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Wenn die Philosophie ihr Grau in Grau malt, dann ist eine Gestalt des Lebens alt geworden, und mit Grau an Grau läßt sie sich nicht verjüngen, sondern nur erkennen; die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug.

When philosophy paints its gray on gray, a certain formation of life has grown old, and with *our* gray on *its* gray that formation doesn't get rejuvenated but only understood; the Owl of Minerva, the wisdom of Athena, takes to wing only at the fall of dusk.

Philosophy of Right, Preface

Cf. Goethe's *Faust*, I.6 (2038-39), where Mephistopheles (the most beautiful of fallen angels) tells the young student:

*Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.*

My dear friend, gray are all theories
And green alone life's golden tree.

That is (I interpret): philosophy's "theorizing" appears gray because it reminds us of the gray and not just the green of life — and we quickly turn gray when insisting on the green only.

Cyril Welch

Sometime early on in my peregrinations through the classics I came upon the remark (by Hegel) that the Owl of Minerva, wisdom itself, begins its flight only at fall of night. It was a bothersome thought to one, like me, for whom the prospect of life seems indissociable from dawn, as in Thoreau's *Walden* and Henry Bugbee's *The Inward Morning*. The remark seemed to reflect the defeatism of the Old World, a pessimism founded on its long history of great accomplishments followed by devastating declines. However, in the course of time, and especially after carefully perusing the entire scope of the classics, slowly learning something of the conditions out of which literature and philosophy — art generally — have grown, I have come to appreciate its simple truth: we pause to rethink, down to the roots, only when things are not going well, even collapsing, either from outright abuse or from the subtle disuse of habit. For only then, within the tense discrepancy between what we perceive to be and what we conceive to be, do we pause to consider the two — one at a time, each in contrast to the other — and possibly understand them, separately as well as in their interrelations on the stage.

But then it would seem that the thoughtful life — the life of literature and philosophy, of art generally — must relish decline and collapse as well as birth and growth, since only they provide the opportunity to spring into the action appropriate to creative work. For, aiming still for rebirth and healthy growth, such work accepts the cycle of birth and death — acknowledges the death hovering over any genuine life. What Goethe's *Faust* finally says of individuals might apply especially well to one's cultural institutions, whether a family, a university or a nation: only those deserve liberty and life who understand they must re-enact them each day anew.

Just as when a love affair is ending in frustration we may ponder, perhaps for the first time, “What is this thing called love?” so too when our political institutions are teetering we may ponder what thinkers ever since Plato have been asking us to ponder: What is this thing called government? — In neither of these two cases does such pondering lack a pressing example, and so neither need degenerate into free-floating, merely hypothetical speculation.

Our own has for some time now been celebrated under the name “democracy”: the people have a say in designating, at intervals, their leaders and representatives (rather than accepting the leadership acquired by birth or force). In our version, the dominant key of those wishes is set by the economic ideal of consumption (not, for example, moral ideals of salvation). Surrounding this ideal loom questions bearing on liberty (meaning not release of the soul but rather lack of undue restraint from the outside) and equality (meaning not equal treatment in general but rather equal treatment before the law). Our basic faith is that individuals can and should make it on their own, like lone wolves roaming the forests (rather than like bees working in a hive). Our faith, we know, contrasts sharply with the faith sustaining the totalitarian regimes in Europe early in the 20th century.

Like any regime, except perhaps more so, our democracy is fraught with internal conflicts, even contradictions.

For one, my liberty might interfere with yours: government must place constraints on us all, and not only for immediate protection of each, but also for safety and stability in the construction, production and distribution of goods: policing becomes necessary, along with a penal code.

For another, equality before the law pertains not only to treatment in courts of law but also seeps into treatment in schools and other institutions, including eventually those quasi-institutions we call businesses, the assurance of which has required ever more government intervention and constraint.

And, for a third, faith in individualism and insistence on welfare contradict each other blatantly, as evident in the conflict between pure capitalism and pure socialism — both of which, separately and together, serve the ideals of consumerism.

In general, perhaps, the basic conflict in our version of democracy is that between rights and duties. Unlike in any other regime, rights lead the way, and duties follow more or less reluctantly. Given the twinned principles of individualism and liberty, whatever one wants appears *prima facie* as a right, and can only be denied or mitigated on the grounds that the wish-become-right conflicts with the rights of others. For instance, even our own democracy began with the universal assumption that government keep public records of the three milestones of each citizen — birth, marriage and death — but in many jurisdictions now “privacy of information” allows an individual to conceal all three from public view, at least until some other right conflicts with this one.

Whereas a non-democratic government, whether monarchic or despotic, teeters, and its nation begins to fall apart, when the citizenry becomes sufficiently dissatisfied to rise in rebellion, a democratic government teeters when the dissatisfaction rises to the point of severe polarization presaging outright civil war. The susceptibility of democracy, especially our form of it, to such polarization stems not only from its initial tolerance of contrary opinions about what is most desirable for our institutions to promote, but also from the fact that an existing democratic government, embodying as it does the wishes of some portion of the citizenry, cannot so easily serve as a scapegoat: unable to find father-figures on top to blame for their misery, those below turn on themselves, as happened in the early 1930s in Germany.

All the while, what holds a country together is faith in its institutions: most centrally in its legislating and judicial bodies, then also in its systems of education, health-care, policing and the many arrangements structured by its bureaucracies (those issuing building

permits, collecting taxes, and so on). It is primarily faith in their integrity (despite the moral failings of their incumbents), and therefore in the degree of their efficacy (never assured for any pending instance). Such faith lingers in the air more than it resides in any one individual. And may support any form of government. Our own form of democracy also depends on it and will, upon its complete loss, fall apart.

While no one will ever discover a way of assuring this ingredient essential to keeping a nation together — short, that is, of some miracle of the pharmaceutical industry — we can wonder how faith in institutions actually works, and thereby perhaps increase our nation's longevity (just as we increase our own by enquiring into our bodily functions).

Faith in *individuals* means trust that they will perform properly: you can depend on them to do what they are charged with doing. Such faith imputes both ability and reliability. This earthly faith some will extend to the Maker of earthly things generally, with the proviso that there's a difference between what God has created (or is creating) and what we (our contemporaries and our ancestors) have done with His creation.

Faith in *institutions* means trust not only in the ability and the reliability of arrangements (the systems of legislation, education and the rest), but also in their fairness in the day-to-day affairs of government — and, in the case of our democracy, their preservation of the liberty and equality of individuals. Only faith in fairness leads to the sense of shared ideals necessary for communal cooperation.

The great experiment of our own democracy introduced a strange relation between the two directions of faith. At the highest level of government, its formation by the selection of representatives and leaders, institutions are established on the assumption that individuals can never be entirely trusted. Desirous of democratic government, but rightly fearful that the citizens in general would never have the ability to assure that the individuals filling the

elected offices would be truly trustworthy, the founders of modern democracies set themselves the task of constructing the institutions of government that could — they hoped — withstand poor and even vicious governors. They aspired to constitutions that would inspire faith in offices while allowing distrust of the office-holders. The ultimate challenge of faith is to keep it directed at the institutions, signs of what remains, despite the behavior of the officials who come and go.

Yet the distinction between the two directions of faith is dynamic rather than static: campaigning for office, candidates encourage or discourage faith in their performance as officers, and the performance of the officers in office will encourage or discourage faith in their offices. Faith is therefore essentially unstable. Thus whatever the failings of the officials who come and go, their chief duty is to uphold the constitution of their office. For the whole nation will fall apart once the citizenry perceives the legislators, executors and magistrates to be flouting the constitution of their offices: an aura of broken faith, of cynicism, opens the way to the formation of underground, more or less law-defying factions, and ultimately to an at least nascent civil war.

It is easy enough to note that — and even how — faith is broken. From examples of failed and failing states — marriages or universities, cities or countries — we like to draw out some of the causes of its destruction. But what *engenders* it?

Faith appears to put trust in things to come — sometimes simply to hope that things will turn out well enough. I have faith in my employees inasmuch as I fully expect they will perform in my best interest; I have faith in my wife that she will confine her primary affection to me; and I have faith in God that He will ultimately direct me into a better life. So far, then, faith pertains to the means and hope pertains to the ends. Such faith can be justified only by knowledge of the ability and reliability of my employees, my wife, and my God. So far, then, it is hardly distinguishable from opinion

about future events, usually based on facts — and is totally blind if totally unrelated to such determinations. Such faith is not pure.

As trust in, rather than opinion about circumstance, pure faith distinguishes between what looms at the moment and imagined outcomes. A man or woman of pure faith tends to the complex of activities in the kitchen and does not get nervous about the mealtime that will follow: one creates the coming of things, the future; makes a working unit out of disparate individuals — makes a life. One keeps such unmixed faith as one keeps a promise and keeps a household — keeps playing and keeps working in continuous creation of the meal, one's marriage, one's university, one's city or one's country. Such faith gathers life whole, keeps its past, present and future together. Faith pertains to all time, so that faltering and failing at any one moment, or over any one duration, appear rightly as only calling for renewed effort — just as when a team loses a game it can be inspired to prepare for the next (and we feel cheated if we discover it has been rigged, even in our favor).

