

Plato's Allegory of the Cave Revisited: And Other Socratic Dialogue

From the "Major Works" series

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Preface

Socratic dialogue is not just for long ago. It is a powerful, dramatic mode that can profitably be engaged today.

There are seven dialogues presented in this ebook, with no two alike. One revisits Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave"; another has a meditation on time and what about time a watch cannot tell; still another takes place between host and guest in a compelling science fiction world. All provoke thought, and you are invited to read this contribution to the tradition of exploring and advancing ideas through Socratic dialogue.

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.

Glaucou: 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.

Glaucou: 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?

Glaucou: 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?

Glaucou: 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?

Glaucou: 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?

Glaucou: 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.

Glaucou: 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 Glaucou, 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.

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

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 millenium" 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-deprecating 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

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

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.

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 systematize 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

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 technologies 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 word 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.](#)

The Law of Attraction: A Dialogue with an Eastern Orthodox Christian Mystic

Paidion: I found some really interesting stuff about the Law of Attraction.

Aneer: What is it that you have found?

Paidion: This wonderful secret, the Law of Attraction, is a secret where if you understand how you attract what you think about... then you have the key to happiness!

Aneer: Have you seen what else the Law of Attraction could be?

Paidion: You mean the Law of Attraction could be more?

Aneer: Let me think about how to explain this...

Paidion: Did the Church Fathers say anything about the Law of Attraction? Or did the Bible?

Aneer: Where to start, where to start—the Law of Attraction says our thoughts are important, and that is true. Not just a little bit true, but deeper than a whale can dive. The Apostle writes:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true,

whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Paidion: And there is something about "ask, seek, knock?"

Aneer: Yes, indeed:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

It is part of the [Sermon on the Mount](#). But there is something that you may be missing about what is in the [Sermon on the Mount](#), and something you may be missing about the Law of Attraction.

Paidion: Why? Is there anything relevant besides the [Sermon on the Mount](#)?

Aneer: Yes indeed, from the first pages of [Genesis](#):

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, "Yea, hath God said, "Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"

And the woman said unto the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die."

And the serpent said unto the woman, "Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat,

The Law of Attraction is here. The very *heart* of the Law of Attraction is here. Have you read [The Magician's Nephew](#)?

Paidion: It is one of my favorite books.

Aneer: Do you remember what Jadis stole?

Paidion: How could Jadis steal anything? She was a queen!

Aneer: Then you have forgotten the verse when Jadis met a garden enclosed:

"Come in by the gold gates or not at all,
Take of my fruit for others or forbear,
For those who steal or those who climb my wall
Shall find their heart's desire and find despair."

The story gives a glimpse of the Queen Jadis finding her heart's desire: undying years, and undying strength. She found everything the Law of Attraction promises. If the Law of Attraction does anything, you can see it unfold in Eve choosing to be attracted to the fruit, or Jadis.

But undying strength was not the only thing in the picture. When Jadis ate that apple, she might never age or die, but neither could she ever *live* again. She cheated death, perhaps, but at the expense of Life. Which is to say that she didn't really cheat Death at all. And she damned herself to a "living" death that was hollow compared to her previous life she so eagerly threw away.

Paidion: So you think Eve was like Jadis? Halfway to being a vampire?

Aneer: Paidion, you're big on imagining. I want you to imagine the Garden of Eden for just a moment. Adam and Eve have been created immortal, glorious, lord and lady of all nature, and Eve tastes an exhilarating rush that has something very vampiric about it: a moment passed, and the woman who had never known pain found the seed of death deep inside her. And in a flash of insight, she *realized* something.

Paidion: What is it she realized?

Aneer: She had the seed of death eating away at her. Nothing could stop her from dying. And her deathless husband would watch her die.

Paidion: A sad end to the story.

Aneer: What do you mean?

Paidion: But it's a tragedy!

Aneer: It may be tragic, but how is it an end to Adam's story?

Adam was still deathless. He would live on; did you assume he would be celibate, or that Eve envisioned God to never provide him a wife to share in blessed happiness?

Paidion: Look, this is all very impressive, but is any of this really part of the ancient story?

Aneer: I cut off the story before its usual end. The end goes surprisingly fast:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, *and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.*

Paidion: Why? Is this just Eve's... solution... to... the... problem...

of... Adam's... [*shudder*]

Aneer: Do you think your generation is the first to invent jealousy?

Paidion: But can't the Law of Attraction be used for good?

Aneer: When people speak of the Law of Attraction, it always sounds like the unearthing of the key to happiness.

Paidion: But what else could it be once we are attracting the right thoughts?

Aneer: What, exactly, are the right thoughts might be something interesting to discuss someday. But for now let me suggest that the Law of Attraction might be something very different, at its core, from the key to happiness: it could be the bait to a trap.

The [Sermon on the Mount](#) truly *does* say,

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

but only after saying something that is cut from the same cloth:

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

The [Sermon on the Mount](#) finds it unworthy of the children of a loving and providing God to chase after food and clothing—or cars and iPods or whatever—as if they have to do so because their Heavenly Father has forgotten their needs. God knows our needs before we begin to ask, and it's a distraction for us to be so terribly concerned about the things that will be added to us if we put first things first and last things last.

Paidion: But what is wrong with wanting abundance?

Aneer: Have you read Plato's [Republic](#)?

Paidion: No.

Aneer: Did you know that royalty do not touch money?

Paidion: Why not? It would seem that a king should have the most right to touch money.

Aneer: Well, let us leave discussion of rights for another day. But there's something in the [Republic](#) where Plato knows something about gold, and it is the reason why royalty do not touch money.

Paidion: And that is?

Aneer: Plato is describing the guardians, the highest rulers of an ideal city. And what he says about them is that they have true gold in their character: they have a truer gold than gold itself, and they are set apart for something high enough that they would only be distracted by handling the kind of gold that is dug up from the earth like something dead.

Paidion: But kings have palaces and jewels and such!

Aneer: Not in Plato's [Republic](#) they don't. The life of a ruler, of a king, in Plato is something like the life of a monk. It's not about having palaces of gold any more than being President is all about being able to watch cartoons all day!

Paidion: Ok, but for the rest of us who may not be royalty, can't we at least want abundance as a consolation prize?

Aneer: "The rest of us who may not be royalty?"

What can you *possibly* mean?

Paidion: Um...

Aneer: *All* of us bear the royal bloodline of Lord Adam and Lady

Eve. All of us are created in the divine image, made to grow into the likeness of Christ and—

Paidion: So we are all made to rule as kings?

Aneer: Read the Fathers and you will find that the real rule of royalty is when we rule over God's creation as royal emblems, as the image of God. For people to rule other people is not just not the *only* kind of royal rule: it's almost like a necessary evil. Do you know of the ritual anointing of kings? In the Bible, a man is made king when he is anointed with oil. Such anointing still takes place in England, for instance. And when a person receives the responsibility for sacred work in the Orthodox Church, he is anointed—chrismated—and in this anointing, the Orthodox Church has always seen the sacred anointing of prophet, priest, and king.

Paidion: But this is just for priests, right?

Aneer: Paidion, every one of us is created for spiritual priesthood. Perhaps I wasn't clear: the anointing of prophet, priest, and king is for every faithful member of the Church, not just a few spiritual Marines. Chrismation, or royal anointing, is administered alongside baptism to all the faithful.

Paidion: And it's part of this royal dignity not to touch money?

Aneer: There is a very real sense in which Christians may not touch money. Not literally, perhaps; many Christians touch coins or other items, and so on and so forth. But there is a real sense in which Christians never have what you search for in abundance, because they have something better.

Paidion: Are you saying half a loaf is better than an *abundance* of loaves?

Aneer: I know a number of people who have found that an abundance of loaves is not the solution to all of life's problems.

Easy access to an abundance of loaves can lead to weight issues, or worse.

May I suggest what it is that you fear losing? It isn't exactly *abundance*, even if you think it is.

Paidion: So am I mistaken when I think I want shrimp and lobster as often as I wish?

Aneer: Maybe you are right that you want shrimp and lobster, but you don't *only* want shrimp and lobster. You want to be able to choose.

Remember in Star Wars, how Luke and Ben Kenobi are travelling in the Millennium Falcon, and Kenobi puts a helmet on Luke's head that has a large shield completely blocking his eyesight? And Luke protests and says, "With the blast shield down, I can't even see. How am I supposed to fight?" And then something happens, and Luke starts to learn that he can fight even without seeing what was in front of him, and Kenobi says, "You have taken your first step into a larger world."?

What you want is to have your ducks in a row and be able to see that you can have shrimp and lobster as often as you want.

What the [Sermon on the Mount](#) says is better than a way to do a better job of having your next meal right where you can see it. It says to put the blast shield down...

And take your first step into a larger world.

Paidion: I'm sure for a man of faith like you—

Aneer: Why call me a man of faith? I may not have all my ducks lined up in a row, but I have *always* known where my next meal is coming from.

Paidion: Well sure, but *that's*—

Aneer: Maybe everybody you know has that privilege, but a great many people in the world do not.

Paidion: That may be, but I still want abundance.

Aneer: May I suggest that you are reaching for abundance on a higher plane?

Paidion: Like what? What is this larger world?

Aneer: When you have the blast shield down over your eyes, what you receive is part of a life of communion with God. When you don't see where your next meal is coming from, and God still feeds you, you get a gift covered with God's fingerprints. You're living part of a dance and you are beckoned to reach for much deeper treasures. If you are asked to let go of treasures on earth, it is so your hands can open all the wider to grasp treasures in Heaven.

Paidion: Maybe for super-spiritual people like you, but when I've tried anything like that, I've only met disappointments.

Aneer: I've had a lot of disappointments. Like marriage, for instance.

Paidion: *You?* You've always seemed—

Aneer: My wife and I are very happily married. We've been married for years, and as the years turn into decades we are more happily married—more in love. But our marriage has been a disappointment on any number of counts.

G.K. Chesterton said, "The marriage succeeds because the honeymoon fails." Part of our marriage is that it's not just a honeymoon; my wife is not some bit of putty I can inflate to the contours of my fantasies about the perfect wife; she is a real person with real desires and real needs and real virtues and real flaws and a real story. She is infinitely more than some figment of my imagination. She has disappointed me time and time

again—*thank God!*—and God has given me something much better in her than if she was some piece of putty that somehow fit my imagination perfectly. By giving me a real woman—*what a woman!*—God is challenging me to dig deeper into being a real man.

Paidion: So all disappointments make for a happy marriage? Because...

Aneer: I'm not completely sure how to answer that. We miss something about life if we think we can only have a happy marriage when we don't get any disappointments. Read the Gospel and it seems that Christ himself dealt with disappointments; his life on earth built to the disappointment of the Cross which he could not escape no matter how hard he prayed. But the Apostle Paul wrote about this disappointment:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

It is part of his glory.

If you have a disappointment, you have one problem. If you have a disappointment and you think that with such a disappointment you can't really be where you should be, you have two problems. Disappointments sting like ninety, but they can be drawn into something deeper and a richer life.

Paidion: So you'd rather be disappointed in life than get your way.

Aneer: Yes.

When I haven't gotten my way, that has been a stepping stone for a refinement on more than one level, a refinement in what I sought and what I wanted. I've gotten better things than if I always had a magic key that gave me what I thought I wanted. St. Paul said, "When I became a man, I put childish things behind me."

Paidion: Am I being childish if I wish the Law of Attraction could get me what I want? If I dream?

Aneer: What the Law of Attraction is a way to satisfy the kind of things childish people set their hearts on. Always getting your way is not an unattainable dream. Always getting your way is not a dream at all. Always getting your way is a nightmare. It is the nightmare of succeeding at being a spoiled brat where others have grown up in all the disappointments you hope to dodge.

Paidion: Is virtue its own reward?

Or is it just the consolation prize when you do the right thing even if you don't get a real reward?

Aneer: Let us return to Plato again.

Elsewhere in the [Republic](#), some people say some questionable things about goodness. Someone says, for instance, that what is good is whatever the stronger group wants, or something like that. And so someone asks if there's anything a good man has that the evil man does not.

Actually, the question is put much more strongly than that. We are asked to suppose that an evil man has every worldly benefit—a good name, wealth, good children, everything in life going his way. And let us suppose that the good man gets quite

the opposite: he is slandered and betrayed, loses everything, is tortured, and is finally crucified. Can we still say that the good man has *anything* the evil one does not?

Paidion: If *that* is the case, it's hard to see that the good man has *anything* valuable that the evil man does not.

Aneer: He has goodness.

Paidion: Well, yes, but *besides*—

Aneer: Paidion, how would you like to have all of the wealth in the world and the health with which to spend it?

Paidion: No thanks!

Aneer: Meaning that on *those* terms, no man in his right mind would choose *any* amount of wealth!

Paidion: Sure, if you have to spend all the money on doctor bills...

Aneer: All right.

Let's suppose you don't have to spend any of it on doctor bills. Suppose you're a billionaire with all kinds of free medical care, and with your billions of dollars comes the worst of health and the most atrocious suffering for the rest of your mercifully short life. Billions of dollars must be worth *that*, right?

Paidion: Does this relate to Plato?

Aneer: Yes—

Paidion: Are you saying that the evil man had bad health? You didn't mention that at first.

Aneer: Well, that depends on what you mean by health. Externally, he had the best of health, I suppose, and the good man had terrible diseases. But the condition of being evil is the spiritual

condition of being diseased, twisted, and shrunken. Even our English words like "twisted" and "sick" are signs of ancient recognition of evil as a spiritual disease. The evil man with worldly glory is the man who has all of the wealth in the world and the health with which to spend it—and the good man is the man who has nothing but his health. He has the one thing the evil man does not: his *health!*

Paidion: Is this about Heaven and Hell? Because however impressive they may be, we aren't there yet.

Aneer: Wrong. Heaven and Hell begin in this life. The eternal tree that forever stands in Heaven or Hell is planted and nourished in this life. The connection between this life and the next is a closer connection than you can imagine.

Paidion: All this sounds very wonderful, and I could wish it were true. For people like you who have faith, at least. I don't...

Aneer: Paidion, there was something that happened in [The Magician's Nephew](#), before Queen Jadis attracted to her the deathless strength that she desired. Something happened before then. Do you remember what?

Paidion: I'm not sure what.

Aneer: It's quite memorable, and it has quite a lot to do with the Law of Attraction.

Paidion: I am afraid to ask.

Aneer: Let me quote the Queen, then.

...That was the secret of secrets. It had long been known to the great kings of our race that there was a word which, if spoken with the proper ceremonies, would destroy all living things except the one who spoke it. But the ancient kings were weak and soft-hearted and bound themselves and all who should come after them with great

oaths never even to seek after the knowledge of that word. But I learned it in a secret place and paid a terrible price to learn it. I did not use it until she forced me to it. I fought to overcome her by every other means. I poured out the blood of my armies like water...

The last great battle raged for three days here in Charn itself. For three days I looked down upon it from this very spot. I did not use my power till the last of my soldiers had fallen, and the accursed woman, my sister, at the head of her rebels was halfway up those great stairs that led up from the city to the terrace. Then I waited till we were so close that we could not see one another's faces. She flashed her horrible, wicked eyes upon me and said, "Victory." "Yes," said I, "Victory, but not yours." Then I spoke the Deplorable Word. A moment later I was the only living thing beneath the sun.

Paidion: Are you saying that the Law of Attraction is like the Deplorable Word?

Aneer: The Law of Attraction is described in glowing terms but what is described so glowingly is that there's you, your thoughts, and a giant mirror called the universe... and that's it. Everything else is killed. Not literally, perhaps, but in a still very real sense. The reason you have not succeeded at getting what you want *couldn't* be because a powerful man, with his own thoughts and motives, is refusing something you want, much less that God loves you and knows that what you want isn't *really* in your best interests. The powerful man is just part of the great mirror, as is God, if there is anything to God besides you. The only possible reason for you to not have something, the only thing that is not killed, is your thoughts.

And how I wish you could enter a vast, vast world which is not a mirror focused on you, where even the people who meet and know you have many other concerns besides thinking about you, who have their own thoughts and wishes and which is

ruled by an infinitely transcendent God who is infinitely more than you even if you were made for the entire purpose of becoming divine, and perhaps even more divine than if you are the only thing you do not lump into the great mirror reflecting your thoughts.

Paidion: But how shall I then live? It seemed, for a moment, like things got better when I paid attention to my thoughts, and things in my life—

Aneer: If you think it seems like your thoughts matter, perhaps that's because your thoughts really *are* important, possibly more important than you can even dream of. Perhaps there are other things going on in the world, but it is your thoughts that stand at the root of everything you contribute to the tree that will stand eternally in Heaven or as Hell. I don't know how to tell you how important it is to attend to your thoughts, nor how to tell you that what you think of as morality is something which all the wise go upstream and deal with at the source, in the unseen warfare of vigilant attention to one's thoughts. Little thoughts build to big thoughts and big thoughts build to actions, and spiritual discipline or "asceticism" moves from the hard battle of actions to the harder battle of thoughts. And thoughts aren't just about concepts; when I've had trouble getting a thought of doing something I shouldn't out of my head, sometimes I've reminded myself that what is not truly desired doesn't really last long. [The Philokalia](#) there, my point is that it is a lifetime's endeavor to learn how to pay proper attention to one's thoughts.

