if it does not represent a total success of doing what Bourbaki tried and failed to do, it is far from a total loss: category theory legitimately observes patterns and trends that transcend the confines of individual subdisciplines in mathematics.

Kaine: So the "damned backswing" is like something from category theory, cutting across disciplines?

Vetus: Yes.

Kaine: And why did you choose the term of a damned backswing?

Vetus: Let me comment on something first. C.S. Lewis, in a footnote in *Mere Christianity*, says that some people complained about his light swearing in referring to certain ideas as "damned nonsense." And he explained that he did not intend to lightly swear at all;

he meant that the ideas were incoherent and nonsense, and they and anyone who believed in them were damned or accursed. And I do not intend to swear lightly either; I intend to use the term "damned" in its proper sense. Instead there is a recurring trend, where some seemingly good things have quite the nasty backswing.

Kaine: And what would an example be?

Vetus: In the U.S., starting in the 1950's there was an incredibly high standard of living; everything seemed to be getting better all the time. And now we are being cut by the backswing: the former great economic prosperity, and the present great and increasing economic meltdown, are cut from the same cloth; they are connected. There was a time of bait, and we sprung for it and are now experiencing the damned backswing.

Kaine: So the damned backswing begins with bait of sorts, and ends in misery? In the loss of much more than the former gain? Do you also mean like addiction to alcohol or street drugs?

Vetus: Yes, indeed; for a while drinking all the time seems an effective way to solve problems. But that is not the last word. The same goes from rationalism to any number of things.

Kaine: Do you see postmodern trends as the backswing of modern rationalism?

Vetus: All that and less.

Kaine: What do you mean by "and less"?

Vetus: The damned backswing did not start with Derrida. The understanding of "reason" that was held before the Enlightenment was a multifaceted thing that meant much more than logic; even as Reason was enthroned (or an actress/prostitute), Reason was pared down to a hollowed-out husk of what reason encompassed in the West before then. It would be like celebrating "cars", but making it clear that when the rubber hits the road, the truly essential part of "a set of wheels" is the *wheel*—and enthroning the wheel while quietly, deftly stripping away the rest of the car, including not just the frame but engine, and seats. The damned backswing of rationalism was already at work in the Enlightenment stripping and enthroning reason. And the damned backswing was already at work in economic boom times in the West, saying that yes, indeed, man *can* live by bread alone.

And perhaps the strongest and most visible facet of the damned backswing occurs in technology. There are other areas: a country erected on freedoms moves towards despotism, just as Plato said in his list of governments, moving from the best to the worst. But in technology, we seem to be able to be so much more, but the matrix of technology we live in is, among other things, a surveillance system, and something we are dependent on, so that we are vulnerable if someone decides to shut things off. Man does not live by bread alone, but it is better for a man to try to live by bread alone than live by SecondWife alone, or any or all the array of techologies and gadgetry. The new reality man has created does not compare to the God-given reality we have spurned to embrace the new, and some have said that the end will come when we no longer make paths to our neighbors because we are entirely engrossed in technology and gadgetry.

Kaine: And are there other areas?

Vetus: There are other areas; but I would rather not belabor the point. Does this make sense?

Kaine: Yes, but may I say something strange?

Vetus: Yes.

Kaine: I believe in the damned backswing, and in full.

Vetus: You're not telling me something.

Kaine: I believe in the damned backswing, but I do not believe that the fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

Vetus: What? Do you mean that you partly believe in the damned backswing, and partly not? Do you believe in the damned backswing "is true, from a certain point of view"?

Kaine: I understand your concern but I reject the practice of agreeing with everyone to make them feel better. If I believed in the damned backswing up to a point, I would call it such.

Vetus: How do you believe it, if you reject that the fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge?

Kaine: Let me ask: do Calvinists believe in the Sovereignty of God?

Vetus: Is the Pope Catholic? (I mean besides John XXIII.)

Kaine: Let me suggest that the Reformed view of Divine Sovereignty could go further than it actually does.

Vetus: How? They are the most adamant advocates of Divine Sovereignty, and write books like *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism*.

Kaine: There's an awfully strong clue in the title.

Vetus: That the author believes so strongly in the Divine Sovereignty that he cannot countenance creaturely freedom?

Kaine: Not quite.

Vetus: Then what is the clue? I don't want to guess.

Kaine: The clue is that the author believes in the Divine Sovereignty so weakly that he cannot countenance creaturely freedom, and that if there is one iota of creaturely freedom, there is not one iota of Divine Sovereignty.

His is a fragile Divine Sovereignty, when in actual fact God's Sovereignty is absolute, with the last word after every exercise of creaturely freedom. There is no exercise of freedom you can make that will impede the exercise of the Divine Sovereignty.

Vetus: I could sin. In fact, I *do* sin, and I keep on sinning.

Kaine: Yes, but God is still Sovereign and can have the last world where there is sin. To get back to Lewis for a second, "All of us, either willingly or unwillingly, do the will of God: Satan and Judas as tools or instruments, John and Peter as sons." The Divine

Sovereignty is the Alpha and the Omega, the Founder of the beginning, and works in and through all: "even Gollum may have something yet to do."

Vetus: But what?

Kaine: "But what?", you ask?

For starters, there is Christmas. Good slips in unnoticed. God slips in unnoticed. True, it will become one of the most celebrated holidays in the Western world, and true, the Western world will undertake the nonsensical task of keeping a warm, fuzzy Christmas without Christ or Christmas mentioned once. But us lay aside both Christian bloggers speaking in defense of a secularized Christmas, and bloggers telling retailers, "You need Christmas, but Christmas doesn't need you." You speak of the damned backswing coming from an unexpected place; this is nothing next to God slipping in unnoticed.

There will be a time when God will be noticed by all. At the first Christmas, angel hosts announced good news to a few shepherds. When Christ returns, he will be seen by all, riding on the clouds with rank upon rank of angels. At the first Christmas, a lone star heralded it to the Magi. When he returns, the sky will recede as a vanishing scroll. At the first Christmas, a few knees bowed. When he returns, every knee will bow. And the seed for this victory is planted in Christmas.

And the same seeds of glory are quietly planted in our lives. You are not wrong to see the damned backswing and see that it is real: but one would be wrong to see it and think it is most real. Open one eye, and you may see the damned backswing at work. Open

both eyes wide, and you may see God at work, changing the game.

And God will work a new thing in you. Not, perhaps, by taking you out of your sufferings or other things that you may pray for; that is at his good pleasure. But you have heard the saying, "We want God to change our circumstances. God wants to use our circumstances to change us." Whole worlds open up with forgiveness, or repentance, or any virtue. If you are moulded as clay in the potter's hands, unsought goods come along the way. The best things in life are free, and what is hard to understand is that this is not just a friend's smile, but suffering persecution for the sake of Christ. It was spiritual eyes wide open that left the apostles rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame [and violence] for Christ's name. And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." This newness begins here and now, and it comes when in circumstances we would not choose God works to give us a larger share in the real world. We enter a larger world, or rather we become larger ourselves and more able to take in God's reality. And all of this is like the first Christmas, a new thing and unexpected. We are summoned and do not dare disobey: Sing unto the LORD a new song; sing unto the LORD all the earth. And it is this whole world with angels, butterflies, the Church, dandelions, energetic work, friends, family, and forgiveness, the Gospel, holiness, the I that God has made, jewels, kairos, love, mothers, newborn babes, ostriches, preaching, repentance from sins, singing, technology, unquestioning obedience, variety, wit and wisdom, xylophones, youth and age, and zebras.

The damned backswing is only a weak parody of the power of God the Gamechanger.

Discussion questions for "The Damned Backswing:"

1. What is the damned backswing?
2. Have you ever seen the damned backswing play out in your life?
3. If you are interested in history, have you seen the damned backswing in history?
4. Could the smartphone be the cusp to an increasing poverty?
5. Is there anything unnerving about postmodern texts making a critique of positivism and then often assuming that nothing needs to be said about the entire previous history and prehistory of human thought and cultures?

Introduction to "Within the Steel Orb:"

"Within the Steel Orb" is a Socratic dialogue set in a science fiction world. The author includes it with reservations because it deals in the spiritual poison of escape. Things that seem wondrous are plagiarized from what is wondrous in the real world.

That stated, it represents a significant, if minor, work for religion and science, and the guest in the story puzzles the host by assuming that if the host's world has such science and technology, surely it must have artificial intelligence in its computers. That is one of several things that it critiques.

Within the Steel Orb

The car pulled up on the dark cobblestones and stopped by the darker castle. The vehicle was silver-grey, low to the ground, and sleek. A—let us call him a man—opened the driver's door on the right, and stood up, tall, dark, clad in a robe the color of the sky at midnight. Around the car he went, opened the door for his passenger, and once the passenger stepped out, made one swift motion and had two bags on his shoulder. The bags were large, but he moved as if he were accustomed to carrying far heavier fare. It was starlight out, and the moon was visible as moonlight rippled across a pool.

The guest reached for the bags. "Those are heavy. Let me—"

The host smiled darkly. "Do not worry about the weight of your bags."

The host opened a solid greyblack door, of unearthly smoothness, and walked swiftly down a granite hallway, allowing his guest to follow. "You've had a long day. Let me get you something to drink." He turned a door, poured something into two iridescent titanium mugs, and turned through another corridor and opened a door on its side. Inside the room were two deep armchairs and a low table.

"This is my first time traveling between worlds—how am I to address you?"

The host smiled. "Why do you wish to know more of my name? It is enough for you to call me Oinos. Please enjoy our welcome."

The guest sipped his drink. "Cider?"

The host said, "You may call it that; it is a juice, which has not had artificial things done to make it taste like it just came out of its fruit regardless of how much it should have aged by the time you taste it. It is juice where time has been allowed to do its work." He was holding a steel orb. "You are welcome here, Art." Then—he barely seemed to move—there was a spark, and Oinos pulled a candle from the wall and set it on the table.

Art said, "Why not a fluorescent light to really light the room up?"

The host said, "For the same reason that you either do not offer your guests mocha at all, or else give them real mocha and not a mix of hot water, instant coffee, and hot cocoa powder. In our world, we can turn the room bright as day any time, but we do not often do so."

"Aah. We have a lot to learn from you about getting back to nature."

"Really? What do you mean by 'getting back to nature'? What do you do to try to 'get back to nature'?"

"Um, I don't know what to really do. Maybe try to be in touch with the trees, not being cooped up inside all the time, if I were doing a better job of it…"

"If that is getting back in touch with nature, then we pay little attention to getting in touch with nature. And nature, as we understand it, is about something fundamentally beyond dancing on hills or sitting and watching waves. I don't criticize you if you do them, but there is really something more. And I can talk with you about drinking juice without touching the natural processes that make cider or what have you, and I can talk with you about natural cycles and why we don't have imitation

daylight any time it would seem convenient. But I would like you to walk away with something more, and more interesting, than how we keep technology from being too disruptive to natural processes. That isn't really the point. It's almost what you might call a side effect."

"But you do an awfully impressive job of putting technology in its place and not getting too involved with it."

Oinos said, "Have you had enough chance to stretch out and rest and quench your thirst? Would you like to see something?"

"Yes."

Oinos stood, and led the way down some stairs to a room that seemed to be filled with odd devices. He pushed some things aside, then walked up to a device with a square in the center, and pushed one side. Chains and gears moved, and another square replaced it.

"This is my workshop, with various items that I have worked on. You can come over here and play with this little labyrinth; it's not completely working, but you can explore it if you take the time to figure it out. Come on over. It's what I've been working on most recently."

Art looked around, somewhat amazed, and walked over to the 'labyrinth.'

Oinos said, "In your world, in classical Greek, the same word, 'techne,' means both 'art' and 'technology.' You misunderstand my kindred if you think we aren't especially interested in technology; we have a great interest in technology, as with other kinds of art. But just as you can travel a long distance to see the Mona Lisa without needing a mass-produced Mona Lisa to hang in your bathroom, we enjoy and appreciate technologies without making them conveniences we need to have available every single day."

Art pressed a square and the labyrinth shifted. "Have I come here to see technologies?"

Oinos paused. "I would not advise it. You see our technologies, or how we use them, because that is what you are most ready to see. Visitors from some other worlds

hardly notice them, even if they are astonished when they are pointed out."

Art said, "Then why don't we go back to the other room?"

Oinos turned. "Excellent." They went back, and Art sat down in his chair.

Art, after a long pause, said, "I still find it puzzling why, if you appreciate technology, you don't want to have more of it."

Oinos said, "Why do you find it so puzzling?"

"Technology *does* seem to add a lot to the body."

"That is a very misleading way to put it. The effect of most technologies that you think of as adding to the body is in fact to undercut the body. The technologies that you call 'space-conquering' might be appropriately called 'body-conquering.'"

"So the telephone is a body-conquering device? Does it make my body less real?"

"Once upon a time, long ago from your perspective, news and information could not really travel faster than a person could travel. If you were talking with a person, that person had to be pretty close, and it was awkward and inconvenient to communicate with those who were far away. That meant that the people you talked with were probably people from your local community."

"So you were deprived of easy access to people far away?"

"Let me put it this way. It mattered where you were, meaning where your body was. Now, on the telephone, or instant messages, or the web, nothing and no one is really anywhere, and that means profound things for what communities are. And are not. You may have read about 'close-knit rural communities' which have become something exotic and esoteric to most of your world's city dwellers... but when space conquering technologies had not come in, and another space-conquering technology, modern roads allowing easy moving so that people would have to

say goodbye to face-to-face friendships every few years… It's a very different way of relating. A close-knit rural community is exotic to you because it is a body-based community in ways that tend not to happen when people make heavy use of body-conquering, or space-conquering, or whatever you want to call them, technologies."

"But isn't there more than a lack of technologies to close-knit communities?"

"Yes, indeed… but… spiritual discipline is about much more than the body, but a lot of spiritual discipline can only shape people when people are running into the body's limitations. The disciplines—worship, prayer, fasting, silence, almsgiving, and so on—only mean something if there are bodily limits you are bumping into. If you can take a pill that takes away your body's discomfort in fasting, or standing through worship, then the body-conquering technology of that pill has cut you off from the spiritual benefit of that practice."

"Aren't spiritual practices about more than the body?"

"Yes indeed, but you won't get there if you have something less than the body."

Art sat back. "I'd be surprised if you're not a real scientist. I imagine that in your world you know things that our scientists will not know for centuries."

Oinos sat back and sat still for a time, closing his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and said, "What have you learned from science?"

"I've spent a lot of time lately, wondering what Einstein's theory of relativity means for us today: even the 'hard' sciences are relative, and what 'reality' is, depends greatly on your own perspective. Even in the hardest sciences, it is fundamentally mistaken to be looking for absolute truth."

Oinos leaned forward, paused, and then tapped the table four different places. In front of Art appeared a gridlike object which Art recognized with a start as a

scientific calculator like his son's. "Very well. Let me ask you a question. Relative to your frame of reference, an object of one kilogram rest mass is moving away from you at a speed of one tenth the speed of light. What, from your present frame of reference, is its effective mass?"

Art hesitated, and began to sit up.

Oinos said, "If you'd prefer, the table can be set to function as any major brand of calculator you're familiar with. Or would you prefer a computer with Matlab or Mathematica? The remainder of the table's surface can be used to browse the appropriate manuals."

Art shrunk slightly towards his chair.

Oinos said, "I'll give you hints. In the theory of relativity, objects can have an effective mass of above their rest mass, but never below it. Furthermore, most calculations of this type tend to have anything that changes, change by a factor of the inverse of the square root of the quantity: one minus the square of the object's speed divided by the square of the speed of light. Do you need me to explain the buttons on the calculator?"

Art shrunk into his chair. "I don't know all of those technical details, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about relativity."

Oinos said, "If you are unable to answer that question before I started dropping hints, let alone after I gave hints, you should not pose as having contemplated what relativity means for us today. I'm not trying to humiliate you. But the first question I asked is the kind of question a teacher would put on a quiz to see if students were awake and not playing video games for most of the first lecture. I know it's fashionable in your world to drop Einstein's name as someone you have deeply pondered. It is also extraordinarily silly. I have noticed that scientists who have a good understanding of relativity often work without presenting themselves as having these deep ponderings about what Einstein means for them today. Trying to deeply ponder Einstein without learning even the basics of

relativistic physics is like trying to write the next Nobel prize-winning German novel without being bothered to learn even them most rudimentary German vocabulary and grammar."

"But don't you think that relativity makes a big difference?"

"On a poetic level, I think it is an interesting development in your world's history for a breakthrough in science, Einstein's theory of relativity, to say that what is absolute is not time, but light. Space and time bend before light. There is a poetic beauty to Einstein making an unprecedented absolute out of light. But let us leave poetic appreciation of Einstein's theory aside.

"You might be interested to know that the differences predicted by Einstein's theory of relativity are so minute that decades passed between Einstein making the theory of relativity and people being able to use a sensitive enough clock to measure the minute difference of the so-called 'twins paradox' by bringing an atomic clock on an airplane. The answer to the problem I gave you is that for a tenth the speed of light—which is faster than you can imagine, and well over a thousand times the top speed of the fastest supersonic vehicle your world will ever make—is one half of one percent. It's a disappointingly small increase for a rather astounding speed. If the supersonic Skylon is ever built, would you care to guess the increase in effective mass as it travels at an astounding Mach 5.5?"

"Um, I don't know…"

"Can you guess? Half its mass? The mass of a car? Or just the mass of a normal-sized adult?"

"Is this a trick question? Fifty pounds?"

"The effective mass increases above the rest mass, for that massive vehicle running at about five times the speed of sound and almost twice the top speed of the SR-71 Blackbird, is something like the mass of a mosquito."

"A *mosquito*? You're joking, right?"

"No. It's an underwhelming, *microscopic* difference for what relativity says when the rumor mill has it that Einstein taught us that hard sciences are as fuzzy as anything else… or that perhaps, in Star Wars terms, 'Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on your own point of view.' Under Einstein, you will in fact **not** find that many of the observations that we cling to, depend greatly on your own frame of reference. You have to be doing something pretty exotic to have relativity make any measurable difference from the older physics at all."

"Would you explain relativity to me so that I can discuss its implications?"

"I really think there might be more productive ways to use your visit."

"But you have a scientist's understanding of relativity."

"I am not sure I'd say that."

"Why? You seem to understand relativity a lot more like a scientist than I do."

"Let's talk about biology for a moment. Do you remember the theory of spontaneous generation? You know, the theory that life just emerges from appropriate material?"

"I think so."

"But your world's scientists haven't believed in spontaneous generation since over a century before you were born. Why would you be taught that theory—I'm assuming you learned this in a science class and not digging into history?"

"My science course explained the theory in covering historical background, even though scientists no longer believe that bread spontaneously generates mold."

"Let me ask what may seem like a non-sequitur. I assume you're familiar with people who are working to get even more of religion taken out of public schools?"

"Yes."

"They are very concerned about official prayers at school events, right? About having schools endorse even the occasional religious practice?"

"Yes."

"Ok. Let me ask what may seem like a strange question. Have these 'separation of Church and state' advocates also advocated that geometry be taken out of the classroom?"

Art closed his eyes, and then looked at Oinos as if he had two heads. "It seems you don't know everything about my world."

"I don't. But please understand that geometry did not originate as a secular technical practice. You migth have heard this mentioned. Geometry began its life as a 'sacred science,' or a religious practice, and to its founders the idea that geometry does not have religious content would have struck them as worse than saying that prayer does not have religious content."

"Ok, I think I remember that being mentioned. So to speak, my math teacher taught about geometry the 'sacred science' the way that my biology teacher taught about the past theory of spontaneous generation."

Oinos focused his eyes on Art. "In our schools, and in our training, physics, biology, and chemistry are 'taught' as 'secular sciences' the same way, in your school, spontaneous generation is taught as 'past science', or even better, the 'sacred science' of geometry is 'taught' in the course of getting on to a modern understanding of geometry."

Art said, "So the idea that the terrain we call 'biology' is to you—"

Oinos continued: "As much something peered at through a glass bell as the idea that the terrain of regular polygons belongs to a secularized mathematics."

"What is a sacred science?"

Oinos sat back. "If a science is about understanding something as self-contained whose explanations do not involve God, and it is an attempt to understand as physics

understand, and the scientist understands as a detached observer, looking in through a window, then you have a secular science—the kind that reeks of the occult to us. Or that may sound strange, because in your world people proclaiming sacred sciences are proclaiming the occult. But let me deal with that later. A sacred science does not try to understand objects as something that can be explained without reference to God. A sacred science is first and foremost about God, not about objects. When it understands objects, it understands them out of God, and tries to see God shining through them. A sacred science has its home base in the understanding of God, not of inanimate matter, and its understanding of things bears the imprint of God. If you want the nature of its knowing in an image, do not think of someone looking in and observing, detached, through a window, but someone drinking something in."

"Is everything a sacred science to you? And what is a sacred science? Astrology?"

"Something like that, except that I use the term 'sacred science' by way of accommodation. Our own term is one that has no good translation in your language. But let us turn to the stars."

"Astrology is right in this: a star is more than a ball of plasma. Even in the Bible there is not always such a distinction between the ranks of angels and the stars as someone raised on materialist science might think." He rose, and began to walk, gesturing for Art to follow him. In the passage, they turned and entered a door. Oinos lit a lamp next to an icon on the wall.

The icon looked like starlight. It showed angels praying at the left, and then the studded sapphiric canopy of the night sky behind a land with herbs shooting from the earth, and on the right an immense Man—if he was a Man—standing, his hand raised in benediction. All around the sapphire dome were some majestic figures, soaring aloft in two of their six wings. Art paused to drink it in.

"What are those symbols?"

"They are Greek letters. You are looking at an icon of the creation of the stars, but the text is not the text for that day; it is from another book, telling of the angels thunderously shouting for joy when the stars were created. So the stars are connected with the angels."

"Is this astrology?"

"No, because the stars and angels both point to God. The influences in astrology point beyond matter to something else, but they do not point far enough beyond themselves. If you can use something to make a forecast that way, it doesn't point far enough beyond itself."

"Why not?"

"One definition to distinguish religion from magic—one used by anthropologists—is that religion is trying to come into contact with the divine, and magic is trying to control the divine. God cannot be controlled, and there is something of control in trying to foretell a future that God holds in mystery. A real God cannot be pried into by a skill. Astrology departs from a science that can only see stars as so much plasma, but it doesn't go far enough to lead people to look into the stars and see a shadow of their Creator. To be a sacred science, it is not enough to point to something more than matter as secular science understands it; as the term is used in our language, one can only be a *sacred* science by pointing to God."

"Then what is a sacred science? Which branches of learning as you break them up? Can they even be translated into my language?"

"You seem to think that if astrology is not a sacred science then sacred sciences must be something much more hidden. Not so. Farming is a sacred science, as is hunting, or inventing, or writing. When a monk makes incense, it is not about how much incense he can make per unit of time; his making incense is the active part of living contemplatively, and his prayer shows itself in physical labor. His act is more than material production; it is a sacred science, or sacred art or sacred endeavor, and what

goes into and what comes out of the activity is prayer. Nor is it simply a matter that he is praying while he acts; his prayers matter for the incense. There are many lands from your world's Desert Fathers to Mexico in your own day where people have a sense that it matters what state people cook in, and that cooking with love puts something into a dish that no money can buy. Perhaps you will not look at me askance when I say that not only monks in their monasteries exotically making incense for worship are performing a sacred science, but cooking, for people who may be low on the totem pole and who are not considered exotic, as much as for anyone else, can and should be a sacred science. Like the great work that will stay up with a sick child all night."

