

# Affection

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I'm a sucker for friendship. In fact, I have, if not countless, at least measureless friends, one or another of whom — and, not infrequently, several at a time — accompany me nearly everywhere I go, ready to respond in one way or another to whatever I am doing, while also remaining very discreet when I am fully absorbed in the moment: watching a good film, say, or reading a good book, or concentrating on some delicate maneuvers in my workshop, or even just talking intently with a neighbor or a colleague about some practical matter; noticing, perhaps, that I am totally absorbed at such moments, they hold their tongues. But when I'm out walking, whether for the fresh air and exercise or to run some errand in town, or just performing some habitual chore like washing the dishes or stacking my firewood — and how many hours of each day are we only half-occupied in such ways? — they readily join me, engaging me in conversations that embrace without distorting these hours, filling them out with a kind of concentration of their own.

Some have no friends, I suspect — no genuine ones, I mean (for so long as you have pleasures or profits to offer, whether for good or for ill, you will find people gathering about, feigning friendship). Lonely souls, if we can judge by the boredom they express when, unable to rest after work, they seek out company indiscriminantly, whether on television, in bars or at parties where there is nothing to celebrate. I myself find such a prospect horrifying.

And I have heard of some who have only one friend with whom they consort regularly — which can be a very convenient, since you always know where to turn for a second opinion. But I discern dangers in having only one friend, not the least of which is the possibility of losing yourself, becoming a kind of clone of that one voice.

But, as I said, I myself have many, for which I am extremely grateful, but which also worries me at times, leading me to wonder whether, among other possible infirmities, I might fall into promiscuity.

Of course, we all have acquaintances, people with whom we exchange greetings and about whom we know tiny bits — such things as their convictions on various topics, where we are likely to come across them, and what sort of things they customarily do. Generally, we hesitate to invite them into our homes, and they would not normally invite us into theirs. At most we chat a bit at work or on the street. They don't really affect us — don't draw us out of our lives, pull us into grander vistas, compared with which our own lives can sometimes appear rather diminutive if not utterly diminished. That's the difference between the many acquaintances and the genuine friends I have.

On this score I would count my parents as my friends, except that the draw they have is, at least in principle, there from the start — I don't remember any time without them, whereas we meet a friend always later in life, so there's always a Before and After, so to speak, and this Before and After belongs to the friendship itself, marking the point at which one's life was first renewed.

On this score, too, I would count my wife as my friend, except that the intercourse here extends into nearly every dimension of life — it's a 24/7 and global affair, as it were, structured with a whole network of practical anticipations in addition to the recollection of Before and After. In the stricter sense, a friend, for me, comes and goes ever again, and doesn't interfere much with daily practicalities, even though we often talk together about these, in search of some extra understanding of them.

One thing about genuine friends, too, is that I find myself recalling what they say even long after they have said it (and in this haunting talk my parents and my wife again appear as friends in some broader sense). In fact, it sometimes worries me just how much I recite their words in the course of my other conversations. I fear I may give the impression that I'm trying to get them to do the work of thinking for me — which I may occasionally do (to take a break as it were), but not

without some awareness that I am shirking my duty. I fear, too, that I might give the impression I am trying to explain my friends — which certainly puts an end to friendship. For the moment we try to explain them, what they have said or done, we cease to let them draw us out of ourselves.

Indeed, we explain things largely, and especially in the case of people, precisely so that they may in some degree cease to bother us, cease to affect us. I tell myself, though, that my citing my friends serves at least to form a community spirit, since I am not only acknowledging their affect on me, but recommending it to others. In this latter regard I might here record that the best teacher I ever had would, both in class and in his office, speak exclusively to the matter at issue, but would also occasionally cite someone else as likewise doing so, with the effect that, bothered by my own inability to address the matter fully, I would, on my own and over considerable stretches of time, search out those others, often becoming fast friends with them as well.

Which reminds me: among my friends I would count a number of my teachers — again stretching the meaning of friendship. My years of study with Henry Bugbee at the University of Montana, then with John Anderson and Richard Gotshalk at the Pennsylvania State University, were guided by the affection engendered by these men. Their talk drew me into matters rather than telling me about them. And, engendering this draw from the source, so to speak, they enabled me to turn to the great literature likewise issuing from the source. It startles me to think that I never had a single course in some of the literature they would mention to me and to which I subsequently guided my own students. I remember Bugbee once saying something about Plato's *Republic* (that it was the first great work in phenomenology) that led me to read it on my own, and later to teach it, with ever growing admiration, for nearly forty years; he also said something to me about some later works of Martin Heidegger, and again I found myself drawn, with nary an academic course to certify my efforts, into a life-long study and teaching of his work.

My teachers are all dead now. Which again reminds me that, at my advanced age, many of my best friends are dead. Indeed, their

friendship was first sealed by their death, since so long as they are still living there is always the chance of some devastating failure (that's one reason for not naming a building or an institution after a living person: it's only at the end that you can be sure of anyone's integrity, our own as well). For this reason, perhaps, I cannot understand, or ever be friends with, those who dishonor the dead. The test of friendship, or at least one such test, is whether the affection survives the person occasioning it.

With such a wide variety of friends, both living and dead, it's no wonder that I get involved in conversations taking me down many different paths, some of which seem utterly incompatible with others — so that people I meet sometimes express surprise, and think me promiscuous, especially those who have never traveled much, and feel comfortable on only one or two paths. I converse with logicians as well as with romantics, with radical right-wingers as well as with radical left-wingers — with anyone whose words I can hear as stemming from some affection. From the 1960s, when I first taught, to my retirement in 2004, I could also converse with students, once they started speaking and writing from what addressed them — always very awkwardly at first, and often erroneously. In contrast, I despised those who merely attended to my words, or the words of others, with nary a sense of the affection engendering them.

I must admit, though, that some of my good friends go off on tangents, pushing what I consider to be diminished agendas, ones promoting promising lines of thought but leaving a lot of collateral damage in their wake. However, so long as they keep to their own guns, which the best ones do, I learn a lot from them; they may be shortsighted in some ways, but in other ways they see much more than I could ever see without them. They then serve as worthy opponents, so to speak. Anyway, opposition is part of friendship: you don't require that friends conform to you, since what matters is that you find yourself conforming toward them, to their source. In any case, I find myself citing the words even of these worthy opponents, especially since they generally have friends of their own who, as do so many friends of my friends, distort them into their own little world devoid of

affection — betray them, even dishonor them, wittingly or unwittingly.

Paradoxical as it may seem, you will find that any genuine friendship forms a community of loners — which accounts for the fact that we can be friends with those absent, even with the dead, since what counts as being *with* them is that their voices, even when disembodied, continue to haunt us. And how can anyone who is unable to be alone become a true friend of anyone else? For you have to come into the friendship *as* someone, which means you have to have something to offer, namely yourself, in some sense free-standing. Which in turn accounts for the fact that genuine friendships are hard-won — unlike the instant friendships in barrooms and tourist resorts, or the contrived ones at work and play, where colleagues join into a practical effort.

When I was still in school one of my classmates used to cross my path daily, dispensing some sarcasm to me and to anyone else around. I despised him heartily — until one year his family moved into a house across the street from mine, and slowly we became the best of friends, driving off on weekends to camp in the woods and talk about life. Later, when in graduate school and having to prepare for comprehensive examinations, I had to study Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which appeared to me (and also to many others, I believe) as somehow repulsive — only later, after I poured over the text with a modicum of Greek, did we become the best of friends. Then Augustine's *Confessions*: what's all this talk addressed to God rather than to the reader? I could go on. The point is that in each case I had to learn to listen to them, which means not just learning their language but also re-finding myself in their orbit. This kind of listening is by no means easy: most hear only the cacophony in their own heads, as any teacher soon learns (and not just about his students). But that's one virtue of friendship: it helps clear our heads.

Oddly again, though, once you become friends you are never really alone, there's always someone to talk with. Or nearly always: since true friends come unannounced (they don't always fare well with formal invitations), it may happen that no one comes at all, and you do feel lonely. Now's when you are tempted to turn on the radio or

television set, or seek out other company indiscriminantly, whether in pulp literature or vacuous conversation with some acquaintance — perhaps, nowadays, on the Internet. Much better, I suggest, is to go for a long walk, preferably in a quiet countryside. If you have any genuine friends they will join you soon enough — they've likely gone out for a walk too.

I almost forgot: there are also *bad* friends. I don't mean those always seeking immediate gratification (they can be amusing at times, and may be harmless enough, at least to you), nor do I mean those business-types, always trying to get ahead in life and prone to run over you (they can certainly remind you of the utilitarian dimension of life, and provide an example of its terrors); these two are basically incapable of friendship, so you all just pretend. By bad friends I mean those who, after they have drawn you into their orbit of thought, insist on telling you how to think — rather than getting you to think, as a true friend does. Such people are addicted to monologue. And not just your contemporaries, but also parents, teachers and preachers: having figured things out for themselves, they lay it all out as the truth to which you must now submit yourself. They make for bad company because either you capitulate and become something of a clone, or you break off the engagement and suffer the loss — after all, they *were* your friends, meaning that they affected you, so you keep hearing them long after you no longer wish to; very annoying, although I can imagine something worse: my being a bad friend to you.

Against this background of failed friendship, you might wonder, as I do, just how friendship works: What's its secret? The name for it is clear enough: affection. It's something of a mystery, though. For being affected here means being drawn out by someone, drawn into something: it "gets you going" — whereas being affected can mean only being subjected to something, being only passive in regard to it. Some people actually enjoy being subjected to music, some especially designed to overwhelm them in this way, leaving them passive, which is to say impassive to all else. In any case, we associate affection not only with being struck by another man or woman, but also with our seeking at least momentary completion in him or her — especially in his

or her conversation with us, whether spoken or written. Paintings and grand edifices (old cathedrals, for instance), theatrical and musical performances, can also affect us this way.

What makes affection mysterious to us is that we cannot rightly describe ourselves in it as either passive or active, simply undergoing or simply performing. It's both at once: we are both energized and, at least initially, helpless, even hapless, perhaps flustered or frustrated. All the while, though, it's what gets us moving, gives us direction — as is negatively evident in the apathy of youths not yet strongly affected by anything or anybody, and of adults firmly settled in life but disaffected by their jobs or marriages.

I've heard it said that there are some things we just can't talk about properly, and that affection is one of them. It either happens or it doesn't. And, being supposedly irrational, cannot be either aroused or dispelled, except by some magic potion, as in a fairytale. Talk about it undoes it, suspends it. Better to leave it alone.

In a way, I agree, especially in regard to individual cases. There are things that require that we, within them, talk from them: talk of them, not about them. And, yes, don't bother listening to anyone talking only *about* affection, as an old bitty might talk about young lovers, herself never having been either well loving or well loved. As used to be said of physicians that they could be trusted to treat only those diseases they themselves have suffered, so only those who have been affected by what they seem to be talking about can be trusted to talk from it, of it: nobody is going to talk properly about any friend of yours who has not been similarly affected by him.

Still, despite all objections, I propose we talk of affection. And for a number of reasons. First, you'll find yourself in good company: nearly all my best friends talk of it and will inevitably join in the conversation, if only silently; you may even make some new friends. Second, affection can easily go wrong, and you should at least learn to distinguish the good from the bad. And there's a third: as I have already noted, the best friends — the genuine ones, not those seeking immediate gratification or long-term advantage — get you to thinking. With such friends you can think about anything you happen to come

across, giving every experience a second chance, a second life in thought, with the result that, as you pause together to think about it (a rose garden, a scene on the street, a film, what a common friend has said), you find that it reveals itself more fully, more richly than it would with only one passing. So that, in thinking together about affection we already enhance and prolong it: that's the best reason I can think of.