Paidion: Um... uh... did you say I was made to be divine? Did you *mean* it?

Aneer: Paidion, if being divine just means that there isn't anything that much bigger than us, then that's a rather pathetic idea of the divine, and I wouldn't give twopenny for it. But if we really and truly understand how utterly God dwarfs us, if we understand what it means that God is the Creator and we are his creatures, and the infinite chasm between Creator and

creature is *then* transcended so that we his creatures can become by grace what God is by nature—then that is really something and I would give my *life* for that way of being divine!

There is a hymn, of ancient age, that says, "Adam, wanting to be divine, failed to be divine. Christ became man that he might make Adam divine." Christ's life is an example of what it means to be divine: as a child he was a refugee, then grew up as a blue-collar worker, then lived as a homeless man, and died a slave's death so vile its name was a curse word. This is a tremendous clue-by-four about what true glory is. This is a divine clue-by-four about what Adam missed when he decided that reigning as immortal king and lord of paradise and following only one simple rule wasn't good enough for him.

And it is in this messy life we live, with so many situations beyond our control and so many things we would not choose, that God can transform us so that we become by grace what he is by nature.

Paidion: Aneer, can I ever enter the vast world you live in? It seems I have, well...

Aneer: Well?

Paidion: Chosen to live in an awfully small world, thinking I was doing something big.

Aneer: *All* of us have. It's called *sin*. Not a popular word today, but realizing you are in sin is Heaven's best-kept secret. Before you repent, you are afraid to let go of something that seems, like the Ring to Gollum, "my precious." Afterwards you find that what you dropped was torment and Hell, and you are awakening to a larger world.

Paidion: But when can I do something this deep? My schedule this week is pretty full, and little of it meshes well with—

Aneer: The only time you can ever repent is *now*.

The Mindstorm

The Alumnus: Hello. I was in town, and I wanted to stop in for a visit.

The Visionary: How good to see you! What have you been up to? We're all interested in hearing what our alumni are doing.

The Alumnus: Well, that would take a bit of explaining. I had a good experience with college.

The Visionary: That's lovely to hear.

The Alumnus: Yes, and I know that some alumni from our [Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy](#), also known as [IMSA](#), didn't. I got through college the same way I got through gradeschool, playing by the law of the jungle. I stopped and thought about how to approach college. I realized soon that higher numbered courses were easier than lower numbered courses, and how to find professors I could work with. And I understand why one alumna said, "IMSA didn't prepare me for college. It prepared me for graduate school." College will not automatically be a good experience for IMSA students, but there are choices the college won't advertise but could be made.

The Visionary: I wish you could speak to some of our students.

The Alumnus: I'd like the opportunity. There are a lot of things to

say—that there's a normal scale of elementary-junior high-high school-undergraduate-graduate school, and IMSA doesn't fit on it. It has high school aged students, but it's not a modified high school; it's close in ways to graduate school, but there's something about it that is missed if you put it at any one point on the scale. And this has the result that IMSA students need to realize that when they enter college, they are not going from high school to the next step after high school; they're going from IMSA to something that was not meant to follow IMSA. But something that has opportunities if they knock on back doors and take advantage of some things the university doesn't know they need.

The Visionary: If you're serious about talking to our students, I mean talking with our students, I can introduce you to the appropriate people.

The Alumnus: Thank you. I was mentioning this to lead up to a gem of a class I took, one on what you need to know to make user-friendly computer programs, i.e. usability. There was something that set me thinking, nettled me, when I was reading through some of the jargon file's Hell desk slang, um, I mean help desk slang. The term "pilot error" meant much the same thing as "ID ten T error".

The Visionary: I know what "pilot error" means in some contexts, but what does "ID ten T error" mean?

The Alumnus: It's easiest to see if you write it out.

The Visionary [goes to a markerboard and writes, "*I D 1 0 T*"]:
Um... I assume there's a reason you started to say, "Hell desk."
Aren't they just blowing off steam?

The Alumnus: Yes. Unfortunately, one of the ways many help desk employees have blown off steam is to say, "Ok. If you'll hold for a minute, I'm going to transfer you to my supervisor. Would you tell her that you appear to have an 'eye dee ten tee' error?" And

they all gloat over what they've gotten the customer to say. No, seriously, you don't need to keep a straight face.

But what really struck me was the entry for PEBKAC, acronym for "Problem Exists Between Keyboard and Chair." There was an example given of,

Did you figure out why that guy couldn't print?

Yeah, he kept canceling the print operation before it could finish. PEBKAC.

This was philosophically interesting.

The Visionary: How?

The Alumnus: In a computer, you get these time wasting messages where a little window pops up and you can't do any useful work until you click on the button. It becomes noise for the sake of noise; like the boy who cried, "Wolf!", we have the computer that cries, "Worth your attention." After a while, the normal thing most people do is click on the button automatically so they can get back to their work. It's a waste of time to try to decipher the cryptic messages.

So when people go to print, another one of these waste-of-time windows pops up, except that this time, when you do the right thing and click on the button and make it go away, your print job fails. And this specific example is chosen as a paradigm example of PEBKAC.

For a lot of these errors, there is a problem between a keyboard and chair. But the problem isn't between the user's keyboard and chair. The problem is between the programmer's keyboard and chair.

The Visionary: Ouch.

The Alumnus: That course was what led to what I did for my Ph.D.

The Visionary: And that was?

The Alumnus: My discipline of record is philosophy of mind/cognitive science.

The Visionary: "Discipline of record?" I'm curious to hear you drop the other shoe.

The Alumnus: Usability is connected to cognitive science—an amalgam of computer science, psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, linguistics, and other areas, all trying to understand human thought so we can re-implement it on a computer. It's a fascinating area for interdisciplinary study, and usability draws on it, just from a different angle: instead of making computers intelligent, it tries to make computers friendly to people who don't understand how they are built. And a lot of things which are clear as day if you built the system aren't automatically clear to customers. A system which is usable lets the user have an illusory cognitive model of how the system works that is far, far simpler than how a programmer would understand it. And programmers don't consciously believe that customers understand the innards of their system, but there's an assumption that creeps in, an assumption of, "My way of thinking about it is how a person thinks about it."

The Visionary: That way of putting it makes the programmers sound ego-centric.

The Alumnus: I wouldn't put it in such crude terms as that; they are thinking in a way that is human.

With languages, there is a lot of diversity. Aside from the variety of languages, there's a difference between the U.S., where the majority only speak one language, and Sénégal, where it is common for people to speak five or six languages. There's a difference between Italy, where people speak one national language in a fairly pure form, and India, where English and Hindi are spliced together seamlessly. For that matter, there's the deaf outlet of speaking with your hands

matter, there's the real outlet of speaking with your hands instead of your mouth. But with all these differences, language itself is not something which is added to being human. Language is not a custom that cultures may happen to include. There are exceptional cases where people do not learn a language, and these are tragic cases where people are deprived of a human birthright. The specifics of language may vary, but language itself is not adding something to being human. It is something that is basically human. The details and even diversity of languages are details of how language works out.

And a lot of things are like that. Understanding something that you're working on is not something added to being human; it's an interpretation of something basic. How one thinks, about technology and other things, is not something added to being human. It's something basically human.

One very natural tendency is to think that "I" or "we" or "people like us" are just being human; we just have what is natural to being human. The "them" group has all sorts of things that are added to being human, but "we" are just being human. So we expect other people to think like us. We assume it so deeply and unconsciously that we are shocked by their perversity when they violate this expectation.

The Visionary: Wow. I hadn't thought of it in those terms before. Do you think IMSA provided a safe haven from this kind of lockstep thinking for its students?

The Alumnus: I think it provides a safe haven for quite a lot of its students. But getting back to my Ph.D. program—

The Visionary: Yes?

The Alumnus: So I began, encouraged by some initial successes, to try and make the first artificial mind. For a while I thought I would succeed, after overcoming some obstacles that couldn't have been that bad.

The Visionary: What were these obstacles?

The Alumnus: Just a special case here and there, an unrepresentative anomaly. But when I worked, I had a sneaking suspicion dawn on me.

Freshman year, I had a college roommate who was brilliant and eccentric. He turned out stunning proofs in math classes. He was also trying to build a perpetual motion machine. He was adjusting this and that; I listened, entranced, when he traced the history of great experiments in physics, and talked about how across the centuries they went from observing obvious behavior to find subtle ways to trick nature into showing you something you weren't supposed to see. Think of the ingenuity of the Millikan oil drop experiment. And so he went on, trying to adjust this and that, seeking to get things just right for a perpetual motion machine. There were times when he seemed to almost have it. It seemed there were ten things you needed for a perpetual motion machine, and he had an almost working machine for any nine of them. But that tenth one seemed never to fall into place.

And I had a sneaking suspicion, one that I was going to try awfully hard to ignore, that for a long time I convinced myself I didn't know what I was expecting. But *deja vu* kept creeping in. I had just succeeded with a project that met every clearly defined goal I set for it... but I had just found another way not to make artificial intelligence.

The crusher was when I read von Neumann's 1958 *The Computer and the Brain*. Then I stopped running from *deja vu*. Here was crass confidence that in 1958 we discovered the basis for all human thought, and all human thought is add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Here was an assumption in lieu of argument. And here was the air I breathed as a cognitive science.

The Visionary: But I've looked at some reports, and artificial

intelligence seems to be just around the corner.

The Alumnus: Full artificial intelligence is just around the corner, and it's been just around the corner since at least the fifties—arguably much longer, because for a hundred years before the brain was a computer, it was a telephone exchange. (I think that's why we talk about a person being "wired" a particular way.) The brain is always understood as the state of the art technology we're most proud of.

I hit rock bottom after thinking about how I had convinced myself I was creating a working artificial intelligence by obtaining results and reinterpreting results as success. It's very seductive, and I was thinking about what some skeptics had said about magic.

What emerged was... The effort to make computers think has found ways that the human mind is much more interesting than we thought. And I began to push in a new direction. Instead of trying to understand human intelligence to make computers more intelligent, I began to try to understand human intelligence to make humans more intelligent.

The Visionary: What exactly do you mean?

The Alumnus: There are a lot of disciplines that teach you how to think. I think scholars in many disciplines see their discipline as the discipline that teaches you how to think, where truly different disciplines are a sort of no-man's land that doesn't qualify as "how to think." But these are a coupled subject matter and how to think about the subject matter. This was, in abstracted, crystalline, and universal form, "How to think." The analogy I used at the time was that it was the elementary school number line (1, 2, 3, ...), abstracted from sets of one physical object, two physical objects, three physical objects...

The Visionary [pausing]: It sounds like you're pioneering a new academic discipline. Would you like IMSA to highlight this?

The Alumnus: I am working that out. Not exactly whether what I am doing would qualify as an academic discipline—I'm pretty sure of that—but whether going down that route would be the wisest choice. For now, I'd rather wait.

The Visionary: Are you sure you wouldn't want the prestige?
Hmm... on second thought, I can see that.

What are the scientific underpinnings of your discipline?

The Alumnus [pause]: That question is one of the first ones people ask me. It's automatic.

In tandem with what you might call my loss of faith in cognitive science, I began to question the cultural place of science. Including that in a question like this, the nearly immediate question people ask is one that assumes the answers are fed by science. Three of the most difficult mental accomplishments I've made are learning to think like a scientist, crafting this discipline of how to think, and learning to genuinely ask "How else could it be?" when people automatically go charging in with science.

The Visionary: But don't you think it's important to understand what's going on in the body?

The Alumnus: Both your questions, "What are the scientific underpinnings of your discipline?" and "But don't you think it's important to understand what's going on in the body?" are examples of the tendency I'm talking about. Your latter question assumes that "understanding the body" and "study the science of the body" are interchangeable terms; they often are treated that way in Western culture, but they need not be.

The Visionary: But how else could it be?

The Alumnus: In journalism and some writing classes, students are taught a technique of cubing, which asks six questions, one

for each side of the cube. The six questions are all "w" words: who, what, when, where, and how.

In most aboriginal cultures, for instance, people ask more than one question, but the big question is, "Why?" The stories provide explanations for why the world is as it is.

In science, the big question is, "How?" Laws and theories provide mechanisms for how things happen. "Why?" isn't just de-emphasized; it's something people learn not to ask, something that is subtly stamped out like much of a child's creativity. Asking "Why?" is a basic error, like asking how much an idea weighs. One philosopher of science I read gave an example of a father asking a teenaged son, "Why is the living room light on?" and getting the answer, "Because the switch is in the 'on' position, closing the circuit and causing electricity to flow through the bulb." That isn't why, that's how. And if students are taught science without being taught how to be independent from science, or for that matter if they are in a culture influenced by science as ours has been, they'll come to share the assumption that this is the one and only serious answer to, "Why is the living room light on?"

That puts things too simply, but my point is that science does not represent the full range of inquiry. Science has cast a powerful shadow, not just in that science is scientific (which is as it should be) but in that non-scientific inquiry is not as independent as it should be.

But I'm getting off topic. What I was meaning to say was that I use science, but my discipline is dependent on an independence from science as well.

The Visionary: Could I backtrack a fair distance?

The Alumnus: Sure, to what?

The Visionary: There was something in the back of my mind when

you answered my question about IMSA shielding its students from a lockstep environment. May I ask a more specific question?

The Alumnus: Certainly.

The Visionary: Did IMSA shield you from a lockstep environment?

The Alumnus: IMSA was unquestionably a better environment for me than a mainstream school.

The Visionary: You're being diplomatic.

The Alumnus: Ok. IMSA tries to be a magnet school serving the gifted population. Instead of memorization, it tries to produce critical observers, right?

The Visionary: Yes, and this isn't just for IMSA. We want to be a beacon of hope, for educational progress to the state and to the world.

The Alumnus: IMSA still doesn't have a football program, right?

The Visionary: IMSA students still don't really want one. If there was enough demand, we'd have one.

The Alumnus: What would you say to a football coach who wanted to liberate the tough, aggressive quarterback struggling to get out of every IMSA bookworm?

The Visionary: I think I see where you're going. Let me play devil's advocate for the moment. Our society has recognized football as an endeavor for some. But don't we recognize that education is a goal for all?

The Alumnus: All analogies break down, and I can't force you to see my point if you don't want to. My reason for drawing that analogy is that the average mind learns by memorization of given material, and that mind is ill-served by trying to liberate

that critical observer just as many bookworms would be ill-served by trying to liberate that hidden quarterback. The kind of student that does well at IMSA doesn't do so well with the memorization that serves the average student. But it's a two-way street.

The Visionary: And I think I see a connection to what you said about programmers assume that how they think about a product is how everybody will think about it. And...

The Alumnus: Yes. But there's something else.

The Visionary: So how do you think IMSA's outreach should be changed? Should we stop outreach?

The Alumnus: I'd want to give that some thought. That isn't why I brought this up. I brought up this two-edged sword to make it easier to see another two-edged sword.

The two-edged sword I've suggested is that, just as IMSA students tend to be uncomfortable with the instructional methods at most schools, average students would be uncomfortable with instruction that seeks to liberate a hidden critical observer. It's a bad match both ways. The other two-edged sword has to do with the nature of giftedness. How would you define giftedness?

The Visionary: I try not to, at least in not as strong terms as you do. IMSA is trying to liberate the genius of every child.

The Alumnus: I think your actions are wiser than your rhetoric. How much thought goes into your admissions decisions?

The Visionary: Our admissions staff give a great deal of thought! Do you think we're careless?

The Alumnus: I would have been disturbed if IMSA made a random choice from among the students whose genius would be nurtured. Are you sure you don't want to define giftedness?

The Visionary: Every child has some talent.

The Alumnus: I agree, although your words sound suspiciously like words that many IMSA parents have learned to wince at. There are a lot of parents who have bright children who have learned that "All of our children are gifted." means, in practical terms, "Your daughter will be educated according to our idealization of an average student, no matter how much it hurts her, and we won't make accomodation."

But you are, unlike me, an administrator whom everybody blames for problems, and you know that there are many occasions where coming out and expressing your candid opinions is an invitation to disaster. I groused about the administration to no end as a student; it is only as an adult that I've come to appreciate the difficult and delicate task of being an administrator, and what kind of performance on an administration's part lets me focus on my work.

I'm going to put on my suspicious and mistrustful observer cap and read into your actions that it would be politically dangerous for you to say "This is the kind of gifted student we look for at IMSA." But I am not an administrator. I am more of a private person than you can afford to be, and there are more degrees of freedom offered to me. Would you mind my giving my opinion on a matter where you in particular need to be very careful in what you say?

The Visionary: I'm always open to listen, and I'm not just saying this as an administrator.

The Alumnus: I should also say that because something is politic, I don't automatically translate "politic" to "insincere." I believe you've been as successful as you have partly because you sincerely want to hear what people have to say. When someone says, "political sensitivity," I've learned to stop being a cynic and automatically hearing, "Machiavellian intrigue."

But when I teach, I try to have a map that accomodates itself to terrain, both old and new to me. There are surprisingly many things I believe that are human universals, although I won't discuss them here. But diversity is foundational to how I communicate, and in particular teach.