"Hmm…" Art said, and then finished his tankard. "Have you traveled much?"

"I have not reached one in five of the galaxies with inhabited worlds. I can introduce you to people who have some traveling experience, but I am not an experienced traveler. Still, I have met sites worth visiting. I have met, learned, worshiped. Traveling in this castle I have drunk the blood of gems. There are worlds where there is nothing to see, for all is music, and song does everything that words do for you. I have beheld a star as it formed, and I have been part of an invention that moves forward as a thousand races in their laboratories add their devices. I have read books, and what is more I have spoken with members of different worlds and races. There seems to be no shortage of wonders, and I have even been to your own world, with people who write fantasy that continues to astonish us—"

"My son-in-law is big into fantasy—he got me to see a Lord of the whatever-it-was movie—but I don't fancy them much myself."

"We know about Tolkein, but he is not considered a source of astonishing fantasy to us."

"Um…" Art took a long time to recall a name, and Oinos waited patiently. "Lewis?"

"If you're looking for names you would have heard of, Voltaire and Jung are two of the fantasy authors we consider essential. Tolkein and Lewis are merely imaginative. It is Voltaire and Jung who are truly fantasy authors. But there are innumerable others in your world."

Art said, "Um… what do you mean by 'fantasy author'?"

Oinos turned. "I'm sorry; there is a discrepancy between how your language uses 'fantasy author' and ours. We have two separate words that your 'fantasy' translates, and the words stand for very different concepts. One refers to works of imagination that are set in another world that is not confused with reality. The other refers to a fundamental confusion that can cost a terrible price. Our world does not produce fiction; we do appreciate the fiction of other worlds, but we do not draw a particularly strong line between fiction where only the characters and events are imagined, and fiction where the whole world is imagined. But we do pay considerable attention to the second kind of fantasy, and our study of fantasy authors is not a study of imagination but a study of works that lead people into unreality. 'Fantasy author' is one of the more important terms in understanding your world and its history."

Art failed to conceal his reaction.

"Or perhaps I was being too blunt. But, unfashionable as it may be, there is such a thing as evil in your world, and the ways in which people live, including what they believe, has something to do with it. Not everything, but something."

Oinos waited for a time. Then, when Art remained silent, he said, "Come with me. I have something to show you." He opened a door on the other side of the room, and went into the next room. The room was lit by diffuse moonlight, and there was a ledge around the room and water which Oinos stirred with his hand to light a phosphorescent glow. When Art had stepped in, Oinos

stepped up, balancing on a steel cable, and stood silent for a while. “Is there anything here that you can focus on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Step up on this cable and take my hand.”

“What if I fall into the water?”

Art tried to balance, but it seemed even more difficult in the dark. For a while, he tried to keep his balance with Oinos’s help, but he seemed barely up. He overcompensated twice in opposite directions, began flying into the water, and was stopped at last by Oinos’s grip, strong as steel, on his arm.

“I can’t do this,” Art said.

“Very well.” Oinos opened a door on the other side of the room, and slowly led him out. As they walked, Oinos started up a spiral staircase and sat down to rest after Art reached the top. Then Art looked up at the sky, and down to see what looked like a telescope.

“What is it?”

“A telescope, not too different from those of your world.”

Oinos stood up, looked at it, and began some adjustments. Then he called Art over, and said, “Do you see that body?”

“What is it?”

“A small moon.”

Oinos said, “I want you to look at it as closely as you can,” and then pulled something on the telescope.

“It’s moving out of sight.”

“That’s right; I just deactivated the tracking feature. You should be able to feel handles; you can move the telescope with them.”

“Why do I need to move the telescope? Is the moon moving?”

“This planet is rotating: what the telescope sees will change as it rotates with the planet, and on a telescope you can see the rotation.”

Art moved the handles and found that it seemed either not to move at all or else move a lot when he put pressure on it.

Art said, “This is a hard telescope to control.”

Oinos said, “The telescope is worth controlling.”

“Can you turn the tracking back on?”

Oinos merely repeated, “The telescope is worth controlling.”

The celestial body had moved out of view. Art made several movements, barely passed over the moon, and then found it. He tried to see what he could, then give a relatively violent shove when the moon reached the edge of his field of view, and see if he could observe the body that way. After several tries, he began to get the object consistently in view… and found that he was seeing the same things about it, not being settled enough between jolts to really focus on what was there.

Art tried to make a smooth, slow movement with his body, and found that a much taller order than it sounded. His movement, which he could have sworn was gentle and smooth, produced what seemed like erratic movement, and it was only with greatest difficulty that he held the moon in view.

“Is this badly lubricated? Or do you have lubrication in this world?”

“We do, on some of our less precise machines. This telescope is massive, but it’s not something that moves roughly when it is pushed smoothly; the joints move so smoothly that putting oil or other lubricants that are familiar to you would make them move much more roughly.”

“Then why is it moving roughly every time I push it smoothly?”

“Maybe you aren’t pushing it as smoothly as you think you are?”

Art pushed back his irritation, and then found the moon again. And found, to his dismay, that when the

telescope jerked, he had moved the slightest amount unevenly.

Art pushed observation of the moon to the back of his mind. He wanted to move the telescope smoothly enough that he wouldn't have to keep finding the moon again. After a while, he found that this was less difficult than he thought, and tried for something harder: keeping the moon in the center of what he could see in the telescope.

He found, after a while, that he could keep the moon in the center if he tried, and for periods was able to manage something even harder: keeping the moon from moving, or perhaps just moving slowly. And then, after a time, he found himself concentrating through the telescope on taking in the beauty of the moon.

It was breathtaking, and Art later could never remember a time he had looked on something with quite that fascination.

Then Art realized he was exhausted, and began to sit down; Oinos pulled him to a bench.

After closing his eyes for a while, Art said, "This was a magnificent break from your teaching."

"A break from teaching? What would you mean?"

Art sat, opened his mouth, and then closed it. After a while, he said, "I was thinking about what you said about fantasy authors… do you think there is anything that can help?"

Oinos said, "Let me show you." He led Art into a long corridor with smooth walls and a round arch at top. A faint blue glow followed them, vanishing at the edges. Art said, "Do you think it will be long before our world has full artificial intelligence?"

Oinos said, "Hmm… Programming artificial intelligence on a computer is not *that* much more complex than getting a stone to lay an egg."

Art said, "But our scientists are making progress. Your advanced world has artificial intelligence, right?"

Oinos said, “Why on earth would we be able to do that? Why would that even be a goal?”

“You have computers, right?”

“Yes, indeed; the table that I used to call up a scientific calculator works on the same principle as your world’s computers. I could almost say that inventing a new kind of computer is a rite of passage among serious inventors, or at least that’s the closest term your world would have.”

“And your computer science is pretty advanced, right? Much more advanced than ours?”

“We know things that the trajectory of computer science in your world will never reach because it is not pointed in the right direction.” Oinos tapped the wall and arcs of pale blue light spun out.

“Then you should be well beyond the point of making artificial intelligence.”

“Why on a million, million worlds should we ever be able to do that? Or even think that is something we *could* accomplish?”

“Well, if I can be obvious, the brain is a computer, and the mind is its software.”

“Is it?”

“What else could the mind be?”

“What else could the mind be? What about an altar at which to worship? A workshop? A bridge between Heaven and earth, a meeting place where eternity meets time? A treasury in which to gather riches? A spark of divine fire? A line in a strong grid? A river, ever flowing, ever full? A tree reaching to Heaven while its roots grasp the earth? A mountain made immovable for the greatest storm? A home in which to live and a ship by which to sail? A constellation of stars? A temple that sanctifies the earth? A force to draw things in? A captain directing a starship or a voyager who can travel without? A diamond forged over aeons from of old? A perpetual motion machine that is simply impossible but functions anyway? A faithful manuscript by which an

ancient book passes on? A showcase of holy icons? A mirror, clear or clouded? A wind which can never be pinned down? A haunting moment? A home with which to welcome others, and a mouth with which to kiss? A strand of a web? An acrobat balancing for his whole life long on a slender crystalline prism between two chasms? A protecting veil and a concealing mist? An eye to glimpse the uncreated Light as the world moves on its way? A rift yawning into the depths of the earth? A kairometer, both primeval and young? A—"

"All right, all right! I get the idea, and that's some pretty lovely poetry. (What's a kairometer?) These are all very beautiful metaphors for the mind, but I am interested in what the mind is literally."

"Then it might interest you to hear that your world's computer is also a metaphor for the mind. A good and poetic metaphor, perhaps, but a metaphor, and one that is better to balance with other complementary metaphors. It is the habit of some in your world to understand the human mind through the metaphor of the latest technology for you to be infatuated with. Today, the mind is a computer, or something like that. Before you had the computer, 'You're just wired that way' because the brain or the mind or whatever is a wired-up telephone exchange, the telephone exchange being your previous object of technological infatuation, before the computer. Admittedly, 'the mind is a computer' is an attractive metaphor. But there is some fundamental confusion in taking *that* metaphor literally and assuming that, since the mind is a computer, all you have to do is make some more progress with technology and research and you can give a computer an intelligent mind."

"I know that computers don't have emotions yet, but they seem to have rationality down cold."

"Do they?"

"Are you actually going to tell me that computers, with their math and logic, aren't rational?"

"Let me ask you a question. Would you say that the thing you can hold, a thing that you call a book, can make an argument?"

"Yes; I've seen some pretty good ones."

"Really? How do paper and ink think out their position?"

Art hesitated, and said, "Um, if you're going to nitpick…"

"I'm not nitpicking. A book is a tool of intelligent communication, and they are part of how people read author's stories, or explanation of how to do things, or poetry, or ideas. But the physical thing is not thereby intelligent. However much you think of a book as making an argument, the book is incapable of knowing what an argument is, and for that matter the paper and ink have no idea of whether they contain the world's best classic, or something mediocre, or incoherent accusations that world leaders are secretly planning to turn your world to dog drool, or randomly generated material that is absolute gibberish. The book may be meaningful to you, but the paper with ink on it is not the sort of thing that can understand what you recognize through the book.

"This might ordinarily be nitpicking, but it says something important about computers. One of the most difficult things for computer science instructors in your world to pound through people's heads is that a computer does not get the gist of what you are asking it to do and overlook minor mistakes, because the computer has no sense of what you are doing and no way to discern what were trying to get it to do from a mistake where you wrote in a bug by telling it to do something slightly different from what you meant. The computer has no sense that a programmer meant anything. A computer follows instructions, one after another, whether or not they make sense, and indeed without being able to wonder whether they make sense. To you, a program may be a tool that acts as an electronic shopping cart to let you order things

through the web, but the web server no more understands that it is being used as a web server than a humor book understands that it is meant to make people laugh. Now most or all of the books you see are meant to say something—there's not much market for a paperback volume filled with random gibberish—but a computer can't understand that it is running a program written for a purpose any more than a book can understand that the ink on its pages is intended for people to read."

Art said, "You don't think artificial intelligence is making real progress? They seem to keep making new achievements."

Oinos said, "The rhetoric of 'We're making real breakthroughs now; we're on the verge of full artificial intelligence, and with what we're achieving, full artificial intelligence is just around the corner' is not new: people have been saying that full artificial intelligence is just around the corner since before you were born. But *breeding a better and better kind of apple tree is not progress towards growing oranges*. Computer science, and not just artificial intelligence, has gotten good at getting computers to function better as computers. But human intelligence is something else… and it is profoundly missing the point to only realize that the computer is missing a crucial ingredient of the most computer-like activity of human rational analysis. Even if asking a computer to recognize a program's purpose reflects a fundamental error—you're barking up the wrong telephone pole. Some people from your world say that when you have a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. The most interesting thing about the mind is not that it can do something more complete when it pounds in computer-style nails. It's something else entirely."

"But what?"

"When things are going well, the 'computer' that performs calculating analysis is like your moon: a satellite, that reflects light from something greater. Its light is useful,

but there is something more to be had. The sun, as it were, is that the mind is like an altar, or even something better. It takes long struggles and work, but you need to understand that the heart of the mind is at once practical and spiritual, and that its greatest fruit comes not in speech but in silence."

Art was silent for a long time.

Oinos stopped, tapped a wall once, and waited as an opening appeared in the black stone. Inside an alcove was a small piece of rough hewn obsidian; Oinos reached in, took it, and turned it to reveal another side, finely machined, with a series of concentric ridged grooves centered around a tiny niche. "You asked what a kairometer was, and this is a kairometer, although it would take you some time to understand exactly what it is."

"Is it one of the other types of computers in your world?"

"Yes. I would call it information technology, although not like the information technology you know. It is something people come back to, something by which people get something more than they had, but it does this not so much according to its current state as to our state in the moment we are using it. It does not change." Oinos placed the object in Art's hands.

Art slowly turned it. "Will our world have anything like this?"

Oinos took the kairometer back and returned it to its niche; when he withdrew his hand, the opening closed with a faint whine. "I will leave you to find that yourself."

Oinos began walking, and they soon reached the end of the corridor. Art followed Oinos through the doorway at the end and gasped.

Through the doorway was something that left Art trying to figure out whether or not it was a room. It was a massive place, lit by a crystalline blue light. As Art looked around, he began to make sense of his surroundings: there were some bright things, lower down, in an immense room

with rounded arches and a dome at the top, made of pure glass. Starlight streamed in. Art stepped through the doorway and sunk down a couple of inches.

Oinos stooped for a moment, and then said, “Take off your shoes. They are not needed here.” Art did so, and found that he was walking on a floor of velveteen softness. In the far heart of the room a thin plume of smoke arose. Art could not tell whether he smelled a fragrance, but he realized there was a piercing chant. Art asked, “What is the chant saying?”

Oinos did not answer.

What was the occasion? Art continued to look, to listen, and began trying to drink it in. It almost sounded as if they were preparing to receive a person of considerable importance. There was majesty in the air.

Oinos seemed to have slipped away.

Art turned and saw an icon behind him, hanging on the glass. There was something about it he couldn’t describe. The icon was dark, and the colors were bright, almost luminous. A man lay dreaming at the bottom, and something reached up to a light hidden in the clouds—was it a ladder? Art told himself the artistic effect was impressive, but there was something that seemed amiss in that way of looking at it.

What bothered him about saying the icon had good artistic effect? Was the artistry bad? That didn’t seem to be it. He looked at a couple of areas of artistic technique, but it was difficult to do so; such analysis felt like a foreign intrusion. He thought about his mood, but that seemed to be the wrong place to look, and almost the same kind of intrusion. There seemed to be something shining through the icon; looking at it was like other things he had done in this world, only moreso. He was looking through the icon and not around it, but… Art had some sense of what it was, but it was not something he could fit into words.

After being absorbed in the icon, Art looked around. There must have been hundreds of icons around, and lights,

and people; he saw what seemed like a sparse number of people—of Oinos's kind—spread out through the vast space. There was a chant of some kind that changed from time to time, but seemed to somehow be part of the same flow. Things seemed to move very slowly—or move in a different time, as if clock time were turned on its side, or perhaps as if he had known clock time as it was turned on its side and now it was right side up—but Art never had the sense of nothing going on. There seemed to always be something more going on than he could grasp.

Art shifted about, having stood for what seemed like too long, sat down for a time, and stood up. The place seemed chaotic, in a way cluttered, yet when he looked at the "clutter," there was something shining through, clean as ice, majestic as starlight, resonant as silence, full of life as the power beneath the surface of a river, and ordered with an order that no rectangular grid could match. He did not understand any of the details of the brilliant dazzling darkness… but they spoke to him none the less.

After long hours of listening to the chant, Art realized with a start that the fingers of dawn had stolen all around him, and he saw stone and verdant forest about the glass walls until the sunlight began to blaze. He thought, he though he could understand the song even as its words remained beyond his reach, and he wished the light would grow stronger so he could see more. There was a crescendo all about him, and—

Oinos was before him. Perhaps for some time.

"I almost understand it," Art said. "I have started to taste this world."

Oinos bowed deeply. "It is time for you to leave."

Discussion questions for "Within the Steel Orb"

1. What was your favorite detail in this story?
2. What was your favorite surprise in this story?
3. Which was your favorite tackling of the rumor mill's account of science?
4. What does the dialogue say about relativity?
5. What does the dialogue say about artificial intelligence?
6. What are your favorite fantasy authors in the usual sense of the term?
7. What are some of your favorite fantasy authors as the term is discussed in the dialogue?
8. What have you realized to repent of?

Introduction to "The Watch"

"The Watch" was a dialogue that was some time between when I thought of it and when I could write it.

If there is anything it contributes, it may be in less stark relief than "Within the Steel Orb:" but it reflects a human flexibility in thinking about time, and what watches can tell, and what they can't. The views of technology are quirky but not as science fiction-like when compared to today's technology.

This story was written some years prior to Apple releasing its smartwatch.

The Watch

Metacult: So, Pater, I was thinking—wait a minute; I hear someone scratching at the door.

Janra: Hi, Vespucci. How are you?

Vespucci: Doing well. Take a seat.

Janra: Where?

Vespucci: Anywhere.

Janra: *Anywhere?*

Vespucci: Anywhere…

> *Off!* Off! Get *off* my lap! Only my wife is allowed to sit there. You know that. Anyways, the *Radical Gadgets* catalogue came in today…

Janra: By the way, I phoned the company today. I think I can get some World War II vintage mechanical—

Vespucci: Don't even *think* about it. If you—

Pater: Easy, brothers. As you were saying?

Vespucci: As I was saying... *Radical Gadgets* has the most interesting tools. The cover product this month was an e-mail filtering package that uses Bayesian filtering techniques to block unwanted messages.

Janra: *That's* original! I checked Freshmeat today, and I think they only have half a dozen well-known anti-spam packages, not counting lesser products and tools that have just been released. Does *Radical Gadgets* always find products this original?

Vespucci: But it is original. And it's not an anti-spam package. It has nothing to do with spam.

Pater: Huh?

Vespucci: Let me explain. You know that Bayesian filtering looks at a message and uses statistics to guess what category it belongs to, right?

Pater: Yes; go on.

Vespucci: But that will work whether you use it for incoming or outgoing e-mails. Most people use the filtering techniques on incoming e-mails, to try and reduce the fire hose of spam coming in. But you don't have to stop there. You can also filter outgoing e-mails.

Pater: Why would I want to filter the e-mails I send *out*?

Vespucci: You've never sent a flame? Come on; I remember a couple of times that you flamed me over something minor, and sent a very embarrassed apology when I waited two weeks and simply sent it back, and asked you to read it aloud, and tell me whether that's what you want me to hear from you. And it's not just you. When you're talking with a person face to face, there are two eyes looking at you and reminding you that a person hears every cutting word you say. That doesn't stop conflicts, but it does mitigate some of the abrasive things we're tempted to say. On a computer, it seems like there's just a keyboard and pixels—no person you can actually hurt. So people hit harder, and you have incredible flamewars, often between people who conduct themselves like responsible adults when they're talking to someone face to face. It's possible to learn discipline, of course, and conduct yourself maturely, but all too many people don't realise there's a discipline you have to learn even if you're mature.

And so instead of just assuming that the only bad e-mails are offensive messages from people who've never seen you, telling you that part of your body isn't big enough and you need to buy their snake oil, or that you're impotent, or that you're not man enough for a relationship with a real woman and will have to content yourself with pixels on a screen—apart from these, there are offensive messages that you send out and then wish you could somehow take back and delete.

And this program does just that. Once you've trained it on your sent mail folder, it watches messages you send out, and uses the same Bayesian technology that's so powerful in identifying spam, and identifies when you're writing something you'll regret later.

Then it saves it, quarantining it in a separate folder until you come to your senses and delete it.

Pater: That's... um, I'm going to go to their computer and order it from their website. Please excuse me for a moment. I really need to—

Metacult: Sit down, Pater. You're not going to e-mail out any flames while we're here talking.

Vespucci: Hmm... um, I hadn't meant to have a big discussion about the anti-flame software. There were several things that caught my attention, but what caught my eye most was a watch that keeps exceptionally accurate time.

Pater: Huh? Who would need a more accurate way to keep time? Most cultures find an hour to be a short time, and a cheap digital watch keeps more accurate time than a $5000 Rolex, because our watches are too accurate already. It would be awfully hard to explain our to-the-second accuracy to an aboriginal—I can't see why, besides pride that wants a possession to boast about, someone would benefit from a more accurate watch.

Vespucci: Oh, but there is benefit—worth paying $5,000 for a digital watch. Even worth having to change the batteries too often.

Pater: How?

Vespucci: The watch doesn't just have an oscillating quartz crystal; it has an array of sensors in the watchband that measure skin temperature and conductivity, pulse, even a clever estimate of blood pressure,

and feeds all of these into an embedded chip with some extraordinarily clever software.

This software takes these data and gets a picture of the person's emotional state. You know how time flies when you're having fun?

Pater: Didn't Einstein explain his theory of relativity by saying, "When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute—and it's longer than any hour. That's relativity."

Vespucci: Um… that has nothing to do with the theory of relativity, and I'm not interested in discussing Einstein's spacetime now. If Einstein said that, he probably had a merry twinkle in his eye. But…

Come to think about it, that is a pretty good picture. The watch estimates your emotional state for one purpose: it keeps track of how long time seems to be passing. It has a normal timer that can count forty minutes until dinnertime, but it can also tell you how long the wait will *feel* like. And that's something no other watch can do.

Metacult: So it deals with subjective time? I read a book once which was trying to argue that time could be understood as something *besides* the number a machine has counted to. It talked about how a small child will ask Mom how long she's leaving for, and Mom's answer—she's really trying to avoid feeling guilty about leaving the child alone—are singularly unhelpful for a child trying to figure out how much perceived time must be endured before Mom returns.

Vespucci: Yes, and the minute-hour quote captures that. All watches tell what time it is from a machine's perspective. This is the only watch that tells time from a human perspective.

Metacult: Wonderful. What does it take into account besides clock ticks and the person's emotional state?

Vespucci: Huh? What else contributes to our experience of time besides the physical time and our psychological state?

Pater: Your question betrays nominalism. The way you've framed things shuts out the true answer.

Vespucci: We're entering the third millenium; I don't see why you're dragging in a controversy from medieval times.

Janra: Mmmph. Excuse me. I think I need a glass of water.

Metacult: Sit down, Janra. And don't look at me like that. I'm going let you answer that.

Janra: Certainly. Here are the steps to hunt a bear: First, fire your gun. Second, aim your gun. Third, locate a bear. Fourth, buy a gun.

Metacult: Try again.

Janra: Clothing to wear in winter: a heavy coat, then on top of that a good sweater or two, then two shirts and two pair of pants, then underwear, with woolen socks over your boots.

Metacult: Please be serious.

Janra: I *am* being serious.

Metacult: Then be mundane.

Janra: Oh. That's another matter entirely.