You know how disparate friends can be: my left-wingers would, I'm afraid, find my right-wingers very repulsive, as would these latter the former; and I find that my romantical friends generally can't bear my logical friends — even though, oddly, some of the latter love the literature and art work in the province of the former. Anyway, I myself appreciate the diversity and, having conversed with them all over the last four or five decades, have noticed a very broad swath in which they all meet in total agreement on one subject and then diverge remarkably on the kindred subject of affection. The subject on which every thinker from Socrates up through Kant agrees is that we come to know ourselves, in the manner of the Oracle at Delphi, as passive in some respects and active in others. “No harm can befall a good man” then means that a good man takes his stand in, concerns himself for, puts his heart into what he does rather than in what befalls him — and can, being now truly himself, penetrate to how things themselves are — rather than seeing in his environment only pleasures and pains, profits or losses, for himself — and thereby attain to a kind eternity of knowledge and immortality of self. Much the same formulation of this dichotomy and its consequences continues down into Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, after which (in the wake of which) the “I think therefore I am” enters into a kind of competition with the *tabula rasa*: Which one is primary, activity or passivity? Kant arbitrates the opposition, settles the dispute sufficiently to allow the contemplation of the game to pass ever more into what we now call the social sciences, the study of human being with no questions asked about the distinction, only and unendingly about its employment.

Please forgive me for talking so offhandedly about my dead friends. I just want to suggest, first, that if you ever wish to get to know

them deeply, you'll have to accept their terms thoughtfully, i.e. both questioningly and understandingly; second, that our own condition evolved under their guidance and now sets the terms without requiring us to think about them, with dire consequences for our understanding of education and a lot else; third, that any effort to understand affection freshly will require a careful consideration of the entire swath, starting at the beginning, the inauguration of the distinction, keeping an eye out for the sudden difference on the question of affection, and ending perhaps with a suspicious eye for latter-day versions of both. In sum, the swath has concealed what now deserves to be revealed.

To appreciate the swath you may need a contrast to begin with. I did. Again it was Henry Bugbee who brought me around, slowly and frustratingly. As I said, he always talked *with* other thinkers, never about them. I, well schooled in mathematics, physics and chemistry, kept trying to isolate “what the authors were saying” with the misunderstanding that I could understand their sayings and then decide whether I agreed with them or not. After several courses where we studied works by Kierkegaard, Martin Buber and Paul Tillich — then also Augustine's *Confessions*, Van Gogh's letters, Heinrich Zimmer's *The King and the Corpse*, *The Bhagavadgita* and *The Tao Te Ching* — several of us students asked him to conduct a seminar on Gabriel Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*, a work he had occasionally mentioned. He agreed and, it being spring, we sometimes sat on the grass outside. It was here, on the grass one warm afternoon, that I first came upon the formulation: to think the mystery of being we must understand ourselves as in a situation, where participation names our place rather than the opposition between activity and passivity. It was a good introduction to Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, which I began reading on my own the following fall, when I was in graduate school.

Long afterwards I learned that the inauguration came with Socrates by way of Plato, who, in his dialogue on sophistry, lets a man from out of town (a “stranger”) formulate it very succinctly, in an effort to understand exactly how we can speak and hear wrongly (strange question!): those things, and only those things, really *are* (πάν τοῦτο ὄντως εἶναι) that possess ability (δύναμις) in doing or undergoing

(ποιεῖν or παθεῖν), i.e. have the *power* either to *make* something different or *be made* different, “in any manner, however small or banal, and even if only just once”; all else is what we today call predicates or attributes — ways we *talk* about “what really is” — and this is where we can so easily go wrong, i.e. get caught up in predicates devoid of their proper subjects. In any situation, then, our task, if we are intent on speaking or hearing truly, will be to focus, *by way of* predication, on the “subject” — an extremely arduous task, as any schoolroom student or teacher should especially know, since they move primarily within talk-at-a-distance — unlike those working together in a kitchen, for instance.

Again, please forgive the pedantry: it’s just that, if we are going to recite what others say, especially what our friends say, we had best get at least their words right. It’s an elementary courtesy, I should think, although it can be onerous enough, since there’s a tendency to remember only fragments of what others say, bits and pieces serving, at best, as mnemonic devices but often supplanting the subject entirely. That can happen also when you rely on translations, since here you are already left with second-hand talk, a sure way to prevent acquaintances from becoming true friends.

Now, what this inaugural distinction means, and especially how it bears on our own career in life — on what used to be called “the soul” — can only come out if we help it. The words themselves, the ones we read or hear, can never of their own accord create the needed focus. You can’t rightly ask your friends to take over this task too: they have spoken, and now it’s up to you to focus not only *their* words but, much more challenging, *your* words on the subject at hand. If you insist that your friends take over this responsibility, you lose them, reduce them to mere acquaintances.

But, you might well ask, how is it possible to think *with* dead friends? I started asking that question when I first began teaching, and have been asking it ever since — first at Penn State as a graduate student assigned to teach Introduction to Philosophy, then at East Carolina College and at Antioch College, and finally at Mount Allison University. It was only during the last decade or two of my teaching that I developed a technique that satisfied me: teaching Aristotle’s

*Organon*, I would require of the students that they tell a story recollecting a development in their own experience where they were already convinced that they learned something, all the while bearing in mind the distinctions Aristotle makes, re-seeing their own experience through his lenses: the developments from “what’s prior to us” toward “what’s prior by nature,” from “sensation through memory to experience,” from “particular to universal,” from “opinion to knowledge” (along with the relevance of his ten categories); then too the learning of material conditions, agency, purpose, and form, and finally the power of defining, in words, the being underlying all these developments. (I applied the technique also to the study of Kant’s three *Critiques*, except that the students here found it more helpful to recall examples of learning how to investigate, as detectives, lawyers or modern-day scientists do — whereas examples of hands-on crafts better serve Aristotle’s scheme of learning.) Students — and I myself, as their teacher — could then go on to contemplate what Aristotle contemplates in his more “abstract” works, without so easily falling prey to the words of the dead and ending in a pseudo-dialogue of abstractions.

Anyway, I’d now like to cite some words of this very good friend of mine, long dead in more than one sense. I do this largely, or at least initially, out of the pure pleasure of good conversation. But I also have an ulterior motive: great thinkers have in fact left their carcasses strewn all over the battlefield of the present, and if we don’t perform some necromancy they continue to clutter the field, preventing any significant combat — and if we *do* so perform, we will find not only that it is they who have set the terms of the battle, but also that they may take our side in it.

The words that keep coming back as I am recalling the question of affection, words begging for blood, like the ghosts Odysseus meets in Hades (who signify nothing until they receive sacrificial blood), are these, from Aristotle’s corpus. In both his and our tongue:

1<sup>st</sup> τὸ γὰρ δεκτικὸν τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ τῆς οὐσίας νοῦς *Metaphysics*, 1072 b 20  
For the receiving of what’s minded, i.e. of substance, is mind.

2<sup>nd</sup> ἀπαθὲς ἄρα δεῖ εἶναι, δεκτικὸν δὲ τοῦ εἶδους

καὶ δυνάμει τοιοῦτον ἀλλὰ μὴ τοῦτο

*On the Soul, 429 a 15*

Having then to be impassive, it [νοῦς, mind] is [as] receiving the form  
i.e. [has its being in being beholden] to its power but not [being] the same.

3<sup>rd</sup> τὸ γὰρ οἰκεῖον ἐκάστω τῇ φύσει κρᾶτιστον καὶ ἥδιστόν ἐστιν  
ἐκάστω·

καὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ δὴ ὁ κατὰ τὸν νοῦν βίος, εἴπερ τοῦτο

μάλιστα ἄνθρωπος·

οὗτος ἄρα καὶ εὐδαιμονέστατος.

*Nicomachean Ethics, 1178 a 5*

For what's by nature proper to each is the mightiest and the  
pleasantest to it;

and for man this is the life in accordance with mind, since this above  
all is man;

so, too, is this the happiest life.

First question: How now can I be true to these words of my friend?  
How, too, can I be a good friend to you, whom I have invited into the  
conversation?

As with any friend, I certainly betray the friendship by  
concentrating only on his words. We remain true to him, and  
especially to his words, by focusing our attention on what he himself  
has in mind, the focal point of his words. Such attendance we naturally  
do with friends, whereas we might well not do so when addressed by  
someone trying to sell us something. Some people do in fact aspire to  
fool us, perhaps fooling themselves all the while; and, in keeping with  
this fact of life, some people hear or read in any serious conversation  
primarily an effort to convince them to buy what happens to be said.  
But I assure you that not one of my own friends intends any such thing;  
indeed, I cannot long be friends with anyone, living or dead, who  
intends to sell me his wares. My friends, affected by what they are  
addressing, speak out of this affection and, they themselves being  
spurred on, pass on to me some of the spurs. That's why conversations  
with true friends stand out in our memory and also raise our  
expectations: in them we both think the same thing, and our ability to  
do so already authenticates what each of us says — to ourselves, at least,  
if not always to those who drop in on the conversation.

So what is all this talk of “mind”? The word, our friend says,  
points to the best part of being human — which, in turn (so he has said  
in my other conversations with him over the decades), supplies not  
only the indispensable basis of true friendship, without which this most  
marvelous development in our lives fades into mere shenanigans of  
pleasantry or utility, but also the direct contact necessary for insightful  
talk of any kind, along with the inferences essential to such talk. Our  
friend's talk of “mind” talks about us, a topic as close to home as you  
can imagine — not about something out in the woods or on the other  
side of the moon. So if you have trouble finding the touchstone for  
what my friend says, the fault can only lie with yourself, whether your  
own unwillingness or your own inability to see where you are,  
preferring to see things far away — and perhaps to keep company with  
those who will in fact take you somewhere else, at least in their  
conversation. But I can only assume you are not one of those.

So just ask yourself about the best times of conversation,  
discounting those that have simply passed the time with no special  
focus — and also those that may have made good use of time, but solely  
in order to get something else done, something other than the  
conversation itself. Such best times might appear rare, but that may be  
only because you have turned your back on them. Certainly *sustained*  
ones are rare, ones continuing for hours on end or, allowing for  
intermissions, even for decades on end; of these I myself can recall only  
a handful in my entire life. But even the briefest one will do for  
revealing the touchstone necessary for entering into our present  
conversation.

It may have happened when you and yours were strolling through  
a public garden, and you were both struck by its design — how all the  
details came together at the moment, and how, now in your talk, the  
whole reflected something about life itself, or some version of it. It may  
have happened when you were walking out of a cinema, the film still  
drawing you into its design, and you find yourselves as much desirous  
of talking about it as reduced to silence. Or it may have happened  
when you finally got into a treatise on even the most abstract  
mathematical subject, when you suddenly “got it” and now, after the

writer had shared it with you, you wished to share it with another friend. Whatever the moment or the time or the place, just make sure you were at your best — that you were fully there, fully present, and not shrinking back in frustration or sleep, or demanding that others do the work for you.

It can happen anywhere and at any time, I insist. Which means that, once you develop a readiness for it, you'll never want for having something to say, or for eagerness to hear what others have to say. For you can now go it alone. Still, I must admit that it helps to have someone in the flesh with whom to converse; otherwise you will have to resort to reading or writing — or both — where conversation with others may be the purest but also the most trying. We need all the encouragement we can get from the flesh as well — especially if, as is likely, we are in fact surrounded by company that ignores, distorts or even denies "life in accordance with mind."

About anything, I say. For the best of conversations bring out the best of what they are about. So that not just some public or private garden may occasion such a conversation, but also rocks along the roadside. And even very imperfect gardens may get you to talking about what gardens can do or allow to be done to them. What such conversation does is elicit the glow lurking, even if not well actualized, in whatever you meet. Insistence on attending only to examples that are already glowing might well indicate a certain refusal to elicit the glow. One advantage of learning to elicit it yourself is that you need no longer die of boredom: there will be many more occasions for marveling at things, far fewer occasions where things appear unworthy of attention. Another advantage (although perhaps it is the same one) is that once you learn the designs essential to gardens and the like, you can make or enjoy other ones rather than remain with the one that first struck you.

Essential to whatever example of conversation you choose will be that, at the time, it pulled you out of yourself — into whatever garden or film or mathematical exegesis occasioned it. I say "it" pulled you out, and then in, but the conversation formed itself *by* your being pulled out, *as* you were being pulled in. The agency of the pull is not

so clear, and it may be best to leave the question undecided. It's enough to appreciate the pull — both the heat of the occasion, its palpable warmth, and the light it so strikingly and yet puzzlingly shed — that it keeps shedding as you recall the occasion. If to be human is to be absorbed in everyday concerns governed by considerations of pleasure and pain, advantage and disadvantage, you are, for the while in which you are pulled out of this maelstrom into the warm, perhaps painful and impracticable light, more than human — and, for that while, of one mind with your friend, perhaps discovering for the first time what true friendship means: not so much a meeting of two minds as the discovery of one.