Asking now how *this* faith is engendered we go wrong if we treat it as a means: it's its own end, and life in all its healthy forms flows from it. As an origin, it defies any means of attaining to it — apart perhaps from some future drug sufficient to engender a simulacrum of faith, mere docility.

Perhaps the fundamental weakness of our democracy lies in its insistence that government is only a means — that it in no way represents the end (the weakness is the same when one plays a game only to win). This insistence originally had its nemesis in the supposition that kings ruled by divine decree (which proved impracticable in post-Renaissance developments), and now has its nemesis in the recollection of the totalitarian governments of the 20th century (which supposed that mere togetherness, whether soft or hard, constituted the defining purpose). In democracy committed to consumerism, the Supply-Siders treat government as necessary evil, to be reduced as much as possible to allow for free production

of goods, and Demand-Siders treat government as good only to the extent that it assures distribution of goods beyond the scope of wealthy producers. The ones are inclined toward restraining the desires of others (invoking moral tenets regarding human destiny) and the others toward satisfying the desires of people generally (invoking moral tenets regarding human need).

It's a weakness we must learn to live with, one that, reducing its very *sine qua non* to calculation of benefit, to mere expectation, to a mere vehicle of rights, poses the greatest challenge of any regime. It will begin wreaking its havoc the moment the legislators, each party of which, unable to push through its own policies, resorts to obstructing passage of the policies proposed by the other party. It will begin wreaking its havoc the moment the judiciary appears to represent not justice but party opinions. And finally it will wreak its havoc when the executive succeeds in ruling over the legislature and the judiciary in order to conduct the business of government. As each individual, so too every regime can suffer disease and die. A democratic regime dies both by simply falling apart, leaving nothing in its place, and by transforming itself, slowly or suddenly, into a dictatorship — into anarchy or into tyranny.

So what might we do to treat such ailing patients? While it seems premature to bewail their anticipated demise, we might at least own up to the fact of their mortality, and more specifically to their mortal disease. So long as we don't, there will clamor around the deathbed the voices of those demanding their rights—voices screaming out incompatible cures, each party accusing the other of killing the patient.

The quieter alternative, appealing to very few, is to recall the marvels of the moribund patient's life while meditating carefully and soberly on the conditions of life itself. That's what Plato did while witnessing the demise of the Homeric tradition, what Augustine again did at the collapse of the Roman era, what Enlightenment thinkers did at the decline of the Christian era, and

what Heidegger and others have done at the close of our own. For as we contemplate the conditions of life itself we celebrate rebirth, the actual coming of which, and the exact form of which, always remain to be seen.

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Not very long ago, Umberto Eco wrote a charming account of his childhood in Italy under Mussolini, appending fourteen signs of what he called Ur-Fascism, the basic temptation of totalitarianism, the nemesis of democracy. He intended each sign to serve as a warning. However, I read each as signaling a topic of consideration in any effort to re-think the human condition — not “what it’s like to be a bat,” but what it’s like to be human.

1.

The cult of tradition: Cult? Veneration of the past as holding the key to wisdom, while decrying the present as decadent and the future as hopeless except as a return to that original condition; most simply nostalgia, as frequently happens in old age, where it’s a sign of having given up. — But is it not so that to be cultivated, to be cultured, means precisely to have returned to great achievements of the past? And is not ignorance of where we are already headed a sure way of blundering into the future? Indeed, its most obvious opposite, the cult of the future (of frenzied innovation, expansion, amelioration) might also sow a seed of destruction, an Ur-Anarchism that may well bring our democracy down.

It’s a Fact that at any moment we are living within inherited conditions, a heritage both providing the wherewithal and setting the tasks of our next move. Each morning we live off these inherited conditions, in ways each of us can describe in reference to our accommodations, our attachments, our jobs. Then, too, evident at least to those who are historically educated, we live off the accomplishments of our predecessors, both in the field of science and in the field of politics — fields that in Fact both provide the

wherewithal and the set the goals of the movement in which we participate actively, perhaps most explicitly in our job. Adolescents who persistently want nothing to do with these inheritances embark on a journey into the Void, sustained only by the energies of their youth and doomed to self-destruction — sometimes taking others with them, intentionally or not.

One Fact of our tradition is that, until the Enlightenment, both science and politics consisted in recovering lost wisdom, rediscovering what our predecessors knew — not in embarking on a voyage in search of new discoveries. It is also a Fact that we now live in a world governed first of all by the achievements and ideals of the Enlightenment (e.g., Cartesian geometry, Newtonian physics, and all that came of these, then also the principles of government painfully established by Hobbes, Locke and others). And the Fact is that we have inherited our democracy, which will survive only so long as we cultivate it, keep faith in our inherited institutions.

But these Facts do not settle the question of what we are to do with our inheritance, especially since we are the heirs also of traditions preceding the Enlightenment, those of ancient Greece and Rome, and also find ourselves presently in a world permeated by traditions not at all our own. To steer clear of the anarchy that most likely leads to totalitarian government, we might have to raise the question of tradition anew: how it figures *a priori* in our condition, what *a priori* tasks (if any) it sets, and how we can understand our own multi-layered heritage and its relation to heritages outside our kith and kin.

Dogs and cats, wolves and tigers, don’t have to concern themselves with their origins; we in fact do.

2.

The rejection of modernism: Rejecting what, exactly? “The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity.” Skepticism lies at the heart of the Enlightenment: the skepticism that, in the works of Bacon, Galileo, Descartes,

Locke, Leibniz and finally Kant, gave rise to modern science, the effort to know our circumstances both empirically and rationally, in systematic fashion, such as can be bequeathed to future generations; and that, in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson and a host of others, gave rise to modern government, the effort to organize cooperation in secular terms — terms letting individuals seek out their well being as each sees fit. For us today, the heirs of these developments, rationality means the ability to stand aloof, to suspend our first impressions, to figure things out by accounting for them — as against absorbing ourselves in an inherited account that we then impose on things. “In this sense [rejecting skepticism for the sake of absorption] Ur-Fascism can be defined as irrationalism.” — But what might it mean to accept absolutely, i.e. uncritically, the ideals of the Enlightenment, the ideals of modern science and of our own democracy? You might well detect in the uncritical acceptance of skepticism the root phenomenon of despair, an inability to keep faith with anything, a desperate retreat into one’s private interests, an unbelief in our inherited institutions — a seed of dissolution that can again be called Ur-Anarchism.

In 399 B.C., 281 of 501 Athenians rejected the call-to-rethink they all detected in Socrates. Four-and-some centuries later the majority of a crowd rejected the call-to-rethink they all detected in Jesus of Nazareth. Starting nearly 1600 years later the Church rejected the skepticism it rightly detected in the Enlightenment thinkers. And during the last 100 years some the best thinkers (novelists, philosophers, painters, physicists) have been pondering what we might call the culmination of the Enlightenment — the Fact that the Heaven of the New Science and Society envisioned in the 17th and 18th centuries had become the dominant doctrine on Earth, and that we in the West have been waking both to its on-going tasks and its inhibiting restrictions. The World Wars of the 20th century you may

interpret as nightmares rousing us from sleep, and the more recent voter responses in Britain and the United States as the first signs of a New Skepticism for the 21st century, a skepticism calling into question the legacy of the Enlightenment.

The contemplative question is: How might we understand all these upheavals? Were the Greeks, the Hebrews, and the Church simply getting it wrong, and hindering progress? Or rather defending themselves in a losing battle against decadence? More urgently for ourselves: How are we to understand the one upheaval, that of the Enlightenment, in the wake of which we keep sailing? Or do we even need to understand it, since its results have proven themselves both in the developments of science (technologies) and in the spread of democracy? But then how are we to understand the most recent popular rejection of Enlightenment ideals?

The often startling, the melancholy Fact of both life and history is that each generation plucks the fruits of its progenitors without having to understand how those fruits were produced — neither the ground out of which the plants grew, nor the careful cultivation required for the plants to flourish. Like the scions of the rich, each generation tends to live off its ancestors, wasting their wealth: left with the names, as Plato put it, with no idea of the deeds named. Perhaps only the depletion of the wealth, the awareness that we have only the name, can wake us up a — and possibly set us back to work.

Whereupon there are again at least two possibilities: to try out something apparently brand new (the original spirit of the Enlightenment, a pastiche of which you may detect in the clamor for innovation), or to think ourselves back to the origins that have fallen into oblivion. And this latter we might pursue with a view either to restituting the prior order built on those origins (a possibly tyrannical nostalgia) or to letting those excavated origins foster a new order. Perhaps what we most need now is a skepticism bearing on the skepticism of our own age as well as on the skepticism

essential to previous ages of our heritage — a general critique of skepticism, as a were, a willingness to call it into question, rethink it, possibly restore it to its original creativity.