> Your entire approach is backwards and inside-out, as backwards as trying to shoot a bear before you have a gun, and as inside-out as wearing your anorak next to your skin.
>
> How? Let me respond to your second comment. If I said, in the most reverent of tones, "We're standing at the forty-second latitude and eighty-seventh longitude," you'd think I was making a mountain out of a molehill: yes, we're at a particular latitude and longitude, but what does that have to do with the price of eggs in China? It's true, but what does that have to do with anything we're discussing? Yet people say, "We're entering the third millennium" as if it is this great statement of far-reaching consequences, the sort of thing that should settle a matter. As you yourself did.
>
> People in the Middle Ages often did not know what year it was, or even what century, any more than people today know what latitude and longitude we're at—quick—do you know what latitude and longitude *you're* at? The reason is that we think the past is under a glass bell, where we humans are living our lives while those odd and quaint creatures under the bell are not the same as us. And it doesn't need to be that way. For a long time after Shakespeare's death, when people put on Shakespeare, they didn't try to reconstruct period accurate costumes. Why? Did they not know that Shakespeare lived long before them? Perhaps, but they also recognised that Shakespeare was

a human who worked with human problems and wrote human drama, and that the reason his plays are worth performing is not because they're old but because they're timelessly *human*. And we forget this when we take great care to dress actors in funny costumes that tell people that this is something quaint from long ago and far away.

You know that many of your physical possessions that make up the physical world come from far away: when you buy something at Target, and make no effort to find treasures from faroff land, you buy a lamp that was made in China or underpants that were made in Mexico. You know that the whole world is interconnected, so even if you don't go hunting off for exotic imports, a great many of the things you buy were made far away.

You can as much live without ideas from bygone ages as you can live in a house you built with your own hands—or for that matter, be born in a house you built with your own hands. That isn't how things work. Nominalism is one of innumerable ideas that has survived, just as the custom of using pots and pans has survived.

Vespucci: If it's one of innumerable ideas, why pay it that much attention?

Janra: Because I can count on my fingers the number of conceptual revolutions that are more important today than nominalism. Trying to understand how people think today without looking at nominalism is like trying to look at a summer meadow without seeing plants. There are other important ideas, but this one makes the short list.

Vespucci: Then why have I not heard more about nominalism, when I hear people talking about postmodernism, for instance, or modernism? And what is nominalism to begin with?

Janra: For the same reason a fish won't tell you about water. Modernism and postmodernism are both nominalism writ large; nominalism is a seed, whose flower is modernism, and whose fruit is postmodernism.

Vespucci: Hmm. I hear the distinct accent of a person laboring in the prison of one idea.

Janra: Bear with me. Nominalism may be seen as the lock on a prison: we need to pay close attention to the lock to see if there's any way to open it. Then, if we can get out, let us see if there are not many more ideas available after we have paid proper attention to nominalism.

Now what is nominalism? In a sentence, nominalism says, "There's nothing out there; it's all in your head." A nominalist doesn't literally mean "nothing" is outside our heads; you can't put on a watch and say, "I refute nominalism thus."

Vespucci: But it was a non sequitur when—

Janra: Yes, I know, I know. Another tangent. But let's forget about saying that matter is just in people's heads and not something external to mind. As I was saying, you can't put on a watch and say, "I refute nominalism thus." But if we really follow nominalist logic, you can't put on a watch. You can have nerve impulses that result in the motion of some elementary particles, but a watch is a tool-to-tell-time-which-you-wear-on-your-wrist, and a tool-to-tell-time-

which-you-wear-on-your-wrist does not and cannot exist in nature. All the *meaning* that makes those atoms a watch can only exist in minds, and for the same reason what-we-call-a-watch can't have the time displayed on its face. It can have elementary particles that are placed like so and interact with light just so, but the meaning that can read a time in that configuration isn't at all in the atoms themselves; it's in your head. This is clarified in a distinction between "brute fact" and "social reality:" brute fact is what exists outside of minds and social reality can only exist in minds, and almost anything humans value consists of a small amount of brute fact and a large portion of social reality—larger than most people would guess. Everything is either brute fact or social reality.

Pater: Is the boundary between brute fact and social reality a brute fact or a social reality?

Metacult: Shut up.

Janra: Imagine three umpires at a baseball game: the first says, "I calls 'em as they are." The second says, "I calls 'em as I sees them." But the third says, "Some's strikes, and some's balls, but they ain't nothing 'til I calls 'em."

With apologies to Kronecker, God created cold matter. All else is the work of man.

Pater: Whoa. Is the basic faculty that lets man create social reality derived from brute fact or social reality?

Janra: Shut up.

Now I have been showing what happens when you push nominalism a good deal further than non-scholars are likely to do. But in fact nominalism has been seeping into our consciousness for centuries, so that we might not find the claim that nature is beautiful to be a mistake, but we see with nominalist eyes and hear with nominalist ears. Most of people across most of time have understood and experienced symbols very different from how a nominalist would.

If we assume that matter is basically something cold and dead, devoid of spiritual properties, then of course a symbol can only exist in the mind, a mental connection between two things that are not connected by nature. Any similarity is in the eye of the beholder, or if not that, is at least a coincidence that isn't grounded on anything deeper. There is no organic connection.

But if we look at how people have understood symbols, their understanding has to do with a view of reality where a great many things are real, where a symbol bespeaks a real and spiritual connection. The crowning jewel of this understanding of symbol was the claim that man is the image of God. When Christians talked about man being the image of God, they were not talking about what we would understand by a photograph or a painting, where pigments are arranged in such a way that an observer can tell they were meant to look like God; they meant a real and organic connection that went far beyond a mere representation of God; they meant that we were what you would think a kind of magical statue which not only represented God, but embodied his actual presence: God's presence operates in us in a real way, and every breath we breathe is the breath of God.

Now the reason we began discussing nominalism was that you said something, and I said, "That question betrays nominalism." Do you remember what you said?

Vespucci: No.

Janra: We were discussing what I consider to be a very interesting watch, and you asked what could contribute to our experience of time besides what an ordinary watch tells, and our emotional state.

That question betrays nominalism. You were in essence asking what could interest us in time besides the brute fact of what most watches tell, and the social, or at least mental, reality of our emotional state.

But there's a world of other things out there.

Vespucci: But what else is there?

Metacult: Hmm. I think we need to work a bit harder to help you look at what you believe. You've been keeping up on superstring theory, right?

Vespucci: Yes. I loved the explanations I could get of relativity, and I love how scientists can turn our commonsense notions upside down.

Metacult: Do you know any classical, Newtonian physics?

Vespucci: I did in high school. I've forgotten most of it now, but I don't remember it being nearly as exciting: a lot of math to go through to get at common sense.

Metacult: May I instead suggest that your common sense is a nonmathematical version of Newtonian physics?

Newton's physics was big on grids: everything was placed on a grid of absolute space, and absolute time. And it connected rooms the wrong way: different places are on the same meaningless grid, but they're not connected besides the grid.

To the medieval mind, it wasn't so. Each space was its own little world as far as Newton was concerned. But they were connected spiritually. There is an icon of two saints from different centuries talking, and the medieval mind was comfortable with this because it saw things other than "but they're from other parts of the spacetime grid!"

Vespucci: But what does this have to do with time? It seems to me you're going off on a tangent.

Metacult: Ok, back to time. Time isn't just a grid adorned by emotions. It's spiritually connected. You yourself are not self-contained.

Pater: And there's liturgical time. One of the things that shocked me was that people seem to have *no* time. It helped me to appreciate the colorful time I had breathed. I was stunned when people experienced time as torture. I experienced it as a sacrament, a channel of God's grace.

From other conversations, I get the impression that the liturgical year isn't real to you: one source of holidays among others. But it is real: interlocking cycles of day, week, year, so that you are breathing in this rhythm and are given something to live in each

moment. Sometimes you're feasting; sometimes you're fasting; often you're given something to meditate on.

Vespucci: So the watch would do a more complete job if its little computer were programmed to keep track of the liturgical cycles? I think the engineers could do that.

Pater: Errmmmmm…

Metacult: I think what he means, but cannot articulate, is that what a computer could make of the liturgical cycles are *not* the place that makes liturgical time. They are more of a doorway into the place, into a room that the Spirit blows. If the watch were to keep track of that, it would have to have, not more sophisticated computer programming, but something else altogether, something sensitive to spiritual realities.

Pater: And that's just what a scientific computer, even a very small one, cannot do. Science works on nominalism. It's brought a lot of good stuff, but it can't perceive or work with spiritual qualities, any more than a pair of binoculars will improve your hearing. And that's fine when you recognise that spiritual qualities are left out, but the temptation is to say, "Because science is so powerful, it sees everything that's real." And a watch designed by scientific engineering can do scientific things, but if it were to try and see liturgical time from the inside, it would inevitably kill what breathes in it.

Janra: So if we were to imagine a watch that keeps track of time, true time, it would need not only sensors and a miniature computer, and a time-keeping quartz crystal, but something attuned to spiritual realities.

Pater: If that were possible. In my culture, we never wear watches. The best watch would be no watch, or perhaps a rock on a wristband, where if you go to it looking for trivia, it doesn't give what you're looking for—and in so doing, reminds you of something important, that you need to look elsewhere.

Janra: What about a watch that had a rock alongside the things we've just described?

Pater: Ermmm…

Janra: And what would men's and women's models look like? Would the rocks be respectively rough and smooth?

Metacult: Actually, men's and women's experience of time differs significantly, so if you had a watch with a truer way of telling time, there would be a much bigger difference than men's watches being heftier and women's watches being slender.

Janra: How?

Metacult: I remember one time when you were talking with a new mother, and whenever the baby needed care, you stopped talking so that Mom could pay attention to her new son. It was a thoughtful gesture, and one that wasn't needed.

Janra: Why not? I'd have wanted to be allowed to give the child my full attention.

Metacult: I know. So would most good men. A man's particular strength is to devote his full attention to a task. A woman's particular strength is to lightly

balance several tasks, giving genuine attention to each. That mother was perfectly able to give attention to her son and listen to you at the same time. That's why she looked at you, slightly puzzled and with an attention that says, "I'm listening," when you stopped talking.

And there are other differences as well. If there is a situation that colors a man's understanding of time, it is a brief period of intense pressure. A woman's understanding of time more has the hue of a longer period that requires sustained attention. And even that misses something. The difference between a man's experience of time and a woman's is not so much like a difference between numbers as a difference between two colors, or sounds, or scents. It's a qualitative difference, and one that is not appreciated—usually people feel in their heart, "She's treating time the same way I do, but doing an unexplainably bad job of it."

Vespucci: I forgot to tell you, the watch also asks when you were born.

Pater: Why? To remind you if you forget your birthday?

Vespucci: I'm surprised, Pater. It's so it can keep track of your age. You experience time differently as you grow. What seems like an hour when you're five only seems like half an hour when you're ten, or fifteen minutes when you're twenty, or five minutes when you're sixty. Time seems to go faster and faster as you grow: there's one change between when you're a child and an adult, and senior citizens say that every fifteen minutes it's breakfast. The quality and pace of time change as you age, which is why young people think youth lasts forever and the rest of us think it

vanishes. They say that once you're over the hill, you begin to pick up speed.

Pater: What does "over the hill" mean?

Vespucci: Um…

Metacult: He really doesn't understand. To him, aging is about maturing and growing, not only for children, but adults as well. He values his youth as a cherished memory, but he's enjoying his growth and looking forward eagerly to the joy awaiting him in Heaven. He doesn't understand your self-depracating humor that speaks as if aging were a weakness or a moral failing.

Vespucci: Ok.

Metacult: Which reminds me. One of the ways my experience of time has changed as I have grown has been to recognize that time flows faster and faster. For some people, this is a reason to try way too hard to be healthy—taking care of their bodies, not because their bodies should be taken care of, but to try and postpone the inevitable. But I'm looking forward to the Heaven that's getting closer and closer, and I am delighted by a glimpse into the perspective of a God who created time and to whom all times are both soon and now.

But the other major change is more internal, more a matter of discipline. I used to live in hurry, to always walk quickly and love to play video games quickly. Then I set foot in Malaysia, and something changed.

There was a difference, which I imperfectly characterized as life being lived more slowly in Malaysia. Which is true, or was for me, but is somewhat beside the point. And I experienced the joy of living more slowly. You know how I've thought that it takes humility to enjoy even pride, and chastity to enjoy even lust. At that point I would have added to those two that it takes slowness to enjoy even haste.

Vespucci: So you tried to be as slow as you had been quick?

Metacult: Yes. I observed that I had been obsessed with time under the tyranny of the clock, and so I tried to abolish time by being slow. Which isn't right; besides chronos, the time a clock can measure, there is kairos, relational or task-oriented or creating time, where you are absorbed in another person or a task, and there time is a glimmer of eternity. And I was interested in the idea of living time as the beginning of an eternal glory, which Pater understands much better than I ever will. First I tried to negate time and live as something less-than-temporal, and I am slowly realizing that instead it means embracing time and entering something more-than-temporal.

In liturgical time—and Pater could say much more about this than I—it flows. Here it moves quickly, there it moves slowly, and there it spins in eddies. It isn't just the speed that flows; it's the color, if you will. Just as the priest is the crowning jewel of the priesthood every person is called for, so the touch of Heaven as we worship is the crowning jewel of what time is meant to be.

And I had also been realizing that I had sought to escape time, and not cherish it as God's good creature.

Most recently, I am trying to… There's a famous quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes, saying, "I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I'd give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." Now I'm looking for a time that is on the other side of complexity: not the mundane ordinariness of disfigured time, but a beautiful ordinariness on the other side of this complexity we've been discussing.

Vespucci: How do you think that will work?

Metacult: I don't know. Part of it has to do with the metaculture you used for my nickname. I don't simply breathe in my culture and ask "How else could it be?", but am in the odd position of being able to step into cultures but never be absolutely at home. And have part of me that doesn't fit. That's not quite right; I do connect, partly in a way that is basically human, and partly in a way that is—

Janra: Don't try to explain. That would take an hour.

Metacult: At any rate, a fair number of people talk about living counterculturally, and one way you can live counterculturally is let live time as a blessing rather than a curse. People who say technology determines our lives are almost right, and that *almost* makes a world of difference if you're willing to live counterculturally. The pressure on us to live in hurry is not a pressure that no one can escape. It is a pressure that few try to escape in the right way—but you can, if you try and go about it the right way.

But quite a lot of the rest of it has to do with very basic parts of the Christian life. God wants us to seek him first, and when we do, he knows full well what

else we need. “Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you as well.” includes a life where time unfolds as a rainbow or a river, something of both color and flow, like the year with its beauty in due season.

Vespucci: Do you see time as a line or a circle? Something that keeps moving in a direction, or something that does the same thing over and over again?

Metacult: Both, of course. God is revealing himself in history and transforming it to his ends. And there is decay; decay follows a line down. In our lives, we are progressing towards Heaven or Hell, and in each day… here we meet the cycles, but if we live well, the cycles in our lives aren’t just an aimless meandering, but like a man who keeps running through a ditch, digging. In one way, he’s going to the same places again and again, but in another way, he’s going deeper—and he may meet both the earth’s warmth in winter (or coolness in summer), and the water of life. The line moves through circles.

Janra: So what would make the perfect watch?

Vespucci: Are there any we haven’t covered?

Metacult: Umm… we’ve looked at one big change from a normal watch—instead of adding a calculator, that *Radical Gadgets* catalogue had a watch that tries to tell a more human time by taking your age and emotional state into account as well as what most watches tell. That was sort of a Pandora’s box. I think we could all agree that that watch was leagues more human than any normal watch… and it was just human enough to reveal how un-human watches are.

Vespucci: How?

Metacult: When the only kind of watch kept track of seconds, it was easy enough to think that time was simply what a watch told. But when one watch started to pay attention to how you feel…

It was kind of like when you've been in the freezing outdoors for a long time, so long that it still hurts a little, but you can almost ignore it. Then you come inside, and THEN it stings. It's not until you enter a genuinely warm room that you realize how cold and numb you really are.

The watch in that catalogue was just human enough to reveal how un-human watches, and the time that they tell, are. It did what no other watch could. It's enough of a success to be a *spectacular* failure. Someone brought up liturgical time, which led to the suggestion that the watch be programmed to keep track of liturgical time. And then we stumbled into a hole with no bottom. Why can't a computer keep track of liturgical time? Well, you see, the Spirit does more than just follow calculations… A watch would need far more than better electronics to do that, far more than scientific engineering can provide. Although I did like the suggestion of adding a rock. Even if I don't see how to make a rock sensitive to women's time and men's time. Or rather, what to do to appropriately respect the difference.

Vespucci: Janra, what you said about nominalism interests me. Could you give a more complete explanation?

Janra: I'd love to, but I need to be somewhere next month.

Vespucci: Please be serious.

Janra: I *am* being serious.

Vespucci: Then be mundane.

Metacult: He *is* being mundane. If you'd like a good introduction, read Philip Sherrard's *The Rape of Man and Nature: An Enquiry Into the Origins & Consequences of Modern Science*. In it, Sherrard says almost nothing about time and everything about the things time is connected to. I think it goes overboard, but if you read it and pay attention to the haunting beauty that keeps coming up, then you'll learn something about being human—and living in human time. It doesn't use the word 'nominalism' very much, but it says quite a lot about it.

Vespucci: Are there any other things you've all left out?

Metacult: Only about two billion. I've talked about kairos as an absorbed time instead of a time when you're watching the clock. What I haven't talked about as kairos as a divinely appointed time, where you are in a divinely orchestrated dance, and you are free, and yet your movements are part of the divine plan. We are human, not by "just" being human, but by allowing the divine to operate in us; it is the divine, not the human, that we need most to be human. I haven't discussed that. We haven't discussed, in connection with nominalism, how there is a spiritual place in us where we meet God, and we have the ability to reason from what we see, and in tandem with nominalism we have become impoverished when both functions are dumped on the reasoning ability and we don't know where we can meet God, where our minds connect with the very Reason that is God

himself. It makes a difference whether we experience time through both our reasoning ability and this spiritual meeting-place, or through our reasoning ability alone.

I also haven't talked about turning back the clock. When people rightly or wrongly believe there is a golden age they've lost, and try to re-create it, they end up severing connections with the recent past and even the golden age.

Vespucci: How does *that* work?

Metacult: I'm not exactly sure.

My guess is that a living culture has a way of not being ambiguous. It gives corrections when you make false assumptions about it; that's why people experience culture shock. People trying to re-create a past golden age need never experience culture shock; if you make a false assumption about the golden age, the golden age won't correct you. So the golden age appears to be whatever you want, and people who aren't satisfied with the present, and want to re-create past glory, end up pushing a fantasy that is different both from the present and the past. The Renaissance and Enlightenment neo-classicism both tried to re-create the glory of classical antiquity and are both notable as departures from the past. People who aren't trying to re-create the past can preserve it, saying, "Be gentle with this tradition. It was not inherited from your parents; it is borrowed from your children." People eager to restore past glory all too often, if not sever, severely damage the link between past and future.

I also haven't talked about keeping up with the Trumps, and your unadvertised way to say "No!" to the tyranny of the urgent. I haven't even talked about—

Janra: Stop! Stop. You're going way overboard. He got your point. In fact, I think he got your point half an hour ago. He—

Pater: Could I interrupt for a moment?

Janra: Certainly. What is it?

Pater: I know this is going to sound REALLY strange, but I want a watch.

Vespucci, Janra, Metacult: Huh?

Pater: You heard me.

Janra: But why?

Pater: I know this is going to sound strange, but I want one.

To you a watch represents all sorts of problems, and I don't wonder if you're dumping too much on it. But that's another issue. I don't have the ticking clock in me that you do. There's an issue of sensitivity—I know you hate watches and probably planners, but I burn people by being late and forgetting that just an hour's delay to me is not "just" an hour to them.

Is it really impossible to make a watch that can represent liturgical time, or even hollow out a space liturgical time can abide in? I thought it was possible

now to make a watch that will keep track of sunrise and sunset. Scientific engineering can't do some things, but could there be another kind of engineering? I suppose that "even" that technical marvel in your catalogue, the watch that knows how long something feels like, would make an awfully neat conversation piece.

Metacult: I think I may know of just the thing for you.

This watch is a sort of hybrid. Part of it is traditional electronic—something that tells hours, minutes, and seconds, that displays the date, and has a timer, alarm, and a stopwatch accurate to the nearest hundredth of a second—and for that matter it's water resistant to two hundred meters. It's a bit battered—which adds to its masculine look.

But that's not the interesting part. The interesting part has an exquisite sensitivity to liturgical rhythm, such as purely electronic gadgetry could never deliver. And it is a connected time, a part of the Great Dance that moves not according to the wearer's emotions alone but what the Great Choreographer orchestrates. It moves in beautiful ordered time. And there is more. It can enter another person's or place's time, and fit. Among other things.

Pater: This is great! Where can I get one?

Metacult: Just a second while I take off my watch… here's the littlest part. The rest is already inside your heart.

Discussion Questions for "The Watch:"

1. Do watches tell how you've experienced time?
2. Are you living under the tyranny of the clock?
3. What could you do to be living less under the tyranny of the clock?
4. What could you do to have your life more lightly ruled by technology?
5. Which of the odd technologies sound the most amusing to imagine?
6. Do you see that some people could be very skeptical about how beneficial the *via moderna* of nominalism could be?
7. What was your favorite humorous surprise?

Introduction to "Yonder"

"Yonder" is a Socratic dialogue set in a science fiction dystopia. It was sparked by watching anime originals for *Ghost in the Shell*, which is what I would call an "immature atheism" version of the good news of spirit and body being as separable and as recombinable as you would want.

"Immature atheism" as I use the term is wonderful news that there is no Father to impose rules or make demands of us, while "mature atheism" is an existentialism that says that the death of our Heavenly Father is horrible news.

"Yonder" is a Socratic dialogue set in a realized transhumanist eschatology. The term "medieval" as it is deliberately used in the text, does not denote the interval between the ancient world and the Renaissance, Reformation, and modernity; "medi-eval" means between times, and it refers to our times after life started to go digital but before we become completely cybered-up. I do not know if the latter is possible, but such is supposed for the sake of the work.

Other things are to be said. The philosophical discussion is excessive at times. The work represents a tribute to *The Divine Comedy* and *The Great Divorce*, which starts with a Hell where you can have any pleasure you want, cheaply and without real cost, and Heaven is a place with intense suffering and real costs.

Yonder

The body continued running in the polished steel corridor, a corridor without doors and windows and without any hint of how far above and below the local planet's surface it was, if indeed it was connected with a planet. The corridor had a competition mixture of gases, gravity, temperature and pressure, and so on, and as the body had been running, lights turned on and then off so the body was at the center of a moving swathe of rather clinical light. The body was running erratically, and several times it had nearly fallen; the mind was having trouble keeping the control of the body due to the body being taxed to its limit. Then the body tripped. The mind made a few brief calculations and jacked out of the body.

The body fell, not having the mind to raise its arms to cushion the fall, and fractured bones in the face, skull, and ribs. The chest heaved in and out with each labored breath, after an exertion that would be lethal in itself. A trickle of blood oozed out from a wound. The life of the abandoned body slowly ebbed away, and the lights abruptly turned off.

It would be a while before a robot would come to clean it up and prepare the corridor for other uses.

"And without further ado," another mind announced, "I would like to introduce the researcher who broke the record for a running body by more than 594789.34

microseconds. This body was a strictly biological body, with no cyberware besides a regulation mind-body interface, with no additional modifications. Adrenaline, for instance, came from the mind controlling the adrenal glands; it didn't even replace the brain with a chemical minifactory. The body had a magnificent athletic physique, clean and not encumbered by any reproductive system. And I *still* don't know how it kept the body alive and functioning, without external help, for the *whole* race. Here's Archon."