Once you have an example of marvelous conversation in mind, one picked out of the thousands of conversations either merely painful or pleasant, or just profitable or profitless, you and I can converse about the marvel as well — not just recall it but, since it now sets the standard against which we will henceforth gauge our conversations on the ground, ask ourselves what makes such conversation possible, and what all is going on in it: what we can say about *it* and not just about gardens, films, and mathematical exercises in which mindful conversation is already at work. In short, after minding things fully, we may, some few of us, mind what it means to mind: not only think about it but also care about it, since it makes all the difference in the world, or at least in friendship and in rediscovering the world intellectually. Such is the life of contemplation, I assure you, of which there are a thousand failed examples for every successful one.

And one of the things I would like to talk about is the meaning of that one word you see in two of the three remarks I recited on this question of minding things: δεκτικόν in our friend's tongue, "receiving" in ours. In each of our two examples we can now ask to what our friend may be calling attention when saying:

1<sup>st</sup> Minding something means receiving what's minded . . .

and

2<sup>nd</sup> Minding, while necessarily impassive, *is* as receiving . . .

For in this one word I do believe you can trace every significant conversation about conversation you will ever have with my long-dead friends — trace out all the understandings of what it means to understand, at every crucial point in the development of our intellectual heritage, the inheritance both enlightening and encumbering our present condition at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A pretentious mouthful, you might say. And you might also object that I want to land on a word rather than attend directly to what it intends. I plead guilty on both charges, but would also like to plead attenuating circumstances. I ask you to bear me out at least long enough to see whether you might figure out a better way to proceed.

First, though, let's turn back to your example of mindful conversation. You were extremely alert at the time, not just drifting through the garden (or whatever) but fully there, actively attending to detail, not just noticing things you ordinarily wouldn't, but also interrelating them, assembling them, attentive to the design, how it arises and where it is going. You were anything but passive, merely taking it in as leaky hull takes in water, or your gum takes in the dentist's needle. On the other hand, you were not making just anything you wanted of it — or, if you were, you were missing the garden, living in your own fancy, as a child might do when playing hide-and-seek among the hedges, or as you in fact do when just scurrying through it for a pleasurable break from the burdens in the office, or for cutting down the time for getting home. Your keen activity *there*, at that time of extreme alertness, when you were actually discovering the garden for what it is in itself and not just passing through for something else, is not only compatible with but actually defined by an openness to what is there: your own presence of mind, already shared in conversation with your friend, forms a kind of *pas de deux* with the presence of the garden itself, so rare in our all-too-human condition. To make a fine point of it, the whole experience was one of opening: the open-mindedness was not just an openness on your part but, being also an openness of the garden itself, belonged to the conversation, to the friendship, just as much as to each of you separately, or more so.

All this happens — at the best of times and in the best of

conversations. Of this there can be no question — or, if there is, it may be that you have not yet really had a truly good time, and certainly not a truly good conversation. But I can hardly believe that. As I said, perhaps you have never had much of any extended good time or extended good conversation (for which one can only be grateful, never boastful). I suspect, though, that you have in fact had them, at least at moments that caught you off guard — they have just been too brief, perhaps too troubling, to have remained with you as hallmarks. In any case, you can neither fabricate nor prove one. All our, or at least all *my* dead friends testify to such discoveries as setting the conditions for making anything genuine or proving anything worthwhile.

But now, when conversing not about gardens and the like but rather about the peculiar minding evident in those conversations, we find all those dead friends chiming in with understandably differing observations. With some reservations, however, they tend to agree, as I have already insisted, on the basic distinction between being passive and being active, and struggle with that third category (if “category” is the right word): being receptive. Under the first, passivity, they all place our susceptibility to sounds, colors, tastes, smells and such tactile sensations as heat and cold, stinging and colliding. Under activity, they all place our ability to form these sensations — interrelate them, recall and anticipate them, devise ways of augmenting or diminishing them, rearrange them to our own pleasure or even to the displeasure of others. Debates then rage over how the two relate to one another — over which comes first, so to speak: the sensitive or the rational — all the way down to current debates about the relation between data and theory in the science born around 1600 and reaching its maturity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. All these often heated conversations take place after the actual minding of circumstance: they mind what it means to mind, and carry their participants into sometimes wildly different directions, each generally aware that what's at issue is our understanding of human being itself (for at issue is indeed self-knowledge of the Delphic sort). It's an issue to which very few remain true, intent as they are in defending some view of their own and attacking anyone who calls their own into question.

Meanwhile, the third “category” gets lost. It’s still there, formally, i.e. faintly, in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* (I. Question 79), which follows Aristotle’s formulation almost line by line if not word for word, since now in another tongue. An excerpt, in A. C. Pegis’ revised English Dominican Translation:

To be passive may be taken in three ways. Firstly, in its most strict sense, when from a thing is taken something which belongs to it by virtue either of its nature, or of its proper inclination; as when water loses coolness by heating, and as when a man becomes ill or sad. Secondly, less strictly, a thing is said to be passive when something, whether suitable or unsuitable, is taken away from it. And in this way not only he who is ill is said to be passive, but also he who is healed; not only he who is sad, but also he that is joyful; or whatever way he be altered or moved. Thirdly, in a wide sense a thing is said to be passive, from the very fact that what is in potentiality to something receives that to which it was in potentiality, without being deprived of anything. And accordingly, whatever passes from potentiality to act may be said to be passive, even when it is perfected. It is *thus* that to understand is to be passive.

Although you here don’t have a friend’s word in his own tongue, you might still relate it roughly to your conversation in the garden (or wherever). You may notice, first, that the grass is attacked by cinch worms or that you yourself are attacked by mosquitoes: pure passivity. You notice, secondly, that the grass gets restored by rain, or that you find relief by spraying some insect repellent on your skin and clothes; restoration from the outside, not just degradation from the outside, may count as passivity. But thirdly, and more directly to the point of your conversation, you will, on this way of minding things, find not only that the garden reminds you of the power of nature to actualize her

children from the inside, to revitalize them daily after the injuries inflicted by cinch worms and drought and each spring after the dormancy of winter, but also that you yourself have been actualized for a while, revitalized, roused from the half-sleep in which you fall each day as you scurry through the barely noticed gardens of your life. Getting actualized, revitalized, roused from half-sleep — incited to become again active, here and now, perhaps by the voice of some friend, dead or alive — here both what is minded and minding itself are “passive” (so says Thomas): each receives aid, over and over again, in becoming and re-becoming itself (continuous creation, it has been called).

And for a while thinkers debated just how “intellect” (*intellectus*, mind) could be both passive and active. But don’t miss the unobtrusive fact that “receiving that to which it was [i.e., already had its being] in potentiality” now (in Thomas’ formulation) counts as passivity on our part, akin to the passivity of grass and the other plants and animals inflicted by their environment and needing to be regenerated. It was not long, however, before thinkers entered the scene boldly proposing other ways of construing the minding of a garden — ways essentially discarding the earlier reliance on “actualizing potential” as the key to understanding both what we encounter and how best to respond to it, i.e. to minding both nature and art.

But I’m taking you too far afield. Let’s listen again to our first friend, heeding all the while the source of what he’s saying. For the greatest challenge is to keep in mind what another asks us to keep in mind, and not get lost in the words or, which is just as common and even more devastating, lost in the debates raging among voices competing for our attention, where soon you too will be staking out your claim in foreign territory rather than mining the field on which you in fact find yourself. As soon as you start minding the debates over what it means to mind a garden, you have ceased minding on the ground. Then, when asked what minding means, you will have nothing to examine, to recall or even to anticipate — and so will have to answer, if you are at all honest, as does David Hume (in keeping with his anglophone placidity, not to say passivity):

The mind is a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. . . . The comparison of the theater must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which it is composed.

With whom Friedrich Nietzsche agrees, with emphasis on this strange effort to mind ourselves in abstraction from our minding things:

*Bewußt werden wir uns nur als eines Haufens von Affekten: und selbst die Sinneswahrnehmungen und Gedanken gehören unter diese Offenbarungen der Affekte.*

We become conscious of ourselves only as a pile of affects: and precisely sense-perceptions and thoughts belong among these manifestations of affects.

For one of the first wonders of human nature, one recognized by every thinker of consequence, is that human being only really *is* in very complicated relations toward other things, relations taking ever-changing shape. We, unlike so many of the things we encounter, show ourselves, to others as well as to ourselves, only when minding these other things. In short, we can mind *ourselves* only as minding *them* — as might be expressed in some myth telling how the gods punished our race, rendering us incapable of being alone after all.

But ask yourself now what it is you receive when at your best? I suggest that, if you can ignore the debates for a moment and simply *look*, you can attest, quite simply, that you receive what you mind. In my cases, I receive the garden, the film, even the development of what might be called a proof (a showing) in that mathematical consideration. I get the garden back, the film back, the proof back: as a whole, one might say, so marvelously distinct from the usual castrated perceptions, the fragments that come and go.

Our friend says something like that: we receive what's minded, i.e. what belongs to us, the *substance* we have otherwise missed, the *form* of it. But these two words, "substance" and "form," belong now to the debates and have long since become opaque.

The one, οὐσία, ordinarily means "estate": what you have inherited to take care of and to bequeath in your turn. And what you have can include the land over which your city spreads as well as the property where your own house or farm rests. In this sense, you can, as our friend does, raise the question whether "substance" should be private or public: a garden, for instance. In this sense, too, Henry David Thoreau can say that, by wandering around the countryside, surveying parts of it for farmers, he could own every bit of it by turns, without having to worry about selling or buying it, repairing its fences or paying taxes on it.

The other word, εἶδος, originally means the striking figure of someone (in Homer's epics: of a warrior), what might be illustrated as the striking design of a garden, of a film, of a deduction, in each case a design setting the standard of other instances: a *paradigm* (as its called in both our tongue and Aristotle's) against which we will measure, for a while, other gardens, other films, other mathematical proofs.

What do you think? Does Aristotle help you out in the conversation? That is, does what *you* see, when you look for yourself, come out any better as you are listening to him — or to my rendition of his words? Anyway, you'll have to decide that for yourself, and also whether you have looked hard enough at your own conversations, and distinguished the genuine from the make-believe ones.

Meanwhile, there are several things I'd still like to talk about. For one: How can we be both impassive (not passive, ἀπαθὲς) and still receptive? Thomas Aquinas, who took Aristotle for his second-best friend and conversed long and hard with him, slides over the difference between being passive and being receptive, perhaps for reasons of his own, reasons having something to do with his very best friend. And I must admit that the difference does not immediately strike the eye of the mind. So we had best return to our paradigms, to each his own.

I've come into the garden with a good friend. One or the other of

us has begun to elicit, in the talk, its striking features, and we together rediscover it whole: it is now ours, whereas before we had likely been only passers-by, even trespassers. We *receive* it whole while we are active in tracing its design — *its* design becoming *our* design. Once formed, the design appears, in retrospect, as itself striking us: so we might speak of ourselves as passive in receiving it — just as we judge the colors of the shrubbery and the sounds of the birds, perhaps the cold or the warmth of the bench or the grass, to come upon us whether we agree to their coming or not.

But any experience can be analyzed, after the fact, into such activity and passivity, without being at all fulfilling, wholesome, special, paradigmatic, revelatory: without our being at our best and without the garden (or whatever) becoming ours. In fact, neither our being at our best nor the garden revealing itself as our estate can ever appear in such post-factum analysis.