By "diversity" I don't just mean "affirmative action concerns." I read what I can about minority cultures, and how Asperger's or ADD minds tick. That much is important, and I'm not just jumping on the bandwagon. But diversity doesn't begin when a student labeled as "minority," "different," or "disadvantaged" sits down in your classroom. Diversity begins much earlier. Diversity is every person. I'm fond of books like David Kiersey's Please Understand Me II which explore what temperament and Myers-Briggs types mean for personhood. I want to appreciate learning styles. I absolutely love when students come in during office hours, because then I can see exactly where a student is, and exactly how that student is learning and thinking, and give an explanation that is tailored to the student's specific situation. I like to lecture too, but I'm freest to meet student needs when students visit me in my office.

And one very important facet of that diversity is one that is unfashionable today, more specifically IQ.

The Visionary: I remember seeing a report that your IQ was so high it was untestable by normal means. I've heard that polite drivers value politeness, skillful drivers value skill, and safe drivers value safety. Is there...?

The Alumnus: If you want to dismiss what I'm saying because of speculation about my motives, there's a good case to do so. I know that. But please hear and accept or dismiss my arguments on their merits, and if you read books like James Webb's Guiding the Gifted Child, you'll see this isn't just my idea. I accept multiple intelligence theory as a nuance, but I would point my finger to the idea that a single IQ was an adjustment in

theory, made by people who started by assuming multiple intelligences.

But with all the debates, and in particular despite the unfashionability of "IQ", there is excellent reason to discuss giftedness in terms of IQ. IQ may not be the whole story, but you're missing something big if it is treated as one factor among others.

Several caveats deleted, I would point out that giftedness is not a binary attribute, any more than being tall is binary. There may be some people who are clearly tall and others who clearly aren't, but regardless of where you draw the line, you can't divide people into a "tall" group of people who are all exactly 190 centimeters tall and a "non-tall" group of people who are 160 centimeters tall. There is diversity, and this diversity remains even if you restrict your attention to tall people.

The Visionary: So then would you say that most high schools serve an average diversity, and IMSA serves a gifted diversity?

The Alumnus: Umm...

The Visionary: Yes?

The Alumnus: An average high school breaks at both ends of its spectrum...

The Visionary: Yes?

The Alumnus: Um...

The Visionary: Yes?

The Alumnus: And IMSA breaks at both ends of its spectrum.

The Visionary: If there are some students who the administration overestimates, this is unfortunate, but—

The Alumnus: That's not my point. Ignoring several other dimensions of diversity, we don't have two points of "average" and "gifted" defining a line. Giftedness, anyway, is not "the same kind of intelligence as most people have, only more of it and faster"; it's a different kind of intelligence. It diverges more the further you go.

Instead of the two points of "average" and "gifted", there are three points to consider: "average", "gifted", and "profoundly gifted."

I think it is to IMSA's great credit that you have a gifted education, not a pullout tacked on to a nongifted education. Serving gifted needs isn't an adjustment; it's the fabric you've woven, and it is impressive.

But "profoundly gifted" is as different from the "moderately gifted" as "moderately gifted" is from "average"...

...and IMSA attracts a good proportion of the profoundly gifted minority...

...and the position of the profoundly gifted at IMSA is exactly the position many IMSA students had in TAG pullouts.

The Visionary: May I say a word in IMSA's defense?

The Alumnus: Certainly.

The Visionary: IMSA began as a dream, a wild, speculative, powerful, risky vision. From the beginning, its place was tentative; some of the first classes did math problems before the state government because IMSA was threatened with closing. IMSA makes things happen that wouldn't happen anywhere, and for all we've done, there are still people who would remove us from the budget. I've talked with alumni, both those who like and dislike the school, and I see something in them which I didn't see in other places.

The Alumnus: And IMSA is a safe place to learn and grow, and IMSA alumni are making a powerful contribution to the world. All of this I assume. And IMSA seems like the kind of place that could grow, that does grow. IMSA could offer the world certain extraordinarily talented individuals that have been stretched to their limit, who have spent certain very formative years doing things most people don't even dream of, and doing so not in isolation but guided and supported as powerfully, and as gently for their needs, as IMSA already offers to so many of its students.

The Visionary: If you have any plans, I would like to hear them.

The Alumnus: Before I give the plans as such, I would like to give a brief overview, not just of the average, moderately gifted, and profoundly gifted mind, but of the average, moderately gifted, and profoundly gifted spirit. Keep in mind that this is not a trichotomy, but three reference points on a curve.

The average mind is concrete. It deals in practical, concrete matters. There was one study which posed isomorphic problems to people, one of which was stated abstractly, and one of which asked in concrete terms who the "cheaters" were. The average respondent did poorly on the abstract isomorph, but was astute when it was put concretely. The average mind is more practical, and learns by an understanding which gradually emerges by going over things again. The preferred learning style is oriented towards memorization and is relatively slow, concrete, and (on gifted terms) doesn't make connections. This person is the fabric with which society is woven; a person like this tends to understand and be understood by others. The average mind concentrates on, and becomes reasonably proficient, in a small number of skills.

The moderately gifted mind, around an IMSA IQ of 140, deals with abstractions. It sees interconnections, and this may be related to why the moderately gifted mind learns more skills with less effort. (If this is true, an average mind would be

learning from scratch, while a moderately gifted mind would only make adaptations from similar skills.) This person is likely to have a "collection of skills", and have a low self-assessment in those skills. (Today's breathtaking performance is, tomorrow, marginally adequate.) Self-actualizing concern for becoming a particular kind of person is much more common. The moderately gifted mind enjoys an advantage over the average mind, and is different, but still close enough to connect. This person learns more quickly, and most of society's leaders are moderately gifted. (Some have suggested that this is not just because people above that range are much rarer, but because they can easily connect.

There is controversy about how isolated the profoundly gifted person is, with an IQ around 180. Some researchers believe that the greater gap is bridged by the greater ability to connect; Webb suggests otherwise, saying that children with an IQ above 170 feel like they don't fit in anywhere. He asks what the effects would be if a normal child grew up in a world where most people had an IQ of 50-55. Some profoundly gifted have discussed the feeling that there's an instruction manual to life that everyone but them has. The unusual sense of humor that appears in the moderately gifted is even more pronounced in the profoundly gifted. Average people tend to believe some tacit and naively realistic philosophy. Moderately gifted people tend to believe some conscious and creative reinterpretation of realism. Profoundly gifted people tend to believe an almost automatic anti-realism. The realism assumed by most people doesn't resonate with them. And I need to explain what I mean by "believe" here. I don't mean that someone engaged them in a discussion and are convinced by logic or eloquence that an anti-realist philosophy is true. I mean something close to experience, as we believe that a radiator is hot after we touch it. Realism is obvious for someone of average intelligence. For someone profoundly gifted, coming to that perspective represents a significant achievement.

Furthermore, where the moderately gifted person has a

"skill collection", the profoundly gifted individual has what might as well be magic powers—

The Visionary: You mean is involved with the occult or psychic phenomena?

The Alumnus: Not exactly. Profoundly gifted individuals have been known to do things like reinventing the steam engine at age six. Some of them can walk into a room and in an instant infer what kind of presentation is going to be given, and what kind of organization is going to give it. They have been known to make penetrating observations of connections between vastly different disciplines. Some have written a book in a week. Others remember everything they have read. Verbatim. Another still has invented a crude physics and using it to solve problems before she was old enough to talk. It's entirely plausible for a profoundly gifted individual to think for a few hours about a philosophical school he's just read about, and have a better grasp of the assumptions and implications surrounding that school than scholars who have studied the discipline for years. Many accomplishments are less extreme than that. Some are more extreme. I said that they might as well be magic powers because they are no more believable to many people than levitation or fairies granting wishes. Moderately gifted achievements are envied. Profoundly gifted achievements are disbelieved, and one social lesson the profoundly gifted learn is that there are certain accomplishments that you don't talk about... which feels the way most people would feel if people were shocked and offended when they tried to say, "I can read," or for that matter, "I can breathe."

These people do not think of themselves as having magic powers. Their impressive abilities are no more breathtaking or astonishing to them than our impressive abilities of walking through an unfamiliar room or understanding a children's book are to us—and if you don't believe that walking through an unfamiliar room or understanding a children's book is an astonishing mental feat, just spend a year in artificial

intelligence. Artificial researchers know what kind of achievement is represented by these "basic" tasks. The rest of us misunderstand them as mundane. If you can understand how you can be better at understanding emotions than any computer in the world, and not think of yourself as gifted, you have a good start on understanding what it's like to feel that it's natural to tinker with your hands, imagine who you're going to be when you grow up, enjoy cooking, and have dreams where your brain creates languages on the fly.

It's a commonplace that the gifted can have a rough time of school. What IMSA does is place the profoundly gifted in the position of fixed pace classes designed for people significantly less intelligent than them.

It's easier to criticize than it is to give a positive alternative; let me give a positive alternative.

First of all, profoundly gifted students can pick things up much more rapidly even than most IMSA students. Something like a factor of four speedup can happen again and again. Many of these students would tear through textbooks if you let them.

The Visionary: But at IMSA we don't dump textbooks on students. We provide an environment where they can discover things for themselves.

The Alumnus: They will discover things for themselves. But if you look at learning styles, the profoundly gifted are some of the most able to understand a crystallized abstraction, and the most likely to work ahead in their textbooks.

IMSA may have a dozen or so profoundly gifted individuals at any one time.

The Visionary: And we've provided accommodation for a bright sophomore physics class.

The Alumnus: Yes, it is possible for students to lobby for accommodation on a specific point.

But it's possible to go further, as IMSA has gone further than TAG pullouts.

There could be a small number of people who serve as tutors, in a sort of tutorial system as can be seen in Oxford's and Cambridge's history. They would be like thesis advisors, less responsible for knowing what the students need to learn than offering direction and referrals.

The Visionary: What would you have them do if they tear through IMSA's curriculum sophomore year?

The Alumnus: Students that bright are likely to have their own axes to grind—good axes, axes which they should be encouraged. I really have trouble imagining a student flying through IMSA's normal curriculum and then wanting to watch TV for two years. The problem of motivating these students is like the problem of defending a lion: the first thing is to get out of the way.

The teachers themselves should offer the kind of individualized instruction that is basic to special education, and deal with the "magic powers" that the main curriculum doesn't know how to deal with.

The Visionary: Would the teachers have to be profoundly gifted?

The Alumnus: I don't know. I would place more emphasis on understanding profoundly gifted students than necessarily being profoundly gifted oneself.

Furthermore, as well as standing in need of conceptual education, profoundly gifted students could benefit from personal development to help them meet the rest of the world. I don't know whether it would be correct to say that average education should be about knowledge, gifted education should

be about how to think, and profoundly gifted education should be about personal development. I think the idea is worth considering. And I would try to develop some things that aren't needed in average education and less needed in moderately gifted education, such as how to bridge the gap and meet the rest of the world.

The Visionary: I'll think about that. I would be delighted to say you've shown me how to solve this problem.

The Alumnus: I'd be surprised if I've shown you how to solve this problem. If I were asked what I could guarantee for this model, it would be that some part of it is wrong. I would ask you to consider what I've presented you as a rough draft. In my opinion it is a rough draft worth revising, changing course in midstream if need be, but it is a rough draft.

The Visionary: This is all very well for office hours, but how do you teach a class? You don't try to individualize a lecture twenty different ways, do you?

The Alumnus: I believe what I said about diversity as foundational, but I also believe there are things that are common. I believe there are significant commonalities as well as significant differences.

What would you say is the dominant educational philosophy at IMSA?

The Visionary: There are several philosophies we draw on, and several things vary from teacher to teacher. But if I were to pick one school, it would be constructivism.

The Alumnus: Does constructivism see the student as an empty pot, to be filled with knowledge?

The Visionary: Quite the opposite. Constructivism sees the students as agents, trying to actively construct their models of

the world, not as empty pots to be filled, or as formless clay for the teachers to shape. We see the teacher as supporting the student in this active task.

The Alumnus: And I agree that students should be active and encouraged by teachers. A related question—do you believe mathematics is something that research mathematicians invent, or something that they find out?

The Visionary: Well, the obvious answer would be that it's something constructed.

The Alumnus: I disagree with you, at least about the "obvious" part.

The Visionary: Then I'll trust your judgment that it's something mathematicians discover. You've probably thought about this a lot more than I have.

The Alumnus: You don't need to agree with me here. There are a lot of good mathematicians who believe mathematics is something invented.

The Visionary: Are you saying I should believe mathematics is constructed?

The Alumnus: No. There are also a lot of mathematicians who understand mathematics and say mathematics is something that's found out.

The Visionary: Now I'm having trouble seeing where you're going.

The Alumnus: There's a debate among mathematicians as to whether mathematics is invented or discovered, with good mathematicians falling into either camp. The word 'discover' itself is ambiguous; one can say "I discovered the TV remote under the couch" and have "discover" mean "dis-cover" or "find out," but one can also say, "I discovered a way to build a better mousetrap," and have "discover" mean "invent". "Invent"

derives from the Latin "invenire," which means "come into", i.e. "find," so that it would be more natural in Latin to say "I just invented my car keys" than "I invented a useful tool."

The Visionary: I think I see what you are saying... Are you saying that there is a single reality described both by discovery and invention?

The Alumnus: Yes. Now to tie in with constructivism... What are students doing when they are constructing models?

The Visionary: They are shaping thought-stuff, for lack of a better term, in a way that's different for each learner.

The Alumnus: And this is to break out of the Enlightenment/Diderot encyclopedia mindset which gives rise to stuffing the learner with facts?

The Visionary: Absolutely.

The Alumnus: Where would you place Kant? Was he a medieval philosopher?

The Visionary: He was one of the Enlightenment's greatest philosophers.

The Alumnus: And Kant's model of ideas was unchanged from Plato.

The Visionary: Um...

The Alumnus: Yes?

The Visionary: What Plato called "Ideas" and Kant's "ideas" are two different things. For Plato, the Ideas were something strange to us: a reality outside the mind.

The Alumnus: Um... Plato and Kant would equally have affirmed the statement, "Ideas are internal."

The Visionary: I don't think so. Plato's Allegory of the Cave suggests that the Ideas are part of something that is the same for all people.

The Alumnus: If I may digress for a moment, I think that famous passage should be called "the Allegory of the Television." I appreciate your limiting the place of television at IMSA. But back to the topic, for Plato the Ideas were internal, but were not private.

The Visionary: Huh?

The Alumnus: Kant was a pivotal figure in our—the Enlightenment's—idea that the only real stuff outside our head is matter. When Kant says "internal," he says "private," and when we say "internal," we say "private." If you think this way, then you believe that thought is something done in a private corner. This privacy may be culturally conditioned, but it is privacy. And yet, however self-evident this seems to us, a great many philosophers and cultures have believed otherwise.

There is a private aspect to thought, but my research into how to think has led me to question the Enlightenment model and believe that we all think on the same contoured surface. We can be on different parts and move in different ways, but in thinking we deal with a reality others deal with as well. And I'm going to sound like a kooky philosopher and say that you have a deficient cosmology, and therefore a deficient corollary understanding of how humans are capable of learning, if you believe that everything is either inside the mind or else something you can kick.

The Visionary: But we're questioning the Enlightenment model, and rejecting parts of it that have problems!

The Alumnus: I know you are. And I would encourage you to question more of it.

The Visionary: How does this belief affect teaching for you?

The Alumnus: Most immediately, it helps me say ways to identify with students—connect with their thought. There are some things that pay off long term. But in the short run, when a student makes a mistake, the student is not bad, nor is the mistake is not an anomaly to push away. A mistake is an invaluable opportunity for me to understand how a student is thinking and draw the student to a better understanding.

In terms of base metaphor, if you look at Dewey's foundationalism, what it is that bothers many IMSA teachers and IMSA teachers are working to change, the basic idea is that the teacher is building up knowledge, from its foundations, in the student's mind. If I were to try and capture it in a metaphor, I would say that the student is an empty lot, and the teacher is building a house on it. The teacher is actively doing teaching to the student.

The constructivism that resonates with many IMSA teachers doesn't like the idea of the teacher being active and the student being the passive receptacle of teaching. It's fine for the teacher to be active, but they don't believe the student is passive because they were quite active learners themselves. Constructivist writers don't refer to 'students' so much as 'learners;' they emphasize that the learner is active. The basic idea is that people are actively trying to build their own unique understandings of the world, and a constructivist teacher is trying to support learners in this endeavor. If foundationalism is crystallized in the image of a teacher building a house on an empty lot, constructivist learning theory is crystallized in the image of learners picking up what they can to build their own private edifices of thought, their interior castles.

The Visionary: What do you think of those?

The Alumnus: I think we're comparing a hammer with a screwdriver. If you read debate on the web, you'll see people

who think constructivism is a hazy and incomprehensibly bad version of foundationalism, and people who think foundationalism is a hazy and incomprehensibly bad version of constructivism. The truth is neither; good foundationalist teaching like Direct Instruction is doing one thing well, and good constructivist learning is doing another thing well, and different people learn differently.

The Visionary: But do you have an alternative?

The Alumnus: Yes, and it is again suggested by basic metaphor. Instead of building a house, or helping learners construct their private models, I would suggest looking at a single word, *katalabein*. I am using a Greek word without an exact English equivalent, because it ties together some things that are familiar—part of the shared inner human reality which we can recognize. It can be translated 'overcome' or 'understand', and it provides for a basic metaphor in which what is understood is actively acquired, achieved even, but it is not necessarily idiosyncratic and private. We still have an active learner, and implications for how a teacher can support that active learner...