A sound came from a modular robot body at the center of the stage and was simultaneously transmitted over the net. "I see my cyborg utility body there; is that my Paidion wearing it? If so, I'm going to… no, wait. That would be harming my own body without having a good enough reason." A somewhat canned chuckle swept through the crowd. "I'm impressed; I didn't know that anyone would come if I called a physical conference, and I had no idea there were that many rental bodies within an appropriate radius." Some of the bodies winced. "But seriously, folks, I wanted to talk and answer some of your questions about how my body broke the record. It was more than generating nerve impulses to move the body to the maximum ability. And I would like to begin by talking about why I've called a physical conference in the first place.

"Scientific breakthroughs aren't scientific. When a mind solves a mathematical problem that hasn't been solved before, it does… not something impossible, but something that you will miss if you look for something possible. It conforms itself to the problem, does everything it can to permeate itself with the problem. Look at the phenomenology and transcripts of every major mathematical problem that has been solved in the past 1.7e18 microseconds. Not one follows how one would scientifically attempt a scientific breakthrough. And somehow scientifically optimized applications of mind to problems repeat past success but never do anything new.

"What you desire so ravenously to know is how I

extended the methodologies to optimize the running body and the running mind to fit a calculated whole. And the answer is simple. I didn't."

A mind interrupted through cyberspace. "What do you mean, you didn't? That's as absurd as claiming that you built the body out of software. That's—"

Archon interrupted. "And that's what I thought too. What I can tell you is this. When I grew and trained the body, I did nothing else. That was my body, my only body. I shut myself off from cyberspace—yes, that's why you couldn't get me—and did not leave a single training activity to another mind or an automatic process. I trained myself to the body as if it were a mathematics problem and tried to soak myself in it."

A rustle swept through the crowd.

"And I don't blame you if you think I'm a crackpot, or want to inspect me for hostile tampering. I submit to inspection. But I tried to be as close as possible to the body, and that's *it*. And I shaved more than 594789.34 microseconds off the record." Archon continued after a momentary pause. "I specifically asked for bodily presences for this meeting; call me sentimental or crackpot or trying to achieve with your bodies what I failed to achieve in that body, but I will solicit questions from those who have a body here first, and address the network after everybody present has had its chance."

A flesh body stood up and flashed its face. "What are you going to say next? Not only that you became like a body, but that the body became like a mind?"

Archon went into private mode, filtered through and rejected 3941 responses, and said, "I have not analyzed the body to see if it contained mind-like modifications and do not see how I would go about doing such a thing."

After several other questions, a robot said, "So what's next?"

Archon hesitated, and said, "I don't know." It hesitated again, and said, "I'm probably going to make a

Riemannian 5-manifold of pleasure states. I plan on adding some subtle twists so not only will it be pleasurable; minds will have a real puzzle figuring out exactly what kind of space they're in. And I'm not telling what the manifold will be like, or even telling for sure that it will genuinely have only 5 dimensions."

The robot said, "No, you're not. You're not going to do that at all." Then the mind jacked out and the body fell over, inert.

Another voice, issuing from two standard issue cyborg bodies, said, "Has the body been preserved, and will it be available for internal examination?"

Archon heard the question, and answered it as if it were giving the question its full attention. But it could only give a token of its consciousness. The rest of its attention was on tracing the mind that had jacked out of the robot body. And it was a slippery mind. Archon was both frustrated and impressed when it found no trace.

It was skilled at stealth and tracing, having developed several methodologies for each, and something that could vanish without a trace—had the mind simply destroyed itself? That possibility bothered Archon, who continued tracing after it dismissed the assembly.

Archon looked for distractions, and finding nothing better it began trying to sound out how it might make the pleasure space. What should the topology be? The pleasures should be—Archon began looking at the kinds of pleasure, and found elegant ways to choose a vector space basis for less than four dimensions or well over eight, but why should it be a tall order to do exactly five? Archon was far from pleasure when a message came, "Not your next achievement, Archon?"

Archon thought it recognized something. "Have you tried a five dimensional pleasure manifold before? How did you know this would happen?"

"I didn't."

"Ployon!"

Ployon said, “It took you long enough! I’m surprised you needed the help.”

Ployon continued, “And since there aren’t going to be too many people taking you seriously—”

Archon sent a long stream of zeroes to Ployon.

Ployon failed to acknowledge the interruption. “—from now on, I thought you could use all the help you could get.”

Archon sent another long stream of zeroes to Ployon.

When Ployon remained silent, Archon said, “Why did you contact me?”

Ployon said, “Since you’re going to do something interesting, I wanted to see it live.”

Archon said, “So what am I going to do?”

“I have no idea whatsoever, but I want to see it.”

“Then how do you know it is interesting?”

“You said things that would destroy your credibility, and you gave an evasive answer. It’s not every day I get to witness that.”

Archon sent a long stream of zeroes to Ployon.

Ployon said, “I’m serious.”

“Then what can I do now?”

“I have no idea whatsoever, but you might take a look at what you’re evading.”

“And what am I evading?”

“Try asking yourself. Reprocess the transcripts of that lecture. Your own private transcript.”

Archon went through the file, disregarding one moment and then scanning everything else. “I find nothing.”

“What did you just disregard?”

“Just one moment where I said too much.”

“And?”

Archon reviewed that moment. “I don’t know how to describe it. I can describe it three ways, all contradictory. I almost did it—I almost forged a connection between mind and matter. And yet I failed. And yet somehow the body ran

further, and I don't think it was simply that I learned to control it better. What I achieved only underscored what I failed to achieve, like an optimization that needs to run for longer than the age of the universe before it starts saving time."

Archon paused before continuing, "So I guess what I'm going to do next is try to bridge the gap between mind and matter for real. Besides the mundane relationship, I mean, forge a real connection that will bridge the chasm."

Ployon said, "It can't be done. It's not possible. I don't even understand why your method of training the body will work. You seem to have made more of a connection than has ever been done before. I'm tempted to say that when you made your presentation, you ensured that no one else will do what you did. But that's premature and probably wrong."

"Then what am I going to do next? How am I going to bridge that gap?"

Ployon said, "I saw something pretty interesting in what you did achieve—you know, the part where you destroyed your credibility. That's probably more interesting than your breaking the record."

Ployon ran through some calculations before continuing, "And at any rate, you're trying to answer the wrong question."

Archon said, "Am I missing the interesting question? The question of how to forge a link across the chasm between matter and spirit is—"

"Not nearly as interesting as the question of what it would *mean* to bridge that chasm."

Archon stopped, reeling at the implication. "I think it's time for me to make a story in a virtual world."

Ployon said, "Goodbye now. You've got some thinking to do."

Archon began to delve. What would the world be like if you added to it the ability for minds to connect with bodies, not simply as it had controlled his racing body, but

really? What would it be like if the chasm could be bridged? It searched through speculative fiction, and read a story where minds could become bodies—which made for a very good story, but when it seriously tried to follow its philosophical assumptions, it realized that the philosophical assumptions were not the focus. It read and found several stories where the chasm could be bridged, and—

There was no chasm. Or would not be. And that meant not taking the real world and adding an ability to bridge a chasm, but a world where mind and matter were immanent. After rejecting a couple of possible worlds, Archon considered a world where there were only robots, and where each interfaced to the network as externally as to the physical world. Each mind was firmware burned into the robot's circuits, and for some still to be worked out reason it couldn't be transferred. Yes, this way… no. Archon got some distance into this possible world before a crawling doubt caught up to it. It hadn't made minds and bodies connect; it'd only done a first-rate job of covering up the chasm. Maybe organic goo held promise. A world made only of slime? No, wait, that was… and then it thought—

Archon dug recursively deeper and deeper, explored, explored. It seemed to be bumping into something. Its thoughts grew strange; it calculated for billions and even trillions of microseconds, encountered something stranger than—

Something happened.

How much time had passed?

Archon said, "Ployon! Where are you?"

Ployon said, "Enjoying trying to trace your thoughts. Not much success. I've disconnected now."

"Imagine a mind and a body, except that you don't have a mind and a body, but a mind-body unity, and it—"

"Which do you mean by 'it'? The mind or the body? You're being careless."

"Humor me. I'm not being careless. When I said, 'it', I meant both—"

"*Both* the mind and the body? As in 'they'?"

"Humor me. As in, '*it*.' As in a unity that doesn't exist in our world."

"Um… then how do you refer to just the mind or just the body? If you don't distinguish them…"

"You can *distinguish* the mind and the body, but you can never *separate* them. And even though you can refer to just the mind or just the body, normally you would talk about the unity. It's not enough to usually talk about 'they;' you need to usually talk about 'it.'"

"How does it connect to the network?"

"There is a kind of network, but it can't genuinely connect to it."

"What does it do when its body is no longer serviceable."

"It doesn't—I haven't decided. But it can't jump into something else."

"So the mind simply functions on its own?"

"Ployon, you're bringing in cultural baggage. You're—"

"You're telling me this body is a prison! Next you're going to tell me that it can't even upgrade the body with better parts, and that the mind is like a real mind, only it's shut in on twenty sides. Are you describing a dystopia?"

"No. I'm describing what it means that the body is real to the mind, that *it* is not a mind that can use bodies but a mind-body unity. It can't experience any pleasure it can calculate, but its body can give it pleasure. It runs races, and not only does the mind control the body—or at least influence it; the body is real enough that the mind can't simply control it perfectly—but the body affects the mind. When I run a race, I am controlling the body, but I could be doing twenty other things as well and only have a token presence at the mind-body interface. It's very different; there is a very real sense in which the mind is *running* when the body is running a race.

"Let me guess. The mind is a little robot running

around a racetrack hollowed out from the body's brain. And did you actually say, *races*, plural? Do they have nanotechnology that will bring a body back after its been run down? And would anyone actually want to race a body that had been patched that way?"

"No. I mean that because their bodies are part of them, they only hold races which they expect the racers to be able to live through."

"That's a strange fetish. Don't they ever have a *real* race?"

"They have real races, real in a way that you or I could never experience. When they run, they aren't simply manipulating something foreign to the psyche. They experience pleasures they only experience running."

"Are you saying they only allow them to experience certain pleasures while running?"

"No. They—"

"Then why don't they allow the pleasures at other times? That's a stranger fetish than—"

"Because they can't. Their bodies produce certain pleasures in their minds when they're running, and they don't generate these pleasures unless the body is active."

"That raises a number of problems. It sounds like you're saying the body has a second mind, because it would take a mind to choose to let the 'real' mind experience pleasure. It—"

Archon said, "You're slipping our chasm between the body and mind back in, and it's a chasm that doesn't exist. The body produces pleasure the mind can't produce by itself, and that is only one of a thousand things that makes the race *more* real than them for us. Think about the achievements you yourself made when you memorized the map of the galaxy. Even if that was a straightforward achievement, that's something you yourself did, not something you caused an external memory bank to do. Winning a race is as real for that mind-body as something it itself did as the memorization was for you. It's something *it*

did, not simply something the mind caused the body to do. And if you want to make a causal diagram, *don't* draw something linear. In either direction. Make a reinforced web, like computing on a network."

Ployon said, "I still don't find it convincing."

Archon paused. "Ok, let's put that in the background. Let me approach that on a different scale. Time is more real. And no—this is not because they measure time more precisely. Their bodies are mortal, and this means that the community of mind-body unities is always changing, like a succession of liquids flowing through a pipe. And that means that it makes a difference where you are in time."

Archon continued. "I could say that their timeline is dynamic in a way that ours is not. There is a big change going on, a different liquid starting to flow through the pipe. It is the middle age, when a new order of society is being established and the old order is following away."

Ployon said, "So what's the old technology, and what's the new one?"

"It's deeper than that. Technological society is appearing. The old age is not an abandoned technology. It is organic life, and it is revealing itself as it is disintegrating."

"So cyborgs have—"

"There are no cyborgs, or very few."

"And let me guess. They're all cybernetic enhancements to originally biological things."

"It's beyond that. Cybernetic replacements are only used to remedy weak bodies."

"Wouldn't it be simpler to cull the—"

"The question of 'simpler' is irrelevant. Few of them even believe in culling their own kind. Most believe that it is—'inexpedient' isn't quite right—to destroy almost any body, and it's even more inadvisable to destroy one that is weak."

"In the whole network, why?"

"I'm still working that out. The easiest part to explain has to do with their being mind-body *unities*. When you do

something to a body, you're not just doing it to that body. You're doing it to part of a pair that interpenetrates in the most intimate fashion. What you do to the body you do to the mind. It's not just forcibly causing a mind to jack out of a body; it's transferring the mind to a single processor and then severing the processor from the network."

"But who would… I can start to see how real their bodies would be to them, and I am starting to be amazed. What else is real to them?"

"I said earlier that most of them are hesitant to cull the weak, that they view it as inexpedient. But efficiency has nothing to do with it. It's connected to—it might in fact be more efficient, but there is something so much bigger than efficiency—"

Ployon cut it off. "Bigger than efficiency?"

Archon said, "There is something that is real to them that is not real to us that I am having trouble grasping myself. For want of a more proper label, I'll call it the 'organic'."

"Let's stop a minute. I'll give you a point for how things would be different if we were limited to one body, but you're hinting at something you want to call 'organic', which is very poorly defined, and your explanations seem to be strange when they are not simply hazy. Isn't this a red flag?"

"Where have you seen that red flag before?"

"When people were wildly wrong but refused to admit it."

"And?"

"That's pretty much it."

Archon was silent.

Ployon said, "And sometimes it happens when a researcher is on to something big… oh… so what exactly is this nexus of the 'organic'?"

"I can't tell you. At least, not directly. The mind-body unities are all connected to a vast (to them) biological network in which each has a physical place—"

"*That's* original! Come on; everybody's trivia archive

includes the fact that all consciousness comes out of a specific subnet of physical processors, or some substitute for that computing machinery. I can probably zero in on where you're—hey! Stop jumping around from subnet to subnet—can I take that as an acknowledgment that I can find your location? I—"

"The location is not part of a trivia encyclopedia for them. It's something as inescapable as the flow of time—"

"Would you like me to jump into a virtual metaphysics where time doesn't flow?"

"—correction, *more* inescapable than the flow of time, and it has a million implications for the shape of life. Under the old order, the unities could connect only with other unities which had bodies in similar places—"

"So, not only is their 'network' a bunch of slime, but when they look for company they have to choose from the trillion or however many other unities whose bodies are on the same node?"

"Their communities are brilliant in a way we can never understand; they have infinitesmally less potential partners available.

"You mean their associations are forced on them."

"To adapt one of their sayings, in our network you connect with the minds you like; in their network you like the people you connect with. That collapses a rich and deeper maxim, but what is flattened out is more organic than you could imagine."

"And I suppose that in a way that is very deep, but you conveniently have trouble describing, their associations are greater."

"We are fortunate to have found a way to link in our shared tastes. And we will disassociate when our tastes diverge—"

"And shared tastes have nothing to do with them? That's—"

"Shared tastes are big, but there is something else bigger. A great deal of the process of making unities into

proper *unities* means making their minds something you can connect with."

"*Their* minds? Don't you mean *the* minds?"

"That locution captures something that—they are not minds that have a body as sattelite. One can say, '*their*' minds because they are mind-body unities. They become greater—in a way that we do not—by needing to be in association with people they could not choose."

"Pretty convenient how every time having a mind linked to a body means a limitation, that limitation makes them better."

"If you chose to look at it, you would find a clue there. But you don't find it strange when the best game players prosper within the limits of the game. What would game play be if players could do anything they wanted?"

"You've made a point."

"As I was going to say, their minds develop a beauty, strength, and discipline that we never have occasion to develop."

"Can you show me this beauty?"

"Here's a concrete illustration. One thing they do is take organisms which have been modified from their biological environment, and keep them in the artificial environments which you'd say they keep their bodies in. They—"

"So even though they're stuck with biological slime, they're trying to escape it and at least pretend it's not biological? That sounds sensible."

"Um, you may have a point, but that isn't where I was hoping to go. Um… While killing another unity is something they really try to avoid, these modified organisms enjoy no such protection. And yet—"

"What do they use them for? Do the enhancements make them surrogate industrial robots? Are they kept as emergency rations?"

"The modifications aren't what you'd consider enhancements; most of them couldn't even survive in their

feral ancestors' environments, and they're not really suited to the environments they live in. Some turn out to serve some 'useful' purpose… but that's a side benefit, irrelevant to what I'm trying to let you see. And they're almost never used as food."

"Then what's the real reason? They must consume resources. Surely they must be used for something. What do they do with them?"

"I'm not sure how to explain this…"

"Be blunt."

"It won't sting, but it could lead to confusion that would take a long time to untangle."

"Ok…"

"They sense the organisms with their cameras, I mean eyes, and with the boundaries of their bodies, and maybe talk to them."

"Do the organisms give good advice?"

"They don't have sophisticated enough minds for that."

"Ok, so what else is there?"

"About all else is that they do physical activities for the organisms' benefit."

"Ok. And what's the real reason they keep them? There's got to be something pragmatic."

"That's related to why I brought it up. It has something to do with the organic, something big, but I can't explain it."

"It seems like you can only explain a small part of the organic in terms of our world, and the part you can explain isn't very interesting."

"That's like saying that when a three-dimensional solid intersects a plane in two dimensions, the only part that can be detected in the plane is a two-dimensional cross-section (the three-dimensional doesn't fit in their frame of reference) so "three-dimensional" must not refer to anything real. The reason you can't make sense of the world I'm describing in terms of our world is because it contains

real things that are utterly alien to us."

"Like what? Name one we haven't discussed."

"Seeing the trouble I had with the one concept, the organic, I'm not going to take on two at once."

"So the reason these unities keep organisms is so abstract and convoluted that it takes a top-flight mind to begin to grapple with."

"Not all of them keep organisms, but most of them find the reason—it's actually more of an assumption—so simple and straightforward that they would never think it was metaphysical."

"So I've found something normal about them! Their minds are of such an incredibly high caliber that—"

"No. Most of their minds are simpler than yours or mine, and furthermore, the ability to deal with abstractions doesn't enter the picture from their perspective."

"I don't know what to make of this."

"You understand to some degree how their bodies are real in a way we can never experience, and time and space are not just 'packaging' to what they do. Their keeping these organisms… the failure of the obvious reasons should tell you something, like an uninteresting two-dimensional cross section of a three-dimensional solid. If the part we can understand does not justify the practice, there might be something big out of sight."

"But what am I to make of it now?"

"Nothing now, just a placeholder. I'm trying to convey what it means to be organic."

"Is the organic in some relation to normal technology?"

"The two aren't independent of each other."

"Is the organic defined by the absence of technology?"

"Yes… no… You're deceptively close to the truth."

"Do all unities have the same access to technology?"

"No. There are considerable differences. All have a technology of sorts, but it would take a while to explain why

some of it is technology. Some of them don't even have electronic circuits—and no, they are not at an advanced enough biotechnology level to transcend electronic circuits. But if we speak of technology we would recognize, there are major differences. Some have access to no technology; some have access to the best."

"And the ones without access to technology are organic?"

"Yes. Even if they try to escape it, they are inescapably organic."

"But the ones which have the best technology are the least organic."

"Yes."

"Then maybe it was premature to define the organic by the absence of technology, but we can at least make a spectrum between the organic and the technological."

"Yes… no… You're even more deceptively close to the truth. And I emphasize, 'deceptively'. Some of the people who are most organic have the best technology—"

"So the relationship breaks down? What if we disregard outliers?"

"But the root problem is that you're trying to define the organic with reference to technology. There is some relationship, but instead of starting with a concept of technology and using it to move towards a concept of the organic, it is better to start with the organic and move towards a concept of technology. Except that the concept of the organic doesn't lead to a concept of technology, not as we would explore it. The center of gravity is wrong. It's like saying that we have our thoughts so that certain processors can generate a stream of ones and zeroes. It's backwards enough that you won't find the truth by looking at its mirror image."

"Ok, let me process it another way. What's the difference between a truly organic consciousness, and the least organic consciousness on the net?"

"That's very simple. One exists and the other

doesn't."

"So all the… wait a minute. Are you saying that the net doesn't have consciousness?"

"Excellent. You got that one right."

"In the whole of cyberspace, how? How does the net organize and care for itself if it doesn't contain consciousness?"

"It is not exactly true to say that they do have a net, and it is not exactly true to say that they do not have a net. What net they have, began as a way to connect mind-body unities—without any cyberware, I might add."

"Then how do they jack in?"

"They 'jack in' through hardware that generates stimulation for their sensory organs, and that they can manipulate so as to put data into machines."

"How does it maintain itself?"

"It doesn't and it can't. It's maintained by mind-body unities."

"That sounds like a network designed by minds that hate technology. Is the network some kind of joke? Or at least intentionally ironic? Or designed by people who hate technology and wanted to have as anti-technological of a network as they can?"

"No; the unities who designed it, and most of those using it, want as sophisticated technological access as they can have."

"Why? Next you're going to tell me that the network is not one single network, but a hodge podge of other things that have been retraoctively reinterpreted as network technology and pressed into service."

"That's also true. But the reason I was mentioning this is that the network is shaped by the shadow of the organic."

"So the organic is about doing things as badly as you can?"

"No."

"Does it make minds incompetent?"

"No. Ployon, remember the last time you made a robot body for a race—and won. How well would that body have done if you tried to make it work as a factory?"

"Atrocious, because it was optimized for—are you saying that the designers were trying to optimize the network as something other than a network?"

"No; I'm saying that the organic was so deep in them that unities who could not care less for the organic, and were trying to think purely in terms of technology, still created with a thick organic accent."

"So this was their best attempt at letting minds disappear into cyberspace?"

"At least originally, no, although that is becoming true. The network was part of what they would consider 'space-conquering tools.' Meaning, although not all of them thought in these terms, tools that would destroy the reality of place for them. The term 'space-conquering tools' was more apt than they realized, at least more apt than they realized consciously; one recalls their saying, 'You cannot kill time without injuring eternity.'"

"What does 'eternity' mean?"

"I *really* don't want to get into that now. Superficially it means that there is something else that relativizes time, but if you look at it closely, you will see that it can't mean that we should escape time. The space-conquering tools in a very real sense conquered space, by making it less real. Before space-conquering tools, if you wanted to communicate with another unity, you had to somehow reach that unity's body. The position in space of that body, and therefore the body and space, were something you could not escape. Which is to say that the body and space were real—much more real than something you could look up. And to conquer space ultimately meant to destroy some of its reality."

"But the way they did this betrays that something is real to them. Even if you could even forget that other minds were attached to bodies, the space-conquering tools bear a

heavy imprint from something outside of the most internally consistent way to conquer space. Even as the organic is disintegrating, it marks the way in which unities flee the organic."

"So the network was driving the organic away, at least partly."

"It would be more accurate to say that the disintegration of the organic helped create the network. There is feedback, but you've got the arrow of causality pointing the wrong way."

"Can you tell me a story?"

"Hmm… Remember the racer I mentioned earlier?"

"The mind-body unity who runs multiple races?"

"Indeed. Its favorite story runs like this—and I'll leave in the technical language. A hungry fox saw some plump, juicy green grapes hanging from a high cable. He tried to jump and eat them, and when he realized they were out of reach, he said, 'They were probably sour anyway!'"

"What's a grape?"

"Let me answer roughly as it would. A grape is a nutritional bribe to an organism to carry away its seed. It's a strategic reproductive organ."

"What does 'green' mean? I know what green electromagnetic radiation is, but why is that word being applied to a reproductive organ?"