But *look* again to what's happening *before* analysis (*did* happen and, being paradigmatic, *must henceforth* happen). At the very least, you were, in company with a friend, meeting it (the garden, or whatever) half-way: the garden invited you, as something like a guest or, perhaps better, a dance-partner. The invitation may even have come from you: you invited the garden as a guest, or as a partner — especially if you already knew the difference between passing through and dwelling in a garden, a film, a mathematical proof (if you already knew what it means to mind something). In either case, the two of you accept; you dance. And if there really is a dance, I suggest that the distinction between agent and patient no longer holds at all, as it might in conversation both before and after. What happens is a wholeness in which there may be distinguishable parts but which cannot be reconstituted from these parts. It engulfs us and everything around us — which can be frightening, so that we may even guard ourselves against it. At first, then, you may, in your innocence, run to others to share it, only to find they do not, or can not, accept the invitation, let alone issue one. So, just as you learn to your dismay that not every encounter turns into a wholesome dance, so too you learn that many of your would-be friends are not very good at it, while some even brace

themselves against it. For all the importance you ascribe to it, you must in the end admit that it's no easy matter, and that you yourself had to learn it the hard way — alone, even if, as with me at least, with some catalytic help from someone who knew better.

Essential to the best conversations, ones in which the gardens, the mathematical proofs, or whatever, reveal themselves freshly — fully, in a sense that enhances rather than diminishes their mystery — is that, for the duration, you are of one mind. And that's the way our mutual friend puts it: mind actualized, now actually minding and not dormant, *is* the receiving, the getting back, of the garden (or whatever), now in full form. You two are of two minds only when you are both a bit asleep, dozing through rather than dwelling within the garden, the film, the proof — when you talk past each other, at cross-purposes, rather mindlessly, as in chit-chat or squabbling, although you may, in passing, remind yourselves of better conversations. For a contrast, consider what happens when you succeed in really reading a book, whether Homer's *Iliad* or Dante's *Comedy*, Plato's *Republic* or Kant's *Critiques*, or any novel, especially one of the greats (by Proust, Dostoevsky, Faulkner . . .): you and your author are of one mind — two only before, after and so long as you can't get into the book — haven't become true friends with the author (so only talk about him, assuring already three minds by saying to others such things as “in Homer's view of things . . .” or “Dante got his idea of . . . from Thomas Aquinas” or “Plato believed, meant, missed, betrayed . . .” or the like.

**B**ut perhaps you are getting tired of all this talk about talk. Perhaps it's time to stop, especially if you are content with this last consideration. As for myself, though, I'd like to go on. For one thing, that last thought seems to cast ill-bearing aspersions on much literary, and especially academic talk — and, worse, seems to leave no room for critical minds. For another, though, that notion of reception as the third thing, prior to the more obvious dichotomy of action and passion, does not fit well with subsequent intellectual developments, ones absolutely essential to our current condition — where, in fact, it seems essential that we not only speak of dead friends in the third person but set them

aside, or even bury them, since they either address us on the sidelines of active life, where we are caught up for a while in our passions, or tell us things outdated or misguided, the better of which we now already know.

As I said, one way of killing a friendship is to pick away at the words of your friend, since the only friendship that lasts is one in which you find yourselves minding what the words intend. Still, once you feel that the friendship rests on solid ground, you do well to re-align the words you hear with greater care, the better to attend to their intention. And one of these words is precisely τὸ δεκτικόν, which I have translated as “the receiving (of. . .).” First, note that the word gets translated variously in his other conversations where “receptivity” applies to what we mind rather than to our minding. For instance (to recur to one of his favorite examples), a doctor might judge whether a patient’s condition *allows* for recovery — just as a woodsman I once met during a walk in the forest near Leideléng remarked of an oak sapling that had caught my attention and seemed to me worth sparing, *Den do gött näischt*: it would come to nothing — it was already too crooked, he explained when I expressed disappointment, and too overshadowed by the mature oaks and beeches surrounding it, so that (I myself now add) the potential naturally belonging to it as an oak tree would never be actualized, and it may as well be cleared out of the way. — Similarly (to recur to an example even closer to our friend’s heart), we rightly consider smelted bronze, stacked logs and rocky cliffs as “nature” because, nature meaning primarily what’s in things that have in themselves their source of movement (most saliently, the source of their growth), materials like bronze, wood and rock *permit* such movement: a skilled cabinet-maker can tell whether the logs are *suitable* for making furniture, and Michelangelo could select the marble at the quarry in Carrara that *could take* the form of his “Pietà.” Whereas a living tree forms itself, lumber and other materials, “dead” in contrast to living plants and animals, can *receive* form and therefore deserve to be called natural. — Finally (again following an example of his), most of us learn something children will always have to learn for themselves, namely that everything we routinely make use of, whether the grass in our

garden or the furniture in our home, is essentially fragile: it is *liable* to destruction, i.e. bound to lose its form, whereupon it ceases to be what it started out being (a chair, a lawn, even a sculpture by Michelangelo).

Learning to mind things requires that we learn to recognize the various kinds of receptivity (even vulnerability) at issue in the things around us. Some of this knowledge comes with long experience. One morning in late October, after decades of hiking in the mountains, Mary Jean and I, heading in our car for Padua and Giotto by way of Switzerland, dropped down from the Splügen pass into Italy and almost immediately found ourselves gazing at a eerily silent power dam wedged in the barren rock towering all around it, the road itself adapting to its jagged contours, with nary a sign anywhere of human habitation. We pulled over for a while to look at the details, in full awareness of what the winter brings at this altitude (the pass itself would soon be closed to traffic). Without being engineers, we were deeply struck by just how much those who designed and built the two walls of the dam (flanking a natural outcropping) had to ask themselves at every stage and in every cranny just what nature *permitted*: they knew, as every mountaineer (or sailor, for that matter) knows, that you don’t mess with nature, or you do so at your extreme peril, and in this case at the peril of the villages below. You might replace a broken chair or replant a trampled lawn, but there are some things that don’t allow you a second chance.

Some recognitions of receptivity require not only experience but also training and talent: there’s the garden architect who looks at a barren stretch and sees immediately what it allows, just as there’s the home-decorator who sees immediately what can be done to turn the barrens of a room into a warm abode. Such people, as also the doctor, woodsman, and engineer, see the *real possibilities*, generative or destructive, in present conditions (and not just abstract possibilities in their own dreams and nightmares): quite a feat, since the seeing here is not of the head’s two eyes but of the mind’s one eye.

It’s when we know what we are doing, especially if not exclusively, that we recognize things as allowing, permitting, liable to . . . , able to take or lose the form of . . . and the like. If I’m wise, I’m open to what’s

there demanding response, and in *my* openness the patient, the oak tree, the crags, the barren stretch and the empty room open up *their* possibilities, often very restricted or restricting. In each case, *your* opening dances with *its* opening — sometimes to the astonishment of spectators, whether at home or at work, at circuses or at games of skill. Wise dealings require that we not only act and undergo, but also let things in and let them develop; in contrast, the beginner first tries to force things, awkwardly, ineffectually, often destructively. Learning to be a surgeon (a woodsman, an engineer, a gardener . . . ) requires one to learn to mind things: not just to synthesize doing and undergoing, but much more, and inclusive of these, to open up to what opens out — to allow what things themselves allow.

**Y**ou and I are now minding minding. Surgeons and the rest have enough on their mind just to mind the affair at their hands. You and I, in amiable contrast to these others, are philosophers — “lovers of wisdom,” you hear it said. But pause for a moment to consider what such love might mean: eagerness to obtain it . . . or eagerness to witness it? Obtain it all on one’s own . . . or indirectly, by puzzling over the wisdom of others? The latter requires a kind of humility: you acknowledge the *sophia* of others — of surgeons and gardeners, for instance, then also of your dead friends. You are affected by their wisdom, and probe it. Here you have a work that, unlike the work of the surgeon, never comes to an end: it remains the love of your life.

Indeed. Have you ever fully minded something to which you remained indifferent? Which left you unmoved, untouched, unaffected? And what can be more impressive, even touching, than witnessing another fully minding something — as a fully engaged blacksmith shoeing a horse, talking to, caressing or even cursing the beast? Or, more rarely, witnessing a speaker fully minding some matter — a fully engaged storyteller perhaps? — even more rarely, a fully engaged philosopher? The best actors, the best dancers, the best singers, the best violinists . . . Or, on the other hand, what makes students so disappointing, so unpromising, so dangerous even, when they proceed unaffected by the literary work assigned — no matter how

adroit they may be when tracing out its structure, its provenance, and the like? Or professors who have become jaded, having lost touch with the subject? And what makes a pedant so irritating, at least for those who know directly what all his erudition is about, namely the subject, gone missing, of all those predicates he recites?

In that garden our conversation melded the minding with what was minded — absorbed into one, atoned, not just the two of us, but also, and more remarkably, the hedges, the flowers and the design of the whole: each is a participant before being either an agent or a patient, recovers its being in the participation at the moment — from which, as is commonly noted, time itself backs off, and we may arrive late at our next appointment.

But to what is affection directed? It can happen even at the most trying of such moments (as when Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim presents himself for the final reckoning: “I am come, alone and unarmed”). What then “deserves” the affection? The garden, of course — but is it the design overreaching the elements, or just the collection of the flowers and the like? My companion, no doubt — but is it the man himself, or rather his conversation, his activity of minding, or the communing effected by our minding the garden together? And, if you happen to know that the gardener was also its architect, you may even feel an affection for him, out of sight or even dead. . . . It’s hard to say — especially since each element only *is* in the participation itself, so that we break the spell by testing one element at a time in order to decide (just as the cause of some maladies can be determined for sure only by a dissection killing the patient). Perhaps all we can say by way of locating the start-point and the end-point of the vector of affection is that on the one side there’s an opening out (an opening that undoes our own propensity to seek cover) and on the other side there’s an opening up (an opening that counters the love of nature to hide). But the two go together to form one bond of affection.

Afterwards, when recalling such a decisive conversation and perhaps anticipating yet another, you may sift through its remnants in search of the essential ingredients. But Humpty-Dumpty now lies shattered on the ground, and nobody will put him together again.

It sounds so mysterious, so mystical, doesn't it? But only to those who insist from the outset that things — conversations, gardens — *are* their elements, *are* what others (I myself, and most of my best friends) take to be fragments first of all, the pieces of shattered egg shells recovered, cleaned up, and examined at length to discover, sometimes, ingredients very useful for cooking up other things — meals of course, but also perfumes and pharmaceuticals and all kinds of machinery.

To break the habit of analytical thinking (a kind of minding that has its own rigorous rules and results already foreseen), you need only (big only!) learn to look before debating. Start by looking at another who is fully minding what he is doing: he's energetically and gracefully responding to what he's dealing with — extremely, often calmly active, but also receptive and not ever, except when failing or idling, merely passive — receptive not only of what's happening (whereas onlookers are usually blind to this), but also of all the techniques and determinations necessary for the job (he has no time to sift through the past for these, they come unbidden to remind him: think of an accomplished athlete, and of the fascination many have for his performance). You might then carefully recall some proficiency of your own, and notice the same things happening: in your minding you are reminded of what's necessary, and lose the beat if you insist on remembering it yourself. Now you may, with exercise, learn to think without getting in the way of what happens of its own accord: you may learn to mind minding. It's a mystery all right, meaning that you can only be a part of it, never on top of it, and, as all mysteries, only enhanced by careful and appropriate thought about it — an art that, like any other, must be arduously learned.

It's the life according to mind, ὁ κατὰ τὸν νοῦν βίος, a life that allows us to say, with our friend, that what's true not just for us when minding but (at least unbeknownst) for everyone really minding, *is* "touching/being touched" (θίγειν), the opposite of which is "unminding" (ἀγνοεῖν: ignoring), "not making contact" (μὴ θιγγάνειν), this lack being what's basically false. Actually touching and being touched, there is no mistaking (ἀπατηθῆναι οὐκ ἔστιν): the options are, simply, whether there is minding or not (ἢ νοεῖν ἢ μὴ).

And only while minding (actually discerning, "telling" what a thing is) can we either excel significantly or fail significantly in what we go on to say about it, how we predicate it. Without such contact our affirmations and denials are hollow: basically false already, even if in the mouths of others one or another may resonate with some truth.