The Visionary: Go on.

The Alumnus: But it's different. I was fascinated with one constructivist learning page that recast the teacher as a sort of non-directive counselor. They facilitated learning experiences, but they realized that students came in with beliefs, like "Weeds are not plants because they don't need to be nurtured," and what really fascinated me was that some of them found themselves in an ethical quandary about the appropriateness of using a science class to influence student beliefs, say to agree with a botanist that dandelions are plants.

The Visionary: None of the IMSA teachers are *that* squeamish about influencing student beliefs.

The Alumnus: One alum made a comment that "looney liberals"

seemed to him to offer a similar service to coal miner's canaries. It wouldn't be fair to accuse most liberals of their excesses, but it was still worth keeping an eye on them: they could be a warning that it was time to rethink basic ideas. Even if those web pages may fall more into the "canary" category than anything else...

The Visionary: But what do you have instead of helping students build private world-pictures?

The Alumnus: Instead of helping students build private world-pictures, helping students grapple with, in the overcoming that is understanding and the understanding that is overcoming, the *katalabein* of material. And this is material that always has a personal touch, but is understood to be internal in a way that is not simply how one has arbitrarily exercised privacy, but connects with a sort of inner terrain that is as shared as the outer terrain. No two people are at—no two people *can* be at—the exact same place in the external, physical world, nor can two people see the same thing, because their personal bodies get in the way. But that does *not* mean we inhabit our own private physical universes. I can tell you how to drive to my house because to get there, you would be navigating some of the same reality as I navigate. But somehow we believe that our bodies may touch the same doorknobs and our shoes may touch the same carpets... Somehow we believe that when we turn inside, the "reality" becomes impenetrably private, influenced by culture perhaps but shared to so little an extent that no two people shares the same inner sun and moon.

The Visionary: But that's the external world! You're not talking about when people can make up anything they want.

The Alumnus: Hmm... As part of your job, you field criticism from people who want IMSA to be shut down, right?

The Visionary: Yes.

The Alumnus: And a good portion of that criticism comes from people who are *certain* you've never considered the objection they raise, right?

The Visionary: You've been reading my mail!

The Alumnus: And how many years has it been since one of those letters contained a criticism that was new to you?

The Visionary: You've been reading my... um... [pause] Wow.

The Alumnus: The introduction to the *Handbook of Special Education* tries to make a point by quoting the opening meeting of the International Council for the Education of Exceptional Children. The meeting had in all respects a typical (for today) discussion of how one should define special needs children. And the meeting was in 1923. The point was made that special educators assume they're the first people to address new issues, when neither the issues nor their thoughts are new. An old internet denizen, writing about "the September that never ended", talked about how each year in September new college students would flood newsgroup discussions with "new, new, new" insights that were, in the denizen's words, "exactly the same tripe" that had been posted the previous year.

There is really not that much that is new, and this is tied to another observation. There is really not that much that is private. There is some. Even in the outer world there are some things that are private to each person. But in the inner world—and I am not talking about *your* inner world, or mine, but a real world, *the* inner world, a place that has contours of its own and laws of its own and terrain of its own and substances of its own which are no more the subject of an idiosyncratic private monopoly than the outer world's sun and moon. Perhaps it has a private dimension, but to assume that an inner world is by definition someone's most private possession is almost like answering the remark "The Atlantic Ocean is getting more polluted," with "*Whose* Atlantic Ocean?"

The Visionary: Is there a way to integrate the inner world with the outer world?

The Alumnus: I am guilty of a rhetorical fault. I have spoken of the outer world as if it were separate from the inner world, and the inner world as if it were separate from the outer world. The real task is not one of integration but desegregation, and that is a lesson I've been wrestling with for years. The biggest lesson I took from my Ph.D. thesis, where I achieved a fascinating distillation of how to think from learning as we know it, is that how to think cannot be distilled from learning, and learning cannot be distilled from the rest of life. It is all interconnected. It's like a classic plot in fantasy literature where a hero is searching for a legendary treasure, and goes to strange places and passes amazing trials. We're there learning with him, until there is an end where "nothing" happens, but by the time that "nothing" takes place, we've been with the hero all along and we have been transformed just as much as he is, and we see through the "nothing" to recognize the treasure that has been all around the hero—and us—all along.

The real world has an internal and an external dimension, and there is nothing like trying to crystallize purer and purer internal knowledge to see the interpenetration of the internal and the external. I learned that the internal is not self-contained.

The Visionary: Is there anything that has been written which deals with this connection?

The Alumnus: Are you asking me if you can borrow a truckload of books? There are some cultures where it's hard to find material which *doesn't* relate the connection in some form.

But let me tie this in with education. Postmodernism is fragmented, so much so that postmodern scholars tend to put "postmodern" in ironic quotes and add some qualifier about whether it's even coherent to talk about such a movement. From

the inside, there isn't a single postmodern movement; talking about a postmodern movement is like talking about a herd of housecats. But this is not because talking about being "postmodern" is meaningless; it's because one of the characteristics is fragmentation, and so if there is anything called postmodern, then it will be much more of a grab bag than something called modern.

Constructivism is postmodern, not in that anything called postmodern must resemble it, but because it can be placed on a somewhat ad hoc spectrum. It is internally fragmented, in that it is not helping students navigate *the* world of ideas, but in trying to reckon with learners' development of private models of the world. In typical postmodern fashion, the movement shows exquisite sensitivity to ways in which student constructed models are parochial, and does not inquire into ways in which students may be grappling with something universal. (At best learners' constructs are culturally conditioned.)

In what I am suggesting, learners are active, but students are working with something which is not so much clay to be shaped in the privacy of one's mind. I am aware of the parochial dimension—as a culture, we've been aware of it to death—but I'm trying to look at something we don't pay as much attention to today. I suggest, instead of a basic metaphor of learners constructing their own models, learners struggling to conquer parts of the world of ideas. Conquer means in some sense to appropriate; it means in part what we mean when we say that a mountain climber physically conquered an ascent and mastered its terrain. And this is not a cookie cutter, but it provides serious place for something that doesn't have soil to root itself in in constructivism.

I suspect that this is a lot less exotic than it sounds. Would you say that IMSA teachers often understand their students?

The Visionary: I think they often *try*.

The Alumnus: I think they often succeed.

Communication in general draws on being able to identify with the other. It says, "Even if I disagree with you, I understand what it means that you believe differently from what I do." You know what it's like when someone is talking with you and simply cannot identify with where you are coming from. It feels clumsy. Good communicators can identify with other people, and even a partial understanding is much better than no understanding at all.

I think the teachers I had at least showed something wiser than constructivism. Read something like Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and you will see appreciation of incommensurability and a communication divide between opposing camps; unlike the later Kuhn, you will also see that this claim of incommensurability, where opposing sides invariably argue past each other in debates, is applied to both major and minor paradigm shifts. Now if we look at a constructivist approach, where this kind of thinking is applied to individual peoples' models as well as models that are shared across a camp, then we have an excellent reason not to teach.

We have an excellent reason to say that teachers' and students' models are not only conflicting but incommensurable, that the teacher may have more power but in a fair debate they would argue past each other, and that the basis for the teacher understanding and therefore successfully influencing the student is at very least questionable. In the end, we have something which affects the concept of teaching more profoundly than the observation that students will see things that teachers don't realize. If you look at Kuhn, you will see a remark that the winning side of a scientific paradigm shift will naturally view the shift as progress. This contributes to an account for people thinking science progresses without science actually progressing. Science shifts. But the shift is not a step forward from less developed science to more developed science. It is a step sideways, from one reigning paradigm to another.

And in like fashion, if you follow a natural constructivist path, you have an alternative to saying that the teacher knows more about science than the students. The teacher is more powerful, but there is a way out for someone who wants to deny that the teacher has more desirable knowledge that the students should learn. Not only can we argue that "teaching" communication is impossible, but we can argue that "teaching" communication is undesirable even if it were possible.

The Visionary: But that can't be what our teachers believe! You have to be misunderstanding constructivism. That's not how it works out.

The Alumnus: I agree with you that that can't be what many IMSA teachers believe. It is only what they say. And what they think they believe.

The Visionary: You mean...

The Alumnus: Foundationalism is a bad account of how most IMSA teachers learn. They learn actively, and IMSA students learn actively. And constructivism offers a compelling metaphor for active learning. But teachers at IMSA don't believe all its implications. Like the character in a George MacDonald book who was fond of saying, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure," and had married in haste, but hadn't really thought about repenting, even though she'd had plenty of leisure in which to repent. If constructivism may undercut the possibility of communication, and the possibility of the teacher drawing students to join her in expert practice, this is not yet a problem. In practical terms, teachers believe they can communicate, and they have something to share. And they do this. There may be problems where this goes down the road, but in practical terms IMSA teachers live a philosophy with communication that is often excellent.

And, as far as metaphors go, I think that the *katalabein* metaphor offers something valuable that the constructivist

metaphor doesn't. In particular, the fact that teachers can communicate, and leave students better off, doesn't just happen to be true; it's something that one can delve into. You don't just take the metaphor into consideration when you communicate on a basis that doesn't come from the model; the metaphor itself gives you a basis to communicate. And it's different enough to compete in an interesting way. Or complement constructivism in an interesting way. Even if it's not perfect.

The Visionary: Yes, I know. Do you regret the fact that it's so messy?

The Alumnus: I regret the fact that it's not messy enough.

When we describe a rainbow, we say that the colors are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. But those aren't the colors of the rainbow. If you pick a color at random on the rainbow, there's a zero percent chance that you will exactly pick one of those colors. A rainbow is a spectrum, and if you have a wavelength for each of those colors, you have seven reference points for a spectrum with infinitely many colors. And a reference point can help you understand a spectrum, but a reference point is not a spectrum.

I've done, I think, a decent job of describing one reference point on a spectrum. But teachers rarely follow one educational theory in pure form; they tend to draw on several, and this is intended not to be a complete theory, but a reference point in a pluralistic theory. Most theories are a single point. This theory is meant to be a spectrum, but isn't there yet.

And as much as a robust theory of education needs to be pluralistic, sensitive to the diversity that is every student, there also needs to be a sensitivity to the diversity of knowledge. English is cursed to only have one word for knowledge.

The Visionary: But we have well enough established division of knowledge into subjects. In fact that's what we're trying to teach

our students to get past.

The Alumnus: That's not quite what I meant.

In most of the languages I know, there's more than one word for knowledge. In French, there is *savoir*, which is the knowledge one has about facts, and *connaissance*, which is the knowledge one has of a person. It's a different kind of thing to know about a fact and to know of a person, and this is reflected in different words. *Conscience* is not simply the French word for conscience; it means consciousness, and some of the more ethereal and personal aspects of knowledge. The Latin *eruditio* and *notitia* have other nuances. In English we do have "wisdom," "knowledge," and "information," which are as different from each other as an apple, an orange, and a pear.

And this is without treating ways of thought. One of the things I learned was that knowledge and ways of thought could be distinguished but not separated. If you look at Eastern ways, whether they are religions like Hinduism or Eastern Orthodoxy, or martial arts like Kuk Sool Won or Ninpo, you will find quite a different pedagogy from what we assume in the West. Instead of trying to open the mind and dump in knowledge, they begin by training the body, in actions, and then this begins to affect the soul and transform the spirit.

The Visionary: Isn't constructivism more like that?

The Alumnus: It is. But instead of reinventing experiential learning, Eastern ways preserve a Tao, or for a Western word, a matrix. Most recently in the West, *Matrix* is the name of a trilogy where each movie was better than the next. But before that, a matrix was a mathematical construct, and are you familiar with what "matrix" meant before that? It was the Latin word meaning "womb." And this concept of a womb, or a matrix, is something which has become alien to Western thought. A matrix is the medium in which you move, the air in which you breathe. It has the authority of your culture and your

mother tongue. It is a very different kind of authority from the authority of a single leader, or a written rule; a matrix does not consciously command you, but provides you with the options which shape your choice. And the Eastern ways all preserve a matrix, a way, that provides their pedagogy. In a sense the difference between constructivist experiential learning and Eastern experiential learning is the difference between non-native speakers trying to speak a language and a community of native speakers continuing to use their language. Except to make the comparison more fair, constructivists are trying to construct a language, and put together something that works, and Eastern pedagogues have inherited something that works. The difference is kind of like the difference between an experimental kind of baseball glove that someone is trying out and a glove that is not only traditional but already broken in.

The Visionary: Um... I'll have to think about what you have said about a "matrix." Ok, you've given me a lot to think about. It would be premature for me to respond now. I'm going to need to think about what you've said. But let me change the subject. What other ideas do you have about teaching, especially concrete ones?

The Alumnus: It's a bit like a light—it makes other things easier to see. But let me talk about other ways of teaching, such as listening.

The Visionary: I know how you can listen if a student asks a question, but how do you listen when lecturing?

The Alumnus: Listening is about trying to understand the other person as a basis for communication. Apart from the feedback that's in student questions—if you look for it—a person's face is a window to what is going on inside, and a teacher sees student faces frequently. I know the ominous silence when the class is so lost that students are afraid to ask questions. I don't just charge on because it's important to cover the remaining material. I try to stop, back up, and help the students to

genuinely understand, and then proceed from genuine understanding. Homework offers implicit feedback on what I succeeded in communicating, and what I did not succeed in. And there's an implicit listening mindset behind trying not to inundate students with too much information at once.

There's a book of little stories, and in one of them, a sage was asked, "What is your name?" He pondered for a moment and said, "My name used to be... Me. But now it's... You." I didn't like that story at first, because I didn't understand it. Now I understand enough of it to see that it has a profound truth. Talking is about "me", and listening is part of a lifelong journey of learning to think in terms of "you." Listening has far more to offer a teacher than a better understanding of student questions.

There are a lot of things I like about how IMSA works—your belief that the needs of the mind cannot be met if the needs of the body are neglected. How this you fit this in with Arbor food service is not clear to me—

The Visionary: Thanks, Dear...

The Alumnus: Any time. But I really like the understanding you have of the human person as interconnected on multiple levels, including the body and mind. I also take that as axiomatic, and teach so that students will understand concepts and preferably their connections, and many other things. Just as I haven't read what I just said about listening in anything that came out of IMSA, but the teachers I had at IMSA were all examples of good listening.

The Visionary: Thank you.

The Alumnus: You're welcome.

But another part of the Enlightenment I reject is its depersonalization of knowledge and teaching. Have you read any Polanyi?

The Visionary: Not yet. Should I put him on my reading list?

The Alumnus: I don't know. He writes hefty, if understandable, material. It takes time to understand him, but he's worth understanding.

Michael Polanyi was a philosopher of science, and his big work was on tacit and personal knowledge. The core idea is that scientific knowledge (I would say knowledge in general) is not a set of dessicated constructs that can be understood without reference to people; it is enfleshed in people who know it. He talked about how competing swimmers inhale a little more air and exhale a little less, so they always have more air in their lungs and therefore buoyancy than we would, but this knowledge is never thought of in so many words by the coach or by the student who "picks it up" from the coach, wordlessly. I don't know if it's a fair reading to say that the knowledge we can articulate is the just tip of the iceberg, but what I do think is a fair reading is to say that the knowledge we can put into so many words is not the whole picture. I think he would have liked IMSA trying to avoid teachers mindlessly regurgitating material so students can learn to mindlessly regurgitating material.

In tandem with the Enlightenment depersonalization of knowledge, is a depersonalization of the concept of teaching and a teacher. About two thousand years ago, one teacher tried to demote teachers from being human gods (who were superior to everyone else) to being human like the rest of us. Then, in connection with the Enlightenment there came a second demotion. A teacher was no longer someone responsible for initiating those in their care into humanity, but only a part of a person imparting a skill to another partial person.

That is an illusion; no matter how much keep our mouths shut on certain matters, we are humans teaching. The question is not whether or not teachers will be an ethical force; the

question is whether, given that teachers will be an ethical force, whether they will be a positive force or a negative force. Because students are affected by what kind of people their teachers are—as well as what they say—a teacher should try to be a positive force. This means things like a humility that listens and appreciates other people, and caring, and is willing to listen both to "I don't understand partial differentiation," and "I've had a lousy week."

This means that a teacher who sees past the present, and sees students as the concert pianists, research scientists, and ballerinas they can become, will by that very respect help make that potential a reality.

The Visionary [looks at watch]: Thank you. I need to be somewhere in a few minutes; do you have any closing comments?

The Alumnus: I think that one aspect of how we speak of teaching is unfortunate. We speak of the active teacher who teaches, and the presumably passive student who is taught. Nothing of this manner of speaking suggests a dialog, a two-way street—but if teaching succeeds, it must be because of a cooperation between student and teacher. Even with constructivist understanding of learning, we're just looking at what the teacher can do.

I spend most of my time thinking about how I can see to my end of the partnership, not how students can handle their job. But there is something I would love to say to students, reinforced by a handout, on the first day of class, some toned-down version of:

Steal knowledge.

Prometheus stole fire. Your job is to steal knowledge.

The wrong way to think is that my job is to teach you and you just sit there and be taught and after

you, and you just sit there and be taught, and after enough teachers have taught you, you'll be educated.