3.

The cult of action: Again, it's the cult, the veneration of one thing to the exclusion of its complement. "Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes." We may detect the seed of totalitarianism in any declaration to the effect that thinking gets in the way of just doing; theory gets in the way of practice; contemplation gets in the way of action; study gets in the way of intuition. For action is engagement in a shared enterprise: if you don't think about action, if the enterprise forbids thinking about it, you identify with the group, go where the group goes: contributively rather than indolently; even eagerly, insisting that others join in the action, despising if not threatening them. — But how about the opposite of such engagement, the effort to sit out the turbulence of the moment, safely situated on the sidelines? According to Aristotle, the wise Solon devised a law disenfranchising anyone who, when the city was torn in conflict, did not take up arms one way or the other: nowadays we might at least join a protest march. If everyone were to sit communal life out, there would be no communal engagement at all. The life of non-action, sideline life, the life of "letting things be" — letting things happen of their own accord, as we must let carrots and cows grow in their own fashion, rather than trying to make apples or horses out of them — sows the seeds of its own destruction, as did the Albigensians in their own way. In this form of life you may also detect a kind of Ur-Anarchism.

In the classical trio, action contrasts both with production and with contemplation — with simply getting something done (tending to one's garden, preparing a meal, shoeing a horse, sailing a boat) and with thinking about things holistically (about what makes a city a

city, about the workings of competence in a field, about the difference between nature and craft). In antiquity, thinkers, routinely accused of parasitism, had to justify their own withdrawal from action. Nowadays "thinking culture" has proved itself, its efficacy, by regularly yielding the multitudinous fruits necessary both for satisfying and defending the voracious appetites of our consumerism. And still we hear the insistence that theory be put to practice, and those who pursue studies in mathematics or philosophy may even, in self-defense, seek out applications for their work. Many are those (and not only politicians, but even more parents and students themselves) who insist that our institutions of education, from nursery to graduate school, prepare the young for production and action, believing that the leisure of contemplation hardly differs from otiose and irresponsible indolence.

But how do each of these three actually function? That's precisely the question raised by the third of the three. Production most obviously has a goal: vegetables that serve meals that serve sailing. Action also serves a goal: the formation and preservation of the city. But, we ask in contemplation, how do the various pursuits of these goals work? How do means and end relate to one another? How do the productive pursuits fit into what we call nature? How do the active pursuits do justice to human nature?

Production and action require us to absorb ourselves in processes enacting the means to the goals, and this absorption leads to a double-oblivion: just as there's no time to contemplate the end, so too the end justifies the means. Nothing can be more disastrous than action deprived of thought: it's Ur-Fascism. And nothing can be more vacuous than contemplation unrelated to action: it's Ur-Anarchism.

4.

Disagreement is treason: Every institution, whether a family or a town, an academic field or a university, has its established conditions — its defining beliefs — and yet actually exists as an

on-going effort with its daily to-do list more or less riddled with questions of where and when, what and how. There are many people involved in any one enterprise, directly (co-workers) or indirectly (predecessors, managers, customers . . .), and each will have seen, will be seeing and will foresee his or her own part in the effort. An affair, the institution, only works if and so long as it retains its defining thread of unity, and yet it also only works if each member is recurrently left free to see his or her way through the labyrinth. Whether a university committee, a football team, a research team, a military platoon, a classroom: its defining action falters if the leader only imposes decisions on the members without engaging their own free agency; it also falters, and more effectively, when some members feel free to pounce on one who proposes alternative routes. Even a master cabinet-maker knows that his apprentice, initially subjected to orders, must learn to perform freely; and one agony of industrial production lies in keeping the workers attuned to what is best rather than resigned to working to rule. — But what about the opposite, for instance the committee chairman simply “chairing,” letting the members decide for themselves, with no direction? an academic department at a university tolerating any opinion whatsoever regarding its field or the manner of teaching students? the teacher who considers himself to be a mere “resource person,” letting the students “learn by themselves”? You might reply that there are proper ways of doing these things — proper and improper opinions. But then that’s what every totalitarian believes.

It’s a thin, an essentially invisible line between what opinions can and what opinions cannot be tolerated in any shared enterprise. Especially in a nation structured by our peculiar form of democracy, which intends to leave to each of its citizens his or her own conception of a fulfilled life. For such a nation will then encircle into itself a plurality of such conceptions, and these conceptions will

surface at every constitutive decision for the whole, every policy proposed — and, since some will cancel out others when enacted, deep-rooted conflict inevitably arises. Tolerance is not simply a willingness to let others conceive of life as they choose but, much more painfully, a willingness to give up the enactment of one’s own. While sheer intolerance of disagreements immediately effects the overthrow of our democracy, sheer tolerance effects it by way of an unsustainable anarchy. Therefore we have higher courts assigned the task of defending the constitution.

There is one belief that’s essential to any sustainable regime, at any level of shared enterprise: belief in the sharedness itself, and in the particular form of it defining the type of regime. In our own democracy this one Ur-Belief has no formal grounding: it’s not required by law, but left to the individual. So it appears, when it appears at all, as a mere sentiment — as when we sing the national anthem or attend a military parade. And sentiments too clash: Should we tolerate disagreement that expresses itself in scoffing at one’s own team or in burning the nation’s flag? The bold experiment of our own democracy requires, non-formally, not only that we believe in the sharedness of our enterprise and that this one belief often entails a willingness to forego the enactment of our own conception of happiness, but also that we can discuss, together and ever again as occasions arise, just what can and what cannot be tolerated. Our regime will stand only so long as such discussion is possible: as proof of the liberty we otherwise merely extol in words.

5.

Racist by definition: The word already names an attitude inimical to our democracy: decision (in matters of behavior, employment, membership...) based on the race of those concerned rather than on either their intrinsic quality as human beings, denizens of our democratic land, or on the special qualities required for the position at issue in the decision. The word “race” has itself become tainted by the fear of that attitude, as though the use of

the word would itself slip us into the attitude of peremptory exclusion and its attendant decision-making. — Yet, until very recently, you freely and wisely recognized, if you were a native Parisian, that those native to London or Berlin, Calcutta or Kyoto, Mexico or Senegal, were of different races — and that you might do well to notice that the human race contains important variations, just as a dog-trainer must in his dealings with dogs. Today, this fascination with races expresses itself obliquely at our universities, with both curricular and extra-curricular courses in ethnic studies — often billed as part of the effort to promote understanding and tolerance for the sake of peace, both at home and abroad: these strange people are, after all, just human like us, their differences being only skin-deep, so that, once we recognize the essential sameness underlying the incidental differences, we ought to get along just fine.

So . . . Are there differences to note, or not? On the one hand, we hear there are none — or that we should ignore the obvious ones, these being inessential. On the other hand, we hear that we must respect them — even empower them (as in identity politics). But if differences are inessential, why bother studying them, let alone granting them special powers as sub-communities, rather than simply highlight what's essential and join into one community? — as Plato does, who in fact recommends that a city conduct its education and induct its leaders with no reference even to the genitals of its youths, let alone the color of their skin — anymore than you would hire a plumber according to whether he is bald or not.

It's a tricky question, more properly addressed by those who have exerted themselves in our 2,500-year tradition of contemplation on the intricacies of our commitment to distinguish and interrelate substance and accident (subject and predicate, being and appearance, truth and illusion). You might better look at the question of race from the standpoint of understanding yourself rather than that of judging others. And first on the agenda in

coming know yourself is the recognition that you require identity: you must show yourself ever again for who you are: a son, a daughter, a parent, a locksmith, a hunter, a teacher, a writer-reader-intellectual; also as a denizen of a land, a country: you are a Canadian, an Italian, or whatever; also as a Catholic, a Moslem, an Atheist, or whatever. Some of these identities you acquire at birth, others you simply choose, and some few you must earn.

You are *this* rather than *that* — but *are* only provisionally, dynamically, ever renewingly: you must ever again *become* what you are. Here's the essential difference, already in your own identity: you may just lose it, perhaps forever but in any case at each moment, whereupon you sink into a more or less fraudulent version of a parent, a teacher, or whatever. — And, once concerned about this difference, you will notice it in others, perhaps become indignant about *their* fraudulence. — And finally you note not just different kinds of people (mothers and fathers, priests and playboys, journalists and plumbers, or whatever: people with job-descriptions different from your own), but also different conditions (childhood, maturity, infirmity . . .), different dispositions (cheerful, deceitful, . . .), and . . . different races (cultures, socially imbued modes of behavior: daily habits and gestures, imbued expectations and loyalties).