It's intermittent, of course — we are only human — and a bit off-putting for others, since it's no longer presented as an entertaining competition for the curious eyes of merely critical onlookers. But it has one remarkable advantage over your normal lives of production and action: you can lead this life (it in fact leads you) just about anywhere and anytime, whereas those other forms, once the job is done, leave you in the lurch — bored, depressed, in search of distraction (as can happen in retirement). For, while either making something (building a house, shoeing a horse, growing vegetables) or managing something (a soccer team, a university, a city), your delight lies in effective minding; but this delight, your own actualization, is dependent on others, on people requiring your services: these are strictly human forms of life. In contrast, having learned to mind minding, you mind all things (τὰ πάντα). You are a free-lance thinker, and can make something out of just about anything — as the Dutch and Flemish genre painters and the French Impressionists did, and that you will find Marcel Proust doing throughout the 3,000+ pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Everything minded invites you to mind both it and the minding of it. Your work is never done; there is no retirement in the usual sense.

It's divine, our friend says. That is, the life κατὰ τὸν νοῦν engulfs you, enriches the life you call your own as well as the life of those who accept the invitation to join in it — but it is not a life at your command, or at the command of others, and so it remains a mystery.

**H**owever, the actualization of the divine form of life consists precisely in contemplating human life: what it's "like" to make gardens, to shoe horses, to coach a team, to run a university, to research the environment and the cosmos, to speak in public, to write a tragedy, to converse significantly and insignificantly — also to be bored, to be frustrated, to be tired of it all. And while we may detect the seeds of

the divine in any such life (since genuine production and action require intense minding at every crucial moment, while boredom and the rest remind us that something is wrong), we soon recognize that a good deal of life, ours included, consists not of minding the integrity of situations but of figuring out how much of what kind of seed to order for the garden (given the plot of land and the needs of those it serves), consulting with others for whom you design and maintain the garden, keeping the books, paying taxes, and all kinds of time-consuming effort detracting from the actual work.

Back in the 1970s I read in a French newspaper of a gardener who took time out to prosecute someone for walking on the grass of the Jardin des Tuileries: he had to explain to the judge that, unlike the English grass in English gardens, the French grass, of finer quality, could not bear regular foot traffic. — To be *merely* human is to fuss with things, scramble around to get things done or prevent undoings — all of which requires a good deal of calculation and discussion of detail, and even spills over into debates on where things come from (the premature wilting of the leaves, the wealth of our own families, the finances of our city) and on where they are going (how long the plants will last, what the city counselors should do next, our own retirement); and, inevitably for most, into considerations of how to do things right and live well. In such a life we are indeed at work, but the work is not yet (or no longer) essentially that of minding things, but only of preparing for or musing upon them.

You will hear it said, especially in the socio-biological departments of our universities, that the human species is just one among all the others that evolved from chance collisions or collusions of who-knows-what chemical elements under who-knows-what thermal conditions, ever changing over several billion years, even if present conditions seem to have remained stable over the last few thousand. Accordingly we err in thinking there is any fundamental discontinuity from beast to human being. You and I, it is said, differ only in degree from our cats and dogs, from the fish we catch and the elephants we admire.

Yet the entire story of evolution introduces a style of thinking supposing that we ourselves, or at least the experts in those fields, are

able to look on at all time and all space, just as we imagine the gods doing — a pretension to stand outside, looking on, that has immense heuristic value but places us either outside what is investigated and knowable or, for most of us, inside pure fantasy. Anything anyone in fact knows or can ever know not only correlates with points in space and time (looking down, so to speak) but also generalizes according to a logical scheme that is distinctively human and always presupposed (rather than learned from scratch) in our own temporal and spatial lives: such distinctions as universal-particular-singular, affirmative-negative-suspended, subject / predicate, cause / effect, independence / interdependence, possibility vs. impossibility, existence vs. inexistence, necessity vs. permissibility — the tools in our analytic toolbox as we stand out of sight or under the radar of our investigations.

Another brash judgement, you might think (drawn, I hope you noticed, from Immanuel Kant, the godfather of the modern understanding of the New Science). I only wish to indicate how you might proceed, if only silently, when bombarded not only with the Big-Bang-&-Natural-Selection Theory, but also with the conclusions drawn fortuitously if not always fatuously from it. You might even want to write another book to highlight the very strict conditions under which the Theory deserves great esteem.

First, though, I'd like you to consider again what *might* be special about human beings, and just how that specialty might set us essentially, discontinuously apart from our cats and dogs, parakeets and horses — and perhaps reveal just how special these are as well. Again, my friend, just *look*...

Special about ourselves, let us begin, is that we have to learn three things — when young, just to do things; when older, to do things well; and, at our end, to die. And it takes time to learn all these things, perhaps a lifetime. In the meantime, we complain — as children, that we are at the beck and call of others to learn; in the long middle years, that others are not doing their share, or doing it badly, even that we ourselves (individually) have done a bad job (we are fault-finders, finding faults everywhere, having to learn that faults are there and how to deal with them); and all along we have to learn how to give it all up,

to pass back into how we were before born. It's all very burdensome, at least at times, and we recurrently have doubts about whether we can carry the burden. Then some us (in this matter, by no means all), take on the added burden of trying to understand where our own situation came from and how it may develop: we study the works of our ancestors with a view to understanding what they bequeathed to us in the way of all those constructions and techniques — to understand how we in turn might become bequeathers. And some very few of us take on yet another burden: that of understanding everything at once, reading up on, if not expatiating on, grand theories of everything, likely finding faults in what we hear from others, or at least having doubts. And we talk and talk and talk about these things, presenting our versions of current tasks, tasks already completed, tasks yet to be accepted — and hearing and criticizing the versions of others. On all these matters we debate with one another, at least silently (for we might in fact be afraid to speak up). And ever again: for us the sun has to be new each day — the light of yesterday, so helpful in enlightening our way and easing our burdens, has given out and we must await another dawn.

Now look at your dog sunning himself before the window in your living room; or at your horse out in the pasture munching on alfalfa; or at the buck and doe, first standing at the edge of the woods, ears attentive to the sounds of the field, then bolting back into the cover of the woods; or just at an ant hill to the side of the path: What a relief! These creatures pursue their various enterprises without *having to* learn those three things: they just learn whatever they learn, which is simply to get on with their pre-assigned tasks of eating and excreting (what fusses we make about these!), mating and killing (hardly any scruples about either one!), gathering together and dispersing themselves (no fault-finding, no bearing of grudges, no tedious socializing!). Since animals can be so graceful in their movements as to arouse admiration, so affectionate and loyal (in the case of many pets), so honest in our dealings with them, we sometimes think of them as our better angels, and in any case as deserving our utmost respect and even (especially in the case of our domestic animals) a very deep love and loyalty,

making it difficult at times to slaughter, trap or shoot them for human consumption, or even put them down when their condition seems no longer bearable, either to them or to ourselves.

One thing strictly animal animals, even your wonderful pets, are not going to do is to offer reflections, either to their own kin or to you, on “the nature of things”: on what life is all about, on the difference between doing things rightly or wrongly, well or badly, on where things (including themselves and ourselves) came from and where they (individually or universally) are going, or on the difference between their own being and other kinds of being. You may even find some acquaintance of yours recommending that you follow their example of uncomplicated natural life, and consider your own propensity to reflect as an aberration from the direct attention to enterprises at hand, a flawed disposition that only gets you into trouble. Whether or not you take the advice, you might note that it has always been and will always be debated.

To resume the question about what's so special about being human, and therefore deserving of careful contemplation, I'd like us to consider three ancient statements of it — three more bequests:

4<sup>th</sup> οὐθὲν γὰρ, ὡς φαμέν, μάτην ἢ φύσις ποιεῖ·  
λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων.

*Politics*, 1253 a 10

Nature, as we discern, does nothing in vain;  
and man is the only one among living beings that has *logos*.

5<sup>th</sup> εἰ δὴ ἐστὶν ἔργον ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ  
ἄνευ λόγου, τὸ δ' αὐτὸ φαμεν ἔργον εἶναι τῷ γένει τοῦδε καὶ  
τοῦδε σπουδαίου... εἰ δὴ οὕτως, τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν ψυχῆς  
ἐνέργεια κατὰ ἀρετὴν...

*Nicomachen Ethics*, 1098 a 5

If the work of man is a being-at-work of the soul according with *logos*, or not without it, we also noting that a work is of the same kind whether simply done or seriously done,... if all this [we can see that] the good of man is the being-at-work of the soul according with excellence.

6<sup>th</sup> ἀνέγκη ἄρα, ἐπεὶ πάντα νοεῖ, ἀμιγῆ εἶναι [τὸ νοεῖν]. *On the Soul*, 429 a 18  
So it's necessary that [mind], since it minds all things, be unmixed.

Take the first of these three: “man is the only one among living beings that has *logos*.” It's conventionally rendered as “man is the rational animal.” If now you *first* examine, as I asked you to do, what it's like to be human, you may discover the richness of the original and the poverty of the customary translation. Both formulations claim that being human is unique. Our speciality, what makes the difference between us and all other forms of life, is, in the original formulation “having *logos*” and, in the conventional rendering, “being rational”: a *condition* in the one formulation becomes an *attribute* in the other. And there's a huge difference: a condition must be actualized (it's a burdensome destiny), whereas an attribute is just a fact (a supposed feature, in this case a tool we may or may not employ).

But what does this “having *logos*” mean in the context of our friend's talk? The word itself, *logos*, gets translated variously: most commonly (when serving to highlight an ability) as “speech” or “reason”; but also (when serving to justify something) as an “argument.” The word refers to what's fundamental about human being, so it's no wonder that you might recurrently find this fundament while you are examining what it's actually like to be human: whether wandering through a garden, alone or with a friend; designing, planting and maintaining it, alone or with others; figuring out the materials and instruments to buy for tending to it; negotiating with merchants, keeping accounts of income and expenses, calculating your taxes, puzzled or frustrated by the poor performance of plants, of co-workers, of tax-collectors or of yourself, taking others to court, listening to debates on public policy, attending concerts or plays, reading or writing books about gardening, drawing up your last will and testament: in every case you are gathering up a multiplicity into a more or less tenuous unity, and presenting this both to yourself and to others while accounting for things past, present, or future — perhaps even for all time, as when talking about the human condition or the mathematics of nature.

But notice that the *logos* of our friend, from which I have extracted

this formulation of human speciality, puts it a bit differently: we are, he says, in a *polis*, a city, which in fact is composed of multiple dwellings for families (households, largely for raising children) and multiple localities (groups, largely for cooperating in common enterprises), but which, on a third tier of organization, aims for something besides propagation (flowers and trees do that) and cooperation (beehives and anthills do that): it represents a vision of the good life and therefore invites us to wrestle with questions of justice vs. injustice, good vs. evil in the course of propagating and cooperating. For this purpose we have *logos*, whereas flowers and bees have no such need. That we *in fact* gather up multifaceted matters (well or badly) with a view to living well — to acting and reacting justly — even though we often *in fact* fail (behave miserably): this is a sign that the *polis* is a *natural* formation, and our engagement in “politics” a *natural* disposition taking us out of the daily tasks of our household and beyond the particular interests of our group.

In order to appreciate the truth, or at least the boldness, of our friend's account of human being, you must first realize that you cannot believe it — or, at least, *we*, collectively and historically, do not believe it. Within relatively short-order, already his chief successors — Paul and Augustine, and finally Thomas and Dante — considered such accounts (variations of which you find in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*) as child's play, delightfully innocent but essentially immature and so incomplete: foolish at heart. For such accounts assume that the gatherings-up of multiplicity into unity of destiny are humanly devised and humanly enacted, humanly learned and humanly understood, whereas, as you read in the opening lines of the Gospel according to John, the basic *logos* has already been gathering things up, so that any human gathering-together of multiplicity into unity, any human *logos*, enjoys whatever tenuous legitimacy it may have only when it reflects the divine *logos*. But this account, too, you cannot believe, or *we* in fact do not.