You will get a much better education if you think that whatever I do, however well or poorly I teach, is simply the baseline, and you can start from there and see what you can do to take as much knowledge as you can.

Listening in class and asking questions is one way to steal knowledge. Is there something I said that doesn't quite make sense? If you just let my teaching wash over you, you've missed an opportunity to steal knowledge.

If you listen to my words, that's good. It's even better if you think about why I would say what I am saying. There may be a clue, maybe a little whisper in your intuition that something more is going on than you realize. That is a key that you can use to steal knowledge.

When you read the textbook, it will tell you more if you push it harder. Look at the problems. What are they asking you to know? What are they asking you to think about? There's a powerful clue about what's important and what's going on, if you're adept enough to steal it.

What do I assume about the material? I make assumptions, and some of those are assumptions I make because of what I know. If you're willing to ask why I assume something, you may steal knowledge of how people think when they understand the material.

My office hours are meant for you. Come in and discuss the material. If I see you make a mistake, that's good. It means you're learning and I have an opportunity to clarify. If you don't understand

something, and all of us don't understand things from time to time, it will cost you points to wait until the test to find out that you don't understand it. It won't cost you anything if you come in during my office hours, and I'll be glad you visited. And you might steal some knowledge.

Steal knowledge. There'll be some days when you're a little tired, and you can't look for all the extra knowledge you can steal. That's OK; just try to take the knowledge I clearly set out before you. But steal knowledge when you can.

You've gotten into IMSA, which is one of the best and one of the worst places in the world. Take advantage of opportunity. Learn to steal knowledge. And when you graduate from IMSA... Steal knowledge.

The Visionary: I definitely have some food for thought to take into the meeting. Do come and visit again! Goodbye!

The Alumnus: That I shall. Goodbye!

Spirit

Links: Read anything good lately?

Dexios: *An article* that tries to catch you by beginning, "They really should have put it into my contract: I, the undersigned, hereby agree to spend one-half to three-quarters of all class time explaining why watching *Dawson's Creek* and thinking vague thoughts about God is not a valid substitute for attending mass." The students weren't affected by the usual exhortations, until she happened on a visit to monastic worship.

Links: ...And?

Dexios: The students were perfectly welcome, but the monks were there worshipping God and the students were welcome to join the monks worshipping God. And that got their attention when a whole legion of ill-starred [attempts to get their attention](#) failed. One student said, "With all the other masses, it's like it was all about me or something. With this mass, I got the feeling it was about God." And *that* succeeded where words about "It's commanded," or "It's good for you," failed.

The students weren't really asking "Why should I go to mass?" at all; they said that because they couldn't form the words to ask what they really meant.

Links: And that was...?

Dexios: "Why should I go to **that** mass?"

Links: Wow. I'm surprised you're siding with a bunch of rebellious—how old are they?

Dexios: Students at a Catholic high school. And as to rebellious—teenagers are likely to rebel and be rebels without a cause if they have too much trouble finding a good enough cause, but there's something that has to do with spirit that isn't rebellious at all. They rejected counterfeit coin.

Links: "Spirit?" As in—

Dexios: Um, as in—[pause]

Links: —as in something you're thinking about?

Dexios: Yes.

Links: So you're saying these students were super spiritual?

Dexios: Yes. No. Saying that they're super spiritual is an answer to the wrong question. Sure, I'd love to bring two (or however many it was) busloads of kids to our parish and show them how Orthodox worship is taken seriously even if you're not monks, but if you're thinking of *spirit* as some special quality that has an incense rising up from the best people's heads, that's exactly what it's not. I would say it's natural, if people hadn't heard a million voices saying that appetite is the only thing that's natural about us. These kids weren't showing spirit because they were being urged to be spirit enough to want real worship and not a show—if anything, they were spirit enough for that despite people urging them that shows dressed up as worship were good enough for them. And the author of the article didn't say that every now and then she sees a kid with a halo and *that* kid wants a real worship service, and is so spiritually snobbish that only a monastic service will satisfy him. (She said the services were "relaxed, by monastic standards," whatever that means.)

What she was saying was that everyday, normal kids kept asking her why they should go to mass until she showed them...

A real mass. Or rather, one where monks were there to worship God and other people were quite welcome to join them in worshipping God.

Links: [pause] In Spirit and in Truth.

Dexios: In Spirit and in Truth. And I realized just now that the article has more going on in it than just spirit. It has a million other substitutes for spirit that people aren't happy with. Maybe it wasn't just spirit that resonated with me.

Links: Where else?

Dexios: Maybe your art history education simply talked about different eras and cultures choosing different strengths to develop—

Links: —it did—

Dexios: —but in mine there was a story of progress: at first medieval art was crude, and then changes began in medieval art that resulted in art getting better and better at being like a photograph until eventually artists weren't an expensive substitute for a photograph. The history of Western art was a history of progress, starting with medieval art that didn't look like a good photograph up to Enlightenment neo-classicism that could give a good photograph a run for its money. Which is exactly right, except that it's backwards.

Links: Let me guess. You're going to say that the medieval art was spiritual, or spirit?

Dexios: Something like that, because the baseline for medieval art was similar [to icons](#). They hadn't gone to such *scientific* lengths to get a *scientifically* correct rendition of the human body for the mirror image of why pastors get their science illustrations

wrong. Pastors and theologians get their science wrong because their focus is on theology and just a little science is brought in to make a point—and the fact that the science is usually wrong shows that their hearts are in the right place. But scientific art, unlike medieval art but like "The Oaths of the Horatii" by Jacques Louis David, for which he sketched first skeletons and then muscles and then bodies and only then painted bodies complete with clothes, represents a fall from a spiritual center of gravity.

Links: But the material world is good, and understanding it is good.

Dexios: Um...

Links: Which of those do you want to deny?

Dexios: Do you believe I have to deny that the material world is good? Or, alternately, that understanding the material world is good?

Links: Unless you want to say some very strange things about science.

Dexios: Ugh, I was hoping to avoid saying strange things about science. But first of all, you seem to be treating "understanding the natural world" and "science" as interchangeable, so that it is inconceivable what "understanding the human body" could mean besides "learning scientific facts about the body."

Links: And how exactly would I learn about the body apart from science?

Dexios: Let's see, you could look **A**ppreciate art that portrays the human form, or discover how your body behaves by playing **B**aseball, or have a **C**hiropractic massage, if there is such a thing, or **D**ance, or—

Links: —didn't you say something about "alignment of the stars, alignment of the bones..." yesterday?

Dexios: You interrupted me! I was hoping to work my way up to something profound. But let's put massage under 'M' and forget about the alignment of the bones. I don't want to get into alternative medicine, besides saying that it seems a hint that people have some sense that their bodies have to have more to do with spirit than the almost mechanical view of "Western medicine", which is powerful and yet considered narrow in some circles.

And now for something related to the other horn for your dilemma.

Having enough to eat is good. So is having clothing, and a roof over your head in nasty weather. But the [Sermon on the Mount](#) tells us not to seek after these things: yes, we need them, and the Heavenly Father knows this well enough. But we are to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and his perfect righteousness, making our center of gravity there, and making a *spiritual* center of gravity. Oh, and by the way, the other things will be given to us as well, even though that isn't the point. The point, if I may use slightly non-Sermon-on-the-Mount language, is to have a spiritual center of gravity.

Links: But aren't you changing the subject of the [Sermon on the Mount](#)? Unless you talk about being poor in spirit, the [Sermon on the Mount](#) doesn't use the word "spirit."

Dexios: Matthew's Gospel talks about the Kingdom of Heaven and John's talks about abundant or eternal Life. As concepts they are not identical but you cannot treat them as dealing with separate realities, which would make the crudest fallacy. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) barely uses the word "spirit," but nothing from the ages is a better resource on living as spirit. And the distinction between 'Spirit', big 'S', and 'spirit', little 's', is not what you think.

Links: What do you mean?

Dexios: The distinction doesn't exist in Greek, or at least is not forced in that if you write "spirit" you have to decide if it has a big or little 's'. A lot of people think they need to place a vast chasm between big 'S' spirit and little 's' spirit so that it's almost two different words. But body is not so much the opposite of spirit as where spirit unfurls, and our spirits, little 's', are not so much the opposite of the Holy Spirit as where God's Spirit unfurls.

But this is a minor point. Nitpicking about a little or big 'S' on "Spirit", I mean. Body is profoundly important. Far from being a mere enemy of spirit, it is a proper counterpart, and that means that when you know the proper meaning of body, you know that it is where spirit unfurls, and the difference between a holy icon and secular art is not that secular art takes a high view of the body in contrast to holy icons, but icons take a high view of the body by letting it get inspired by spirit. Literally and figuratively, body is meant to be where spirit unfurls, and the monk who lives a life of "contemplation" and the "secular" Christian who lives contemplation in the world are both spirit at work. But may I make a more concrete illustration of spirit? In social ethics, perhaps?

Links: What are Orthodox social ethics?

Dexios: "Our social program is the Trinity," as Orthodox seem to not be able to stop repeating. I'm not sure you have to say "Trinity" instead of, say, plugging in spirit, but what it is becomes clearer by contrast with Catholic social ethics. Catholic social ethics addresses a question that isn't addressed in the Bible, or at least looks at its question in a very different light.

Links: What did they see? A better way to solve an old problem?

Dexios: Well, that would at least be their interpretation, and when they present things their way, it's kind of hard to see any other way of seeing it.

Links: What is the basic question?

Dexios: The basic question they address is, "What should be done about the poor," and the way they interpret that question is, "What societal structures should be erected so that poverty isn't the same sort of issue?"

Links: But isn't that how the problem is approached today?

Dexios: Maybe, but its differences from how the Gospel interprets the problem are profound. If you look in the Bible, poverty looms large. Where the Old Testament theocracy had done things by force, the New Testament calls people to responsibility and generosity. "Give to the one who asks of you" and all that. But nowhere in the Gospel is there an agenda for societal reform. There are no quasi-statist outlines for how the government should take from the rich and redistribute to the poor: Christians are told what they should do, not how the government should approach things differently.

It is not, in terms of the Gospel precepts, an improvement to go from people learning to be sons of God and in their sonship exercising almsgiving and generosity as profound and powerful spiritual discipline, to coercion that transfers other people's resources while denying them the power to choose and all but snatching from their hand most opportunities to be generous. It is apparently perceived that by thinking in the terms of secular ideologies in imitation of various secular and anti-Christian movements, the Catholic Church is growing enough to take an effective approach that will make a real difference. Or perhaps it is not growth but a failure to understand what exactly is going on in Christ's movement.

Links: But the New Testament is not pure capitalism.

Dexios: Indeed not. I operate within a capitalist system because that is where God has placed me; but that doesn't mean that I have to make capitalism my God.

Links: I've read that in the ancient Church there were some rather communist people who were big into selling lands and liquidating property.

Dexios: Yes, and they are *not* a support for imposing communism.

Links: They seem pretty communist in what they chose to do.

Dexios: They seem pretty communist in what they *chose* to do too. The Bible has high praise for people who in their sonship choose to give away everything that makes them wealthy. I've heard today about one man who gave away his Ferrari to become a monk. That discipleship is singularly beautiful, *and it is not the same thing as imposing a plan that takes away other people's wealth and the opportunity to even be generous in giving it away.* There are few things a capitalist community needs more than the salt and light of people who show that there are bigger things in life than wealth.

But that does not mean that the high virtue of selling one's property and giving away the proceeds should be forced and have its virtue and power flattened out. [The story of Ananias and Sapphira](#) seems to have a clear point. Ananias and Sapphira owned their property and were under no obligation to sell it. When they did sell it, although they pretended to lay all of the money at the apostles' feet they were under no obligation to donate any of it, let alone all of it. Their sin was in lying to God and saying that they had given everything when they kept something back. For that sin alone God struck them both dead. Even if the story implies something deeper about selling one's property and laying the proceeds about the apostles' point, it gets to that point by explicitly saying that there is no obligation to give. Which perhaps suggests that giving at its best is not a matter of what is required but the deiform, Christian, flowing, free virtue of generosity which is infinitely more than duty.

Links: I think I am beginning to see what's wrong with thinking Acts encourages communism.

Dexios: I should hastily clarify that most of the Catholic social teaching I've read does not endorse communism; they take somewhat different positions but the general drift is that even though the encyclicals adopt features of socialism, socialism and communism were off limits to Catholics.

Links: Then why try so hard to show that the New Testament endorses voluntary giving rather than involuntary communism?

Dexios: Because people trying to get you to see things the Catholic social ethics say, in effect, "Why are you fussing so much about us asking for a few coercive measures to give from the rich to the poor? Can't you see that the New Testament waxes eloquent about the glory of Early Church *communism*, which goes much further than the modest and sensible measures we happen to ask for?" But it *doesn't*—perhaps Christians in their discipleship and giving went further than these social reforms would ask for; they went further in that. But the "communism" in the New Testament was a matter of voluntary discipleship and generosity, *not* coercion. And therefore the New Testament is a profound warrant to rising above greed and giving up possessions, but that passage at least is not a warrant for the kind of social reform it is used to endorse.

Links: If I can sum up what you're saying, you're saying, "Care for the poor in the Gospel is an aspect of spirit and discipleship, and by trying to institute compulsory programs that destroy the opportunity for voluntary generosity, you're destroying the opportunity for spiritual discipleship." Correct?

Dexios: That is correct.

Links: Then what do they say to that objection? Or do they not address it?

Dexios: Um... that is hard to unravel. Do you want me to try?

Links: At least *try*.

Dexios: Are you familiar with behaviorism? Behaviorism's fallen out of favor, but it is a psychological school that dealt with how people behave after reward and punishment—but with no acknowledgment of emotions, beliefs, or other internal states—

Links: How does *that* draw people?

Dexios: That's not clear to me, but it was influential. At any rate, and this is the analogy I'm trying to draw, that in behaviorist teaching, people do not say, "There is no soul," but *they draw the student to look at things so that the possibility of a soul is never even considered*. This was said to introduce Michael Polanyi, a philosopher who worked with tacit and personal scientific knowledge. Similarly, the Catholic social ethics sources I've read do not raise the objection of sonship and voluntary giving to explicitly rebut it, but rather frame things so that concept is never even thought of or considered.

There are a couple of ways of doing this, but besides not considering it, they quote Biblical and patristic praise for voluntary giving as a straightforward example for why we should support coercive social programs. No explanation is offered; no acknowledgment is given that giving as a matter of New Testament spiritual discipleship could be something other than a support for institutional and partly statist programs that work by coercion. Most readers, I expect, will look at things the way they're supposed to see, and think that New Testament praise of giving applies to giving through social programs.

One thing that *did* surprise me was that it wasn't just conservatives who were offering criticism. There were apparently some people on the left who were all for social programs and planning, but weren't entirely thrilled that the Pope was entering their domain. It might have come across as an intrusion from another domain, like advice to mathematicians on how to solve the $3x+1$ problem.

Links: The $3x+1$ problem? What's that?

Dexios: Take a counting number; if it's even, divide by two, but if it's odd, multiply by three and add one. If you get a calculator and keep doing this, you'll see that any number you try gives 4, then 2, then 1, then cycles back to 4, 2, 1, etc. But even though if you'll do this many times and the same thing keeps happening, it's proven obnoxiously hard to prove that the thing that happens every time you try does, in fact, happen no matter what number you start with. A lot of mathematicians have spent a lot of effort without solving it, but actually solving the problem has proven as elusive as designing a society without problems, or at least without major ones. Solving the problem will be an incredibly big deal, maybe the mathematical event of the century, should it ever be solved.

But can you imagine how the mathematical community would respond if the Vatican tried to advise it on the most productive way to try to solve the $3x+1$ problem?

Links: Um... but the Papacy is not ordinarily associated with authority in mathematics. Isn't ethics a little less unusual of a thing for the Vatican to be talking about?

Dexios: It's not strange that a Pope was talking about ethics; the surprising thing is that the Pope was answering a question that has little in the way of spirit. Almost every little question and every specific answer in these encyclicals is about what is to be coerced. The encyclicals manage to talk about care for the poor without almost ever exhorting Catholics and the rich to be generous. The idea that caring for the poor could be an occasion for virtue has remnants here and there, but the basic substance of the answer was in terms of what coercive mechanisms should take of those who have, not how the rich should voluntarily give or how people should grow in virtue.

Spirit is not something abstract from daily decisions; it is present, among other things, in being generous to beggars and allowing your money and what you do with it to be progressively transformed into spirit. When the question of

caring for the poor becomes something where one person's generosity is ridiculed and the question is framed as what should be coercively taken from people and made as a coerced gift without generosity, then an area that has much room for spirit to be manifest is drained of spirit.

Other criticisms came that papal teaching was Utopian, that it was a thinly disguised Marxism, and I forget what else—there was one encyclical entitled "Mater et Magistra", "Mother and Teacher", and one pundit said there was something making the rounds about "Mother, yes; teacher, no." Usually the critiques came from conservatives, but there were liberals who wished the Vatican would proclaim the Gospel. Maybe I'm being naive, but it doesn't seem impossible to me that atheists who are big into social planning, and who do not believe in the Gospel, none the less think that the Pope can give something by preaching the Gospel that they with their social plans cannot. I think there's a lot of respect in that. What I would suggest is running through most, if not necessarily all, is that once upon a time the Pope used his authority to make saints, and now he seems to be exchanging his birthright for something much less, making social blueprints.