One deep-rooted challenge of our democracy lies in its requirement that we foster our own identity, defined most encompassingly by our race, while remaining indifferent to the identities of many others — *their* races. Ours is a pluralistic society, encompassing a variety of races: that's a Fact, whether we like it or not. But it is also a Fact that only at the price of becoming indifferent to our own identity, to losing it, can we be indifferent to the company we keep — the identity of others swarming around us.

Meanwhile, a sure-fire way to assure the conflagration of racism is to label as racist every effort to keep the faith of one's own identity. Students and teachers at our universities often make a point of studying and appreciating differences, and they easily cloak

themselves in a trans-nationalist and virtue-based identity that fine-tunes their sensibilities to the detection of racism in the speech and behavior of those outside the sanctuary of academia. They may then become racists themselves, by their own definition: profiling and divisive.

Perhaps the Ur-Challenge of our democracy is to think through the human condition in search of the possibility of its chief requirement: that we privatize identity. And to recognize that the odds are against us. The best, perhaps the only places to begin meeting this challenge, are our institutions of education: as places of study, not as places of social reform — for any effective reformation grows out of an earlier understanding, one that ever requires renewal and degenerates into prejudice apart from that renewal.

6.

Derives from individual or social frustration: Any regime, democratic or other, falters when frustration comes to the boiling point. Monarchies and their similitudes can perhaps more easily keep the lid on their pots, if only in the manner of pressure cookers, but democracies, and especially ones of our own stamp, stagger already under low pressure, since government here must answer more or less directly to the people. And as citizens begin to square off against one another, as in both lynching parties and political parties-turned-violent, the only solution may just lie in some radical imposition from above, i.e. totalitarian government: an imposition sponsored not by an outside power but by the mass of frustrated insiders. In massive frustration we may immediately detect both Ur-Anarchism and Ur-Fascism.

Yet how can any organization, any government, function without recognition of unsatisfactory conditions? Precisely in our own democracy, dissatisfaction is the prime mover of on-going action: of definite projection and legislation — and, in our democracy, of elections permitting the replacement of the agents responsible for

projects and policies. On the ground, one of the tasks of democratic agents is to discern and calm the frustrations of their constituencies — frustrations which, like intestinal hunger, can only be relieved ephemerally, never perennially, let alone for life.

As the ground of our democracy begins to quake, we might then wonder about the forms and functions of frustration — itself very familiar, very close to home. The easiest understanding locates it in material conditions: hunger, for instance — people starving to death or worse — but then also in the desire for more this year than one obtained last year. While earlier democracies envisioned liberty as the freedom of diverse citizens to pursue their diverse versions of divine destiny, each in their own way, ours envisions liberty primarily as the freedom of each to devise his or her own form of materialism, leaving government with the sole task of assuring conditions for optimal consumption of goods: our present democracy is inconceivable apart from the primacy of economic growth — with the result that fundamental disagreements arise only in such questions as bear on the distribution of wealth, long-term vs. short-term projects for exploiting natural resources, or forms of protection from internal and external threats to our way of life.

On the ground, however, frustrations run more deeply, i.e. less measurably, than those of consumption. For examples: concerns about salvation used to define government, and more recently one hears of concerns about self-esteem (at least in the governance at home and at school). You might, however, consider the possibility that human beings are essentially dissatisfied with themselves and their circumstances — essentially and not just ephemerally frustrated, already individually and only then socially. This is the possibility all pre-Enlightenment traditions ask us to consider, in marked contrast to our own consumerism, which must consider frustration arising in prosperous conditions as chemically based and chemically curable — thus our present commitment to modern pharmaceuticals, both prescribed and proscribed.

Every healthy regime, whether at home or abroad, represents an understanding of life itself. It serves, well or ill, as a role model, good or bad, for its constituency. And an understanding of life answers not only to such questions as What constitutes human fulfillment (dignity), thereby also legitimate frustration? but also to the all-embracing questions of birth and death and how one proceeds well from one to the other: it defines the province of education — both at homes and at schools.

7.

Obsession with a plot: There are indeed evil plots, more or less covert: thieves and child-molesters plot, factions at universities and in parliaments plot, businessmen and terrorists plot. And, yes, other nations may plot against yours. Except when doing it ourselves, we generally agree that such plots reek of destruction, and, at the wrong end of the plot, we rightly fear them, and take whatever measures we can against them, from locking doors to enacting restrictions on the manufacture and distribution of commodities. — Then, too, there are individuals who see one plot or another everywhere, and warn us incessantly of imminent dangers, and take every measure possible against them. And while we might call obsessed individuals cowardly, or treat them as mentally ill, whole peoples can become obsessed — as commonly happens during wartime, when enemy agents lurk behind every lamppost. Or witches. Or devils. Or the Anti-Christ. History is replete with examples of individuals and societies wreaking havoc, perpetrating evil, precisely by taking up arms to fight what they perceive to be evil. Yet the opposite of obsession with evil, the refusal to recognize it all, to see only good, gives free reign to thieves and the rest, and so paves the way to destruction as well. Herein, in the dichotomy of response to evil, lies the core “problem of evil” — not in the auxiliary question of *why* there is evil, as though we had a right to live in an evil-free world.

In point of fact, the possibility of degenerating into totalitarian government has itself become the obsession of our own democracy — starting with the rise of various totalitarian regimes during the first decades of the 20th century, then retroactively with the self-flagellation regarding the extermination of the aboriginals and the protraction of slavery in the Americas, and finally in the detection of racism, sexism and imperialism everywhere in modern life. In this obsession, too, we might discern what Umberto Eco calls Ur-Fascism — seeds from which may sprout the very thing it most fears.

Assuming that concern for fulfillment belongs to human being, we do well not only to re-consider what forms such fulfillment may rightly take, but also to consider very carefully what forms it wrongly takes: what exactly it is that we should fear, and above all what failure of human being we may rightly fear — first of all in ourselves, then in our children, our neighbors and our nation.

8.

Humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of other countries: Envy, in other words. It’s one of the seven deadly sins in Dante’s work and Christianity generally (with analogs, no doubt, in non-Western traditions). Lowest, perhaps the basis of the other sins, is pride (in the sense of arrogance) — desire not only to be the best possible (a desire in itself quite laudable) but to be the best relative to others as well (which mistakes the task of being human by conflating the best with some humanly defined achievement). Third up is rage, desiring that others come up to your own standard of performance (*per force* humanly defined). Between these two lies envy: resentment at the sight, memory or anticipation of others rising to conditions you yourself desire to have or to be — so that, unable at the moment to rise, you wish others to fall. All three indicate a dynamic recognition of fulfillment (unlike the fourth sin up: sloth), and all three contravene the fulfillment of others (the opposite of envy is generosity, a form of ἀγάπη, without which, Paul says, he

himself is nothing at all, and he renders no service to others, merely sounds off when talking to them). The top three (avarice, gluttony, lechery) are forms of passion that aspire to corporeal fulfillment only.

If there is any proof that concern for fulfillment belongs to human being, the phenomenon of envy, fairly saturating nearly every joint effort (given enough time to insinuate itself), should dispel any lingering doubt. And it provides promising occasions for re-thinking the human condition in search of an adequate understanding of its workings — rather than simply deriding it. In any case, it works by way of a recognition of a perfection, a recognition that mistakes its location in another's achievement rather than in one's own destiny. A nation with no vision of individual perfection might indeed be cleansed of envy.

It's a Fact that we share our fates — in several senses, and in each sense in several ways. We share in projects — work together at the moment (on construction sites or playing fields) or work in the wake of others (attending university at the expense of parents and taxpayers) or work in view of others (clients, employers, the reading public). And we not only measure ourselves, the value of what we are, do and have, against others, we fear them and we blame them. And all the while we yearn for others (for another, as in love, or just for human company, as at festivities). In all these venues things can go terribly wrong or wonderfully right, and each situation leaves us with some sense of the difference. Great conversation and great literature can help us understand all this.

9.

Life is lived for struggle: That sounds as though recommending the disposition to pick fights, as is commonly evident in school yards and barrooms. The contrast is then “live and let live” — attend to one's own affairs, the struggles of which suffice already for the day. But don't political economists and Darwinian biologists in effect assume that individuals basically

struggle to live? Don't many historians in fact explain movements of whole nations as reaction to hardship? And how about the tendency, in easy conversation, to explain some particular behavior of third parties in reference to their self-interest (greed and the like)? — But what about those of us who struggle to climb high mountains just for the pain of it, struggle to learn foreign tongues with no discernable advantage in view, struggle to increase the production of our wheat fields way beyond any practical need? And why *do* people pick fights?

Socrates posed the question very succinctly: Do you want to *live well* or do you want just to keep living — to *live on*, to survive? If the first, you will want to ask what it means to live well (nobly, justly). If the second, you will not likely ask what it means in general, but only what it means for you (which pleasures you find most pleasurable, both immediately and in the long run: sustainably). The first can be very painful, raising questions of honor and dignity — what makes life worth living — and may entail sacrifices, even the ultimate sacrifice. The second can be very grubby, shot through with disappointments and resentments, unfulfilled hopes and unfulfilled promises, stupefying spectacles and pharmaceuticals.