"Some objects absorb most of a spectrum of what they call light, but emit a high proportion of light at that wavelength—"

"—which, I'm sure, is taken up by their cameras and converted to information in their consciousness. But why would such a trivial observation be included?"

"That is the mechanism by which green is delivered, but not the nature of what green is. And I don't know how to explain it, beyond saying that mechanically unities experience something from 'green' objects they don't experience from anything else. It's like a dimension, and there is something real to them I can't explain."

"What is a fox? Is 'fox' their word for a mind-body unity?"

"A fox is an organism that can move, but it is not considered a mind-body unity."

"Let me guess at 'hungry'. The fox needed nutrients, and the grapes would have given them."

"The grapes would have been indigestible to the fox's physiology, but you've got the right idea."

"What separates a fox from a mind-body unity? They both seem awfully similar—they have bodily needs, and they can both talk. And, for that matter, the grape organism was employing a reproductive strategy. Does 'organic' mean that all organisms are recognized as mind-body unities?"

"Oh, I should have explained that. The story doesn't work that way; most unities believe there is a big difference between killing a unity and killing most other organisms; many would kill a moving organism to be able to eat its body, and for that matter many would kill a fox and waste the food. A good many unities, and certainly this one, believes there is a vast difference between unities and other organisms. They can be quite organic while killing organisms for food. Being organic isn't really an issue of treating other organisms just like mind-body unities."

Archon paused for a moment. "What I was going to say is that that's just a literary device, but I realize there is something there. The organic recognizes that there's something in different organisms, especially moving ones, that's closer to mind-body unities than something that's not alive."

"Like a computer processor?"

"That's complex, and it would be even more complex if they really had minds on a computer. But for now I'll say that unless they see computers through a fantasy—which many of them do—they experience computers as logic without life. And at any rate, there is a literary device that treats other things as having minds. I used it myself when saying the grape organism employed a strategy; it isn't

sentient. But their willingness to employ that literary mechanism seems to reflect both that a fox isn't a unity and that a fox isn't too far from being a unity. Other life is similar, but not equal."

"What kind of cable was the grape organism on? Which part of the net was it used for?"

"That story is a survival from before the transition from organic to technological. Advanced technology focuses on information—"

"Where else would technology focus?"

"—less sophisticated technology performs manual tasks. That story was from before cables were used to carry data."

"Then what was the cable for?"

"To support the grape organism."

"Do they have any other technology that isn't real?"

"Do you mean, 'Do they have any other technology that doesn't push the envelope and expand what can be done with technology?'"

"Yes."

"Then your question shuts off the answer. Their technology doesn't exist to expand what technology can do; it exists to support a community in its organic life."

"Where's the room for progress in *that*?"

"It's a different focus. You don't need another answer; you need another question. And, at any rate, that is how this world tells the lesson of cognitive dissonance, that we devalue what is denied to us."

Ployon paused. "Ok; I need time to process that story—may I say, 'digest'?"

"Certainly."

"But one last question. Why did you refer to the fox as 'he'? Its supposed mind was—"

"In that world, a unity is always male ('he') or female ('she'). A neutered unity is extraordinarily rare, and a neutered male, a 'eunuch', is still called 'he.'"

"I'm familiar enough with those details of biology,

but why would such an insignificant detail—"

"Remember about being mind-*body* unities. And don't think of them as bodies that would ordinarily be neutered. That's how new unities come to be in that world, with almost no cloning and no uterine replicators—"

"They really *are* slime!"

"—and if you only understand the biology of it, you don't understand it."

"What don't I understand?"

"You're trying to understand a feature of language that magnifies something insignificant, and what would cause the language to do that. But you're looking for an explanation in the wrong place. Don't think that the bodies are the most sexual parts of them. They're the least sexual; the minds tied to those bodies are even more different than the bodies. The fact that the language shaped by unities for a long time distinguishes 'masculine' and 'feminine' enough to have the difference written into 'it', so that 'it' is 'he' or 'she' when speaking of mind-body unities."

"Hmm... Is this another dimension to their reality that is flattened out in ours? Are their minds always thinking about that act?"

"In some cases that's not too far from the truth. But you're looking for the big implication in the wrong place. This would have an influence if a unity never thought about that act, and it has influence before a unity has any concept of that act."

"Back up a bit. Different question. You said this was their way of explaining the theory of cognitive dissonance. But it isn't. It describes one event in which cognitive dissonance occurs. It doesn't articulate the theory; at most the theory can be extracted from it. And worse, if one treats it as explaining cognitive dissonance, it is highly ambiguous about where the boundaries of cognitive dissonance are. One single instance is very ambiguous about what is and is not another instance. This is an extraordinarily poor method of communication!"

"It is extraordinarily good, even classic, communication for minds that interpenetrate bodies. Most of them don't work with bare abstractions, at least not most of the time. They don't have simply discarnate minds that have been stuck into bodies. Their minds are astute in dealing with situations that mind-body unities will find themselves in. And think about it. If you're going to understand how they live, you're going to have to understand some very different, enfleshed ways of thought. No, more than that, if you still see the task of understanding ways of thought, you will not understand them."

"So these analyses do not help me in understanding your world."

"So far as you are learning through this kind of analysis, you will not understand… but this analysis is all you have for now."

"Are their any other stories that use an isomorphic element to this one?"

"I don't know. I've gotten deep enough into this world that I don't keep stories sorted by isomorphism class."

"Tell me another story the way that a storyteller there would tell it; there is something in it that eludes me."

Archon said, "Ok… The alarm clock chimed. It was a device such that few engineers alive fully understood its mechanisms, and no man could tell the full story of how it came to be, of the exotic places and activities needed to make all of its materials, or the logistics to assemble them, or the organization and infrastructure needed to bring together all the talent of those who designed, crafted, and maintained them, or any other of sundry details that would take a book to list. The man abruptly shifted from the vivid kaleidoscope of the dreaming world to being awake, and opened his eyes to a kaleidoscope of sunrise colors and a room with the song of birds and the song of crickets. Outside, the grass grew, the wind blew, a busy world was waking up, and the stars continued their ordered and

graceful dance. He left the slumbering form of the love of his life, showered, and stepped out with his body fresh, clean, and beautifully adorned. He stopped to kiss the fruit of their love, a boy cooing in his crib, and drove past commuters, houses, pedestrians, and jaybirds with enough stories to tell that they could fill a library to overflowing.

Archon continued, "After the majestic and ordered dance on the freeway brought him to his destination safe, unharmed, on time, and focusing on his work, he spent a day negotiating the flow of the human treasure of language, talking, listening, joking, teasing, questioning, enjoying the community of his co-workers, and cooperating to make it possible for a certain number of families to now enter the homes of their dreams. In the middle of the day he stopped to eat, nourishing a body so intricate that the state of the art in engineering could not hold a candle to his smallest cell. This done, he continued to use a spirit immeasurably greater than his body to pursue his work. Needless to say, the universe, whose physics alone is beyond our current understanding, continued to work according to all of its ordered laws and the spiritual world continued to shine. The man's time at work passed quickly, with a pitter-patter of squirrels' feet on the roof of their office, and before long he entered the door and passed a collection with copies of most of the greatest music produced by Western civilization—available for him to listen to, any time he pleased. The man absently kissed his wife, and stepped away, breathing the breath of God.

"'Hi, Honey!' she said. 'How was your day?'

"'Somewhat dull. Maybe something exciting will happen tomorrow.'"

Ployon said, "There's someone I want to meet who is free now, so I'll leave in a second… I'm not going to ask about all the technical vocabulary, but I wanted to ask: Is this story a farce? It describes a unity who has all these ludicrous resources, and then it—"

"—*he*—"

"—he says the most ludicrous thing."

"What you've said is true. The story is not a farce."

"But the story tells of things that are momentous."

"I know, but people in that world do not appreciate many of these things."

"Why? They seem to have enough access to these momentous resources."

"Yes, they certainly do. But most of the unities are bathed in such things and do not think that they are anything worth thinking of."

"And I suppose you're going to tell me that is part of their greatness."

"To them these things are just as boring as jacking into a robotically controlled factory and using the machines to assemble something."

"I see. At least I think I see. And I really need to be going now… but one more question. What is 'God'?"

"Please, not that. Please, *any* word but that. Don't ask about that."

"I'm not expected, and you've piqued my curiosity."

"Don't you need to be going now?"

"*You've piqued my curiosity*."

Archon was silent.

Ployon was silent.

Archon said, "God is the being who made the world."

"Ok, so you are God."

"Yes… no. *No! I am not God!*"

"But you created this world?"

"Not like God did. I envisioned looking in on it, but to that world, I do not exist."

"But God exists?"

"Yes… no… It is false to say that God exists and it is false to say that God does not exist."

"So the world is self-contradictory? Or would it therefore be true to say that God both exists and does not exist?"

"No. Um… It is false to say that God exists and it is

false to say that God exists as it is false to say that a square is a line and it is false to say that a square is a point. God is reflected everywhere in the world: not a spot in the entire cosmos is devoid of God's glory—"

"A couple of things. First, is this one more detail of the universe that you cannot explain but is going to have one more dimension than our world?"

"God is of higher dimension than that world."

"So our world is, say, two dimensional, that world is three dimensional, and yet it somehow contains God, who is four dimensional?"

"God is not the next step up."

"Then is he two steps up?"

"Um…"

"Three? Four? Fifty? Some massive power of two?"

"Do you mind if I ask you a question from that world?"

"Go ahead."

"How many minds can be at a point in space?"

"If you mean, 'thinking about', there is no theoretical limit; the number is not limited in principle to two, three, or… Are you saying that God has an infinite number of dimensions?"

"You caught that quick; the question is a beautiful way of asking whether a finite or an infinite number of angels can dance on the head of a pin, in their picturesque language."

"That question is very rational. But returning to the topic, since God has an infinite number of dimensions—"

"In a certain sense. It also captures part of the truth to say that God is a single point—"

"*Zero* dimensions?"

"God is so great not as to need any other, not to need parts as we have. And, by the way, the world does not contain God. God contains the world."

"I'm struggling to find a mathematical model that will accommodate all of this."

"Why don't you do something easier, like find an atom that will hold a planet?"

"Ok. As to the second of my couple of things, what is glory?"

"It's like the honor that we seek, except that it is immeasurably full while our honors are hollow. As I was saying, not a place in the entire cosmos is devoid of his glory—"

"His? So God is a body?"

"That's beside the point. Whether or not God has a body, he—"

"—*it*—"

"—he—"

"—*it*... isn't a male life form..."

Archon said, "Ployon, what if I told you that God, without changing, could become a male unity? But you're saying you can't project maleness up onto God, without understanding that maleness is the shadow of something in God. You have things upside down."

"But maleness has to do with a rather undignified method of creating organisms, laughable next to a good scientific generation center."

"His ways are not like your ways, Ployon. Or mine."

"Of course; this seems to be true of everything in the world."

"But it's even true of men in that world."

"So men have no resemblance to God?"

"No, there's—oh, no!"

"What?"

"Um... never mind, you're not going to let me get out of it. I said earlier that that world is trying to make itself more like this one. Actually, I didn't say that, but it's related to what I said. There has been a massive movement which is related to the move from organic to what is not organic, and part of it has to do with... In our world, a symbol is arbitrary. No connection. In that world, something about a symbol is deeply connected with what it represents. And the

unities, every single one, are symbols of God in a very strong sense."

"Are they miniature copies? If God does not have parts, how do they have minds and bodies?"

"That's not looking at it the right way. They indeed have parts, as God does not, but they aren't a scale model of God. They're something much more. A unity is someone whose very existence is bound up with God, who walks as a moving… I'm not sure what to use as the noun, but a moving something of God's presence. And you cannot help or harm one of these unities without helping or harming God."

"Is this symbol kind of a separate God?"

"The unities are not separate from God."

"Are the unities God?"

"I don't know how to answer that. It is a grave error for anyone to confuse himself with God. And at the same time, the entire purpose of being a unity is to receive a gift, and that gift is becoming what God is."

"So the minds will be freed from their bodies?"

"No, some of them hope that their bodies will be deepened, transformed, become everything that their bodies are now and much more. But unities who have received this gift will always, *always*, have their bodies. It will be part of their glory."

"I'm having trouble tracking with you. It seems that everything one could say about God is false."

"That is true."

"Think about it. What you just said is contradictory."

"God is so great that anything one could say about God falls short of the truth as a point falls short of being a line. But that does not mean that all statements are equal. Think about the statements, 'One is equal to infinity.' 'Two is equal to infinity.' 'Three is equal to infinity.' and 'Four is equal to infinity.' All of them are false. But some come closer to the truth than others. And so you have a ladder of statements from the truest to the falsest, and when we say

something is false, we don't mean that it has no connection to the truth; we mean that it falls immeasurably short of capturing the truth. All statements fall immeasurably short of capturing the truth, and if we say, 'All statements fall immeasurably short of capturing the truth,' *that* falls immeasurably short of capturing the truth. Our usual ways of using logic tend to break down."

"And how does God relate to the interpenetration of mind and matter?"

"Do you see that his world, with mind and matter interpenetrating, is deeper and fuller than ours, that it has something that ours does not, and that it is so big we have trouble grasping it?"

"I see… you said that God was its creator. And… there is something about it that is just outside my grasp."

"It's outside my grasp too."

"Talking about God has certainly been a mind stretcher. I would love to hear more about him."

"Talking about God for use as a mind stretcher is like buying a piece of art because you can use its components to make rocket fuel. Some people, er, unities in that world would have a low opinion of this conversation."

"Since God is so far from that world, I'd like to restrict our attention to relevant—"

Archon interrupted. "You misunderstood what I said. Or maybe you understood it and I could only hint at the lesser part of the truth. You cannot understand unities without reference to God."

"How would unities explain it?"

"That is complex. A great many unities do not believe in God—"

"So they don't understand what it means to be a unity."

"Yes. No. That is complex. There are a great many unities who vehemently deny that there is a God, or would dismiss 'Is there a God?' as a pointless rhetorical question, but these unities may have very deep insight into what it

means to be a unity."

"But you said, 'You cannot understand—'"

Archon interrupted. "Yes, and it's true. *You* cannot understand unities without reference to God."

Archon continued. "Ployon, there are mind-body unities who believe that they are living in our world, with mind and body absolutely separate and understandable without reference to each other. And yet if you attack their bodies, they will take it as if you had attacked their minds, as if you had hurt *them*. When I described the strange custom of keeping organisms around which serve no utilitarian purpose worth the trouble of keeping them, know that this custom, which relates to their world's organic connection between mind and body, does not distinguish people who recognize that they are mind-body unities and people who believe they are minds which happen to be wrapped in bodies. Both groups do this. The tie between mind and body is too deep to expunge by believing it doesn't exist. And there are many of them who believe God doesn't exist, or it would be nice to know if God existed but unities could never know, or God is very different from what he in fact is, but they expunge so little of the pattern imprinted by God in the core of their being that they can understand what it means to be a unity at a very profound level, but not recognize God. But *you* cannot understand unities without reference to God."

Ployon said, "Which parts of unities, and what they do, are affected by God? At what point does God enter their experience?"

"Which parts of programs, and their behaviors, are affected by the fact that they run on a computer? When does a computer begin to be relevant?"

"Touche. But why is God relevant, if it makes no difference whether you believe in him?"

"I didn't say that it makes no difference. Earlier you may have gathered that the organic is something deeper than ways we would imagine to try to be organic. If it is

possible, as it is, to slaughter moving organisms for food and still be organic, that doesn't mean that the organic is so small it doesn't affect such killing; it means it is probably deeper than we can imagine. And it doesn't also mean that because one has been given a large organic capital and cannot liquidate it quickly, one's choices do not matter. The decisions a unity faces, whether or not to have relationships with other unities that fit the timeless pattern, whether to give work too central a place in the pursuit of technology and possessions or too little a place or its proper place, things they have talked about since time immemorial and things which their philosophers have assumed went without saying—the unity has momentous choices not only about whether to invest or squander their capital, but choices that affect how they will live."

"What about things like that custom you mentioned? I bet there are a lot of them."

"Looking at, and sensing, the organisms they keep has a place, if they have one. And so does moving about among many non-moving organisms. And so does slowly sipping a fluid that causes a pleasant mood while the mind is temporarily impaired and loosened. And so does rotating oneself so that one's sight is filled with clusters of moisture vapor above their planet's surface. And some of the unities urge these things because they sense the organic has been lost, and without reference to the tradition that urges deeper goods. And yes, I know that these activities probably sound strange—"

"I do not see what rational benefit these activities would have, but I see this may be a defect with me rather than a defect with the organic—"

"Know that it is a defect with you rather than a defect with the organic."

"—but what is this about rotating oneself?"

"As one goes out from the center of their planet, the earth—if one could move, for the earth's core is impenetrable minerals—one would go through solid rock,

then pass through the most rarefied boundary, then pass through gases briefly and be out in space. You would encounter neither subterranean passageways and buildings reaching to the center of the earth, and when you left you would find only the rarest vessel leaving the atmosphere—"

"Then where do they live?"

"At the boundary where space and planetary mass meet. *All* of them are priveleged to live at that meeting-place, a narrow strip or sphere rich in life. There are very few of them; it's a select club. Not even a trillion. And the only property they have is the best—a place teeming with life that would be impossible only a quarter of the planet's thickness above or below. A few of them build edifices reaching scant storeys into the sky; a few dig into the earth; there are so few of these that *not* being within a minute's travel from *literally* touching the planet's surface is exotic. But the unities, along with the rest of the planet's life, live in a tiny, priceless film adorned with the best resources they could ever know of."

Ployon was stunned. It thought of the cores of planets and asteroids it had been in. It thought of the ships and stations in space. Once it had had the privelege of working from a subnet hosted within a comparatively short distance of a planet's surface—it was a rare privilege, acquired through deft political maneuvering, and there were fewer than 130,982,539,813,209 other minds who had shared that privelege. And, basking in that luxury, it could only envy the minds which had bodies that walked on the surface. Ployon was stunned and reeling at the privilege of—

Ployon said, "How often do they travel to other planets?"

"There is only one planet so rich as to have them."

Ployon pondered the implications. It had travelled to half the spectrum of luxurious paradises. Had it been to even one this significant? Ployon reluctantly concluded that it had not. And that was not even considering what it meant for this golden plating to teem with life. And then Ployon

realized that *each* of the unities had a *body* on that surface. It reeled in awe.

Archon said, "And you're not thinking about what it means that surface is home to the biological network, are you?"

Ployon was silent.

Archon said, "This organic biological network, in which they live and move and have their being—"

"Is God the organic?"

"Most of the things that the organic has, that are not to be found in our world, are reflections of God. But God is more. It is true that in God that they live and move and have their being, but it is truer. There is a significant minority that identifies the organic with God—"

Ployon interrupted, "—who are wrong—"

Archon interrupted, "—who are reacting against the destruction of the organic and seek the right thing in the wrong place—"

Ployon interrupted, "But how is God different from the organic?"

Archon sifted through a myriad of possible answers. "Hmm, this might be a good time for you to talk with that other mind you wanted to talk with."

"You know, you're good at piquing my curiosity."

"If you're looking for where they diverge, they don't. Or at least, some people would say they don't. Others who are deeply connected with God would say that the organic as we have been describing it is problematic—"

"But all unities are deeply connected with God, and disagreement is—"

"You're right, but that isn't where I was driving. And this relates to something messy, about disagreements when—"

"Aren't all unities able to calculate the truth from base axioms? Why would they disagree?"

Archon paused. "There are a myriad of real, not virtual disagreements—"

Ployon interrupted, “And it is part of a deeper reality to that world that—”

Archon interrupted. “No, no, or at best indirectly. There is something fractured about that world that—”

Ployon interrupted. “—is part of a tragic beauty, yes. Each thing that is artificially constricted in that world makes it greater. I’m waiting for the explanation.”

“No. This does not make it greater.”

“Then I’m waiting for the explanation of why this one limitation does *not* make it greater. But back to what you said about the real and the organic—”

“The differences between God and the organic are not differences of opposite directions. You are looking in the wrong place if you are looking for contradictions. It’s more a difference like… if you knew what ‘father’ and ‘mother’ meant, male parent and female parent—”

Ployon interrupted, “—you know I have perfect details of male and female reproductive biology—”

Archon interrupted, “—and you think that if you knew the formula for something called chicken soup, you would know what the taste of chicken soup is for them—”

Ployon continued, “—so now you’re going to develop some intricate elaboration of what it means that there is only one possible ‘mother’s’ contribution, while outside of a laboratory the ‘father’s’ contribution is extraordinarily haphazard…”

Archon said, “A complete non sequitur. If you only understand reproductive biology, you do not understand what a father or mother is. Seeing as how we have no concept yet of father or mother, let us look at something that’s different enough but aligns with father/mother in an interesting enough way that… never mind.”

Archon continued, “Imagine on the one hand a virtual reality, and on the other hand the creator of that virtual reality. You don’t have to choose between moving in the virtual reality and being the creator’s guest; the way to be the creator’s guest is to move in the virtual reality and

the purpose of moving in the virtual reality is being the creator's guest. But that doesn't mean that the creator is the virtual reality, or the virtual reality is the creator. It's not just a philosophical error to confuse them, or else it's a philosophical error with ramifications well outside of philosophy."

"Why didn't you just say that the relationship between God and the organic is creator/creation? Or that the organic is the world that was created?"

"Because the relationship is not that, or at very least not just that. And the organic is not the world—that is a philosophical error almost as serious as saying that the creator is the virtual reality, if a very different error. I fear that I have given you a simplification that is all the more untrue because of how true it is. God is in the organic, and in the world, and in each person, but not in the same way. How can I put it? If I say, 'God is in the organic,', it would be truer to say, 'The organic is not devoid of God,' because that is more ambiguous. If there were three boxes, and one contained a functional robot 'brain', and another contained a functional robot arm, and the third contained a non-functioning robot, it would be truer to say that each box contains something like a functioning robot than to say that each box contains a functioning robot. The ambiguity allows for being true in different ways in the different contexts, let alone something that words could not express even if we were discussing only one 'is in' or 'box'."

"Is there another way of expressing how their words would express it?"

"Their words are almost as weak as our words here."

"So they don't know about something this important?"

"Knowledge itself is different for them. To know something for us is to be able to analyze in a philosophical discussion. And this knowledge exists for them. But there is another root type of knowledge, a knowledge that—"

"Could you analyze the differences between the

knowledge we use and the knowledge they use?"

"Yes, and it would be as useful to you as discussing biology. This knowledge is not entirely alien to us; when a mathematician 'soaks' in a problem, or I refused to connect with anything but the body, for a moment a chasm was crossed. But in that world the chasm doesn't exist… wait, that's too strong… a part of the chasm doesn't exist. Knowing is not with the mind alone, but the whole person—"

"What part of the knowing is stored in the bones?"

"Thank you for your flippancy, but people use the metaphor of knowledge being in their bones, or drinking, for this knowing."

"This sounds more like a physical process and some hankey-pankey that has been dignified by being called knowing. It almost sounds as if they don't have minds."

"They don't."

"*What?*"

"They don't, at least not as we know them. The mathematical analogy I would use is that they… never mind, I don't want to use a mathematical analogy. The computational analogy I would use is that we are elements of a computer simulation, and every now and then we break into a robot that controls the computer, and do something that transcends what elements of the computer simulation "should" be able to do. But they don't transcend the simulation because they were never elements of the simulation in the first place—they are real bodies, or real unities. And what I've called 'mind' in them is more properly understood as 'spirit', which is now a meaningless word to you, but is part of them that meets God whether they are aware of it or not. Speaking philosophically is a difficult discipline that few of them can do—"

"They are starting to sound mentally feeble."