Links: But you must acknowledge that society is better off for such efforts, right?

Dexios: There is a certain set of blind spots that accompanies those assumptions; it is blind spots, I suggest, that has people look at pre-Vatican-II Catholics living in terms of spirit, giving to the world as saints, and caring for the poor in their generosity, and treat that as something murky and confused that Catholics have outgrown in the progress since Vatican II.

One of the things that comes with the social prescriptions, alongside a coercive character that stunts generosity, is that whatever the solution is, the answer is an institution, perhaps a state organization or something done by it. And no one questions whether this is the best way to do things; one would

think it was the only way conceivable. But in fact it is not the only way.

In the ancient world, a great many things that have today been transformed into big, impersonal institutions—charity, hospitality, medicine, what would today be insurance, manufacture and production, commerce, and so on and so forth—were handled by smaller and more personal institutions. I might comment by the way that it's lost on most people today is that when women were associated with the home that meant they were associated with the beating heart of charity, hospitality, manufacture, and many other things, so that the image of the depressed housewife with no company and nothing but housework to do is as anachronous to read into the ancient world as telephones or the internet: what feminism is reacting to is *not* the traditional society's place for women, but what is left of it after that place, and most of what is connected to it, is torn to shreds.

Even today there are some things we do not relegate to impersonal institutions—romantic love and friendship, for instance. And I don't know if there is a resurgence of home business due to the internet—perhaps certain modern changes cannot represent the last word.

But when Popes started to decide they needed a social teaching to fill out a deficiency, everything besides being coerced is filtered through impersonal institutions. And though one may see a pause once or twice to make fun of people being generous to beggars the way they did on the ancient world, the vision of progress does not stop to question whether filtering everything through a big institution was a big idea. I haven't read through all the sources, but I haven't read anything yet that stopped to explain "Here's why John 3:16 did not say, 'For God so loved the world that he formed a sanitized, impersonal organization.'"

Perhaps I am asking society to open a door that was forever closed: the earliest evangelists tried to resurrect medieval style

closed, the earliest encyclicals tried to resurrect medieval-style guilds, and it is not clear to me why other sources mock this decision to try to resurrect a vibrant institution that worked long and well in one time in favor of speculation about institutions not proven to work in any time. My point is not that many things are done by impersonal organization today but that when the Catholic Church opens its mouth for social teaching, no one seems to consider that anything besides an impersonal organization powered by coercion could be desirable. By contrast, our social program is spirit: God so continues to love the world that he continues to send his saints, his sons, that whosoever believes through their life of spirit and their divine love might have eternal life from his only-begotten Son. (And a million smaller and less eternal changes, too.)

Links: So then another way to get at the point of "Our social program is the Trinity" is to say, "The Orthodox Church's approach to living socially does not need a Utopian blueprint for society."

Would I be correct in hearing queer quotes when you use the word "progress"?

Dexios: I usually hear "fashions" when I read a Catholic social ethicist writing about progress. It is progress given the assumptions of a particular perspective, and (usually) given a lack of understanding of what was moving away. Again to return to my example of deprecating pre-Vatican-II days when Catholics tried to become saints and, I would say, benefit society by becoming spirit—and the "progress" to an activist approach to society—what we have is not a movement from the less advanced to the more advanced but a fashion shift from something that has fallen out of favor to something that will presumably fall out of favor. And in this case, a step back.

Links: What do you mean?

Dexios: To borrow an image which Catholic author Peter Kreeft

borrowed from C.S. Lewis, ancient ethics asked three ethical questions while modern ethics answers one (usually, but maybe two). To visualize these questions with the image of a fleet of ships at sea, the first question is how the ships can avoid bumping into each other, and this question is shared by ancient and modern ethics. The second question is how the ships can keep shipshape and maintain themselves inside, and even though this question cannot really be separated from the first question, only some modern ethics addresses it. The third question, which is the most important one, is why the ships are out at sea in the first place.

If we look at the deprecated, Orthodox model of becoming saints and being Heavenly minded enough to be of earthly good, then on a proper understanding that approach is something that says something to answer each of these questions; on that count at least, it is robust. If we look at the activist model, then things are reduced to one question, how the ships can be kept from bumping into each other, perhaps forcibly. It does reasonably well given that narrowing of focus, but it only answers that one question.

Now I would suggest that it is dubiously a moral advance to addressing three major questions to addressing one. Perhaps moral depth cannot always be settled by counting questions addressed, but this moral "advance" has been achieved by almost completely shutting off two out of three substantial questions. Which would appear to be not progress, but impoverishment.

Links: I think I can see how when you see the word "progress" you want to supply an English translation of "fashion". Or would you rather say "regress"?

Dexios: I don't want to analyze whether "regress" would be true, but I would rather speak of "fashion." When fashions shift, people go from emphasizing some things to others. People become sensitized to some things and blinded to others. And,

perhaps, sometimes, there will be real regress some times and real progress others. But there is a tendency for a fashion to see its waxing popular as progress, and I wish people could have the ability to say, "Maybe this is progress, maybe this is regress, and maybe this is just a fashion shift that, like most fashion shifts, looks like genuine progress once you adopt its peculiar sharp sensitivities and its peculiar blind spots." And no fashion shift is devoid of spirit, but if you are looking for where spirit is to be found, the house of fashion delivers less than it promises.

Links: It seems to me that Utopian dreams have never been fully realized but they have been realized somewhat, and that makes a big difference. You know that the wealthy nations may owe some of their wealth to oppression but some of it is due to the Utopian dreams of Adam Smith among others, who have discovered Midas's secret?

Dexios: Don't you mean Midas's curse?

Links: Don't you mean Midas's blessing?

Dexios: In the story of Midas, Midas gained the "blessing" of turning everything he touched to gold. And it was wonderful, or it seemed wonderful, to kick pebbles and watch gold nuggets fall to earth. But then food turned to inedible gold, and drink likewise, and if I understand the story correctly he embraced his daughter only to have her reduced to nothing but a golden statue. Then he began to be blessed, and spiritual gold was forged when he realized that maybe turning everything to gold wasn't such a good idea. Unfortunately, we haven't gained the same transformation to spiritual gold when we are bombarded by advertisements.

Malcolm Muggeridge said that nothing proves "Man does not live by bread alone" like discovering the secret of mass-producing bread, and we have not only enough bread for everybody but enough meat for most beggars to eat meat regularly. People say, "I'm not rich; I'm in debt," and have no

idea that they can purchase a month's food without suffering real financial injury. Which, to a great many people who don't know where their next meal is coming from, might as well be the ability to buy a BMW without facing any real financial obstacles. It seems for many of us by definition rich means "having more money than us because we couldn't possibly be rich."

Links: What's the downside?

Dexios: One U.S. woman was visiting a woman in Central America, I forget where. They were having coffee when she looked around her hostess's kitchen and met a dawning realization... "There isn't any food on your shelves."

"No... but there will be... and it's a good thing that I don't have any food now, because if I had it, why would I need to trust God for? But I will have food later..."

Links: We're spiritual kindergardeners, aren't we?

Dexios: If even that. That woman is spirit. She is sonship and sainthood. She is the [Sermon on the Mount](#), and if we patronize her when we patronize "those less fortunate than ourselves," we might also patronize St. Francis of Assisi for not knowing how to make a difference in the world. Not that I envy her poverty. But I envy her finding the [Sermon on the Mount](#) in her poverty, and it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to have what she has.

If capitalism is the most effective Utopian vision, it produces a Utopia for spoiled children. It may well deliver what the Utopian specifics in Catholic social teaching wouldn't get working, but what capitalism delivers and what much Catholic Utopianism tries to deliver does not make people better, or nobler, or wiser. In the particular classically liberal capitalist societies I know, most people have about as many creature comforts as we know how to make—air conditioning in Habitat for Humanity houses, meat for the homeless, television for

everyone who's not homeless—and medicine and safety push back suffering and death so that you have a good chance of not dying young, and many, many people die segregated off in nursing homes so the rest of society does not have to be visibly reminded that people grow old and die. Utopia is not something that may someday exist if social planners someday get things right; it exists here and now because social planners got what they were trying to do right.

Links: But is suffering good? Does the Bible ever talk about wonderful suffering?

Dexios: Let me quote:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. [Rom 5.3-4](#). I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. [Rom 8.18-9](#). For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. [I Cor 1.5-7](#). ...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. [Phil 3.10](#). Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. [Col 1.24](#). For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. [Heb 2.10](#). But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when

his glory is revealed. [1 Pet 4.13](#).

At least for people like us who live in Utopia, you can think that all the things a spoiled child wants are your right and if you are really suffering—maybe you won't be so crass as to say that any suffering is God's punishment, but you'll still think it's an interruption that keeps you from the normal course of Christian life. But honoring God in suffering is the normal course of Christian life. Besides what I quoted, there's the book of Job where God lays his honor on the line based on what Job will do when he has miserable suffering. I don't know how to capture all the complexity of the Biblical views on suffering, but if suffering is praised as a sharing in the sufferings of the Son who was made perfect through suffering, then maybe it's not doing the world a favor to engineer away suffering, even if that is possible.

It's not just that the Gospel works best without suffering and now we may have good enough social plans to get the Gospel to where it works best. I fear Catholic social plans if they botch and have weird side effects like social plans sometimes do, but I fear them even more if they achieve what they want. Perhaps this is easy to say from Utopia, but having what Utopia provides, I have real doubts about whether it makes me spirit. In those things that most make me a mature man, I think Utopia is overrated. I may have some maturity through the discipline of going against the flow, but there's a way where comfort can make faith lukewarm where intense persecution would make it stronger.

Catholic social planning is trying to make good that is only available to a majority available to everyone. I wish they had a somewhat bigger version of good to be sharing.

Links: So you are suspicious of efforts to help the poor.

Dexios: I am suspicious of some efforts and participate in others. I try to feed the hungry, and besides directly showing kindness to

beggars I support charities—but these charities provide more than a spoiled child would want. They support people's spiritual needs, like churches. I don't believe education needs to be put on quite as high a pedestal as some people give it, but I support education.

I guess I need to clarify. My point wasn't to say exactly what everybody in the world should have; when someone speaks to me out of pain, I rarely talk about pain as occasion for spiritual growth. But in Catholic social teaching people seemed to be saying "Wouldn't it be nice if people had this, and this, and this," and listed a number of things that for the most part do not make people better, or nobler, or wiser. There may be a discussion of duties alongside rights, but much of the encyclicals were about how much it would be better to have such things, and living in a society where most people do have those sort of things, I needed to say, "This is not what you think it is."

Links: Is there anything specific that you would say that you want for the poor, and that you would try to help them come to it?

Dexios: Absolutely.

I want them to become spirit in as full a sense as possible. I want them to glorify God and enjoy him forever. I want them to live the life of Heaven that is meant to be here and now and not just after our resurrection. I want them to be transfigured, spirit, soul, and body, into the likeness of Christ, and to be little Christs. I want them to become divine, partakers of the divine nature. I want them to own the Kingdom of Heaven and live the Divine Life. And maybe it would be nice if some of them could send missionaries to the first world, to share some of their riches. And I would like the world to profit from their wealth as the poor are chosen to shame the rich. And not just to follow the vogues of the first world.

Links: Question: What do you think about non-Christian texts, like

the *Tao Te Ching*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, or *Gospel of Thomas*?

Dexios: Um...

Links: You're going to say something nasty about Eastern religions, aren't you?

Dexios: Asking what I think about non-Christian texts like the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, or the *Gospel of Thomas* is like asking what I think about different forms of indoor exercise, like weightlifting, aerobics, and sticking your face in the fan.

The *Tao Te Ching* is spirit, and indeed words can be spirit, not just Christian words. So is the *Bhagavad-Gita*. From all I have heard, they are deep, deeper than a whale can dive, and they have taught healthy communities what it means to be human for thousands of years.

But a society that embraces Gnosticism sticks its face in the fan. Gnosticism unlike Hinduism and Taoism comes up again and again and each time it's a downward spiral that does not give spirit to a society that embraces it the way Hinduism and Taoism do.

Links: I've read some Gnostic sacred texts and they engaged my spirit like almost nothing else; they drew me in.

Dexios: I'm not surprised. Gnostic scripture is spiritual porn. Sorry to use that image, but...

Links: Are you just calling names, or is there a substantive reason for that unflattering comparison?

Dexios: Marriage is spirit, and it incorporates a number of things into its partnership, including what repeated studies have found is the best environment to enjoy sex. But no marriage that's lasted much longer the honeymoon has got there simply by sailing on pleasure; marriage is a crown of thorns, like monasticism, and part of the benefit it provides is not just an

environment for children to grow up, but an environment for the *parents* to grow up. The best marriages are not a Utopia for spoiled children but a little Utopia for mature adults.

Marriage is like spirit and spirit is like marriage, including what can be misunderstood as the spiritual erotic, a haunting, exotic factor that belongs there even if it is ultimately beyond the erotic. But that doesn't mean that exotic haunting all day long is what you should be getting. It doesn't mean, in other words, that Gnosticism is the best way to be spirit.

Links: Have you read the Gnostic Scriptures?

Dexios: I've read a good number of Gnostic sacred texts.

There are a lot of people today who've heard that the Gnostic scriptures show the human face of Jesus, and the canonical Gospels make him seem so divine he's not human. I've heard some people say that the best way to rebut that is to actually get people to read the Gnostic sacred texts, because the Gnostic sacred texts give some people what other people try to get from LSD, and their Christ is exotic and spiritual and several other things that do not include being human, not like the Jesus who wept at Lazarus' death and prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane with sweat like drops of blood—something medical that occasionally happens when people are too stressed out to possibly describe and that we do not need to explain away.

Links: So if people actually READ the texts they'll stop saying "Here at last is the human face of Jesus."?

Um, from the look on your face, you don't like that question.

Dexios: Let me draw an analogy. There was one time when some art was displayed at a coffeeshop, and some people thought it was a big deal because it showed nudity. It struck me as... maybe I haven't always been chaste in looking at nude artwork, but I

honestly didn't see what the big deal others saw. In a sense it wasn't any more exciting than a cartoonish schematic diagram; it didn't pose a problem to me because I didn't understand how the art worked.

Then... I had been looking at the art and not understanding it, and suddenly something clicked and I did understand it, and when it communicated to me... Other artwork can just celebrate the human form, if this was like a schematic diagram it was schematic and focused attention on the sexual. When it clicked, the artwork went from simply being weird to being much more seductive than what we're told a "celebration of the human form" is supposed to be.

And that is exactly what happened when I read enough Gnostic scripture. I read a little and it seemed weird. I read more and it clicked and I felt its pull. And I have been changed somewhat, and not entirely for the better.

Links: How could it change you?

Dexios: Once you have drunk from a well, you thirst for it.

Links: Do you really think that Gnosticism and *The da Vinci Code* are such a bad well to thirst for, such a bad spirit? There's more spirit in *The da Vinci Code*, though maybe not as you're using the term, than anything else to hit the shelves for a while. And it's well-written.

Dexios: I know it's well-written; after reading a bunch of Christian reports accusing it of being garbage literature, I feel its pull. I read it and to my consternation I want Mary Magdalene to be the Grail, and I seem to want to exchange a eucharistic Cup by which the Lord's blood pulses in believer's veins to believing that there is a very dilute royal bloodline alive in a few people I haven't met, which is an exchange of gold for copper, but still something the book left me wanting. There is indeed a lot of spirit in it; it makes a good lure.

Links: Calling the book's good points a "lure" is harsh, if the only real thing you're going to acknowledge it is—what is it that this "lure" points to?

Dexios: Despair.

I was quite struck when I read a book entitled *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, written by a Protestant, by the way, and it said that Gnosticism besides being an a-historical phenomenon entirely hinged on one mood: despair.

The hope Dan Brown offers in *The da Vinci Code* is a hope of despair. It's a hope that there's some sexy secret to be had behind appearances, behind the here and now, and whatever else he may have wrong about earlier forms of Gnosticism being lovely and humane, he's dead right about digging for something deeply hidden. You may have heard that some Gnostics taught that the world around us was made by an impotent, inferior, evil God and is evil. Even if not everybody said that in so many words the here and now that God gives us is something despicable. It is something to despair in and try to get around for some good that maybe more spiritual people can find. Is this good news?

Links: Hmm. I'd just assumed that the worst thing about Dan Brown was his anti-Catholicism. But you're pretty critical of the Catholic Church too.

Dexios: Indeed, because it misses the mark. It comes close in some ways, but it misses the mark. But Dan Brown doesn't seem hostile to the Catholic Church because of where it misses the mark, because of where it hits it. Whatever its imperfections may be, the Catholic Church has for about two thousand years been teaching people to be human and live lives of spirit, and live them in the here and now. Whatever other fussing I may make of the Catholic Church, it would be strange of me to deny that the Catholic Church offers something better than despair. Maybe I could wish they would do a better job of it, but the

Catholic Church offers hope, and not just because a recent Pope had some very uplifting words about living in hope. Hope is a very deep root in the Catholic Church, and it lends shape to all sorts of other things.