For us the state — *lo stato*, as Machiavelli and others first began to call the focus of political enquiry — is a conventional outgrowth of the multiplicity of human interests at the second tier of human

organization, where individuals join forces in order to pursue a commonality of interests, each acting out of self-interest, the individual satisfaction of which is enhanced by negotiating and compromising with others similarly interested. No more analogy with anthills and beehives. On the traditional list of ten categories, the widest-ranging tier of organization is a *condition* (ἔχλις), not a *substance* (οὐσία). Being only a conglomerate, the state *is* its statistics, is *never* an “itself by itself” (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό) defined by a destiny, an end in view, a looming and endangered perfection, a “what it has all along intended to be” (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι). It consists of on-going trade-offs, gives and takes ever again subject to revision. It exists by agreement, not by nature: by a super-contract imagined to have been negotiated at the beginning, just after the lone wolves of the forest came to prefer the constraint of contract to the free-for-all of pillage. And our engagement in *logos* now appears in the same light: language is given to us not to debate and assure justice in the on-going battle of good versus evil, or to celebrate the battle, as in art works (including this one), but rather to facilitate cooperation in utilitarian matters: to buy and to sell more proficiently than would be possible if we could only point our fingers, wave our hands and shake our fists, lower or raise the volume of our grunts. There is then nothing very distinctive about “rationality” so understood; even reasoning appears as merely a complex procedure built upon very elementary on-and-off switches, as the operating systems of our computers illustrate, and as a feature some other living beings also display, even if more simply.

You might wish to try again, then — on the second formulation of our specialty: What does it mean, the “being-at-work of the soul according with *logos*”? The context of this determination is the question of human happiness — so once again you can ask yourself whether what you hear helps clarify what you yourself can see. And you will in fact see yourself and others offering a wide variety of answers to this all-too-human question, one whole set recommending that you seek pleasure and avoid pain, another recommending that you set yourself tasks and earn yourself a name, and a third recommending that you learn and fulfill nature. The first set is basic, proposing something

recognizable everywhere, starting with children. The second set is heroic, proposing something recognizable in adventuresome youth and practical middle age. The third is esoteric, proposing something that makes no real sense to either hedonists or activists, since it requires, once again, contemplation of human being itself — with a view to what constitutes fulfillment, what leads toward fulfillment, and what detracts from fulfillment: all of which assume that there is such a thing as natural fulfillment (as against personal preference). Restated in the form of a syllogism, you hear two premisses and a conclusion:

1. The work proper to, distinctive of man is the setting to work (the enactment) of the soul according with *logos*. That is, our fundamental task, the function belonging to us uniquely as human beings, is to perform whatever we are doing by gathering its multiplicity into a unity — not just to nail boards together with the hands, but to integrate whatever we are doing and undergoing into a design (a house, say): to foresee a whole.
  2. Every work bears within itself the possibility of *merely* being done or being done *well* — being done with a view to the good at issue in the work. The one example given (elided in the citation) is that of a musician: within his vocation (his craft, his τέχνη) he already knows he can do a good job or not. Broadly: a human being can perform the work of being human, namely gathering multiplicities into unity, either well or badly.
- ∴ The good of man (our fulfillment) happens when we are active (actualizing our life, putting our soul to work), in harmony with gathering together multiplicities well — excellently and not just routinely. And whether you’re a musician or a carpenter, a poet or a philosopher.

Again, it’s a pagan argument, and one that you may, for a moment,

find rather convincing. But looked at more carefully, it reveals suppositions you cannot believe in, at least not so long as your own *logos* proceeds in harmony with the *logos* prevalent in our universities (and, from there, throughout institutions generally, including public media). For the argument assumes fixed species, within which there reigns the basic drama of nature, i.e. of everything living. Anything that *is*, so says the argument in full, struggles to become itself. This struggle is in fact what makes for the “nature of things”: a flower or a tree, an anthill or a beehive, a cow or a man, a family or a city — each “has a nature,” meaning that as soon as it is born it heads for a goal that belongs to it, it more or less succeeds for a while, and finally it perishes, being only an instance of its abiding, standard-setting species. Gardeners and farmers may implicitly believe this basic trajectory for the things under their care — each thing has its own work, *is* its assigned work, and *their* work as human beings is to gather together the work *proper* (natural) to each thing: to get it to work. Such being their own being, the gardener and the farmer *are* good, and so *feel* good when getting their things to work. And whereas most of us, once truly born and no longer simply seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, apply ourselves to a specialized way of tending to selected species of things, whether the making or preserving of gardens or the making or protecting of cities, some few of us abandon such productive and practical affairs and present to ourselves, and to whoever converses with us, *logoi* of the drama we find evident in everything, at all times and places.

In contrast, the now-prevalent *logos* denies fixed destinies of fulfillment, whether for orchids or for cities, and locates the basic drama in the conflicts among “species” (i.e., among instances so named), and in the developments following haphazardly from the successes and failures in battle; it proceeds to project backwards, on the time-line engendered already by the *logos* of those animated developments, a vision of purely mineral clashes accounting for the inanimate formations of earth, air, fire and water evident in the background of living beings of all sorts, including ourselves, a background that now extends way beyond our own planet. The whole of which again

justifies the proclamation that there’s nothing special about human being, except perhaps (we of course have no way of being sure) that we are the only species in the vast universe of infinite space that carefully works out, in god-like unaffected perspective, a vision, if not yet a successful theory, of everything. We form a species (really only a collective) that just happened to come into being and, we can only suppose, will sooner or later pass away as all the others have — all the sooner if we don’t take measures to correct our own bad habits of profligacy.

It’s a pagan argument, again, and one that you might also find rather convincing, as anyone can who has undertaken the arduous task of investigating things from that god-like perspective (whereas those who have not undertaken this task debate the prevalent *logos* in a vacuum, like youths debating the existence of God before they even know their own). Of course, it contradicts flatly the voices that originally set our world, what we call the West, on its course. It might be noted in passing, though, that the intervening voices of Christianity also contradicted the voices of our ancient ancestors — not flatly, since the Greek thinkers supplied the bulwark protecting Christianity, both in and out of School, but still significantly: whether from Paul or Augustine, Thomas or Dante, the Christian voice denies that perfecting your craft, performing it perfectly, can serve as a necessary, never mind as a sufficient condition for fulfillment, now called salvation. But that’s another story, another *logos*.

**F**rom the way I keep contrasting our early and late traditions, you might suppose I intend to suggest you must choose between the two. I assure you I am not suggesting this: it is not a question of agreeing or disagreeing with the “findings” of one or the other. Their differences lie in where each places us, and both placements are not only possible but have in fact proved themselves. Our ancient friends bid us to re-think familiar things *inside* their own happening, where thinking (*logos*) is already at work and conforming to the standards inherent in the things themselves, in order to highlight what’s at issue for us *besides* getting things done (produced, organized) most

pleasantly and most profitably, the better to understand the *full* issue (which makes sense only as we understand it and not just hear or read about it). In contrast, our contemporary friends bid us to re-think familiar things *outside* their happening, where thinking, now our own *logos*, starts anew and first establishes the standards to which it will conform, standards to which then things themselves must conform.

In fact, if you ever want my advice on how to pursue your education, I'll tell you to learn both: for all their differences, both are ways of minding things. They are both metaphysical in the sense that both of them leap beyond the familiar, invoke realities that are experienced and justified only in thought itself, espy and decry fundamental illusions in ordinary accounts (*logoi*) of things both familiar and unfamiliar. Excellent training grounds, then — at least for those who go to school in order to develop their minds.

Yet the two conflict. Other than just ignoring the conflict (always and everywhere the dominant possibility), you may discern at least three ways of accounting for the status of each. You might draw on the astounding advances that have been made in medicine, computer science, and the like, assume that “later is better,” and find reasons to discredit the physics of the past. Or you might draw on the power of literature to transform our understanding of life itself, our various commitments to things and, perhaps inspired by the ancient supposition that “older is better,” find reasons to distrust the science of the present, for instance its servitude to commercial interests. Of course, one can always compromise, which sounds reasonable but in fact amounts to suppressing rather than resolving the conflict.

I propose to you a third, a kind of resolution — which is to fathom the principles of each of the two with a view to understanding *how* the original understanding of being (with all its talk about affection and destiny, mind and fulfillment, and the specialness of human being) itself leads, by a kind of genetic mutation, into the modern antithetical understanding of things, necessarily reductive rather than inductive, with its specialized disciplines of chemistry, biology, psychology and sociology. The original we may call High Metaphysics, since it everywhere foresees fulfillments for unfulfilled presences, and projects

invisible forms to account for the stresses and strains of fulfillment (whether of petunias, beehives, or ourselves). The other we may call Low Metaphysics, since it sees everything present as a product of antecedent conditions, and injects invisible elements to account for the shifting forms of survival with no eye out for fulfillment, indeed to discount all pretensions to fulfillment, since they distract from the tasks of survival.

Here's the real challenge I would like you to believe and to confront, which no longer consists in deciding which one is better than the other, much less which is true and which is false, in whole or in part. It asks you to mind both, especially their respective versions of the claim that what's already familiar to us is only a shimmering mirage of the way things really are.

Very intimidating, you might object, my insistence that you learn both our classical, fulfillment-oriented literary tradition and our modern, survival-oriented literary tradition, now the only one recognized as scientific. Several life-times would be necessary, you might say, and even then only possible for geniuses! — True enough, I admit, providing you think I am asking you to learn all the *results* of these two. I assure you, however, that nearly all you ever hear about as “science” comprises only left-overs, both conclusions announced in the media (“Science has shown that . . .”) and the multitude of formulations students imbibe at school and learn to apply in productive enterprises. You need only (within a single lifetime) study the spirit of science as born the literature of Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, and René Descartes, and illustrated in the development of mathematics from arithmetic and geometry into algebra, analytic geometry (Descartes again), the calculus formed by Leibniz and Newton, and finally the theory of set formation (finally replacing the contemplation of species). Kant's three *Critiques* would serve immensely well to direct your eyes to where it is all going (not into any fulfillment, however); and all along you must learn what it means to investigate empirically (a little biology and chemistry will suffice: doing it, not just hearing about it).

As for our classical tradition, I admit it poses much more formidable obstacles. While you will, I hope, not object to reading

Homer and Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Pindar, Plato and Aristotle, their works are so heavily encrusted with barnacles you may find that they strand you on the shores of life: it will take a Herculean labor on your part to get them afloat and sailing again, and you have no choice but to learn a bit of Greek if you do try your hand at it. And, just as in the study of a modern science, you must proceed sentence by sentence: overviews are already still-born left-overs.

In the course of such studies you learn to distinguish between original thought and its subsequent thoughtless versions — what I have called left-overs. Despite our faith in progress, the opposite happens over and over again: the great thought of Homer and Hesiod peters out into mindless stories of the gods, the great thought of Plato and Aristotle dwindles into the opinions and maxims of Hellenistic and Roman writers, the great thought of Christianity shrinks into a plethora of wooden doctrines projecting imaginary conditions, and the great thought of the Enlightenment becomes routine “research and development,” glorying now in gadgetry and social engineering. In each instance that we know of, great thought leaves a trail of rubble behind, a trail that invites re-clearing if not re-blazing. Although it may make you sad to see greatness wane, it should remind you that, like monetary wealth, any vision we inherit remains a shadow of itself until we take upon ourselves the arduous task of earning it all over again, re-positioning ourselves in its light. The alternative is to live off your inheritance, in the shadows, in apparent safety if not luxury, and whereupon you leave subsequent generations so impoverished that they may in fact *have* to put themselves to work once again, if only for the exercise and the fresh air the work outside will afford.

**L**et us now we dig down deep into High Metaphysics to detect how it begets Low Metaphysics.

Recall Plato’s formulation of the criterion for determining that something *is*: those things, and only those things, really *are* (πάν τοῦτο ὄντως εἶναι) that possess ability (δύναμις) to do or undergo (ποιεῖν or παθεῖν), i.e. have the *power* either to *make* something be different or itself *be made* different — “in any manner, however small or banal, and

even if only just once.” You can read these words in Plato’s *Sophist* (247D-E), but the oft-shirked task is to get them to mean something “in context,” which ultimately means in *your* context — the only, or at least the overwhelmingly chief focus of any truly philosophical work, perhaps of any genuine work at all.