Formally speaking (in the literature from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Nietzsche), the first aims to realize the active dimension of life and the second cultivates the passive dimension of life: the one is concerned to *do* things well, *act* in fulfilling ways; the other to *have* things pleasing, *get* fulfilled (always having to recover from excesses: to *get* rather than *be* well). For important minority reports highlighting the passive dimension, you may study the literature from Lucretius (Epicurus' heir) to Hume and John Stuart Mill (and their innumerable heirs today).

Politically speaking, celebrating the active life will appear to some as sowing the seeds of Fascism, while prioritizing the passive life will appear to others as sowing the seeds of Communism — each group recalling the duo that beset the first half of the 20th century

and carries on in whimpering forms still today. Both, as we have seen, can grow into totalitarianism, where “pacifism is trafficking with the enemy.”

As our own democracy falters, we may ask freshly, in a way not initially committed to the active/passive distinction, what it means to be human, and what kinds of fulfillment and destitution lie in wait for us, and how we variously learn our own role in their arrival and departure. We might then come to appreciate the role boredom plays in sabotaging any form of government, whether at home or in a nation’s capital.

10.

Contempt for the weak: For losers, then. Yet any competitive endeavor, any work or play that must be learned, requires that there be losers. There will always be moral losers as well: people who behave in shameful ways. And those who, winners in competitions at work and play, and even proper in their behavior, know themselves to be lost souls. It’s a tough question: what to do with all those who fall behind — whether materially or morally, and for any of a variety of reasons: outrageous vice or ghastly bad luck, innate inability or environmental infliction.

The poor will always be with us, and we may even be among them. To heap scorn upon them may just mean you can’t bear the sight of human failure and would prefer to believe they brought their misery upon themselves. But to rush to their aid may again just mean you can’t bear the sight of human suffering, since it reminds you of your own, whether actual, recalled or foreboded. Moreover, rushing to help others may rightly bring scorn upon you from them: they would rather prove themselves as the first-responders to their own condition, rather than let you take over the task, i.e. take over their very being — and in their contempt for you they may indeed prove themselves to be the stronger.

A family, a university, a republic depends not only on a willingness to work together. It depends even more basically on an Ur-Belief in the institution, a faith that keeps as the overriding goal the health of the institution. Such faith requires of each individual a kind of respect for the others. But is there no such thing as a healthy contempt — for those, namely, who, by dint of some effective pretense, have falsely earned the respect of others? For the blowhard who claims to excel in some task while in fact making a mess of it? For the sanctimonious who lay claim to moral superiority by declaring others to be immoral? For bullies, too — not because they are paining others (for this they are criminal, and should be brought to justice) but because, having to prove themselves against the weak, they are themselves weak: “Pick on someone your own size,” we say to them.

It may be that systematic contempt for the weak veers toward bully-rule. But its opposite, bleeding-heart liberalism, dismissing as it does the prerequisite of human dignity — that we rise to challenges, including the challenge of having lost out — also gnaws at the delicate fabric of institutional integrity, in this case veering toward anarchy and unleashing its opposite. What’s needed to resist Ur-Fascism is not “more democracy” (a call we often hear from liberals) but more reflection on the conditions by which our democracy may digest excesses such as these two. To reflect, for instance, on what it means to be strong — as Socrates famously asked Thrasymachus to do.

11.

Everybody is educated to become a hero: What’s the matter with that? Must one not learn to stand up to terrifying circumstances? And should we not, as parents and teachers, encourage learning to overcome the disposition to retreat from dangers — from icy conditions on sidewalks through schoolyard skirmishes, right up to life-threatening circumstances on ski-slopes to battle-fields? Learning not always to play it safe? Might that not serve

as a healthy ideal for everybody, even if many fail the test? — Such, at least, was the ideal of ancient Sparta, some of which lurks in nearly every culture, even our own consumerism, which requires peace as a prime condition (only we relegate heroism to the movies, where it takes such caricatured form that very few are tempted to try it out for themselves).

Again, though, it's not here a question of heroism itself: it's the *cult* of it that might lead to, or be a sign of the demise of our democracy — indicate, that is, a pre-totalitarianism the way certain conditions of the organs indicate pre-cancer. “This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death,” Umberto Eco says, recalling no doubt the bluster of Mussolini he experienced as a child: the eagerness to die in a way proving one's devotion to the fasces. The cult of most anything can miss the point — even the cult of goodwill, which we may detect in the effort to be nice at all costs — at the cost of truth, for instance. To make a cult of something is to take its shell for its substance, the way a would-be poet might adopt the life-style of some apparently great poet — a certain beard, for instance, or habits of smoking or drinking, speaking or writing. Whole nations have fallen into a similar trap, however perceptive and active their internal dissenters.

Perhaps it's only when substance has given way to its shell that we can ask once again, as of old, What *is* substance? What *is* important — *truly* so — for us as individuals and for the world in which we live, whether family or farmstead, university or city? And as we ask this question, we should turn to the way we raise and train our children: to our systems of education. For here, in the way we help others grow up, our conception of what life is all about declares itself for all who have ears to hear and eyes to see, including possibly oneself. And concomitantly with such declaration also our understanding of death — each his or her own, but also the death of others and even the demise of joint human effort. *Ask*, not just repeat or propound. Perhaps the ability to ask these questions lies

at the basis of our much-touted freedom of speech, a permission that otherwise lies fallow.

12.

The will to power is transferred to sexual matters: The heart of machismo, Eco says — illustrious examples of which he no doubt witnessed in the underground of Italian politics — where, I have heard it said, a man would never let out that he allowed his woman on top or in any other way get him to serve her. And from there such willfulness can extend to general decrees impugning non-standard practices, such as chastity and homosexuality. All of which already makes the Ur-Fascist, let alone the outright fascist, repugnant to liberal sensibilities. — But what is all this talk about “will to power”? Does such a will already sow the seed of fascism? Or is the seed only sowed in the *transfer*, in the misconstrual or mislocation of it?

All talk nowadays of “will to power” has at least a silent partner in Friedrich Nietzsche, who asks us to become aware that the phrase names (and begins to describe) the substance of anything that *is* — to become aware that effective response to anything that *is* requires that we activate our own will . . . to power. — But what's the difference? What does it mean to encounter, in *our* will to power, things having *their* will to power?

You are out walking your dog: he's sniffing at every lamppost and hedge, tugging on the leash, and you sometimes pause to let him do his business. Then too a woman, similarly walking her dog, comes toward you on the path: both dogs tug at their leashes, and you and she of course tug back, obedient to Newton. The two dogs growl at each other, sniff each other out and, if neither goes on the attack, might frolic with one another. Meanwhile you exchange a few words, friendly or hostile or indifferent, to the woman who may, in the fullness of time, become your spouse. — Each being (dog, lamppost, hedge, leash, the woman and yourself) *is* in and as its power (capacity, potentiality, ability). That is, you aspire at that

moment to be a dog-walker, the dog aspires to encounter fragrances, and tugs against the leash aspiring to restrain him; the lamppost “aspires” to light the way (and *is* for us what it is only as it “succeeds” — and yet also *is*, in counter-aspiration, a urinal of sorts); the woman, like you, aspires to be a dog-walker, perhaps also a woman, and, between the two of which you, a man, will aspire to be a man (according to what each of you happen to mean by being a woman and being a man); and so on. In contrast, if you and the rest do *not* aspire to these various manifestations of being, you and the rest are either something else or mere phantoms lacking substance.

So far, all this is straight out of Plato, the neatest formulation being that in his *Sophist*, at 247D-E, where an outsider addresses Theaetetus, a well known mathematician at the time, on the question of how falsehood can arise in our talk: “All those things really are (πάν τοῦτο ὄντως εἶναι) that possess power (δύναμις) in doing or in undergoing (ποιεῖν or παθεῖν), i.e. to make something different or suffer such making from another (in any manner, however small or banal, and even if only just once). “For I posit this definition of beings,” the outsider concludes: “they *are* only their power [to do or undergo, to make different or to get made different].” —But how does this traditional understanding of beings differ from that of Nietzsche and his myriad acolytes of the 20th century?

For one thing, Plato’s understanding of being-as-power looks to those human engagements in which there is, or seems to be, a stable measure against which we can assess the exercise of the power: power is power (ability, capacity) to become something definite: a dog to be a good specimen, a lamppost to function as a lamppost should, a hedge to flourish as a hedge and not as a stalk of grass, a man to be a man and a woman to be a woman — in every case to *become* over time (and to remain for a while) a good exemplar of a kind, as a sportsman aspires to be good at his sport. It’s some measure that determines successful being. “It is evident,” Aristotle (Plato’s close associate) says in Book IX of his *Metaphysics*, “that

actuality is prior to power” (φανερὸν ὅτι πρότερον ἐνέργεια δυνάμεώς ἐστίν: 1049 b 5) — the in-functioning of a thing, its functioning as it should, is the measure defining the power the thing otherwise only foreshadows.