Links: So maybe Dan Brown doesn't offer the purest form of spirit, or maybe people would be better off if they could get to spirit in not such a despairing way. But doesn't Dan Brown deserve credit for at least getting people to devote attention to matters of spirit?

Dexios: There's a story where a princess is having a dreamlike meeting with her fairy grandmother many generations removed. Her nurse doesn't believe the princess's extraordinary tales about the grandmother, and when the princess wants to know, "Is it naughty of Nurse to not believe in you?" the grandmother only says, "It would be naughty of you."

Quite probably there are people for whom Dan Brown is a step up, who move from unspiritual despair to spiritual despair. Quite certainly there are people learning from better sources, such as Taoism and Hinduism again, and are brought into spirit. And certainly I am glad that the high school students who ask, "Why go to mass?" can join monastic Catholic worship, not so much because it is monastic as because it is worship worthy of human beings. But I as Orthodox could not join them.

Links: Why not?

Dexios: Because however God deals with other people, it would be naughty of us.

God can move through non-Orthodox resources, and non-Christian ones. But when he places someone in full communion with his Church, the Orthodox Church, things that are permissible under partial communion are no longer permissible: though I am loth to speak of communion as a resource, God will work through other resources in a genuine way to people who only have those other resources, but when

way to people who only have those other resources, but when we have the opportunity to drink from the pure source we are not to take our substance from downstream. And it would be naughty of us, whether or not it would be naughty of others, to refuse to recognize the Orthodox Church of Christ as the fountain from which we drink.

Links: It would be depriving spirit of flourishing in body, wouldn't it?

Dexios: I know that I'd say that for Dan Brown and other people who think that being Gnostic is the hidden root of spirituality. Against these I say that spirit is a great banner that when it unfurls gives shade to people-watching, travelling, listening to music, Starbuck's—

Links: Starbuck's? Doesn't that, well—

Dexios: If you mean to purchase your identity at Starbuck's then it will run short. But if you learn to enjoy things in the spirit, if you know there is more to life than food and drink, then an occasional treat can include Starbuck's. Stewardship isn't tight-fisted, and if you don't *need* commercial products like some kind of sacrament, you are freed to truly enjoy them.

Links: But what if the way people are naturally led to approach Starbuck's is as a sacrament?

Dexios: What if? So we live in a wealthy society. So when someone asks, "Was economic wealth made for man, or man for economic wealth?" people just hit the snooze button. So advertising is an abominable manipulation to make people covet things they don't need. If you are to live a life of spirit, then that means living a life of spirit in this economy, living simply and generously, and not laying the reins on the horse's neck. Your responsibility is to let what you buy be body where your life of spirit is manifest, and if Starbuck's tries to sell you an identity, and that identity is inimical to living a life of spirit, your responsibility is still to live a life of spirit that unfurls itself

in how you use wealth.

Links: This makes sense now that you say it, but where did you get that?

Dexios: That is one of the things that may, or may not, be added to us if we seek first the Kingdom of God, and it is not essential for everyone.

Links: Then what is essential?

Dexios: Spirit. Contemplation. Don't ask where to strike the balance between action and contemplation. Pursue contemplation, and don't be surprised if after a time the way God tells you to contemplate is to plant a tree.

Links: Where did you get "plant a tree" from?

Dexios: Martin Luther. When he was asked what he would do if he knew the Lord were returning tomorrow, instead of talking about praying long prayers or wailing about his sins, he simply said what he was planning on doing, which was to plant a tree. If it was really OK for him to plan to plant a tree, as he did, then there's no particular reason that if the Lord were returning the next day he should be suddenly embarrassed about legitimate, spiritual activity and try to be super-spiritual.

Contemplation seems to include a lot of planting a tree. It can mean entering a monastery, but it can also mean working a job, making friendships, shooting hoops, and playing with the neighbor's children. If we go to church, or try to cultivate a discipline of quiet, that means quite a lot of "secular" things, a "secular" body for spirit to be manifest in. And people who give up on doing big things for God often end up doing tremendous things for God as part of their contemplation.

Links: Huh? How does that work? Or are you just being down on activists?

Dexios: Ever hear about a Wesley boy trying to do serious work for God?

Links: No.

Dexios: One of the Wesley brothers believed that missionaries were the biggest super-Christians, and so got everything arranged to be a big missionary for God.

And then he hit rock bottom. He failed as a missionary, returned a failure, and then fell lower than rock bottom when, on the ship, there was a terrible storm, and he was afraid for his life and puzzled about why there were men on deck singing. When he asked them if they were afraid, they said that no, they were not afraid, because they believed in Jesus. That finished him.

Only after that happened did he become one of the biggest forces in American Christianity.

Links: You make God sound cruel.

Dexios: If you expect God to share an activist mentality then God looks very cruel, but God isn't a secular activist. This wasn't even a social justice issue; Wesley said "God, I'll be a really good hammer and do really impressive work," and if anything, God said, "I don't want a hammer. I want a son." People who try to be activists sometimes make the best sons after they fail as activists, but the reason God didn't endorse Wesley's plan about how he was going to make a difference was that God makes a difference through people, and however big and important the work is that needs to be done, God makes sons first and foremost, and never circumvents sonship to "cut to the chase" and get to the important part, because to him sonship is the important part, and he can equip people to do results once they fail as hammers if need be.

There's a big difference between "I'll do the best I can" and

"I'll lay myself before God and work as he is at work." The difference is whether your power is a matter of spirit. There was a visiting African pastor who came to the U.S. and said, "It's amazing what you can do without the Holy Spirit;" that stinging compliment is one God's sons need not hear. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) says more about where our power should come from than what we should achieve; the Gospel is about trusting God, not just about the fate of our souls but getting things done here on earth. It's challenging and it becomes all the more challenging when you realize how broken of a world we live in.

And perhaps God also does things through people who think they know how mountains are moved here on earth and try to short-circuit God's call to become a son like his Son. God could still work with them if they more fully spirit. Spirit has its own power in God.

Links: Let me change the subject, or maybe I'm not changing the subject. Where do the seven sacraments fit into this?

Dexios: Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Matrimony, the Sign of the Cross, reverently Bowing, the Holy Kiss, and the Blessing of Fruit—

Links: —that's a rather strange list of seven sacraments!

Dexios: It seems perfectly natural to me. If it seems strange to you, then perhaps there's something you don't understand about the usual list. Holy Communion, Baptism, Confirmation, Confession, Ordination, Marriage, and Unction for Healing are not the Seven Exceptions. They may be the biggest seven—but you don't understand them until you realize that there's either one sacrament or a thousand, and that a thousand little things in our piety are the same sort of thing as The Big Seven. Like blessing fruit to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration!

Links: But why bless fruit then? Do you also bless candles to celebrate the Annunciation?

Dexios: I'd have to look up when we bless candles, but it does not seem strange to me to bless fruit. The Transfiguration is not just when the Son of God shone, but it is specifically when his body, the first of the material world to be drawn into spirit, shone. It was a first taste of the Transfiguration when the rest of his kingdom comes in force, and the Holy Transfiguration of Christ ultimately becomes the holy transfiguration of the whole Creation, and its fruits. Today people might pick something else to represent Creation's productivity, but grapes and fruit come from Creation and are a part of it, and in a sense by blessing fruit on the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration we know what it means, that it's not just something way back when that's only about Christ, but about something that is meant to expand through the whole Creation of which Christ is head. Just as Christ is to be the first of many sons and draw mankind into him, so his body is the first case of matter drawn into the divine, of body that is spirit, and his coming was the beginning of a shockwave that keeps reaching out.

Links: So is the Transfiguration a big enough deal that it's worth adorning with a sacrament, like many other holidays.

Dexios: That makes it sound like something external. The spirit of the Transfiguration is the spirit of sacrament, and of icons. I've said earlier that spirit transforms body, or should; now I'll go further and say that God makes us spirit *through* body. If you try to understand Holy Communion and ask the wrong questions, you're in danger of stopping at learning what happens after the priest has consecrated the elements, even though it's important that the bread and wine have become the body and blood of Christ they represent. That's only half the story. The rest of the story is when this bread and wine that have become the body and blood of Christ are partaken by the faithful, and the faithful are transformed. Our bodies are not a mere ornament as we partake of the divine nature; we partake of the Church and Creation, and the divine life, precisely when we receive what has been transformed that it may transform us.

God makes us spirit through not only our bodies but his material creation: the Word became flesh, and the flesh became Word, and the Word keeps becoming flesh, and the flesh keeps becoming Word, and the shockwave ever reaches outward.

Links: And the Church has a lot of blessings, from a traveller's blessing to blessing Pascha baskets, doesn't it? And there are many sacred actions as we say our prayers, aren't there? I imagine if you counted all the sacramental rites and sacred actions you'd actually wind up with more than the figure of one thousand that you grabbed.

Dexios: But the nature of a sacrament doesn't really end up there. Ultimately the world is icon and sacrament. A man is the microcosm of the universe, but you have to understand that the "universe" is the spiritual as well as physical world, and that "microcosm" means that the spiritual and physical are all bound up in miniature. In a man who is spirit, they are more tightly bound together: you can look at most people's faces and if they're not masking then you can see into their spirit; spirit and body do not war against each other. And if you understand how our bodies are in fact the bodies of our spirits, and our spirits are the spirits of our bodies, then you understand that in "man writ large", the universe that is the opposite of man the microcosm, then matter is pregnant with spirit.

Perhaps the crowning jewel is the kind of rite over which a priest presides. It is a crowning jewel of the warp and woof of "mundane" life, if life is ever "mundane" properly understood. For one example, you may have heard of the clergy shortage in Alaska: something like a third of the state population is Orthodox but there are precious few priests. And a congregation asked the bishop what to do as they cannot often have a priest to worship. The bishop said only two things. One of them I will not mention. The other was to eat together.

Holy Communion casts a long shadow. Part of this means that a priest can bless fruit and anyone can partake of it, and

maybe there's a blessing even if it's not a big deal as the Eucharist. But you're missing something if that's the only place you look.

A meal with other people is part of the Eucharist unfurling. It's not directly the Eucharist, but if you understand what the Eucharist is then a common meal stands in its luminous shadow. The bishop's advice was not simply a substitute for imperfect times; even when there is a priest it is good for the Eucharist to unfurl into a common meal, and however nice it is for the priest to bless the food that's not all that is going on. Table fellowship is common communion and "common" conceals a wealth of majesty. It's not a really different thing from the Eucharist.

Links: [pause] It seems like I want to learn it all. What else is there to learn?

Dexios: Not to learn everything. You can learn about the priest, whose role I haven't covered, but what I've said about us needing monks applies even more strongly to one person given over to be spirit in a way that helps others be spirit. There is spiritual discipline, which almost as many different shapes as sacrament—I haven't talked about fasting: the demons always fast but only someone like us with body and spirit can be transformed and have his body become spirit by fasting. I haven't talked about—

If you want to become more spirit, why don't you think of an act of spirit and do that?

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"

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 might 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

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

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 thought 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."

How Shall We Live This Instant?

Quest: So your use of 'orthodoxy' is not, strictly speaking, 'mere Christianity' as defined by C.S. Lewis, or any of its close kin.

Targe: It is not.

Quest: Then what is it? You have already said that it was not Thomas Owen's "postmodern paleo-Orthodox evangelical Christian."

Targe: The failure is interesting.

Quest: *How so?*

Targe: Well, one definition proposed as coinciding with postmodern paleo-Orthodox evangelical Christians is, "someone who can say the Nicene Creed without crossing their fingers." And the politically correct "their" is significant; I'll get to that in a moment. But what I would point out that Baptists in their version of the Creed add a footnote to "Catholic" stating that it means "universal," which of course it does, but the Protestant who says that is crossing fingers, or what is much the same thing, using the same words to mean different things: hence 'Church' means a purely invisible Church, the entire conception of which is as foreign to the Bible as it has been to ages of Orthodoxy. For another example of crossing fingers by saying the same thing but meaning something different, a

Mormon can say most or possibly all of the Creed, but they mean something different by it: hence their saying, "As the Father is, so shall we be; as we are, so the Father was." Part of the Catholic-Orthodox understanding of the Creed, for instance, is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are absolute in perfection from before there was time. And it's crossing fingers to say you believe in God, the Father Almighty, and mean that a limited being became what we now call God the Father Almighty. And the connection is questionable at least between Mormon and Orthodox understandings of 'deification'; the same word has two different and what might as well be unrelated meanings.

Quest: So you would throw it out?

Targe: The Spirit Spirits where He wills. Some have said, "We can say where the Church is, but not where it isn't," and others have said, "*Not even that.*" In that sense there really *is* an invisible Church, and those who are most insistent on necessity of being a faithful members of the Orthodox Church must needs acknowledge that there are Hindus and ancient pagans who will be saved, and there are members of the Orthodox Church who will be damned. His Eminence KALLISTOS, perhaps of concern to some Orthodox as dancing too close to the edge, none the less has an "all-purpose anecdote" (as he calls it) that anybody not caught in the trap of "True" Orthodoxy must recognize, tells a story about a woman who was severe in her fasting and observance of spiritual practices:

Once there was an old woman and she died. And somewhat to her surprise, she woke to find herself in a lake of fire. Looking out she saw her guardian angel walking on the shore. And she called out, "There has been some mistake. I am a very respectable old lady and I should not be here in this lake of fire."

"Oh," said the guardian angel, "do you ever remember a time when you helped someone else?"

And the old woman thought for some time and she said, "Yes. Once I was gardening and a beggar came by and I gave her an onion."

"Excellent," said the angel, "I happen to have that very onion with me now." And he reached into his robes and he produced it. And he said to her, "Let us see what the onion will do. You take the other end and I will pull." Perhaps it was not an onion but a shallot.

Gradually then, the angel, with the help of the onion, began to pull the old woman out of the lake of fire. But she was not the only person there. When the others saw what was happening they crowded round her and hung on in the hope of being pulled out as well. This did not please the old woman at all. She began to kick and to cry out, "Let go! Let go! It's not you who's being pulled out it's me! It's not your onion, it's mine!"

And when she said, "It's mine!" the onion split in two and she fell back into the lake of fire and there, so I'm told, she still is.

And His Eminence KALLISTOS obtained the story from Dostoevsky, who recorded it from someone else.

Quest: But what does that have to do with "postmodern"?

Targe: Well, if we accept the usual definition of postmodern—which Oden is not exactly trying to subvert, but claim "We were here first" competition—it is misleading at best to say, "If you were born in these centuries, you are a modern; if you are born in these decades, you are a postmodern." There are engineers, large number of engineers who are moderns and who are aware of postmodernism as something that is out there, but aware with the kind of awareness one holds of fashions in faroff countries. And they may understand it well or, more often, not so well. Quite possibly they do not know a postmodern (in the

usual sense).

Quest: How does Oden's usage of "postmodern" differ from the more run of the mill version?

Targe: We have more a coincidence of names. What is usually called *post*-modernism is really a further unfolding of [the damned backswing](#) in the inner logic of modernism. René DesCartes fills the classic sociological definition of a pariah among postmodern authors in that attacks on him do not need justification (just read refereed academic journals and books where an attack on DesCartes is rarely accompanied by a footnote), but he began a program of tearing things up that was a precursor to deconstructionism. And it is from his patronage and country that Derrida came, and I've tried a few things to understand Derrida in any constructive way. I fairly quickly tried reading Derrida in the original. (*It didn't help.*) And Oden's claim, rightly enough, is that this should really be called "hyper-modernism." There are other things it could be called, like "modernism 2.0" or "modernism on steroids" or "the inner (il)logic of modernism further unfolding", but Oden's suggestion is appropriate enough. And what he means by "post-modernism", when it does not mean "hyper-modernism," is people who have tried the modernist project and rejected it, like an engineer with a T-shirt that says, "Been there, wrecked that." And in that sense postmodernism regards modernism and hypermodism as a vacation from reality and, perhaps with some archaeological interest or perhaps not, sees something like ancient or medieval life as still open to us. It may be noted, perhaps with excitement, that the Orthodox Church does not view the Church Fathers as a closed canon; perhaps a Catholic might not be inclined to say that there are medieval theologians still writing, but there is much room for Orthodox to say that patristic writing has not stopped and will not stop until the Lord returns.

Quest: So there are people writing now you would identify as Church Fathers?

Targe: Probably.

Quest: You do not introduce someone as a living saint; some have ascended to the third heaven and still been damned. There is a story of a saint who at the end of life set one foot in Paradise, and the demons praised him, saying, "Glory to you; you have defeated us!" and the saint said, "Not yet, I haven't!" and pulled the other foot into Paradise. There are saints whose relics are incorrupt but it is the general wisdom of the Orthodox Church to allow some time for the dust to settle on a saint's tomb. And I believe there are future saints that are alive, and *some* that will be recognized as Church Fathers who delivered living patristic theology, but we should not seek them out. We have recognized saints and Church Fathers from ages before; let us sit at their feet and learn from their life.

Thomas Oden's version of postmodernism is tangled though.

Targe: How do you mean?

It is an attempt to be part of the Orthodox Church without being part of the Orthodox Church. Now this endeavor has happened before; one could argue that the Reformation was an attempt at (paleo-)Orthodoxy. And more recent efforts like Radical Orthodoxy start by having Protestant authors greatly appreciate pre-Protestant theologians, and not just the Blessed St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and yet somehow Radical Orthodoxy ends up producing articles that speak of "the incestuous, homosexual union of the Father and the Son" and be as deliberately lewd as academic theology which has no pretensions to any Orthodox label. It's a wasteland.