"Yes, if you keep looking at them as an impoverished version of our world. It is hard to speak philosophically as it is hard for you to emulate a clock and do nothing else—

because they need to drop out of several dimensions of their being to do it properly, and they live in those dimensions so naturally that it is an unnatural constriction for most of them to talk as if that was the only dimension of their being. And here I've been talking disappointingly about knowledge, making it sound more abstract than our knowing, when in fact it is much less so, and probably left you with the puzzle of how they manage to bridge gaps between mind, spirit, and body… but the difficulty of the question lies in a false setup. They are *unities* which experience, interact with, know all of them as united. And the knowing is deep enough that they can speculate that there's no necessary link between their spirits and bodies, or minds and bodies, or what have you. And if I can't explain this, I can't explain something even more foundational, the fact that the greatest thing about God is not how inconceivably majestic he is, but how close."

"It sounds as if—wait, I think you've given me a basis for a decent analysis. Let me see if I can—"

"Stop there."

"Why?"

Archon said, "Let me tell you a little story.

Archon continued, "A philosopher, Berkeley, believed that the only real things are minds and ideas and experiences in those minds: hence a rock was equal to the sum of every mind's impression of it. You could say that a rock existed, but what that had to mean was that there were certain sense impressions and ideas in minds, including God's mind; it didn't mean that there was matter outside of minds."

"A lovely virtual metaphysics. I've simulated that metaphysics, and it's enjoyable for a time."

"Yes, but for Berkeley it meant something completely different. Berkeley was a bishop,"

"What's a bishop?"

"I can't explain all of that now, but part of a bishop is a leader who is responsible for a community that believes

God became a man, and helping them to know God and be unities."

"How does that reconcile with that metaphysics?"

Archon said, "Ployon, stop interrupting. He believed that they were not only compatible, but the belief that God became a man could only be preserved by his metaphysics. And he believed he was defending 'common sense', how most unities thought about the world.

Archon continued, "And after he wrote his theories, another man, Samuel Johnson, kicked a rock and said, 'I refute Berkeley thus!'"

Ployon said, "Ha ha! That's the way to score!"

"But he didn't score. Johnson established only one thing—"

"—how to defend against Berkeley—"

"—that he didn't understand Berkeley."

"Yes, he did."

"No, he didn't."

"But he did."

"Ployon, only the crudest understanding of Berkeley's ideas could mean that one could refute them by kicking a rock. Berkeley didn't make his ideas public until he could account for the sight of someone kicking a rock, or the experience of kicking it yourself, just as well as if there were matter outside of minds."

"I know."

"So now that we've established that—"

Ployon interrupted. "I know that Berkeley's ideas could account for kicking a rock as well as anything else. But kicking a rock is still an excellent way to refute Berkeley. If what you've said about this world has any coherence at all."

"*What?*"

"Well, Berkeley's ideas are airtight, right?"

"Ployon, there is no way they could be disproven. Not by argument, not by action."

"So it is in principle impossible to force someone out

of Berkeley's ideas by argument."

"Absolutely."

"But you're missing something. What is it you've been talking to me about?"

"A world where mind and matter interpenetrate, and the organic, and there are many dimensions to life—"

"And if you're just falling further into a trap to logically argue, wouldn't it do something fundamentally *unity*-like to step into another dimension?"

Archon was silent.

Ployon said, "I understand that it would demonstrate a profound misunderstanding in our world… but wouldn't it say something equally profound in that world?"

Archon was stunned.

Ployon was silent for a long time.

Then Ployon said, "When are you going to refute Berkeley?"

Since the dawn of time, those who have walked the earth have looked up into the starry sky and wondered. They have asked, "What is the universe, and who are we?" "What are the woods?" "Where did this all come from?" "Is there life after death?" "What is the meaning of our existence?" The march of time has brought civilization, and with that, science. And science allows us to answer these age-old human questions.

That, at least, is the account of it that people draw now. But the truth is much more interesting.

Science is an ingenious mechanism to test guesses about mechanisms and behavior of the universe, and it is phenomenally powerful in that arena. Science can try to explain how the Heavens move, but it isn't the sort of thing to explain why there are Heavens that move that way—science can also describe how the Heavens have moved and reached their present position, but not the "Why?" behind it. Science can describe how to make technology to make life

more convenient, but not "What is the meaning of life?" Trying to ask science to answer "Why?" (or for that matter, "Who?" or any other truly interesting question besides "How?") is a bit like putting a book on a scale and asking the scale, "What does this book mean?" And there are indeed some people who will accept the scale's answer, 429.7425 grams, as the definitive answer to what the book means, and all the better because it is so *precise*.

But to say that much and then stop is to paint a deceptive picture. *Very* deceptive. Why?

Science at that point had progressed more than at any point in history, and its effects were being felt around the world. And science enjoyed both a profound prestige and a profound devotion. Many people did not know what "understanding nature" could mean besides "learning scientific descriptions of nature," which was a bit like not knowing what "understanding your best friend" could mean besides "learning the biochemical building blocks of your friend's body."

All this and more is true, yet this is not the most important truth. This was the Middle Age between ancient and human society and the technological, and in fact it was the early Middle Age. People were beginning to develop real technologies, the seeds of technology we would recognize, and could in primitive fashion jack into such a network as existed then. But all of this was embraced in a society that was ancient, ancient beyond measure. As you may have guessed, it is an error to misunderstand that society as an inexplicably crude version of real technological society. It is a fundamental error.

To really understand this society, you need to understand not its technology, but the sense in which it was ancient. I will call it 'medieval', but you must understand that the ancient element in that society outweighs anything we would recognize.

And even this is deceptive, not because a single detail is wrong, but because it is abstract. I will tell you about

certain parts in an abstract fashion, but you must understand that in this world's thinking the concrete comes *before* the abstract. I will do my best to tell a story—not as they would tell one, because that would conceal as much as it would reveal, but taking their way of telling stories and adapting it so we can see what is going on.

For all of their best efforts to spoil it, all of them live on an exquisite garden in the thin film where the emptiness of space meets the barrier of rock—there is a nest, a cradle where they are held tightly, and even if some of those who are most trying to be scientific want to flee into the barren wastes of space and other planets hostile to their kind of life. And this garden itself has texture, an incredible spectrum of texture along its surface. Place is itself significant, and I cannot capture what this story would have been like had it been placed in Petaling Jaya in Malaysia, or Paris in France, or Cambridge in England. What are these? I don't know… I can say that Petaling Jaya, Paris, and Cambridge are cities, but that would leave you knowing as much as you knew 5 milliseconds before I told you. And Malaysia, France, and England are countries, and now you know little besides being able to guess that a country is somehow capable of containing a city. Which is barely more than you knew before; the fact is that there is something very different between Petaling Jaya, Paris, and Cambridge. They have different wildlife and different places with land and water, but that is not nearly so interesting as the difference in people. I could say that people learn different skills, if I wanted to be very awkward and uninformative, but… the best way of saying it is that in our world, because there is nothing keeping minds apart… In that world, people have been separate so they don't even speak the same language. They almost have separate worlds. There is something common to all medievals, beyond what technology may bring, and people in other cities could find deep bonds with this story, but… Oh, there are many more countries than those I listed, and these countries have so

many cities that you could spend your whole life travelling between cities and never see all of them. No, our world doesn't have this wealth. Wealthy as it is, it doesn't come close.

Petaling Jaya is a place of warm rainstorms, torrents of water falling from the sky, a place where a little stream of unscented water flows by the road, even if such a beautiful "open sewer" is not appreciated. Petaling Jaya is a place where people are less aware of time than in Cambridge or Paris and yet a place where people understand time better, because of reasons that are subtle and hard to understand. It draws people from three worlds in the grandeur that is Asia, and each of them brings treasures. The Chinese bring with them the practice of calling adults "Uncle" or "Aunt", my father's brother or my father's sister or my mother's brother or my mother's sister, which is to say, addresses them not only by saying that there is something great about them, but they are "tied by blood"—a bond that I do not know how to explain, save to say that ancestry and origins are not the mechanism of how they came to be, or at least not just the mechanism of how they came to be. Ancestry and origins tell of the substance of who they are, and that is one more depth that cannot exist in our world with matter and mind separate. The Indians and Bumi Putras—if it is really only them, which is far from true—live a life of friendship and hospitality, which are human treasures that shine in them. What is hospitality, you ask? That is hard to answer; it seems that anything I can say will be deceptive. It means that if you have a space, and if you allow someone in that space, you serve that person, caring for every of his needs. That is a strange virtue—and it will sound stranger when I say that this is not endured as inexpedient, but something where people want to call others. Is it an economic exchange? That is beside the point; these things are at once the shadow cast by real hospitality, and at the same time the substance of hospitality itself, and you need to understand men before you can understand it. What

about friendship? Here I am truly at a loss. I can only say that in the story that I am about to tell, what happens is the highest form of friendship.

Paris is, or at least has been, a place with a liquid, a drug, that temporarily causes a pleasant mood while changing behavior and muddling a person's thoughts. But to say that misses what that liquid is, in Paris or much else. To some it is very destructive, and the drug is dangerous if it is handled improperly. But that is the hinge to something that—in our world, no pleasure is ever dangerous. You or I have experienced pleasures that these minds could scarcely dream of. We can have whatever pleasure we want at any time. And in a very real sense no pleasure *means* anything. But in their world, with its weaker pleasures, every pleasure is connected to something. And this liquid, this pleasure, if taken too far, destroys people—which is a hinge, a doorway to something. It means that they need to learn a self-mastery in using this liquid, and in using it many of them forge a beauty in themselves that affects all of life. And they live beautiful lives. Beautiful in many ways. They are like Norsemen of ages past, who sided with the good powers, not because the good powers were going to win, but because they wanted to side with the good powers and fight alongside them when the good powers lost and chaos ruled. It is a tragic beauty, and the tragedy is all the more real because it is unneeded, but it is beauty, and it is a beauty that could not exist if they knew the strength of good. And I have not spoken of the beauty of the language in Paris, with its melody and song, or of the artwork and statues, the Basilica of the SacrÃ©-Coeur, or indeed of the tapestry that makes up the city.

Cambridge is what many of them would call a "medieval" village, meaning that it has stonework that looks to its members like the ancient world's architecture. To them this is a major difference; the ancient character of the buildings to them overwhelms the fact that they are buildings. To that medieval world, both the newest

buildings and the ones they considered "medieval" had doorways, stairwells, rooms, windows, and passages. You or I would be struck by the ancient character of the oldest and newest buildings and the ancient character of the life they serve. But to these medievals, the fact that a doorway was built out of machine-made materials instead of having long ago been shaped from stone takes the door—the *door*—from being ancient to being a new kind of thing! And so in the quaintest way the medievals consider Cambridge a "medieval" village, not because they were all medievals, but because the ancient dimension to *architecture* was more ancient to them than the equally ancient ways of constructing spaces that were reflected in the "new" buildings. There was more to it than that, but…

That was not the most interesting thing about them. I know you were going to criticize me for saying that hospitality was both a human treasure and something that contributed to the uniqueness of Petaling Jaya, but I need to do the same thing again. Politeness is… how can I describe it? Cynics describe politeness as being deceit, something where you learn a bunch of standard things to do and have to use them to hide the fact that you're offended, or bored, or want to leave, or don't like someone. And *all of that is true*—and deceptive. A conversation will politely begin with one person saying, "Hi, Barbara, how are you?" And Barbara will say, "Fine, George, how are you?" "Fine!" And the exact details seem almost arbitrary between cultures. This specific interaction is, on the surface, superficial and not necessarily true: people usually say they feel fine whether or not they really feel fine at all. And so politeness can be picked apart in this fashion, as if there's nothing else there, but *there is*. Saying "How are you?" opens a door, a door of concern. In one sense, what is given is very small. But if a person says, "I feel rotten," the other person is likely to listen. Barbara might only "give" George a little bit of chatter, but if he were upset, she would comfort him; if he were physically injured, she would call an

ambulance to give him medical help; if he were hungry, she might buy him something to eat. But he only wants a little chat, so she only gives him a little chat—which is not really a little thing at all, but I'm going to pretend that it's small. Politeness stems from a concern for others, and is in actuality quite deep. The superficial "Hi, how are you?" is really not superficial at all. It is connected to a much deeper concern, and the exterior of rules is connected to a heart of concern. And Cambridge, which is a place of learning, and has buildings more ancient than what these medieval people usually see, is perhaps most significantly distinguished by its politeness.

But I have not been telling you a story. These observations may not be completely worthless, but they are still not a dynamic story. The story I'm about to tell you is not in Petaling Jaya, nor in Paris, nor in Cambridge, nor in any of thousands of other worlds. And I would like to show you what the medieval society looks like in action. And so let's look at Peter.

Peter, after a long and arduous trek, opened the car door, got out, stretched, looked at the vast building before him, and listened as his father said, "We've done it! The rest should be easy, at least for today." Then Peter smiled, and smashed his right thumb in the car door.

Then suddenly they moved—their new plan was to get to a hospital. Not much later, Peter was in the Central DuPage Hospital emergency room, watching people who came in after him be treated before him—not because they had more clout, but because they had worse injuries. The building was immense—something like one of our biological engineering centers, but instead of engineering bodies according to a mind's specification, this used science to restore bodies that had been injured and harmed, and reduce people's suffering. And it was incredibly primitive; at its best, it helped the bodies heal itself. But you must understand that even if these people were far wealthier than most others in their tiny garden, they had scant resources

by our standard, and they made a major priority to restore people whose bodies had problems. (If you think about it, this tells something about how they view the value of each body.) Peter was a strong and healthy young man, and it had been a while since he'd been in a hospital. He was polite to the people who were helping him, even though he wished he were anywhere else.

You're wondering why he deliberately smashed his thumb? Peter didn't deliberately smash his thumb. He was paying attention to several other things and shoved the door close while his thumb was in its path. His body is not simply a device controlled by his mind; they interact, and his mind can't do anything he wishes it to do—he can't add power to it. He thinks by working with a mind that operates with real limitations and can overlook something in excitement—much like his body. If he achieves something, he doesn't just requisition additional mental power. He struggles within the capabilities of his own mind, and that means that when he achieves something with his mind, he *achieves* something. Yes, in a way that you or I cannot. Not only is his body in a very real sense more real to him than any of the bodies you or I have jacked into and swapped around, but his *mind* is more real. I'm not sure how to explain it.

Peter arrived for the second time well after check-in time, praying to be able to get in. After a few calls with a network that let him connect with other minds while keeping his body intact, a security officer came in, expressed sympathy about his bandaged thumb—what does 'sympathy' mean? It means that you share in another person's pain and make it less—and let him up to his room. The family moved his possessions from the car to his room and made his bed in a few minutes, and by the time it was down, the security guard had called the RA, who brought Peter his keys.

It was the wee hours of the morning when Peter looked at his new home for the second time, and tough as Peter was, the pain in his thumb kept the weary man from

falling asleep. He was in as much pain as he'd been in for a while. What? Which part do you want explained? Pain is when the mind is troubled because the body is injured; it is a warning that the body needs to be taken care of. No, he can't turn it off just because he thinks it's served his purpose; again, you're not understanding the intimate link between mind and body. And the other thing… sleep is… Their small globe orbits a little star, and it spins as it turns. At any time, part of the planet faces the star, the sun, and part faces away, and on the globe, it is as if a moving wall comes, and all is light, then another wall comes, and it is dark. The globe has a rhythm of light and dark, a rhythm of day and night, and people live in intimate attunement to this rhythm. The ancients moved about when it was light and slept when it was dark—to sleep, at its better moments, is to come fatigued and have body and mind rejuvenate themselves to awaken full of energy. The wealthier medievals have the ability to see by mechanical light, to awaken when they want and fall asleep when they want—and yet they are still attuned, profoundly attuned, to this natural cycle and all that goes with it. For that matter, Peter can stick a substance into his body that will push away the pain—and yet, for all these artificial escapes, medievals feel pain and usually take care of their bodies by heeding it, and medievals wake more or less when it is light and sleep more or less when it is dark. And they don't think of pain as attunement to their bodies—most of them wish they couldn't feel pain, and certainly don't think of pain as good—nor do more than a few of them think in terms of waking and sleeping to a natural rhythm… but so much of the primeval way of being human is so difficult to dislodge for the medievals.

He awoke when the light was ebbing, and after some preparations set out, wandering this way and that until he found a place to eat. The pain was much duller, and he made his way to a selection of different foods—meant not only to nourish but provide a pleasant taste—and sat down

at a table. There were many people about; he would not eat in a cell by himself, but at a table with others in a great hall.

A young man said, “Hi, I’m John.” Peter began to extend his hand, then looked at his white bandaged thumb and said, “Excuse me for not shaking your hand. I am Peter.”

A young woman said, “I’m Mary. I saw you earlier and was hoping to see you more.”

Peter wondered about something, then said, “I’ll drink for that,” reached with his right hand, grabbed a glass vessel full of carbonated water with sugar, caffeine, and assorted unnatural ingredients, and then winced in pain, spilling the fluid on the table.

Everybody at the table moved. A couple of people dodged the flow of liquid; others stopped what they were doing, rushing to take earth toned objects made from the bodies of living trees (napkins), which absorbed the liquid and were then shipped to be preserved with other unwanted items. Peter said, “I keep forgetting I need to be careful about my thumb,” smiled, grabbed another glass with fluid cows had labored to create, until his wet left hand slipped and he spilled the organic fluid all over his food.

Peter stopped, sat back, and then laughed for a while. “This is an interesting beginning to my college education.”

Mary said, “I noticed you managed to smash your thumb in a car door without saying any words you regret. What else has happened?”

Peter said, “Nothing great; I had to go to the ER, where I had to wait, before they could do something about my throbbing thumb. I got back at 4:00 AM and couldn’t get to sleep for a long time because I was in so much pain. Then I overslept my alarm and woke up naturally in time for dinner. How about you?”

Mary thought for a second about the people she met. Peter could see the sympathy on her face.

John said, “Wow. That’s nasty.”

Peter said, “I wish we couldn’t feel pain. Have you

thought about how nice it would be to live without pain?"

Mary said, "I'd like that."

John said, "Um…"

Mary said, "What?"

John said, "Actually, there are people who don't feel pain, and there's a name for the condition. You've heard of it."

Peter said, "I haven't heard of that before."

John said, "Yes you have. It's called leprosy."

Peter said, "What do you mean by 'leprosy'? I thought leprosy was a disease that ravaged the body."

John said, "It is. But that is only because it destroys the ability to feel pain. The way it works is very simple. We all get little nicks and scratches, and because they hurt, we show extra sensitivity. Our feet start to hurt after a long walk, so without even thinking about it we… shift things a little, and keep anything really bad from happening. That pain you are feeling is your body's way of asking room to heal so that the smashed thumbnail (or whatever it is) that hurts so terribly now won't leave you permanently maimed. Back to feet, a leprosy patient will walk exactly the same way and get wounds we'd never even think of for taking a long walk. All the terrible injuries that make leprosy a feared disease happen *only* because leprosy keeps people from feeling pain."

Peter looked at his thumb, and his stomach growled.

John said, "I'm full. Let me get a drink for you, and then I'll help you drink it."

Mary said, "And I'll get you some dry food. We've already eaten; it must—"

Peter said, "Please, I've survived much worse. It's just a bit of pain."

John picked up a clump of wet napkins and threatened to throw it at Peter before standing up and walking to get something to drink. Mary followed him.

Peter sat back and just laughed.

John said, "We have some time free after dinner; let's

just wander around campus."

They left the glass roofed building and began walking around. There were vast open spaces between buildings. They went first to "Blanchard", a building they described as "looking like a castle." Blanchard, a tall ivory colored edifice, built of rough limestone, which overlooked a large expanse adorned with a carefully tended and *living* carpet, had been modelled after a building in a much older institution called Oxford, and… this is probably the time to explain certain things about this kind of organization.

You and I simply requisition skills. If I were to imagine what it would mean to educate those people—or at least give skills; the concept of 'education' is slightly different from either inserting skills or inserting knowledge into a mind, and I don't have the ability to explain exactly what the distinction is here, but I will say that it is significant—then the obvious way is to simply make a virtual place on the network where people can be exposed to knowledge. And that model would become phenomenally popular within a few years; people would pursue an education that was a niche on such a network as they had, and would be achieved by weaving in these computer activities with the rest of their lives.

But this place preserved an ancient model of education, where disciples would come to live in a single place, which was in a very real sense its own universe, and meet in ancient, face-to-face community with their mentors and be shaped in more than what they know and can do. Like so many other things, it was ancient, using computers here and there and even teaching people the way of computers while avoiding what we would assume comes with computers.

But these people liked that building, as contrasted to buildings that seemed more modern, because it seemed to convey an illusion of being in another time, and let you forget that you were in a modern era.

After some wandering, Peter and those he had just

met looked at the building, each secretly pretending to be in a more ancient era, and went through an expanse with a fountain in the center, listened to some music, and ignored clouds, trees, clusters of people who were sharing stories, listening, thinking, joking, and missing home, in order to come to something exotic, namely a rotating platform with a mockup of a giant mastodon which had died before the end of the last ice age, and whose bones had been unearthed in a nearby excavation. Happy to have seen something exotic, they ignored buildings which have a human-pleasing temperature the year round, other people excited to have seen new friends, toys which sailed through the air on the same principles as an airplane's wings, a place where artistic pieces were being drawn into being, a vast, stonehard pavement to walk, and a spectrum of artefacts for the weaving of music.

Their slow walk was interrupted when John looked at a number on a small machine he had attached to his wrist, and interpreted it to mean that it was time for the three of them to stop their leisured enjoyment of the summer night and move with discomfort and haste to one specific building—they all were supposed to go to the building called Fischer. After moving over and shifting emotionally from being relaxed and joyful to being bothered and stressed, they found that they were all on a brother and sister floor, and met their leaders.

Paul, now looking considerably more coherent than when he procured Peter's keys, announced, "Now, for the next exercise, I'll be passing out toothpicks. I want you to stand in two lines, guy-girl-guy-girl, and pass a lifesaver down the line. If your team passes the lifesaver to the end first, you win. Oh, and if you drop the lifesaver your team has to start over, so don't drop it."

People shuffled, and shortly Peter was standing in line, looking over the shoulder of a girl he didn't know, and silently wishing he weren't playing this game. He heard a voice say, "Go!" and then had an intermittent view of a tiny

sugary torus passing down the line and the two faces close to each other trying simultaneously to get close enough to pass the lifesaver, and control the clumsy, five centimeter long toothpicks well enough to transfer the candy. Sooner than he expected the girl turned around, almost losing the lifesaver on her toothpick, and then began a miniature dance as they clumsily tried to synchronize the ends of their toothpicks. This took unpleasantly long, and Peter quickly banished a thought of "This is almost kissing! That can't be what's intended." Then he turned around, trying both to rush and not to rush at the same time, and repeated the same dance with the young woman standing behind him—Mary! It was only after she turned away that Peter realized her skin had changed from its alabaster tone to pale rose.