Is that the difference between Plato and Nietzsche — that Nietzsche drops the requirement that power measure up to an eternal measure (as health might serve the physician as his guide) and can lead to any of a indefinite variety of ends? That there is no such thing as a right way to walk dogs, a right way to light up a path, a right way for a hedge to be a hedge, a right way for a woman to be a woman and a man to be a man? That each thing expresses itself toward the future in its own way, paving its way as it goes along? — That, we might conclude, a thing is just as much in what it undergoes as in what it does, and so takes on an infinite number of guises?

Starting around 1600, with Francis Bacon, Galileo and Descartes in the lead, and all other Enlightenment thinkers in their train, “final causes” appeared as fictions: after considerable disbelief and resistance from the Old Guard, the New Science expunged purposes (inherent goals) from the study of nature, relegating them to expressions of human desire. Nature itself behaves in the manner of a coo-coo clock. Thus to *know* anything natural we must learn to describe it as a mechanism and elicit the laws of this mechanism: present things have a past that will also indicate their future — there is no lurking fulfillment defining their culmination. During the 19th century even biology, which seems to understand organisms teleologically, began the difficult voyage of becoming a mechanical science, with the marvels of modern medicine attesting to the value of such navigation.

Yet the relegation of final causes to human desire only begins to describe the will to power that Nietzsche discerns. For one thing, it so far reconstrues human being in the image of the bully — unique among beings only in that it can impose its desire outwardly:

refashion “nature” or enslave one’s companions (not without resistance from these, which only makes the imposition more interesting, as in a competitive sport). For another, it deprives nature of its femininity: “it” (transformed from “she”) no longer receives and serves us, exacting services in return, but essentially defies us, aspires only to destroy us, enslaving us until we learn to join together in coordinated warfare against it.

To be sure, Nietzsche recognizes in these historical Facts the emergence of the primacy of will — human will but also, as its correlate, the will of whatever we encounter (its *resistance*, whether passive or active). While, from the outside, we see only the conflict of wills familiar to any adult from the inside, with Nietzsche you might discern will as essentially will to flourish free of commitment to the flourishing of anything else: to write books reenacting the human drama of such flourishing, paint landscapes revealing their power (Van Gogh, Monet . . .) and compose music similarly. The creative will has lost, or is losing ground when exercised simply to impose itself on the will of other things and of other people, as children do when pulling the legs off a spider or smashing mollusks on rocks at the seashore, and as failed teachers do when tormenting their pupils to show who is boss — all out of frustration, inability to flourish in their own right: freely and open-endedly. The being of non-human beings lies in their power of *resistance*, our own being lies in our ability (power) to incorporate their resistance into our own creative work (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, John Dewey — all of whom celebrate resistance).

So far, Nietzsche’s account of will to power follows closely the options stated by Plato and pursued uniformly throughout our intellectual tradition, including that of the Enlightenment: anything *is*, counts as *being*, only inasmuch as it either makes-different or gets-made-different; my dog, the hedge, the woman I meet *is* as both doing and undergoing, *is* both actively and passively (only a god can *be* in pure act, a being we can only imagine in contrast to our own

dual, our mortal nature). All great thinkers of the West have noted this duality and, in the case of human being, have noted that we ourselves only flourish when we enhance the active side of our nature, and subside in our being to the extent that we merely get acted on — blow with the wind, ultimately the ill wind of death. Nietzsche’s version of power accentuates this active side and leaves the passive side to fend for itself: undergoing can only signal defeat.

And here, finally, you might discern the difference: not in the question whether “power” names being, and not in the rejection of “final causes” as the key to understanding beings, but rather in the understanding of affection. Here, the central question is: What *motivates* one to grow from the initial passivity of childhood into the mature activity of adulthood — from the initial conformity of the apprentice to the mature creativity of the master? — lacking which one does not so mature? For two thousand years the answer varied in detail but remained the same in essence: we are pulled, as though by a magnet, out of our passivity into activity. We are attracted, affected by . . . we *know* not what, we “feel” it — we *undergo* it, we are “in love”: something (a book, a painting, a landscape, a musical phrase) or somebody (a teacher, a friend, a passing stranger) *occasions* it, we are “hooked” and we run after it, initially confusing it with that something or somebody, running a bit wild until we build enough momentum to break into fully free affection: free activity in service to our own origin (divine, but variously interpreted so).

What now if all such drawing appears illusory? What if we have become convinced that no book, no painting, no environmental configuration (to speak abstractly), and certainly no teacher or friend *rightly* affects us (“rightly” in the sense of setting the right standard to be emulated), but, like an enemy soldier, serves only to stimulate our own activity to neutralize its effect, a being essentially detrimental to our own being? Then there are three options: (1) we surrender to the enemy and become its prisoners (perhaps for life,

perhaps only for a pleasant interlude), or (2) we slash out to subdue it, or (3) we create something out of the materials initially presented in opposition to us. It's this third option that you will find Nietzsche promoting.

In most ways Nietzsche's own account extracts the essence of what his predecessors have proposed. Yet there's a difference: whereas Plato and his entourage retain the sense that the actualization of one's own being entails service to, care of, aid in the actualization of beings other than oneself (one's dog, one's hedge, one's lover, one's city), and Enlightenment thinkers struggle to retain some sense of duty to their fellows while understanding all else as hostile, Nietzsche's version sees in such service only a kind of servitude. Thus, in the ravages of time, "will to power" degenerates into lending support to the frustrates of option 2, just as Darwin's account of struggle degenerates into a justification for competitive social conditions.

Whereas Plato very strongly, and Aristotle in passing, discern in affection the seed of wisdom, a seed requiring the most careful cultivation in self-knowledge and attunement with nature in the exercise of craft, already Descartes and others see in it only hindrance to active clarification both of one's own condition and of natural circumstances. With the result that we late-borns, great-great-grandchildren of the Enlightenment, are not sure how to understand sexual matters. For these matters (matters of erotic love) form an intricate network of power that countervails our own power, transcends by far our own will. And we can only squirm to understand this network in one or more of the three ways left to us: mere submission, mere mastery, or mere stimulus for creativity — always as a material means, never as service. And most, incapable of creative work, remain with the conflict between submission and mastery: man-conquering-woman and woman-conquering-man, right-to-choose on the part of one and right-to-life on the part of

another. These and like questions regarding sexual matters (down to pronouns) have become dominating themes in our democracy.

Just as we might contemplate democracy afresh once it begins to falter in its function, so we might contemplate afresh willing / desiring — *eros* itself — once it begins to run wild. As it does when we expect of democratic institutions that, instead of answering to what people need, ask what it is that people want. And our own democracy has evolved ever more in the direction of assuming that people have a right to what they want, a right that prevails until it interferes with the wants/rights of others, whereupon the conflict must be adjudicated. Here again, and in close association with sexual matters, we may detect the early seed of anarchy, the first suggestion of what can only break out into open conflict among individuals, and between them and their government, especially as the judiciary loses its credibility. Ur-Fascism and Ur-Anarchism are twinned phenomena: both stem from taking volition as setting its own measures rather than answering to measure.

13.

Based on a selective populism: One among several options open to politicians struggling to gain and retain the support necessary for governance is to impress their constituencies that they represent "them" rather than some special interest group (priests, businessmen, educated professionals). So far, then, you might ask: "What's wrong with that? Isn't that what democracy is all about — serving the people?" Well, yes, but . . . What does it mean to serve "the people"? On this option, it means to proclaim that the government will give people what they want — which is, first of all, respect for "the people" (the *demos*) as a class (in contrast to those "elites"); and, second, material advantage. Again, you might ask: "What's wrong with that? Aren't these two, respect and advantage for the populace, the great boons of post-monarchical, post-feudal rule?" Well, yes, but . . . What happened to the idea that political

decisions be governed first of all by a concern for and vision of what's good of the city, the πόλις as a whole, rather than the good of any fragment of it? Moreover, any legitimate vision of "what's good" requires insight into what people "really need" (whether in essence or simply in the long run) and not just recognition of what they happen to want at the moment — which varies from individual to individual and so disallows unity. Here, "the people" is just a fiction allowing the politician to discount (even accuse of treason) anyone who stands apart from the fictional unity. Populism panders to the public, signals a politician's abandonment of political responsibility, and contradicts itself by becoming selective.

Yes, populism is the anti-Christ of democracy, the seed for a monster of conformism downwards: only "the people" have rights, individuals have none, or only spurious ones regarding petty choices (e.g., which public toilets to use). And its representatives will heap scorn on the parliaments elected to represent "the people": parliamentarians, you will hear, only represent special interest groups, and get bogged down if not deadlocked in their conflicts. Totalitarian government is not far away, following close on the heels of the anarchy engendered by such bogs and deadlocks: for "the people" will indeed support the strongman, however well and truly the "elites" inveigh against such consent.