Quest: Do you believe all of Oden's "postmodern paleo-Orthodox evangelical Christians" are judged by that standard?

"Tolkien once remarked to me that the feeling about home must have been quite different in the days when a family had fed on the

have been quite different in the days when a family had fed on the produce of the same few miles of country for six generations, and that perhaps this was why they saw nymphs in the fountains and dryads in the woods - they were not mistaken for there was in a sense a real (not metaphorical) connection between them and the countryside. What had been earth and air & later corn, and later still bread, really was in them.

"We of course who live on a standardised international diet (you may have had Canadian flour, English meat, Scotch oatmeal, African oranges, & Australian wine to day) are really artificial beings and have no connection (save in sentiment) with any place on earth. We are synthetic men, uprooted. The strength of the hills is not ours."

—C. S. Lewis in a letter to Arthur Greeves, 22 June 1930

Targe: God help us, no. People who try such things may be very virtuous indeed. But—no, I need to put that off again—but consider well [the three-fold comparison of natural sciences, academic theology, and Orthodox theology in "Religion and Science Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution."](#) Something remarkably similar may be said of Oden's hypermodern, Oden's postmodern, and Orthodoxy's patristic. That is, you can make a threefold comparison between hypermodern, postmodern, and patristic as you can with science, academic theology, and patristic theology. Let us look some at Wittgenstein's forms of life: Wittgenstein as a philosopher was dead wrong about many things and the phrase "after Wittgenstein" is itself a warning label, but in patristic Orthodoxy across the centuries and millenia, there is a cycle of day and night and though candles may give a little light, you act during the day and wind down at night. For the hypermodern and the postmodern by contrast, things are very different from the Orthodox patristic norm, when the sun goes down you usually turn on lights, and though scrupulous Jews may leave by sunset to avoid work on the Sabbath, it is not the rule for offices or factories to close just because of a sunset. For those living before modern times, there existed such a thing as an "epistolary relationship," in some arrangement of pen pals, but to the hypermodern and

postmodern, it is more prevalent among the youth than among adults to have relationships increasingly mediated by shifting sands of computer technologies, by social networks and ten thousand other things. Overall it may be true that liberals use technology better than conservatives: "My Barack Obama" in Obama's first campaigns used some of the best technology has to offer, and while Django is freely offered to conservatives too, the power base for conservatism is not suburban or urban middle class, and a great many Republican votes come from the kind of people torn up in [Deer Hunting with Jesus](#). To that basic observation, I may respond that the way new technologies are adapted and used works more like a liberal process than a conservative conservation. In some sense conservatives who use technology skillfully might be considered "virtual liberals": yes, their votes may be to the right, and yes, their views and voices may be to the right, but they are skilled at negotiating a liberal style of waters. If conservatives use technology a little more clumsily, this is because the inner workings continue in some sense to preserve their character. One translates between Italian and Spanish more easily than one translates between Italian and Russian: and here the relation between technology and liberalism is like that between Italian and Spanish, and the relation between technology and conservatism is like that between Italian and Russian. The mere incompetence of some conservatives with technology is a sign of a strength somewhere else. But compared to any previous century, a conservative or postmodern (Oden-style) looks remarkably more like a liberal or hypermodern (Oden-style), or the vast number of mostly liberal people who run TV and popular blogs. The Paleo movement, which has perhaps appropriately been called a lifestyle (although [Paleo Hacks](#) discusses lifestyle far less than diet or exercise), is remarkable because it is exceptional. It looks at one aspect of life, diet—or maybe two, diet and exercise, plus a few other details—and says that what we have done with food since the industrial revolution is morbid. And it looks at how best to recover the strengths of the basic human hunter-gatherer style of diet (and of life) with what we have in front of

us. But diet and exercise are two out of a hundred aspects of human life and living, two out of very *many* layers, and if conservatives like Dorothy Sayers and C.S. Lewis complained about newfangled light available whenever you flick a switch, or cars that annihilated God-given space, or talked about refusing to eat tinned food, this was a blip even for conservatives. Neither C.S. Lewis nor Dorothy Sayers complained about the ease of putting pen to paper, easing the physical side of writing to be economically cheap and physically effortless compared to medieval standards C.S. Lewis would have known well, where writing was compared to ploughing a furrow and unambiguously classified as a form of (strenuous) manual labor.

Today, rural adults volunteer to keep cinemas alive and providing movies to children and youth. In days past cautious Christians avoided movies; now it is a conservative move to keep cinemas alive as a piece of history not to be lost. Technology progresses along its own inner rules, and it unfolds and its [damned backswing unfurls](#).

It is a common preference in the U.S. to choose retrieving information over owning it. The development of computers has followed this preference, and most of what you do that is most interesting is to retrieve new, fresh information. We live in digital dark ages where the cascade of technologies, one largely displacing another, will leave future archaeologists and historians thirsty for an understanding of what we have, and we have reached the point, and long passed it, that curators of computational museums have physical storage media that they believe to be mostly or completely intact, and to contain real information, but they are at a loss for how to read it. The Air Force started a program to purchase one of every type of storage device, printer, etc. so that they would be able to prevent this from happening. But there was a kink along the way; some of the printers they purchased, left to sit for months, had rubber parts turn to gum. The Air Force saw and specifically took countermeasures to curate and keep the means of reading any

form of computer storage, and while a museum may have come out of it, the original goal is all but impossible. Perhaps they could have gotten farther by actively maintaining all of their inventory, but there comes a point when you cannot obtain what you need to maintain old equipment, no matter how skilled you are at making repairs or how much you can pay.

Those who understand such thing said that when Steve Jobs unveiled the iPad, he toppled the first domino in a chain that will make netbooks, notebooks, and desktops go the way of the landline or horse: a rarity, at least. And when Microsoft revealed Windows 8, they basically said, "*We agree. We'll go further than you, Apple. You let Macs continue to run on MacOS, without any effort to convert them to iOS devices. We'll make a version of Windows optimized for mobile users, and we'll release that as the desktop version as well as the mobile version.*" Whether that move was right or not, time will tell. But Microsoft and Apple have declared an agreement that the tablet is the wave of the future and the desktop, even the Mac, is the wave of the past.

There is a science fiction short story, from when computers first entered the public consciousness, of a monastery of some religion which was involved in writing down all of the names of God to bring about the end of the world. They purchased a computer to help them do this task much faster. The ending of the story had the salesman getting on an airplane, noting, "They should be reaching the end of their calculation now," and looking out the window and seeing a star vanish. There is already a star that has vanished: Apple has not rolled out Retina display to 17" MacBook Pros; instead, Apple has *retired* the top of the line, its 17" MacBook Pros. If you don't have a 17" MacBook and you want one, time for creative internet shopping!

And [the damned backswing](#) unfurls economically. The 1950's drew unprecedented levels of wealth and an ersatz civic

virtue of keeping up with the Joneses; compare the appliances and possessions of a 1990's house with a 1950's house and some have said that we were no longer keeping up with the Joneses: we were keeping up with the Trumps. So the longer and longer we go, the richer we get? Um, not exactly; we are being cut by [the damned backswing](#). We indeed possess luxuries and possessions never before available in the history or prehistory of the race of men. But these luxuries, which we *may not* be able to keep hold of, do not our dreams of riches all come true. To quote an investment billboard, "My wild dream of retirement? Actually retiring!" [The damned backswing that gave us newfangled forms of luxury is now cutting and delivering poverty well below a 1950's "keeping up with the Joneses" standard of living.](#)

Quest: Guess things were better in the fifties?

Targe: I'd like to visit a point with G.K. Chesterton, whether or not Chesterton sees eye to eye with Orthodoxy on this point. In discussing Francis of Assisi's aspirations as a soldier, Chesterton says that loving other people and fighting them is perfectly consistent. And in Orthodoxy, unlike Catholic theology, there is no real concept of a just war. Orthodox are allowed to be soldiers, and there are saints who were soldiers. But a soldier who has tried to kill cannot become a priest, and regardless of what might have been the cause of war, Orthodox soldiers are expected to do years of penitence after their combat. Orthodoxy may have soldiers as much as Catholicism, but the concept of a just war is foreign to it.

But I still wish to visit one of Chesterton's points, besides his saying that Francis of Assisi was perfectly right to go to fight in war against a neighboring city-state. He commented that if two such city-states were to fight continually against each other for a century, it might come within some remote distance of the body count of one of our modern scientific wars. And here I would like to make a comment about firearms and the Iran-Iraq war.

Modern Western firearms did not create the Iran-Iraq war; but we have come to possess modern assault rifles at the end of a process of change and military obsolescence, where generals and military leaders have adapted and adopted new tactics for centuries. The development of weapons may be easier for an outsider to see than shifts in tactics and strategy but alongside one gamechanger of a weapon after another has been a shift in tactics to try and achieve victory with a minimum of losses from among one's own troops, and really also an attempt to kill as few as the enemy as you reasonably can while achieving your objective. One World War II sailor talked about how his ship sunk an enemy ship, and then, with tears, explained that the smell of a certain oil burning wafted into their craft, and he and the other sailors were absolutely disgusted, not because what they were smelling was vile (but it *was* vile), but because they realized that meant that men from the other ship, their enemies, were dying with that obscene *stench* in their nostrils. And the soldier, crying, said, "You can't hate him. He's another sailor, just like yourself!"

It is possible for a soldier to love his enemies, and in Arab culture, before Western armaments were dropped in, men fought all the time, just like St. Francis, but there was something about their fighting that was almost like sparring or horseplay. Killing men outright was not the rule, and it was *not* desired. And then, without much precedent, 20th century weapons were dumped on, by Western standards, 12th or 13th century military strategy, and there were none of the West's slow learning over the centuries how to handle increasingly more destructive weapons while *trying* to accomplish goals with less casualties on both sides.

Quest: It should seem then that you should welcome the fifties.

Targe: The fifties came after World War II. One of the definitions of a modern war is a war that ends at the exhaustion of one side's resource: a war of attrition, such as when part of the U.S. made

a second Declaration of Independence, another part decided it non-negotiable that the United States be a single country, and neither side pulled back when blood flowed like a river, deep and wide. As to World War II, on essentially every side it was several notches removed from what I have tried to call orthodoxy, even though making what it means clear is hard. Even the traditional Arab raiding and lightweight fighting was a longstanding departure from what I call orthodoxy, but it was in the same ballpark. It did not go too far from the Garden of Eden. But warfare in its modern sense—the inventor of what we now know as a modern machine gun had almost *pacifist* intentions; he thought that when that invention was brought into war, people would be so horrified and disgusted that they would stop using guns, or at least machine guns, into war, and apparently horrified at the nation that would use such a vile weapon and horrified at using guns on people. But though an early machine gun may have been called "the Devil's paintbrush," automatic assault rifles are standard in infantry combat for anyone who is serious about war. There has been a long history of weapons that were expected to be too horrible to use: several Popes tried unsuccessfully to ban crossbows in their day's version of the Geneva Conventions, and the machine gun just mentioned, and the battleship, and most recently nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. For now at least we have stopped using them. But whether or not warfare as such is "orthodox", modest and small wars by modern standards depart from orthodoxy much further than Francis of Assisi going to fight another city-state with dreams of soldierly glory.

Now to return to the 1950's. In the course of the greatest industrial war so far, America developed very well optimized industrial production to fuel the war. People may well have been Spartan enough in what they were doing and how they were living (ration books and all that), but when the war ended, the gears of factories started out turning other things besides munitions, and advertising became more manipulative and seductive, and people began to keep up with the Joneses. This

may be better than the river of blood in world war, but there is something about spend, spend, spend to keep the factories spewing out goods that is further from orthodoxy than the sacrifice of a war effort which gave as much of one's sap and soul with no personal benefit in the progress, than consuming the output of factories spewing consumer goods on the level of materials for war. Dorothy Sayers's [The Other Six Deadly Sins](#) comes to mind, *readily* to mind. Sayers outlined a door to orthodoxy open to post-war Europe, but Europe did not choose that route.

Quest: And now we have shifted gears further: calling the 1950's sexist has given way to attacking whether religion may act against queer interests, it would seem.

Targe: There is an instance of a pattern of people saying, "You are making a mountain out of a molehill. You should give in here." To make an extremely offensive comparison, this is a bit like the molester's message, "Don't tell anyone. It's OK." Both parts of the message are internalized by the person addressed. It's the same warped character that said, "Voting for Bush because you oppose gay marriage is a bit like buying a ticket to England because you like the salted nuts the airline stewardesses serve on the flight."

I have never seen someone who says "You are making a mountain out of a molehill. You should give in," treat the 'molehill' as a molehill that is readily conceded to focus on more important points. I have never heard of someone who calls an opponent's position a molehill ever give in on that point. And here actions speak louder than words: the rhetorical move of "your position is a molehill; you should give it up and do things our way" is always, *always* accompanied by actions treating the "molehill" as a non-negotiable *mountain*.

One of those molehills concerns the ordination of women. *Gender or Giftedness?* one promoted title asks. And it is begging the question; it assumes giftedness has nothing to do

with gender when gender provides much of the concrete shape by which God has gifted all of mankind.

There is someone who said that all of the Luddites were right; all describe something of mankind dying. Plato took a Luddite approach to writing, saying in a famous passage in Phaedrus, let me look it up...

At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth; the bird which is called the Ibis was sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days Thamus was the king of the whole of Upper Egypt, which is in the district surrounding that great city which is called by the Hellenes Egyptian Thebes, and they call the god himself Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he went through them, and Thamus inquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. There would be no use in repeating all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; for this is the cure of forgetfulness and folly. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, he who has the gift of invention is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance a paternal love of your own child has led you to say what is not the fact: for this invention of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters. You have found a specific, not for memory but for reminiscence, and you give your disciples only the pretence of wisdom; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be

omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome, having the reputation of knowledge without the reality.

And anyone who thinks this is a mere hiccup would be well advised to remember that Orthodoxy preserves alive the character of an oral tradition. Perhaps this is not the most important truth about Orthodoxy. Mount Athos preserves a great many age-old forms of life, but it would be a serious misunderstanding to make that one's primary reason to visit the Holy Mountain.

Quest: Is there any hope? Any way to turn back the clock? It seems we have departed from the natural operating conditions of *Homo sapiens* quite a bit.

Targe: In more ways than we can name. We have lost a primal stillness; even Lao Tzu in the fifth century B.C. knew a primal stillness had *then* been lost among his people; he was concerned people had become noisy, complicated where peace is simple. He is said to have been a keeper of some royal library, but he did not turn to books for our salvation.

Quest: Then where is hope to be found?

Targe: *Here and now.* There was one hieromonk who reflected back on his time in a Soviet, Marxist concentration camp, and simply said, "God was so present there." There, in the midst of everything the Devil might do, was God. He had been tortured to the point of breaking all of his fingers, and he simply remembered that God was there.

Quest: He must have been quite a monk.

And yet I wonder... um, maybe it's better not to mention...

Targe: Yes?

Quest: Um...

Targe: Yes?

Quest: Orthodoxy and Paleo both say things about diet, and they don't say the same thing. Can we benefit from both?

Targe: That is an excellent question to discuss with your priest.

Quest: And beyond that?

Targe: That is still an excellent question to discuss with your priest.

Strictly speaking, Orthodox fasting and Paleo diet are compatible. Nothing in Orthodox fasting rules dictates that one eats bread every day, or rice or noodles. During a fasting period, you may eat seafood and an abundance of vegetables, and for that matter possibly more variety than keeping the fast without Paleo. Have you ever gone through a fast and exhausted the possibilities of just vegetables available in grocery stores?

But let's look at fasting in the extreme. The reconciliation I gave above, saying there is an area where the two dietary rules intersect, is a bit of a decoy. If you read the lives of the saints, they walk on water, or enter fire without being burnt. Saints give to God above what nature provides, and often, though not always, saints who work great wonders live on a diet that would seem to produce all manner of weakness. But these are spiritual athletes. Now the asceticism of fasting or something like it is normative, but in considering Orthodoxy and the Paleo diet, let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. One's priest, and perhaps also one's doctor, is really the kind of person one should seek help from. In general, the rule in Orthodoxy is, *Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.*

[Attempts to turn back the clock keep moving us further from the source. Don't look back. Look up!](#)

There is something false in things as we have been looking

at them, in saying that Luddites since the time of Plato have mourned losses that came with technological gains, in talking about food and drink: the Kingdom of Heaven is not a matter of food and drink. Now the choices we make may matter, but the true way of looking at things is not from the material up to the spiritual, but from the spiritual down to the material. Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you as well. This was true in the first century, when the Sermon on the Mount was given, but the truth is as old as humanity.

And it is also the answer to the question, "how we shall live in this instant?"

Singularity

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

John: Mine illuminèd 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 illuminèd one may speak aright. Call thou me as one illuminèd, 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 depravèd ascetical enterprise, chopped off, severed from

even the limb, made hollow, and then grown 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 regardeth this icon and receive it as is wont.

Herodotus: As is wont?

John: As is wanton. For veneration and icons are forcèd 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 τέχνη: 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 giganatical 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 environment 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 lullabies 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.