We name many things, some of which do and some of which don’t count as being, and only those that *do* count as being raise (legitimately) the question how to talk about them: the question whether what we say about them is true or false. My wife and my town, the dog in my yard and the mice in my attic, my cabbages in the garden and the hedges around my house, the soil in which those plants grow and the rocks forming the wall around them: each can effect or suffer changes and so *are* — all the more clearly to me if I myself undertake to govern the course of the changes they effect in other things or the changes they undergo (the wall topples and I re-stack the stones, the mice eat my grain and I set traps to kill them). On the other hand, “time” and “space,” “universality” and “particularity,” “justice” and “beauty,” “species” and “natural selection” are ways of talking about things and not themselves beings, or at least not without further ado, some sort of retrofitting that gets them back to work, where we might talk sensibly of them changing things or being changed by them. One example: “Communism changed the shape of Russia for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” can be recycled into a book telling of people, factories, cities, forests and the like, all enclosed in frames of time and space, each effecting or undergoing changes in attribution recorded as factual (here’s the document), possible (fits the facts but not yet determined), or necessary (had to happen, once conditions were in place, e.g. death once a cancer set in). Another: “Justice is doing your own thing, i.e. not doing just anything” (τὸ τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν καὶ μὴ πολυπραγμονεῖν δικαιοσύνη ἐστὶ) can be recycled into a conversation about what fulfilled human being (whether city, team or individual) means, i.e. portends for any one city, team or individual — what human organizations and individuals can effect or undergo.

The stated criterion of being is just an opener, of course, a doorway to unending questions. The first and perhaps most abiding question to

which this doorway leads is precisely what it means to speak and think about things as having a destiny — so that the “destiny” of a human being (such as my wife), a construction (such as my house), an animal (such as my dog), a plant (such as my hawthorn hedge), or the stone piled to form a wall or chosen for a sculpture . . . so that each of these destined forms might *also* count as a being: man, house, dog, hedge, stone. To take but one example: if you wish to build a house you may discover that many requirements form the destiny of yours and anyone else’s in the city: not only engineering requirements just to ensure its perseverance as a house, but also a battery of municipal codes aspiring to assure the efficiency and safety of the house — requirements that may raise the question just how much all these humanly formulated requirements reflect nature or only convention: whatever your decision, they all the while illustrate just how much Nature and Town Council have a say in the making of your house (and not only yours, but *any* house).

More, and now decisively: the stated criterion formulates a core property of human being itself: you and I *are* as both making and being made, as both active and passive, as both changing some things (perhaps even ourselves) and being changed by some others; each of us *is* as both thinking things (elaborately figuring out, talking about them) and feeling things (simply seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting them). Purely passive, we are dead as stones, or perhaps only dead asleep (still *able* to rise from this brotherly death). Purely active, we are either gods or, for a while, god-like.

Of course, this account of nature came under unrelenting attack by every single thinker we now recognize as forming what we call, in retrospect, the Enlightenment: formally if not factually rejected, long before Darwin, was the claim that we could know natural things as governed by destiny-defined forms; those of us who think and act that way (as likely do gardeners and pet-owners, even elementary-school teachers and kindly family doctors) know things not scientifically but in some other way, whether by habit, routine, sentiment, instinct or rough generalization (words that themselves do not refer to anything that *is*, but only to our way of construing things).

But note this well: throughout the original attacks, and lingering ever since in the left-overs comprising our present condition, such thinkers rely on, and all the more vehemently insist upon understanding human being almost exactly as the thinkers of High Metaphysics did: as a mix of activity and passivity. But with a difference: *whatever* we simply undergo, since it has no life of its own (no internal dynamism of destiny) has no legitimate claim on us: our activity, our art, can no longer consist in “helping nature complete what she has been unable to finish” — the key thought of the High Metaphysics born in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, since what we undergo easily makes us uncomfortable and even kills us (certain viruses and bacteria, as they later came to be called, violent winds and waves at sea, the niggardliness of nature in its supply of materials, and of course raiders from both within and without the city), we had best recoil into our shared fortress and work together to overcome what we undergo.

It’s a huge difference, one we can be grateful for, and you are certainly free to understand it, as most do, as simply marking a turning point in the progress of civilization or, more rarely, as an unfortunate development distracting us from simpler forms of life. What I propose, however, is another tact: to examine carefully what would justify (indeed, permit) the change-over *within* the continuum, the meta-physical agreement on the primacy of the distinction Plato formulates so concisely. A thought-experiment, then . . .

Imagine this: What would you and all that you encounter look like if you took Socrates’ dictum “To a good man nothing bad happens” as meaning that a good man is one who takes his stand *solely* in what he *does* in the face of encounters, how he *responds* to what he undergoes, what he *makes* of his circumstances — all of which remains essentially untouched by what he happens to undergo. It’s a worthwhile thought, finding admirable illustrations in people of very strong character, and counter-illustrations in those who panic or otherwise fall apart in the face of difficult circumstances. But, as an experiment, try taking it to its extreme, so that it means total independence on your part. Left to yourself now, you need only respond to what happens in a way that

retains the self-sufficiency of the whole network of your responses. Sticks and stones can break your bones as well as the windows in your house, but you are not your bones just as you are not your house: no harm done to *you* by those stones. Apart from the time of your youth, when you first had to learn to *be*, exclusively, your activity, you are now and for the foreseeable future an unaffected observer of all the things happening around you — at their center perhaps, but essentially not a part of their happening, in no way beholden to them, either to their own changing of other things (e.g., you) or their being changed by other things (e.g. by you).

Now look at the consequences of this autarky . . .

Most problematic for you will be your relations with others of your kind. Affirming, in this thought-experiment, that only what you do, the doing of it, counts as human being, you will recognize other beings as human only to the extent that they convince you they are, in their turn, active; anybody who appears merely passive you will meet with contempt, or at least indifference. The only bond you can have with others will be that of co-operation in the re-making of circumstances to your shared liking, the bond depending on the shared activity, whatever the pretext to achieving likable results jointly. You will not form friendships with the dead, since death marks precisely inactivity: you only recognize that there *were* such people, and again scorn anyone living who takes seriously what the dead had to say; what counts is the possibility of activity to come, and then first of all yours. Along the same lines, you will have no genuine respect for bosses, leaders of any kind, whether of scouts, of factories, or of nations, even if you have to work under them: their talk appears as just another force from the outside, an imposition to which you may variously respond (placate, circumvent, outwit, forget), accepting even the cruelest punishment as just another occasion to prove yourself. — At all levels, others of your kind pose problems for you, and even if you find some to your special liking, and engaging you in a bond that cannot easily be reduced to that of cooperation, you will understand the bond as one of sentiment only, an instance of your passivity that gives you pleasure, as a delicious meal does, or titillation of some bodily organ (starting with massages

of your sore back): so long as it does not get in the way of your activities, you may not mind having an emotional life on the side.

Problematic, too, will be what you may still call “nature,” but considered now as essentially alien to yourself. Ensnared within your own activity, your concomitant passivity (not, according to our experiment, really yourself) channels only bombardments (some pleasing, others painful or indifferent), so that even recognition of others like yourself depends on faith (not always warranted) and there is no recognition of non-human beings at all, at least not in their pretended forms. Having no essential activity of its own, no dynamism of fulfillment, every apparent body, beginning with your own and extending further outside to include your house, your dog, and the rest, is not what it seems (an integral form) but only a composite of elements, something you will understand via your own activity of analysis — with the result that the only “reality” of what’s *other* than yourself is a mix of your own calculations and whatever basic elements you have ferreted out of the otherness to explain the apparent forms taken by your house, your dog, and the rest — no mean achievement, since it will allow you to impose your own designs on materials, including your own body, entirely in keeping with your own liking.

However you conduct your own experiment you should be able to detect something of the genetic difference that may help you not only to master the basics of our modern understanding of circumstance, but also, and more to the point of our own vocation, to detect the self-understanding essential to our Enlightenment aspirations, and so the exact genetic mutation I promised to disclose.

— But first, note three far-reaching changes, effected by the assumptions of self-sufficiency (to be carefully distinguished from our carefully wrought conclusions — discoveries based on our assumptions):

Time you take to be infinitely linear, represented imaginatively by a line extending indifferently before and after any one moment, especially the moment locating us right now: the present. This in contrast to our earlier traditions, where time is understood as circular: each moment is one defined by, and struggling to live up to, a heritage,

a preset destiny recognized and formulated by sages dateable backwards but speaking to us of our future — from the craftsman who receives his techniques and tools from his predecessors, to the philosopher who reinstates the forgotten power of our heritage, each knowing already that he may fail to live up to his expectations (precariousness gives us the sense the future).

Space, then, you take to be infinitely global, akin to infinite time in that you will always anticipate nooks and crannies beyond any place you happen to reach in your travels (beyond any present place), perhaps in search of minerals on some distant planet or meteor. This again in contrast to our earlier traditions, where space is understood topographically as the flat, rolling, jutting place on earth where we in fact find ourselves and must make our home, perhaps with a house not only ensconced within a larger network of commitments called a city, but also oriented according to the sun that rises in the East and sets in the West, to and from which we may travel by day and night with the help of the lights from above, and coming finally to rest in the dark below.

And, thirdly, language you take to be an acquisition over time and in some nooks of space by some conglomerations of beings. You then imagine vast stretches back along the time-line when there were no languages, as there were no such conglomerations, and ask yourself whether there might not be nooks and crannies in far away spaces where some similar conglomerations may have evolved. Then, too, you set to work to detect the rudiments of language in conglomerations we seldom treat as human, e.g. our dogs in their amazing obedience to our own commands and bees in their amazing ability to cooperate with one another. However one imagines the process of acquisition, language appears as the passing of information from one individual to another (including expression of volition, as in dog-training). — All this in startling contrast to the ancient supposition that *logos* locates our destiny to struggle with good and evil, to struggle to live a good life, individually and communally, where justice and nobility ultimately govern considerations of production and action, so that fulfilled *logos* takes the form of oratory and, at its best, of what we today call

literature (such language being considered rather superfluous, or at least of only secondary importance, in schools and homes committed to practical achievements).

These three differences bring unending intellectual challenges in their train (the scientific understanding of space and time as infinite, and of language as distinct from the mathematical logic essential to formulating on-going phenomena in space and time). But they also establish a kind of homelessness in our culture, a free-floating-ness in which only intellectuals committed to those assumptions, and working daily on expanding the conclusions drawn from them, can, in their incessant activity, feel fully functional. For these assumptions, and the whole perspective they afford, can credit neither the wisdom nor the faith of non-intellectuals — so unlike what you find, or should find, in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and then (much differently) in the Gospels of Christianity.

Now, my friend, recall that not one of these problems pertains to Socrates' evident admonition "No harm can befall a good man" — which rather belongs to a network of thoughts about loyalty to the city (a place), gratitude for its tradition (time), and commitment to discourse on fulfillment (*logos*: language as our "medium" for breaking out of prison *together* and in the name of *nature* otherwise betrayed). Plato and Aristotle expand on his wealth of thought and set the rails for the intellectual work (cosmology and theology, medicine and law) against which the Enlightenment thinkers rebelled to make way for the New Science, the one now grown old and complacent in our public institutions, as well as in the minds of many.

But the call to arms you find in Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Galileo Galilei drew its strength from, found its very principles in the post-Aristotelian pre-Christian thinkers we now broadly call Stoics: Epictetus and Seneca ("sticks and stones can break my bones but *not me*"), Lucretius (whose *de rerum natura*, discovered in a dusty library in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, presented the atomistic view of nature still fresh and challenging, under the name of chemistry, in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*), and (perhaps most importantly) the Stoic logicians, whose work can only be reconstructed from the fragments cited by other

antique authors: the rejection of the natural-form syllogism of Aristotle for the sake of what we now call the sentential calculus — which paved the way for understanding universal statements not as shared destinies but as hypotheticals drawing on items one-at-a-time (a fascinating development, essential to our infinitesimal calculus, and one deserving much study in its own right). Yet there is nothing in any of these Stoic thinkers to suggest any call to arms of the sort we are familiar with. Indeed, Epictetus and Lucretius recommend lying back and resting — withdrawing from the fracas of action, which they viewed as out of control and unredeemable.