There can be no democracy without parliaments capable of decisions based on their own majority — and without constitutional judiciaries to restrain parliamentarians from impinging on the well being of minorities in the demos itself. But what if a parliament becomes in fact dysfunctional? And the judiciary in fact gets politicized just as its parliament is? It's a sad thought: the bad politicians preceding totalitarian regimes unwittingly, which is to say stupidly if not ill-willedly, pave the way for their outrightly evil successors.

Unity in plurality requires good will and great skill in a never-ending balancing act — will and skill on the part of leaders who must act with their feet on the ground, eyes set on problems to be solved, and ears attuned to the populace: to serve, no doubt to incense at times, and to retire when no longer able to do the job.

14.

Speaks newspeak: Orwell's *1984*, of course — where language serves only to integrate the citizenry and no longer gets measured by any standard of truth. The terminology of this re-constituted language consists of neologisms "everybody" employs in the course of such integration — as we today routinely employ acronyms allowing us to get on with the discourse rather than pausing to think their references. But such attention-defying neologisms stand only as examples of discourse defying attention to the matters under discussion. Indeed, language-for-integration-only takes the more effective form of "an impoverished vocabulary and an elementary syntax." The whole point being to divert attention from matters themselves (thereby assuring stability of the organization), the language-police will place a vast array of restrictions on linguistic expressions, ever on the lookout for those which may reflect unacceptable attitudes (e.g., toward race or sex) — on the grounds that such expressions, possibly offending the sensibilities of some members of the organization, will prove divisive. Such pre-cleansed language, limiting as it does "the instruments for complex and critical reasoning," no longer carries the weight of having to reveal what it formally addresses, with the result that it is false from the outset, quite apart from misrepresentations and prevarications. It's an ideal language for totalitarian governance. — All of which raises the question, at least for those still free of such linguistic bondage: Just how does (or might) public speaking and public listening relate to truth and not merely to integration of ongoing organizational enterprise?

Would it not be naive, for example, to expect of political speeches that they reveal matters wholly? matters involving complexities of fact and decision that require wisdom to understand? Many demonstrations on the street seem to assume that it's just a matter of one sophisticated interest group (e.g., an oil corporation proposing a pipeline, or a university proposing a raise in tuition) clashing with a hastily formed group with a contrary interest — as though there was no truth, but only self-interest at stake.

The Fact is that very little of our speaking and listening has much to do with creating a focus on anything serving as a standard of its truth. Consider at least these four spheres of talk: social chat, business exchanges, carefully crafted academic lectures, and great literature — suspending for a moment the discourse peculiar to radio, television, and now the Internet. While each of the four may on occasion focus attention on something (actually *refer* us to something other than itself), each also tends to become ingrown, more or less obfuscating. Especially in merely social exchanges, where the point lies mostly in the formation or disruption of social ties. Salesmen, too, want to sell their goods, and will tell you mostly what you want to hear. Academic lecturers certainly intend to reveal their subjects, but they (especially when reading notes written long before) tend to present fixed formulations, frozen into themselves, which is exactly what many students want to hear, even if they also complain of the boredom (and when the same lecturers attend a conference in their own academic field they will expect the speakers to fit what little they have to say into the scholarship already fixed into place: they too will prefer boredom to provocation). And, finally, great literature is anything but clear about what it intends to reveal — precisely because revelation requires in any case hard work, all the more difficult in cases where we simply hear about it from others.

What is truth? Plato and Aristotle proposed that it happens when the things said (predicates) arise from and point back toward what underlies all the talk (the subject) — and took this event ever again apart, leaving it to us to put it back together. They did so at the time when the dominant talk, the archaic talk (the Homeric tradition) had lost its hold on truth, and become a caricature of itself, serving primarily as a weapon against others (e.g., against Socrates, who recognized that the talk was serving as a crutch rather than as a revelation). Similarly, as the pagan version was becoming a caricature of itself, the great thinkers inaugurating the Christian tradition (starting with Paul and then Augustine) raised the question again. Finally, the great thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries, as the Christian tradition was losing its hold and freezing into a weapon, posed the question all over again. And all along, as the conduit of truth that so easily clogs up, language itself gets called into question.

In the 19th and 20th centuries you find two opposing considerations of these questions: those aspiring to shore up the conceptions of truth and language born in the works of thinkers from Descartes through Kant and matured in the developments of modern science, and those struggling for a rebirth (already in Rousseau and Herder, Hegel and Wilhelm von Humboldt, most recently in Wittgenstein and Heidegger — for all of whom you can now find easy-to-comprehend, i.e. misleading caricatures).

Generically: Truth is clarity about a situation — clarity *in* our situation, clarification *of* what is going on in our situation. Truth is an event in which not only circumstances reveal themselves as they are, have been, might be, but you too get revealed just as you are, and for what you are worth. Truth is more or less painful: you had likely preferred that circumstances be different, that you had been there differently.

— *Generically:* Untruth is unclarity about where you are — about circumstances, just what they are. Untruth is our prevalent condition: usual (what you are used to) and normal (what routinely

sets the norm). One in which you remain an indifferent participant, contentedly or disgruntledly playing the game, joining a march, watching the news.

— *Generically*: Saying and hearing true things is reciting or imbibing recognizable facts — “The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620” through “Civil War ravaged the United States in the early 1860s”; “Honesty is the best policy” through “Nice guys finish last”; and all the facts about the environment you hear about in your classes and in the media, or read about in books, reciting them more or less correctly — without understanding either the research engendering them or the mind-set in which they are embedded and from which they derive their truth. Facts (as becomes astoundingly evident in scientific and judicial proceedings) are always just fragments of a larger story, and change their meaning, their weight, as the story gets enlarged, ever again retold — for a story must go on if truth itself is to happen, otherwise it sinks into the oblivion of routine (the usual, the normal): into untruth.

— *Generically*: To tell a lie is to recite a story that directs attention away from facts that others must deal with. A lie can be good: the time may not be ripe for a child to deal with a circumstance; an adolescent may deal more effectively with a circumstance if deluded about its (and his) likely prospects; even grown-ups can take only so much truth at a time. But lies can also be self-serving: lead others by the nose, get the teller out of a scrape. Children do it. Employees and managers do it. Parents do it. We all do it, often without admitting it, as when a mother disguises the truth from her children, deluding them, even herself, about their achievements, and deceiving others as well. It’s the story that bears the lie, and only incidentally the twisted or hidden fact. An effective self-serving liar will make sure he gets the facts themselves straight.

— Lastly, and again *generically*: Art works portray the interplay between truth and untruth, whether linguistic, musical, sculptural, architectural, or framed on a wall. Many art works fail. Many times

we ourselves fail to engage in them, so that we judge the failure to be theirs. Indeed, some might be outright false. Indifference to the portrayal of this all-decisive interplay, as in most popular movies and televised shows, is devastating.

With an eye to public discourse, we likely admit that truth has *something* to do with facts, but it also has *much* to do with keeping the ship afloat: with integration — where each relates to all, and all make room for each. Truth has *something* to do with faith: with keeping promises over time (not just that others must in future keep their word, but also that we keep up the words bequeathed to us, and forming our very condition). Truth has *something* to do with recognizing daily dangers: with spelling out impending disagreeable developments (currency inflation, energy depletion, enemy attacks). Truth has *something* to do with recognizing encroaching evil: anarchism in its ever-changing forms (the threat most at home in our democracy) and fascism (the totalitarianism most inimical to our democracy). And truth has *something* to do with freedom to speak out and to lend an ear — a freedom requiring not just that we permit others to say and hear what’s on their minds, or that we permit ourselves to do so, but, much more painfully, that we affirm the legitimacy of opposition itself (that, in *some* way, we ourselves may be wrong: that *no one* has special title to the truth) — which may just require the most courage and constitute the greatest freedom.

Untruth prevails at every time and at every place. Truth, however we specifically conceive it, is only as an event, and so must ever re-emerge. But then the urgency, the emergency, generally goes unnoticed, especially where and when everything functions smoothly. But they won’t for long. Every dimension of truth tempts us into betrayal: facts, cooperation, faith in the future and faithfulness to the past, daily dangers and fundamental evils — we easily confuse them all with simulacra undoing truth itself. Our own primary task is to recover what we have neglected: a

strenuous, even humbling task, which we are likely to take upon ourselves only when left with no choice.

You want concrete solutions? On the ground, in “practical” matters, every solution presupposes an understanding of what’s most needed — an understanding of truth. Insisting that contemplation yield practical solutions, you abandon the question of truth and quickly land in untruth. Still, I reiterate one practical bit of advice, borrowed from our ancient traditions: if you genuinely desire improvement in our political condition, do whatever you can to ensure a thoughtful education for the youth — i.e. more for the coming generation than for your own.