Their team won, and there was a short break as the next game was organized. Peter heard bits of conversation: "This has been a bummer; I've gotten two papercuts this week." "—and then I—" "What instruments do you—" "I'm from France too! *Tu viens de Paris?*" "Really? You—" Everybody seemed to be chattering, and Peter wished he could be in one of—actually, several of those conversations at once.

Paul's voice cut in and said, "For this next activity we are going to form a human circle. With your team, stand in a circle, and everybody reach in and grab another hand with each hand. Then hold on tight; when I say, "Go," you want to untangle yourselves, without letting go. The first team to untangle themselves wins!"

Peter reached in, and found each of his hands clasped in a solid, masculine grip. Then the race began, and people jostled and tried to untangle themselves. This was a laborious process and, one by one, every other group freed itself, while Peter's group seemed stuck on—someone called and said, "I think we're knotted!" As people began to thin out, Paul looked with astonishment and saw that they were indeed knotted. "A special prize to them, too, for managing the best tangle!"

"And now, we'll have a three-legged race! Gather into pairs, and each two of you take a burlap sack. Then—" Paul continued, and with every game, the talk seemed to flow more. When the finale finished, Peter found himself again with John and Mary and heard the conversations flowing around him: "Really? You too?" "But you don't understand. Hicks have a slower pace of life; we enjoy things without all the things you city dwellers need for entertainment. And we learn resourceful ways to—" "—and only at Wheaton would the administration *forbid* dancing while *requiring* the games we just played and—" Then Peter lost himself in a conversation that continued long into the night. He expected to be up at night thinking about all the beloved people he left at home, but Peter was too busy thinking about John's and Mary's stories.

The next day Peter woke up when his machine played a hideous sound, and groggily trudged to the dining hall to eat some chemically modified grains and drink water that had been infused with traditionally roasted beans. There were pills he could have taken that would have had the effect he was looking for, but he savored the beverage, and after sitting at a table without talking, bounced around from beautiful building to beautiful building, seeing sights for the first time, and wishing he could avoid all that to just get to his advisor.

Peter found the appropriate hallway, wandered around nervously until he found a door with a yellowed plaque that said "Julian Johnson," knocked once, and pushed the door open. A white-haired man said, "Peter Jones? How are you? Do come in… What can I do for you?"

Peter pulled out a sheet of paper, an organic surface used to retain colored trails and thus keep small amounts of information inscribed so that the "real" information is encoded in a personal way. No, they don't need to be trained to have their own watermark in this encoding.

Peter looked down at the paper for a moment and said, "I'm sorry I'm late. I need you to write what courses I

should take and sign here. Then I can be out of your way."

The old man sat back, drew a deep breath, and relaxed into a fatherly smile. Peter began to wonder if his advisor was going to say anything at all. Then Prof. Johnson motioned towards an armchair, as rich and luxurious as his own, and then looked as if he remembered something and offered a bowl full of candy. "Sit down, sit down, and make yourself comfortable. May I interest you in candy?" He picked up an engraved metal bowl and held it out while Peter grabbed a few Lifesavers.

Prof. Johnson sat back, silent for a moment, and said, "I'm sorry I'm out of butterscotch; that always seems to disappear. Please sit down, and tell me about yourself. We can get to that form in a minute. One of the priveleges of this job is that I get to meet interesting people. Now, where are you from?"

Peter said, "I'm afraid there's not much that's interesting about me. I'm from a small town downstate that doesn't have anything to distinguish itself. My amusements have been reading, watching the cycle of the year, oh, and running. Not much interesting in that. Now which classes should I take?"

Prof. Johnson sat back and smiled, and Peter became a little less tense. "You run?"

Peter said, "Yes; I was hoping to run on the track this afternoon, after the lecture. I've always wanted to run on a real track."

The old man said, "You know, I used to run myself, before I became an official Old Geezer and my orthopaedist told me my knees couldn't take it. So I have to content myself with swimming now, which I've grown to love. Do you know about the Prairie Path?"

Peter said, "No, what's that?"

Prof. Johnson said, "Years ago, when I ran, I ran through the areas surrounding the College—there are a lot of beautiful houses. And, just south of the train tracks with the train you can hear now, there's a path before you even

hit the street. You can run, or bike, or walk, on a path covered with fine white gravel, with trees and prairie plants on either side. It's a lovely view." He paused, and said, "Any ideas what you want to do after Wheaton?"

Peter said, "No. I don't even know what I want to major in."

Prof. Johnson said, "A lot of students don't know what they want to do. Are you familiar with Career Services? They can help you get an idea of what kinds of things you like to do."

Peter looked at his watch and said, "It's chapel time."

Prof. Johnson said, "Relax. I can write you a note." Peter began to relax again, and Prof. Johnson continued, "Now you like to read. What do you like to read?"

Peter said, "Newspapers and magazines, and I read this really cool book called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Oh, and I like the Bible."

Prof. Johnson said, "I do too. What do you like about it most?"

"I like the stories in the Old Testament."

"One general tip: here at Wheaton, we have different kinds of professors—"

Peter said, "Which ones are best?"

Prof. Johnson said, "Different professors are best for different students. Throughout your tenure at Wheaton, ask your friends and learn which professors have teaching styles that you learn well with and mesh well with. Consider taking other courses from a professor you like. Now we have a lot of courses which we think expose you to new things and stretch you—people come back and see that these courses are best. Do you like science?"

"I like it; I especially liked a physics lab."

Prof. Johnson took a small piece of paper from where it was attached to a stack with a strange adhesive that had "failed" as a solid adhesive, but provided a uniquely useful way to make paper that could be attached to a surface with a slight push and then be detached with a gentle pull,

remarkably enough without damage to the paper or the surface. He began to think, and flip through a book, using a technology thousands of years old at its heart. “Have you had calculus?” Prof. Johnson restrained himself from launching into a discussion of the grand, Utopian vision for “calculus” as it was first imagined and how different a conception it had from anything that would be considered “mathematics” today. Or should he go into that? He wavered, and then realized Peter had answered his question. “Ok,” Prof. Johnson said, “the lab physics class unfortunately requires that you’ve had calculus. Would you like to take calculus now? Have you had geometry, algebra, and trigonometry?”

Peter said, “Yes, I did, but I’d like a little break from that now. Maybe I could take calculus next semester.”

“Fair enough. You said you liked to read.”

“Magazines and newspapers.”

“Those things deal with the unfolding human story. I wonder if you’d like to take world civilization now, or a political science course.”

“History, but why study world history? Why can’t I just study U.S. history?”

Prof. Johnson said, “The story of our country is intertwined with that of our world. I think you might find that some of the things in world history are a lot closer to home than you think—and we have some real storytellers in our history department.”

“That sounds interesting. What else?”

“The Theology of Culture class is one many students find enjoyable, and it helps build a foundation for Old and New Testament courses. Would you be interested in taking it for A quad or B quad, the first or second half of the semester?”

“Could I do both?”

“I wish I could say yes, but this course only lasts half the semester. The other half you could take Foundations of Wellness—you could do running as homework!”

"I think I'll do that first, and then Theology of Culture. That should be new," Peter said, oblivious to how tightly connected he was to theology and culture. "What else?"

Prof. Johnson said, "We have classes where people read things that a lot of people have found really interesting. Well, that could describe several classes, but I was thinking about Classics of Western Literature or Literature of the Modern World."

Peter said, "Um… Does Classics of Western Literature cover ancient and medieval literature, and Literature of the Modern World cover literature that isn't Western? Because if they do, I'm not sure I could connect with it."

Prof. Johnson relaxed into his seat, a movable support that met the contours of his body. Violating convention somewhat, he had a chair for Peter that was as pleasant to rest in as his own. "You know, a lot of people think that. But you know what?"

Peter said, "What?"

"There is something human that crosses cultures. That is why the stories have been selected. Stories written long ago, and stories written far away, can have a lot to connect with."

"Ok. How many more courses should I take?"

"You're at 11 credits now; you probably want 15. Now you said that you like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I'm wondering if you would also like a philosophy course."

Peter said, "*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is… I don't suppose there are any classes that use that. Or are there? I've heard Pirsig isn't given his fair due by philosophers."

Prof. Johnson said, "If you approach one of our philosophy courses the way you approach *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, I think you'll profit from the encounter. I wonder if our Issues and Worldviews in

Philosophy might interest you. I'm a big fan of thinking worldviewishly, and our philosophers have some pretty interesting things to say."

Peter asked, "What does 'worldviewishly' mean?"

Prof. Johnson said, "It means thinking in terms of worldviews. A worldview is the basic philosophical framework that gives shape to how we view the world. Our philosophers will be able to help you understand the basic issues surrounding worldviews and craft your own Christian worldview. You may find this frees you from the Enlightenment's secularizing influence—and if you don't know what the Enlightenment is now, you will learn to understand it, and its problems, and how you can be free of them." He spoke with the same simplistic assurance of artificial intelligence researchers who, seeing the power of computers and recognizing how simple certain cognitive feats are for humans, assumed that it was only a matter of time that artificial intelligence would "bridge the gap"—failing to recognize the tar pit of the peaks of intelligence that seem so deceptively simple and easy to human phenomenology. For computers could often defeat the best human players at chess—as computerlike a human skill as one might reasonably find—but deciphering the language of a children's book or walking through an unfamiliar room, so easy to humans, seemed more difficult for computers the more advanced research began. Some researchers believed that the artificial intelligence project had uncovered the non-obvious significance of a plethora of things humans take for granted—but the majority still believed that what seemed trivial for humans must be the sort of thinking a computer can do, because there is no other kind of thinking… and an isomorphic simplicity, an apparent and deceptive simplicity much like this one, made it seem as if ideas were all that really mattered: not all that existed, but all that had an important influence. Prof. Johnson did not consciously understand how the Enlightenment worldview—or, more accurately, the Enlightenment—

created the possibility of seeing worldviews that way, nor did he see how strange the idea of crafting one's own worldview would seem to pre-Enlightenment Christians. He did not realize that his own kindness towards Peter was not simply because he agreed with certain beliefs, but because of a deep and many-faceted way in which he had walked for decades, and walked well. It was with perfect simplicity that he took this way for granted, as artificial intelligence researchers took for granted all the things which humans did so well they seemed to come naturally, and framed worldviewish thought as carrying with it everything he assumed from his way.

Peter said, "Ok. Well, I'll take those classes. It was good to meet you."

Prof. Johnson looked over a document that was the writeup of a sort of game, in which one had a number of different rooms that were of certain sizes, and certain classes had requirements about what kind of room they needed for how long, and the solution involved not only solving the mathematical puzzle, but meeting with teachers and caring for their concerns, longstanding patterns, and a variety of human dimensions derisively labelled as "political." Prof. Johnson held in his hands the schedule with the official solution for that problem, and guided Peter to an allowable choice of class sections, taking several different actions that were considered "boring paperwork."

Prof. Johnson said, "I enjoyed talking with you. Please do take some more candy—put a handful in your pocket or something. I just want to make one more closing comment. I want to see you succeed. Wheaton wants to see you succeed. There are some rough points and problems along the way, and if you bring them to me I can work with them and try to help you. If you want to talk with your RA or our chaplain or someone else, that's fine, but please… my door is *always* open. And it was good to meet you too! Goodbye!"

Peter walked out, completely relaxed.

The next activity, besides nourishing himself with lunch (and eating, sleeping, and many other activities form a gentle background rhythm to the activities people are more conscious of. I will not describe each time Peter eats and sleeps, even though the 100th time in the story he eats with his new friends is as significant as the first, because I will be trying to help you see it their way), requires some explanation.

The term "quest," to the people here, is associated with an image of knights in armor, and a body of literature from writers like Chretien de Troyes and Sir Thomas Mallory who described King Arthur and his knights. In Chretien de Troyes, the knight goes off in various adventures, often quests where he is attempting different physical feats. In Sir Thomas Mallory, a new understanding of quests is introduced, in the quest for the holy grail—a legendary treasure which I cannot here explain save to say that it profoundly altered the idea of a quest, and the quest took a large enough place in many people's consciousness that it is used as a metaphor of the almost unattainable object of an ultimate pursuit (so that physicists would say that a grand unified theory which crystallizes all physical laws into a few simple equations is the "holy grail of physics"), and that the holy grail is itself in the shadow of a greater treasure, and this treasure was one many people in fact had possessed (some after great struggle, while others had never known a time when they were without it). In Mallory in particular the quest can be more than a physical task; most of Arthur's knights could not reach the holy grail because of—they weren't physical blemishes and they weren't really mental blemishes either, but what they were is hard to say. The whole topic (knights, quests, the holy grail…) connects to something about that world that is beyond my ability to convey; suffice it to say that it is connected with one more dimension we don't have here.

Peter, along with another group of students, went out on a quest. The object of this quest was to acquire seven

specific items, on conditions which I will explain below:

"A dog biscuit." In keeping with a deeply human trait, the food they prepare is not simply what they judge adequate to sustain the body, but meant to give pleasure, in a sense adorned, because eating is not to them simply a biological need. They would also get adorned food to give pleasure to organisms they kept, including dogs, which include many different breeds which in turn varied from being natural sentries protecting territories to a welcoming committee of one which would give a visitor an exuberant greeting just because he was there.

"An M16 rifle's spent shell casing." That means the used remnant after… wait a little bit. I need to go a lot farther back to explain this one.

You will find something deceptively familiar in that in that universe, people strategically align resources and then attack their opponents, usually until a defeat is obvious. And if you look for what is deceptive, it will be a frustrating search, because even if the technologies involved are primitive, it is a match of strategy, tactics, and opposition.

What makes it different is that this is not a recreation or an art form, but something many of them consider the worst evil that can happen, or among the worst. The resources that are destroyed, the bodies—in our world, it is simply what is involved in the game, but many of them consider it an eternal loss.

Among the people we will be meeting, people may be broken down into "pacifists" who believe that war is always wrong, and people who instead of being pure pacifists try to have a practical way of pursuing pacifist goals: the disagreement is not whether one should have a war for amusement's sake (they both condemn that), but what one should do when not having a war looks even more destructive than having a war. And that does not do justice to either side of the debate, but what I want to emphasize that to both of them this is not simply a game or one form of

recreation; it is something to avoid at almost *any* cost.

A knight was someone who engaged in combat, an elite soldier riding an animal called a horse. In Chretien de Troye's day and Mallory's day, the culture was such that winning a fight was important, but fighting according to "chivalry" was more important. Among other things, chivalry meant that they would only use simple weapons based on mechanical principles—no poison—and they wouldn't even use weapons with projectiles, like arrows and (armor piercing) crossbow bolts. In practice that only meant rigid piercing and cutting weapons, normally swords and spears. And there was a lot more. A knight was to protect women and children.

The form that chivalry took in Peter's day allowed projectile weapons, although poison was still not allowed, along with biological, thermonuclear, and other weapons which people did not wish to see in war, and the fight to disfigure the tradition's understanding women had accorded them meant that women could fight and be killed like men, although people worked to keep children out of warfare, and in any case the "Geneva Convention", as the code of chivalry was called, maintained a sharp distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the latter of which were to be protected.

The specific projectile weapon carried by most members of the local army was called an M16 rifle, which fired surprisingly small .22 bullets—I say "surprisingly" because if you were a person fighting against them and you were hit, you would be injured but quite probably not killed.

This was intentional. (Yes, they knew how to cause an immediate kill.)

Part of it is the smaller consideration that if you killed an enemy soldier immediately, you took one soldier out of action; on the other hand, if you wounded an enemy soldier, you took three soldiers out of action. But this isn't the whole reason. The much bigger part of the reason is that their sense of chivalry (if it was really just chivalry; they

loved their enemies) meant that even in their assaults they tried to subdue with as little killing as possible.

There were people training with the army in that community (no, not Peter; Peter was a pure pacifist) who trained, with M16 rifles, not because they wanted to fight, but as part of a not entirely realistic belief that if they trained hard enough, their achievement would deter people who would go to war. And the "Crusader battalion" (the Crusaders were a series of people who fought to defend Peter's spiritual ancestors from an encroaching threat that would have destroyed them) had a great sense of chivalry, even if none of them used the word "chivalry".

"A car bumper." A car bumper is a piece of armor placed on the front and back of cars so that they can sustain low-velocity collisions without damage. (At higher velocities, newer cars are designed to serve as a buffer so that "crumple zones" will be crushed, absorbing enough of the impact so that the "passenger cage" reduces injuries sustained by people inside; this is part of a broader cultural bent towards minimizing preventable death because of what they believe about one human life.) Not only is a car bumper an unusual item to give, it is heavy and awkward enough that people tend not to carry such things with them—even the wealthy ones tend to be extraordinarily lightly encumbered.

"An antique." It is said, "The problem with England is that they believe 100 miles is a long distance, and the problem with America is that they believe 100 years is a long time." An antique—giving the rule without all the special cases and exceptions, which is to say giving the rule as if it were not human—is something over 100 years old. To understand this, you must appreciate that it does not include easily available rocks, many of which are millions or billions of years old, and it is not based on the elementary particles that compose something (one would have to search hard to find something *not* made out of elementary particles almost as old as the universe). The term "antique"

connotes rarity, and in a sense something out of the ordinary; that people's way is concerned with "New! New! New!" and it is hard to find an artifact that was created more than 100 years ago, which is what was intended.

This quest is all the more interesting because there is an "unwritten rule" that items will be acquired by asking, not by theft or even purchase—and, as most antiques are valuable, it would be odd for someone you've just met—and therefore with whom you have only the general human bond but not the special bond of friendship—to give you such an item, even if most of the littler things in life are acquired economically while the larger things can only be acquired by asking.

"A note from a doctor, certifying that you do not have bubonic plague." Intended as a joke, this refers to a health, safeguarded by their medicine, which keeps them from a dreadful disease which tore apart societies some centuries ago: that sort of thing wasn't considered a live threat because of how successful their medicine was (which is why it could be considered humorous).

"A burning piece of paper which no one in your group lit. (Must be presented in front of Fischer and not brought into the building.)" This presents a physical challenge, in that there is no obvious way to transport a burning piece of paper—or what people characteristically envision as a burning piece of paper—from almost anywhere else to in front of Fischer.

"A sheet of paper with a fingerpaint handprint from a kindergartener."

"Kindergarten" was the first year of their formal education, and a year of preparation before students were ready to enter their first grade. What did this society teach at its first, required year? Did it teach extraordinarily abstract equations, or cosmological theory, or literary archetypes, or how to use a lathe?

All of these could be taught later on, and for that matter there is reason to value all of them. But the very

beginning held something different. It taught people to take their turn and share; it taught people "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," the Golden Rule by which their great Teachers crystallized so much wisdom. All of this work and play, some of the most advanced lessons they could learn, were placed, not at the end, but at the *beginning* of their education.

That is what kindergarten was. What was a kindergartener? The true but uninformative answer would be "a person in kindergarten."

To get past that uninformative answer, I need to stress that their minds are bound up with organic life—they did *not* spring, fully formed, as you and I did. In most complex organisms, there is a process that transforms a genetically complete organism of just one cell to become a mature member of the species; among humans, that process is one of the longest and most complex. During that time their minds are developping as well as their bodies; in that regard they are not simply in harmony with the natural world this society believes it is separate from… but one of its best examples.

But to say that alone is to flatten out something interesting… even more interesting than the process of biological mental development is the place that society has for something called "childhood". Not all cultures have that concept—and again I am saying "culture" without explaining what it means. I can't. Not all societies understand "childhood" as this society does; to many, a child is a smaller and less capable adult, or even worse, a nonentity. But in this culture, childhood is a distinctive time, and a child, including a kindergardener, is something special—almost a different species of mind. Their inability to healthily sustain themselves is met, not always with scorn, but with a giving of support and protection—and this is not always a grudging duty, but something that can bring joy. They are viewed as innocent, which is certainly not true, and something keeps many people from resenting them

when they prove that they are not innocent by doing things that would not be tolerated if an adult did it. And the imperviousness of this belief to contrary experience is itself the shadow of the whole place of childhood as a time to play and learn and explore worlds of imagination and the things most adults take for granted. And many adults experience a special pleasure, and much more than a pleasure, from the company of children, a pleasure that is tied to something much deeper.

This pleasure shines through even a handprint left with "fingerpaints," a way of doing art reserved for children, so that this physical object is itself a symbol of all that is special about childhood, and like symbols of that world carries with it what is evoked: seeing such a handprint is a little like seeing a kindergartener.

And they were off. They stopped for a brief break and annoyedly watched the spectacle of over a hundred linked metal carts carrying a vast quantity of material, and walked in and out of the surrounding neighborhoods. Their knocks on the door met a variety of warm replies. Before long, they had a handprint from a kindergartener, a dog biscuit (and some very enthusiastic attention from a kind dog!), a note from an off-duty doctor (who did not examine them, but simply said that if they had the bubonic plague there would be buboes bulging from them in an obvious way), a cigarette lighter and a sheet of paper (unlit), a twisted bumper (which Peter surprised people by flipping over his shoulder), and finally a spent shell casing from a military science professor. When they climbed up "Fischer beach," John handed the paper and lighter to his RA and said, "Would you light this?" It was with an exhausted satisfaction that they went to dinner and had entirely amiable conversation with other equally students who scant minutes ago had been their competitors.

When dinner was finished, Peter and Mary sat for a while in exhausted silence, before climbing up for the next scheduled activity—but I am at a loss for how to describe

the next scheduled activity. To start with, I will give a deceptive description. If you can understand this activity, you will have understood a great deal more of what is in that world that doesn't fit in ours.

Do I have to give a deceptive description, in that any description in our terms will be more or less deceptive? I wasn't trying to make that kind of philosophical point; I wasn't tring to make a philosophical point at all. I am choosing a description of the next scheduled activity that is more deceptive than it needs to be.

When students studied an academic discipline called "physics," the curriculum was an initiation into progressively stranger and more esoteric doctrines, presented at the level which students were able to receive them. Students were first taught "Newtonian mechanics" (which openly regarded as false), before being initiated into "Einstein's relativity" at the next level (which was also considered false, but was widely believed to be closer to the truth). Students experienced a "night and day" difference between Newtonian mechanics and all higher order mysteries. If you were mathematically adept enough to follow the mathematics, then Newton was easy because he agreed with good old common sense, and Einstein and even stranger mysteries were hard to understand because they turned common sense on its head. Newton was straightforward while the others were profoundly counterintuitive. So Einstein, unlike Newton, required a student to mentally engulf something quite alien to normal, common sense ways of thinking about the world around oneself. Hence one could find frustrated student remarks about, "And God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was Newton. Then the Devil howled, 'Let Einstein be!' and restored the status quo."

Under this way of experiencing physics, Newton simply added mathematical formality to what humans always knew: everything in space fit in one long and continuous three-dimensional grid, and time could be

measured almost as if it were a line, and so Einstein was simply making things more difficult and further from humans' natural perceptions when his version of a fully mathematical model softened the boundaries of space and time so that one could no longer treat it as if it had a grid for a skeleton.

Someone acquainted with the history of science might make the observation that it was not so much that Newton's mechanics were a mathematically rigorous formalization of how people experienced space and time, but that how people experienced space and time had *become* a hazy and non-mathematical paraphrase of Newtonian mechanics: in other words, some students some students learned Newtonian mechanics easily, not because Newtonian physics was based on common sense, but because their "common sense" had been profoundly shaped by Newtonian physics.

This seemingly pedantic distinction was deeply tied to how the organic was being extinguished in their society.

I suspect you are thinking, "What other mathematical model was it based on instead?" And that's why you're having trouble guessing the answer.