17 February 2017

Sources

- 1 “ . . . only those deserve liberty and life who understand they must re-enact them each day anew”: *Faust*, Part Two, Act 5, Großer Vorhof des Palasts, verses 11573-76, Faust speaking: *Ja! Diesem Sinne bin ich ganz ergeben, / das ist der Weisheit letzter Schluß: / nur der verdient sich Freiheit und Leben, / der täglich sie erobern muß*. I think also of Heracleitus’ fragment 6: ὁ ἥλιος νέος ἐφ’ ἡμέρῃ (“the sun is new each day”).
- 2 Umberto Eco’s article on Ur-Fascism (“The Demise of the Left,” *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995) is, or at least has been available on the Internet. [see following pages]
- 3 “ . . . the wise Solon devised a law disenfranchising anyone who, when the city was torn in conflict, did not take up arms one way or the other”: Aristotle’s *Constitution of Athens*, 8 (available in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes).
- 4 “To reflect, for instance, on what it means to be strong — as Socrates famously asked Thrasymachus to do”: The opening book of Plato’s *Republic*, where the sophist must agree that anyone really strong requires τέχνη (knowledgeable ability), the exercise of which benefits its “patient,” the weaker of the two (experience shows this: not to be confused with experiencing thoughts or deeds before or after the exercise).
- 5 “For two thousand years the answer varied in detail but remained essentially the same: we are pulled, as though by a magnet, out of our passivity into activity”: Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*; Augustine’s *City of God*, XIV, 7; Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part, Q. 26 (“Passions of the Soul: Love”); and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Finally, Descartes’ *The Passions of the Soul*, his very last work, still acknowledges this tradition and explicitly seeks to dethrone it (which perhaps contributed as much to the Enlightenment as did his now more famous “I think, therefore I am”).

The Demise of the Left

Umberto Eco

[only the 14 signs, not the reminiscences]

1. The first feature of Ur-Fascism is the cult of tradition. Traditionalism is of course much older than fascism. Not only was it typical of counter-revolutionary Catholic thought after the French revolution, but it was born in the late Hellenistic era, as a reaction to classical Greek rationalism. In the Mediterranean basin, people of different religions (most of them indulgently accepted by the Roman Pantheon) started dreaming of a revelation received at the dawn of human history. This revelation, according to the traditionalist mystique, had remained for a long time concealed under the veil of forgotten languages—in Egyptian hieroglyphs, in the Celtic runes, in the scrolls of the little known religions of Asia.

This new culture had to be syncretistic. Syncretism is not only, as the dictionary says, “the combination of different forms of belief or practice”; such a combination must tolerate contradictions. Each of the original messages contains a sliver of wisdom, and whenever they seem to say different or incompatible things it is only because all are alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth.

As a consequence, there can be no advancement of learning. Truth has been already spelled out once and for all, and we can only keep interpreting its obscure message.

One has only to look at the syllabus of every fascist movement to find the major traditionalist thinkers. The Nazi *gnosis* was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic, occult elements. The most influential theoretical source of the theories of the new Italian right, Julius Evola, merged the Holy Grail with The Protocols of the Elders of

Zion, alchemy with the Holy Roman and Germanic Empire. The very fact that the Italian right, in order to show its open-mindedness, recently broadened its syllabus to include works by De Maistre, Guenon, and Gramsci, is a blatant proof of syncretism.

If you browse in the shelves that, in American bookstores, are labeled as New Age, you can find there even Saint Augustine who, as far as I know, was not a fascist. But combining Saint Augustine and Stonehenge—that is a symptom of Ur-Fascism.

2. Traditionalism implies the rejection of modernism. Both Fascists and Nazis worshiped technology, while traditionalist thinkers usually reject it as a negation of traditional spiritual values. However, even though Nazism was proud of its industrial achievements, its praise of modernism was only the surface of an ideology based upon Blood and Earth (*Blut und Boden*). The rejection of the modern world was disguised as a rebuttal of the capitalistic way of life, but it mainly concerned the rejection of the Spirit of 1789 (and of 1776, of course). The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense Ur-Fascism can be defined as irrationalism.

3. Irrationalism also depends on the cult of action for action's sake. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes. Distrust of the intellectual world has always been a symptom of Ur-Fascism, from Goering's alleged statement (“When I hear talk of culture I reach for my gun”) to the frequent use of such expressions as “degenerate intellectuals,” “eggheads,” “effete snobs,” “universities are a nest of reds.” The official Fascist intellectuals were mainly engaged in attacking modern culture and the liberal intelligentsia for having betrayed traditional values.

4. No syncretistic faith can withstand analytical criticism. The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge. For Ur-Fascism, disagreement is treason.

5. Besides, disagreement is a sign of diversity. Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference. The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition.

6. Ur-Fascism derives from individual or social frustration. That is why one of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the appeal to a frustrated middle class, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups. In our time, when the old "proletarians" are becoming petty bourgeois (and the lumpen are largely excluded from the political scene), the fascism of tomorrow will find its audience in this new majority.

7. To people who feel deprived of a clear social identity, Ur-Fascism says that their only privilege is the most common one, to be born in the same country. This is the origin of nationalism. Besides, the only ones who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies. Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged. The easiest way to solve the plot is the appeal to xenophobia. But the plot must also come from the inside: Jews are usually the best target because they have the advantage of being at the same time inside and outside. In the U.S., a prominent instance of the plot obsession is to be found in Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*, but, as we have recently seen, there are many others.

8. The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies. When I was a boy I was taught to think of Englishmen as the five-meal people. They ate more frequently than the poor but sober Italians. Jews are rich and help each other through a secret web of mutual assistance. However, the followers must be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak. Fascist governments are condemned to lose wars because they are constitutionally incapable of objectively evaluating the force of the enemy.

9. For Ur-Fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle. Thus pacifism is trafficking with the enemy. It is bad because life is permanent warfare. This, however, brings about an Armageddon complex. Since enemies have to be defeated, there must be a final battle, after which the movement will have control of the world. But such a "final solution" implies a further era of peace, a Golden Age, which contradicts the principle of permanent war. No fascist leader has ever succeeded in solving this predicament.

10. Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology, insofar as it is fundamentally aristocratic, and aristocratic and militaristic elitism cruelly implies contempt for the weak. Ur-Fascism can only advocate a popular elitism. Every citizen belongs to the best people of the world, the members of the party are the best among the citizens, every citizen can (orought to) become a member of the party. But there cannot be patricians without plebeians. In fact, the Leader, knowing that his power was not delegated to him democratically but was conquered by force, also knows that his force is based upon the weakness of the masses; they are so weak as to need and deserve a ruler. Since the group is hierarchically organized (according to a military model), every subordinate leader

despises his own underlings, and each of them despises his inferiors. This reinforces the sense of mass elitism.

11. In such a perspective everybody is educated to become a hero. In every mythology the hero is an exceptional being, but in Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death. It is not by chance that a motto of the Falangists was *Viva la Muerte* (in English it should be translated as “Long Live Death!”). In non-fascist societies, the lay public is told that death is unpleasant but must be faced with dignity; believers are told that it is the painful way to reach a supernatural happiness. Bycontrast, the Ur-Fascist hero craves heroic death, advertised as the best reward for a heroic life. The Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death.

12. Since both permanent war and heroism are difficult games to play, the Ur-Fascist transfers his will to power to sexual matters. This is the origin of *machismo* (which implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality). Since even sex is a difficult game to play, the Ur-Fascist hero tends to play with weapons—doing so becomes an ersatz phallic exercise.

13. Ur-Fascism is based upon a selective populism, a qualitative populism, one might say. In a democracy, the citizens have individual rights, but the citizens in their entirety have a political impact only from a quantitative point of view—one follows the decisions of the majority. For Ur-Fascism, however, individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. Since no large quantity of human beings can have a common will, the Leader pretends to be their interpreter. Having lost their power of

delegation, citizens do not act; they are only called on to play the role of the People. Thus the People is only a theatrical fiction. To have a good instance of qualitative populism we no longer need the Piazza Venezia in Rome or the Nuremberg Stadium. There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People. Because of its qualitative populism Ur-Fascism must be against “rotten” parliamentary governments. One of the first sentences uttered by Mussolini in the Italian parliament was “I could have transformed this deaf and gloomy place into a bivouac for my maniples”—“maniples” being a subdivision of the traditional Roman legion. As a matter of fact, he immediately found better housing for his maniples, but a little later he liquidated the parliament. Wherever a politician casts doubt on the legitimacy of a parliament because it no longer represents the Voice of the People, we can smell Ur-Fascism.

14. Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak. Newspeak was invented by Orwell, in 1984, as the official language of Ingsoc, English Socialism. But elements of Ur-Fascism are common to different forms of dictatorship. All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning. But we must be ready to identify other kinds of Newspeak, even if they take the apparently innocent form of a popular talk show.