The answer is related to the organic. Someone who knew Newton and his colleagues, and what they were rebelling against, could get a sense of something very different even without understanding what besides mathematics would undergird what space meant to them. In a certain sense, Newton forcefully stated the truth, but in a deceptive way. He worked hard to forge a concept of cold matter, pointing out that nature was not human—and it was a philosophical error to think of nature as human, but it was not nearly so great as one might think. Newton and his colleagues powerfully stressed that humans were superior to the rest of the physical world (which was not human), that they were meant not simply to be a part of nature but to conquer and rule it. And in so doing they attacked an equally great truth, that not only other life but even

"inanimate" matter was kin to humans—lesser kin, perhaps, but humans and the rest of the natural world formed a continuity. They obscured the wisdom that the lordship humans were to exercise was not of a despot controlling something worthless, but the mastery of the crowning jewel of a treasure they had been entrusted to them. They introduced the concept of "raw material", something as foreign to their thinking as… I can't say what our equivalent would be, because everything surrounding "raw material" is so basic to us, and what they believed instead, their organic perception, is foreign to us. They caused people to forget that, while it would be a philosophical error to literally regard the world as human, it would be much graver to believe it is fundamentally described as inert, cold matter. And even when they had succeeded in profoundly influencing their cultures, so that people consciously believed in cold matter to a large degree, vestiges of the ancient experience survived in the medieval. It is perhaps not a coincidence that hundreds of years since Newton, in Newton's own "mother tongue" (English), the words for "matter" and "mother" both sprung from the same ancient root word.

The Newtonian conception of space had displaced to some degree the older conception of place, a conception which was less concerned with how far some place was from other different places, and more concerned with a sort of color or, to some extent, meaning. The older conception also had a place for some things which couldn't really be stated under the new conception: people would say, "You can't be in two places at once." What they meant by that was to a large degree something different, "Your body cannot be at two different spatial positions at the same time." This latter claim was deceptive, because it was true so far as it goes, but it was a very basic fact of life that people could be in two places at once. The entire point of the next scheduled activity was to be in two places at once.

Even without describing what the other place was

(something which could barely be suggested even in that world) and acknowledging that the point of the activity was to be in two places at once, this description of that activity would surprise many of the people there, and disturb those who could best sense the other place. The next scheduled activity was something completely ordinary to them, a matter of fact event that held some mystery, and something that would not occur to them as being in two places at once. The activity of being present in two or more places at once was carried on, on a tacit level, even when people had learned to conflate place with mathematical position. One such activity was confused with what we do when we remember: when we remember, we recall data from storage, while they cause the past to be present. The words, "This do in rememberance of me," from a story that was ancient but preserved in the early medieval period we are looking at, had an unquestioned meaning of, "Cause me to be present by doing this," but had suffered under a quite different experience of memory, so that to some people it meant simply to go over data about a person who had been present in the past but could not be present then.

But this activity was not remembering. Or at least, it was not *just* remembering. And this leaves open the difficulty of explaining how it was ordinary to them. It was theoretically in complete continuity with the rest of their lives, although it would be more accurate to say that the rest of their lives were theoretically in complete continuity with it. This activity was in a sense the most human, and the most organic, in that in it they led the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the plants, the rocks, the mountains, and the sees in returning to the place they came from. This description would also likely astonish the people who were gathered in a painted brick room, sitting on carpet and on movable perches, and seeing through natural light mixed with flickering fluorescent lights. Not one of them was thinking about "nature."

What went on there was in a very real sense

mediocre. Each activity was broken down, vulgarized, compared to what it could be—which could not obliterate what was going on. When they were songs, they were what were called "7-11" songs, a pejorative term which meant songs with seven words repeated eleven times. There was a very real sense in which the event was diminished by the music, but even when you factor in every diminishing force, there was something going on there, something organic and more than organic, which you and I do not understand—for that matter, which many people in that world do not understand.

Archon was silent for a long time.

Ployon said, "What is it?"

Archon said, "I can't do it. I can't explain this world. All I've really been doing is taking the pieces of that world that are a bit like ours. You've been able to understand much of it because I haven't tried to convey several things that are larger than our world. 'God' is still a curious and exotic appendage that isn't connected to anything, not really; I haven't been able to explain, really explain, what it is to be male and female unities, or what masculinity and femininity are. There are a thousand things, and… I've been explaining what three-dimensional substance is to a two-dimensional world, and the way I've been doing it is to squash it into two dimensions, and make it understandable by removing from it everything that makes it three dimensional. Or almost everything…"

"How would a three dimensional being, a person from that world, explain the story?"

"But it wouldn't. A three dimensional being wouldn't collapse a cube into a square to make it easier for itself to understand; that's something someone who couldn't free itself from reading two dimensional thinking into three dimensions would do. You're stuck in two dimensions. So am I. That's why I failed, utterly failed, to explain the "brother-sister floor fellowship", the next scheduled activity.

And my failure is structural. It's like I've been setting out to copy a living, moving organism by sculpturing something that looks like it out of steel. And what I've been doing is making intricate copies of its every contour, and painting the skin and fur exactly the same color, and foolishly hoping it will come alive. And this is something I can't make by genetic engineering."

"But how would someone from that world explain the story? Even if I can't understand it, I want to know."

"But people from that world don't explain stories. A story isn't something you *explain*; it's something that may be told, shared, but usually it is a social error to explain a story, because a story participates in human life and telling a story connects one human to another. And so it's a fundamental error to think a story is something you convey by explaining it—like engineering a robotic body for an animal so you can allow it to have a body. I have failed because I was trying something a mind could only fail at."

"Then can you tell the story, like someone from that world would tell it?"

Peter and Mary both loved to run, but for different reasons. Peter was training himself for various races; he had not joined track, as he did in high school, but there were other races. Mary ran to feel the sun and wind and rain. And, without any conscious effort, they found themselves running together down the prairie path together, and Peter clumsily learning to match his speed to hers. And, as time passed, they talked, and talked, and talked, and talked, and their runs grew longer.

When the fall break came, they both joined a group going to the northwoods of Wisconsin for a program that was half-work and half-play. And each one wrote a letter home about the other. Then Peter began his theology of culture class, and said, "This is what I want to study." Mary did not have a favorite class, at least not that she realized, until Peter asked her what her favorite class was and she

said, “Literature.”

When Christmas came, they went to their respective homes and spent the break thinking about each other, and they talked about this when they returned. They ended the conversation, or at least they thought they did, and then each hurried back to catch the other and say one more thing, and then the conversation turned out to last much longer, and ended with a kiss.

Valentine’s Day was syrupy. It was trite enough that their more romantically inclined friends groaned, but it did not seem at all trite or syrupy to them. As Peter’s last name was Patrick, he called Mary’s father and prayed that St. Patrick’s Day would be a momentous day for both of them.

Peter and Mary took a slow run to a nearby village, and had dinner at an Irish pub. Amidst the din, they had some hearty laughs. The waitress asked Mary, “Is there anything else that would make this night memorable?” Then Mary saw Peter on his knee, opening a jewelry box with a ring: “I love you, Mary. Will you marry me?”

Mary cried for a good five minutes before she could answer. And when she had answered, they sat in silence, a silence that overpowered the din. Then Mary wiped her eyes and they went outside.

It was cool outside, and the moon was shining brightly. Peter pulled a camera from his pocket, and said, “Stay where you are. Let me back up a bit. And hold your hand up. You look even more beautiful with that ring on your finger.”

Peter’s camera flashed as he took a picture, just as a drunk driver slammed into Mary. The sedan spun into a storefront, and Mary flew up into the air, landed, and broke a beer bottle with her face.

People began to come out, and in a few minutes the police and paramedics arrived. Peter somehow managed to answer the police officers’ questions and to begin kicking himself for being too stunned to act.

When Peter left his room the next day, he looked for

Prof. Johnson. Prof. Johnson asked, “May I give you a hug?” and then sat there, simply being with Peter in his pain. When Peter left, Prof. Johnson said, “I’m not just here for academics. I’m here for you.” Peter went to chapel and his classes, feeling a burning rage that almost nothing could pierce. He kept going to the hospital, and watching Mary with casts on both legs and one arm, and many tiny stitches on her face, fluttering on the borders of consciousness. One time Prof. Johnson came to visit, and he said, “I can’t finish my classes.” Prof. Johnson looked at him and said, “The college will give you a full refund.” Peter said, “Do you know of any way I can stay here to be with Mary?” Prof. Johnson said, “You can stay with me. And I believe a position with UPS would let you get some income, doing something physical. The position is open for you.” Prof. Johnson didn’t mention the calls he’d made, and Peter didn’t think about them. He simply said, “Thank you.”

A few days later, Mary began to be weakly conscious. Peter finally asked a nurse, “Why are there so many stitches on her face? Was she cut even more badly than—”

The nurse said, “There are a lot of stitches very close together because the emergency room had a cosmetic surgeon on duty. There will still be a permanent mark on her face, but some of the wound will heal without a scar.”

Mary moved the left half of her mouth in half a smile. Peter said, “That was a kind of cute smile. How come she can smile like that?”

The nurse said, “One of the pieces of broken glass cut a nerve. It is unlikely she’ll ever be able to move part of her face again.”

Peter looked and touched Mary’s hand. “I still think it’s really quite cute.”

Mary looked at him, and then passed out.

Peter spent a long couple of days training and attending to practical details. Then he came back to Mary.

Mary looked at Peter, and said, “It’s a Monday. Don’t you have classes now?”

Peter said, “No.”

Mary said, “Why not?”

Peter said, “I want to be here with you.”

Mary said, “I talked with one of the nurses, and she said that you dropped out of school so you could be with me.

“Is that true?” she said.

Peter said, “I hadn’t really thought about it that way.”

Mary closed her eyes, and when Peter started to leave because he decided she wanted to be left alone, she said, “Stop. Come here.”

Peter came to her bedside and knelt.

Mary said, “Take this ring off my finger.”

Peter said, “Is it hurting you?”

Mary said, “No, and it is the greatest treasure I own. Take it off and take it back.”

Peter looked at her, bewildered. “Do you not want to marry me?”

Mary said, “This may sting me less because I don’t remember our engagement. I don’t remember anything that happened near that time; I have only the stories others, even the nurses, tell me about a man who loves me very much.”

Peter said, “But don’t you love me?”

Mary forced back tears. “Yes, I love you, yes, I love you. And I know that you love me. You are young and strong, and have the love to make a happy marriage. You’ll make some woman a very good husband. I thought that woman would be me.

“But I can see what you will not. You said I was beautiful, and I was. Do you know what my prognosis is? I will probably be able to stand. At least for short periods of time. If I’m fortunate, I may walk. With a walker. I will never be able to run again—Peter, I am nobody, and I have no future. Absolutely nobody. You are young and strong. Go and find a woman who is worth your love.”

Mary and Peter both cried for a long time. Then

Peter walked out, and paused in the doorway, crying. He felt torn inside, and then went in to say a couple of things to Mary. He said, "I believe in miracles."

Then Mary cried, and Peter said something else I'm not going to repeat. Mary said something. Then another conversation began.

The conversation ended with Mary saying, "You're stupid, Peter. You're really, really stupid. I love you. I don't deserve such love. You're making a mistake. I love you." Then Peter went to kiss Mary, and as he bent down, he bent his mouth to meet the lips that he still saw as "really quite cute."

The stress did not stop. The physical therapists, after time, wondered that Mary had so much fight in her. But it stressed her, and Peter did his job without liking it. Mary and Peter quarreled and made up and quarreled and made up. Peter prayed for a miracle when they made up and sometimes when they quarreled. Were this not enough stress, there was an agonizingly long trial—and knowing that the drunk driver was behind bars surprisingly didn't make things better. But Mary very slowly learned to walk again. After six months, if Peter helped her, she could walk 100 yards before the pain became too great to continue.

Peter hadn't been noticing that the stress diminished, but he did become aware of something he couldn't put his finger on. After a night of struggling, he got up, went to church, and was floored by the Bible reading of, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." and the idea that when you do or do not visit someone in prison, you are visiting or refusing to visit Christ. Peter absently went home, tried to think about other things, made several phone calls, and then forced himself to drive to one and only one prison.

He stopped in the parking lot, almost threw up, and then steeled himself to go inside. He found a man, Jacob, and… Jacob didn't know who Peter was, but he recognized

him as looking familiar. It was an awkward meeting. Then he recognized him as the man whose now wife he had crippled. When Peter left, he vomited and felt like a failure. He talked about it with Mary…

That was the beginning of a friendship. Peter chose to love the man in prison, even if there was no pleasure in it. And that created something deeper than pleasure, something Peter couldn't explain.

As Peter and Mary were planning the wedding, Mary said, "I want to enter with Peter next to me, no matter what the tradition says. It will be a miracle if I have the strength to stand for the whole wedding, and if I have to lean on someone I want it to be Peter. And I don't want to sit on a chair; I would rather spend my wedding night wracked by pain than go through my wedding supported by something lifeless!"

When the rehearsal came, Mary stood, and the others winced at the pain in her face. And she stood, and walked, for the entire rehearsal without touching Peter once. Then she said, "I can do it. I can go through the wedding on my own strength," and collapsed in pain.

At the wedding, she stood next to Peter, walking, her face so radiant with joy that some of the guests did not guess she was in exquisite pain. They walked next to each other, not touching, and Mary slowed down and stopped in the center of the church. Peter looked at her, wondering what Mary was doing.

Then Mary's arm shot around Peter's neck, and Peter stood startled for a moment before he placed his arm around her, squeezed her tightly, and they walked together to the altar.

On the honeymoon, Mary told Peter, "You are the only person I need." This was the greatest bliss either of them had known, and the honeymoon's glow shined and shined.

Peter and Mary agreed to move somewhere less expensive to settle down, and were too absorbed in their

wedded bliss and each other to remember promises they had made earlier, promises to seek a church community for support and friends. And Peter continued working at an unglamorous job, and Mary continued fighting to walk and considered the housework she was capable of doing a badge of honor, and neither of them noticed that the words, "I love you" were spoken ever so slightly less frequently, nor did they the venom creeping into their words.

One night they exploded. What they fought about was not important. What was important was that Peter left, burning with rage. He drove, and drove, until he reached Wheaton, and at daybreak knocked on Prof. Johnson's door. There was anger in his voice when he asked, "Are you still my friend?"

Prof. Johnson got him something to eat and stayed with him when he fumed with rage, and said, "I don't care if I'm supposed to be with her, I can't go back!" Then Prof. Johnson said, "Will you make an agreement with me? I promise you I won't ever tell you to go back to her, or accept her, or accept what she does, or apologize to her, or forgive her, or in any way be reconciled. But I need you to trust me that I love you and will help you decide what is best to do."

Peter said, "Yes."

Prof. Johnson said, "Then stay with me. You need some rest. Take the day to rest. There's food in the fridge, and I have books and a nice back yard. There's iced tea in the—excuse me, there's Coke and 7 Up in the boxes next to the fridge. When I can come back, we can talk."

Peter relaxed, and he felt better. He told Prof. Johnson. Prof. Johnson said, "That's excellent. What I'd like you to do next is go in to work, with a lawyer I know. You can tell him what's going on, and he'll lead you to a courtroom to observe."

Peter went away to court the next day, and when he came back he was ashen. He said nothing to Prof. Johnson.

Then, after the next day, he came back looking even more unhappy. "The first day, the lawyer, George, took me

into divorce court. I thought I saw the worst that divorce court could get. Until I came back today. It was the same—this sickening scene where two people had become the most bitter enemies. I hope it doesn't come to this. This was atrocious. It was vile. It was more than vile. It was—"

Prof. Johnson sent him back for a third day. This time Peter said nothing besides, "I think I've been making a mistake."

After the fourth day, Peter said, "Help me! I've been making the biggest mistake of my *life*!"

After a full week had passed, Peter said, "*Please*, I *beg* you, don't send me back there."

Prof. Johnson sent Peter back to watch a divorce court for one more miserable, excruciating day. Then he said, "Now you can do whatever you want. What do you want to do?"

The conflict between Peter and Mary ended the next day.

Peter went home, begging Mary for forgiveness, and no sooner than he had begun his apology, a thousand things were reflected in Mary's face and she begged his forgiveness. Then they talked, and debated whether to go back to Wheaton, or stay where they were. Finally Mary said, "I really want to go back to Wheaton."

Peter began to shyly approach old friends. He later misquoted: "I came crawling with a thimble in the desparate hope that they'd give a few tiny drops of friendship and love. Had I known how they would respond, I would have come running with a bucket!"

Peter and Mary lived together for many years; they had many children and were supported by many friends.

Ployon said, "I didn't follow every detail, but… there was something in that that stuck."

Archon said, "How long do you think it lasted?"

"A little shorter than the other one, I mean first

part."

"Do you have any idea how many days were in each part?"

"About the same? I assume the planet had slowed down so that a year and a day were of roughly equal length."

"The first part took place during three days. The latter part spanned several thousand days—"

"I guess I didn't understand it—"

"—which is… a sign that you understood something quite significant… that you knew what to pay attention to and were paying attention to the right thing."

"But I didn't understand it. I had a sense that it was broken off before the end, and that was the end, right?"

Archon hesitated, and said, "There's more, but I'd rather not go into that."

Ploy on said, "Are you sure?"

"You won't like it."

"Please."

The years passed and Peter and Mary grew into a blissfully happy marriage. Mary came to have increasing health problems as a result of the accident, and those around them were amazed at how their love had transformed the suffering the accident created in both of their lives. At least those who knew them best saw the transformation. There were many others who could only see their happiness as a mirage.

As the years passed, Jacob grew to be a good friend. And when Peter began to be concerned that his wife might be… Jacob had also grown wealthy, very wealthy, and assembled a top-flight legal team (without taking a dime of Peter's money—over Peter's protests!), to prevent what the doctors would normally do in such a case, given recent shifts in the medical system.

And then Mary's health grew worse, much worse, and her suffering grew worse with it, and pain medications

seemed to be having less and less effect. Those who didn't know Mary were astonished that someone in so much pain could enjoy life so much, nor the hours they spent gazing into each other's eyes, holding hands, when Mary's pain seemed to vanish. A second medical opinion, and a third, and a fourth, confirmed that Mary had little chance of recovery even to her more recent state. And whatever measures been taken, whatever testimony Peter and Mary could give about the joy of their lives, the court's decision still came:

> The court wishes to briefly review the facts of the case. Subject is suffering increasingly severe effects from an injury that curtailed her life greatly as a young person. from which she has never recovered, and is causing increasingly complications now that she will never again have youth's ability to heal. No fewer than four medical opinions admitted as expert testimony substantially agree that subject is in extraordinary and excruciating pain; that said excruciating pain is increasing; that said excruciating pain is increasingly unresponsive to medication; that subject has fully lost autonomy and is dependent on her husband; that this dependence is profound, without choice, and causes her husband to be dependent without choice on others and exercise little autonomy; and the prognosis is only of progressively worse deterioration and increase in pain, with no question of recovery.
>
> The court finds it entirely understandable that the subject, who has gone through such trauma, and is suffering increasingly severe complications, would be in a state of some denial. Although a number of positions could

> be taken, the court also finds it understandable that a husband would try to maintain a hold on what cannot exist, and needlessly prolong his wife's suffering. It is not, however, the court's position to judge whether this is selfish…
>
> For all the impressive-sounding arguments that have been mounted, the court cannot accord a traumatized patient or her ostensibly well-meaning husband a privelege that the court itself does not claim. The court does not find that it has an interest in allowing this woman to continue in her severe and worsening state of suffering.

Peter was at her side, holding her hand and looking into his wife's eyes, The hospital doctor had come. Then Peter said, "I love you," and Mary said, "I love you," and they kissed.

Mary's kiss was still burning on Peter's lips when two nurses hooked Mary up to an IV and injected her with 5000 milligrams of sodium thiopental, then a saline flush followed by 100 milligrams of pancurium bromide, then a saline flush and 20 milligrams of potassium chloride.

A year later to the day, Peter died of a broken heart.

Ployon was silent for a long time, and Archon was silent for an even longer time. Ployon said, "I guess part of our world is present in that world. Is that what you mean by being in two places at once?"

Archon was silent for a long time.

Ployon said, "It seems that that world's problems and failings are somehow greater than our achievements. I wish that world could exist, and that we could somehow visit it."

Archon said, "Do you envy them that much?"

Ployon said, "Yes. We envy them as—"

Archon said, “—as—” and searched through his world’s images.

Ployon said, “—as that world’s eunuchs envy men.”

Archon was silent.

Ployon was silent.

Discussion questions for "Yonder:"

1. What are the relations between spirit and matter in this dialogue?
2. What are the relations between spirit and matter in our world?
3. Does cheap pleasure ennoble those in the dialogue?
4. Does cheap pleasure ennoble us today?
5. What can we appreciate about our world from this dialogue?
6. Is there anything beautiful to the real cost and a lack of (analogous) mature atheism in our world?
7. Did God do right in placing you exactly where he placed you? Why or why not?

Conclusion

I would like to quote again the passage from G.K. Chesterton quoted from the introduction, but at a different angle:

> Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamp-post, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen, "Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If Light be in itself good—" At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmedieval practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamp-post, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war

> in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, to-day, to-morrow, or the next day, there comes back that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark.

What I did not mention earlier was a more ancient race than the grey-clad monk in the spirit of the Middle Ages: the figure of the black-clad Orthodox monk who is patristic in spirit, in a confession in which Church Fathers are ongoing.

The black-clad Orthodox monk is innocent of the indeed arid manner of the schoolmen; and to him, theology proper is not an academic discipline or philosophy whose subject-matter is God, but the direct experience of God. And to him Light is not the created light of a gas-lamp, but the uncreated Light of God whom some are privileged to see in this world and some fewer are privileged to radiate. C.S. Lewis marks with some confusion in "The Weight of Glory," "As for the second [concept regarding glory], who wants to be a kind of living electric light bulb?"

The convention of representing a saint as having a halo comes from the fact that Orthodox saints do radiate with the uncreated Light Who Is God, and what Orthodoxy has is not primarily a philosophy of Light, but a theology of Light. Even for the vast majority of us who have neither shone with the uncreated Light nor seen others greater than us shining, the reference point is significant. Christ is the Great Physician, and whether or not we have seen a miracle of any description, we are right both to seek Western medical treatment and to pray and ask others to pray for those we love who are ill. This prayer is of concern to every people, and whether or not we are reckoned with the few saints whose prayers are answered in unmistakably miraculous manners, it is a good thing to pray for the ill,

and God may guide the hands of the doctors and the bodies of the sick in ways not clearly miraculous but still better. I am not about to stop using artificial light, but Christ Who is the Great Physician is also Christ Who is eternally transfigured and Christ who is the only Light that the blessed in Heaven itself will ever need.

And in Orthodoxy, even if the gas-lamp and also electric lamps are confiscated in the Damned Backswing, even if we lose all such wealth, we have an alternative to reasoning in the dark: we can see in the Light. It may for most of us only be the Light broadly construed, but the broadly construed Light is as pivotal as the broadly construed Great Physician whom we invoke along with following up with every secular effort to address medical needs.

The grey-clad monk's arid manner of the Schoolmen may inquire about the philosophy of Light, but the black-clad Orthodox monk in the truly philosophic Life lives by the uncreated Light whom proper theology sees, and the anchor by which even philosophy is transcendently surpassed.

Let us ever live by the true Light that enlightens every man!