And perhaps here, in the difference between Stoics and Moderns, you can detect the first clue to the genetic mutation I have spoken of: withdrawal from passivity into pure activity becomes, mysteriously, a feint for concerted attack. Once you have learned to think the human enterprise from some standpoint other than your own, still today that of the Enlightenment, you will note, with great astonishment and at least some admiration, our own *intellectual* commitment to intervene forcibly (as against coaxingly) in our environment (whether personal, social or natural) — the aspiration to change things radically, to bring them totally into line with our own desires, and not merely rearrange them so that they may better be themselves. While the projection of arrangements (along with desire) belongs essentially to human being — and while anyone anywhere may, in his daily engagements, revert to forcing things to comply with his projections — contemplation of the Greek or Christian sort counteracts this reversion, liberates us from its entanglements, induces another understanding of projection, another kind of engagement. In explicit and acknowledged contrast, our Enlightenment tradition bids us to enhance rather than curb the initial drives of our immanent engagements. Ours is a decidedly *willful* generation, one that essentially despises contemplation, ranking it along with lifestyles of mere erudition (absorption in the past) and wishful thinking (fantasies of the future), i.e. copouts serviceable at most as training grounds.

Still, though, what accounts for the shift into attack mode? Or might we simply assume that the development only followed from the

genius of a handful of thinkers at the time, in this case Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and their heirs, in whose works we can find the groundwork of our own aspirations? Or that people generally just got tired of the endless repetition of the old, Christianized, basically Aristotelian doctrine of the soul, of the universe, and of God? Or that socio-economic conditions drove people out of their bamboozled complacency with imaginary hierarchies of social order into active amelioration of these conditions?

There are always debates on these questions — ones issuing from the comforts of living rooms and seminar rooms. But look rather at your own experience of great conversation, scenes where you were deeply absorbed — fully active, you might say, but also fully receptive and *therefore* sensitive to sights, sounds, touches, smells, even tastes. You may or may not have been embarrassed by it afterwards, but at the time . . . Were you not both upholding and being upheld by the scene — by the garden and everything in it, including your friend? If you do acknowledge this, and overcome any embarrassment at being “taken in” (isn’t that a sign of weakness?), I suggest you already know you are in general beholden to lots of things. Everything now appears as inherited: not just the garden and your friend but also the ways you and yours find yourselves talking about them and keeping them together. And you may well acknowledge that you have more than once sold them all for a mess of potage.

I call this “affection”: the fullness of upholding, getting upheld, and being beholden — all together in a momentary melding. Which, you will note, becomes the “emotion” of a “sentimental attachment” only when you *miss* the things — most obviously *afterwards*, when you have lost contact with the garden and your friend, perhaps even the language in which the encounter occurred, whereupon you *yearn* for that time, or for that sort of time, and may even return, longingly, to the place. Which was a time and place when and where each thing showed itself for what it was and might again be: αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό, itself by itself. At such moments you are no longer under attack or on the attack, you *are* together with . . . whatever (it can also happen on a playing- or battle-field, in a chair with a book about gardens or about

life itself — even during the performance of a mathematical proof). At such moments of affection you are first empowered to *know* things: you no longer only hear about them, gleaning a kind of knowledge you henceforth know to be spurious, a mis-beholding of yourself and things δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν ἀνίγματι, “via a mirror, in weird sayings” — spurious precisely because whatever the talk is about, you are not yet fully exposed to it, not yet *known* by it.

Minding is essentially erotic, amorous, you will read in the literature from Plato and Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and Dante Alighieri on into Shakespeare’s sonnets and Proust’s great epic: beholden to “the good,” you read, meaning, in our language (which is not so accustomed to converting adjectives into substantives), devoted to what’s good for what you are minding, the fulfillment of which is also your good, your fulfillment. And because not substantially anything in and by ourselves, we easily get lost in surrogates: schemes, regrets, rationalizations — all the clutter possible for us as beings distinctively capable of *logos* no matter whether grounded or not, free to miss the point of what we are doing and ever again having to regain it. Fully minding, we are clutter-free (ἀμιγῆ): receptive, amorously responsive to whatever first presents itself — primarily to the eyes and ears (because, you read, these two apertures are “most cognitive”) but, in specialized endeavors, also to the tongue and nostrils (as in the culinary arts) and to the skin as well (as in physiotherapy, the shake of a hand, and more).

And here’s where you might detect the genetic mutation that permitted the development of the mainstay of our own inherited condition, namely the self-sufficing cognition essential to the attack mode of modern science and technology: the quarantining of affection. Instituting this measure, we can take the measure of our own being as pure activity: only now *am* I myself *as* the gathering, and things themselves are *as* arrayed within the gathering. Every love affair only confuses matters.

If you’d like to study the quarantining, you may find it helpful to juxtapose two other accountings: Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa*

*Theologica*, the portion called “The Passions of the Soul,” and René Descartes’ whole work of the same name, as though intended as a response.

We often think of Descartes’ snappy formulation “I think, therefore I am” as central to modern developments, but you will find in his explication of the “passions” something much more clearly modern and standard-setting for today’s intellectual work. This comparative study I must leave to you, my friend, partly because I myself cannot directly read Thomas’ own words but can only decode the English rendition of them. Still, it should be clear enough, in rough outline, that Thomas still presents *amor* as essentially drawing us (indeed, all things) toward fulfillment, leaving us (especially us, incessantly having to choose) with the agonizing possibility of getting waylaid or otherwise getting driven off course (gluttony and fornication at one level, vanity and curiosity at another, despair and rage at still another) — whereas Descartes presents *amour* (now French) as signaling our passivity only, and therefore as a danger to overcome rather than as a lure to follow up. The quarantining requires a lot of care, a lot of attention to detail, with the result that his lengthy analysis may distract you from its purport. Yet you must learn to appreciate that the lengthy procedure is necessary for the survival of the patient — the enterprise of knowledge itself. For without *amour* as a way out of ourselves (it being now only a passion, only about *us*), we may just hole ourselves up in our own activity (e.g. athletic exploits or mathematical proofs) or self-absorbed passivity (e.g. at meals or in brothels), and have no real contact with things, therefore no real knowledge.

Knowing without affection: this it is that drives our own culture, most obviously in educational institutions, where you will hear incessant talk of “objective investigation” and “overcoming bias” as essential ingredients to investigation. Although, as in our pre-modern traditions, we are still talking about first-hand knowing, not the accumulation of old formulations stored in textbooks and passed on in class-rooms and reading-rooms, there is an essential ambiguity in the difference: much of what you can know first-hand will be circumscribed by an ever-growing backlog of formulations you have only

heard and read about. Which is fine, so long as you keep the difference in mind (a kind of post-Delphic self-knowledge). The whole point of the New Knowledge is that we can inherit and bequeath second-hand versions in a manner freeing posterity to attend first-handedly to matters at the edge, pushing the horizon further back where future generations can expand it even further, always with a backlog of second-hand knowledge justified in its service to first-hand knowing. The advantages for medicine, agriculture and space-exploration have become indisputably evident, as was promised at the beginning.

But geography, history and psychology, too, must forego the principle of affection. Our cultural task is to exploit the earth, and any talk of loving and protecting it makes healthy sense only in our own private gardens; in public, we can only moderate the pace, leave some resources for later, and beware of side-effects, such as pollution of the air or nuclear contamination of the earth. It's much the same with history: the task is to become clear about what happened in the past, not to recover the wisdom of our ancestors but much rather to detect their errors, both moral and calculative, so that we and our children will not fall into the same traps, and especially not into that of veneration. And also with the dramas of life: since great art work, great literature, great thought, all display the tensions of getting out of oneself and having a genuinely shareable future (of loving the truth, and at all costs), the culture of affectionless knowing stumbles over such works and must explain them as expressing inner conflicts of passivity more or less preventing objective consideration of circumstance, now the only hope for the future (with the result that would-be artists, writers and thinkers are tempted to take upon themselves the task of spotting evils in others and in other things, and of offering remedies).

Am I proposing that you judge these developments to be wrong? No, I tell you, only that you consider carefully their suppositions — an appreciation of which not only enhances your appreciation of their achievements but also might even provide the framework for affectionful knowing. Such consideration, as I said, will require you to master the methods of at least one modern science, which will in turn

require you to master the elementary developments in mathematics during the last few hundred years — otherwise you run the risk of just whining on the sidelines. But it will also require you to do something counter-cultural: to make friends with a whole swath of your ancestors, the very ones who articulated the developments that we now take for granted.

And in this regard I'd like to put in a word for Descartes. Like Plato and Aristotle, then Thomas Aquinas in their wake, he re-thinks not just the ways we rise to things in the course of dealing with them, but also the ways we find ourselves struck if not overwhelmed by them. His account, however, differs from the traditional (Thomistic) account, with its six fluent ways (loving and hating, rejoicing and sorrowing, desiring and shunning) and five frustrated ways (despairing and hoping, fearing and daring, plus raging, the opposite of which, being-at-peace, does not count as a "passion"). I'm sure you will have no trouble recognizing these various modes: you need only look at the wide variety of conversations you have had, especially the unfilled ones. Descartes himself, though, allows for only six such "primitives": loving, rejoicing and desiring when things are working out well, hating and sorrowing when things are going badly — plus being surprised in a way that leads us to consider closely things that seem to us rare and extraordinary. It's this last (which, he says, usually lurks in the other five as well) that I find especially noteworthy.

Surprise (or astonishment: the French is *admiration*) as a passion! That is, a sudden surprise, a shock alerting us to what we have not already figured out, lingering on our mind as a reminder of what we had not already known. This passion supplies the key to knowledge (as, on earlier accounts, love had): "those who have no natural inclination toward this passion are ordinarily very ignorant," he rightly says, "for which reason it's good to be born with some inclination to it, since it disposes us to the acquisition of the sciences." And you may recall your own examples. You hear someone speak and you stop in your tracks: strange and incomprehensible, but you are still not sure with what resonates. You travel to a foreign country: time and again things strike you as differing from your customary perceptions, snap

you out of your languor at home, the routine in which nothing any longer grabs your attention. You are at a job that you still find engaging: unexpected obstacles appear to you as opportunities while your duller, your bored and boring colleagues find them only annoying — and, theoretically inclined, *this* difference startles you, and you wonder about human possibilities.

What Descartes calls “admiration” (*subite surprise de l’âme, qui fait qu’elle se porte à considérer avec attention les objets qui lui semblent rares et extraordinaire*) places us on the edge of what we know and trust — if not “out of ourselves” at least to our farthest reaches. It does not mean we like it, or approve of it.

And, yes, you can even become intoxicated by the novelty of things, run from one beautiful or freakish thing to another without ever pausing to understand what role *you* have to play in the encounter. You can be simply stunned, dulled by novelty, just as earlier you were dulled by routine. A malady, Descartes calls this: being blindly curious, searching for rarities for distraction, not in order to know them. The only remedy, Descartes says, is to acquire knowledge in other domains rather than remaining within the one — as I remember having to do twice: once, when I realized that the power of Henry Bugbee’s voice was smothering my own (and was lucky to find another mentor in the figure of John M. Anderson); another time when I realized that the power of Martin Heidegger’s works was impeding my own work (and turned to the study of logic, both Aristotelian and mathematical, as an effective antidote).

At the edge: that’s where you find yourself in the “passion” of admiration. If, that is, you are “so inclined” — and if, I would add, you can bear it. For once again, as on the classical account of ἔρως or *amor*, we are here *exposed* to what we encounter (something close to “being known” and for that reason possibly learning something). A kind of ecstasy, a stepping out, or at least an opening of the door — a *receiving* that, once again, does not fit neatly into the scheme of passivity vs. activity, if nothing else because it immediately requires alertness to what’s “outside,” stamina to remain alert, and willingness to keep track of what happens — a remembering and a minding of it that only then,

in our activity, we can systematize and probe for the sake of knowing it, integrating it into our life, or our life into it.

But only up to, at most onto the threshold, not beyond it. That is, you remain an observer and can never, in this mode, participate in what you observe. Although both the classical passion of love and the modern passion of admiration illustrate the marvel of “the receptive” (τὸ δεκτικόν), they differ absolutely on this one point: erotic receptivity submerges you in the “movedness of nature” (*telos-driven movement*) while admiring receptivity keeps you afloat in the observation and calculation of chemo-mechanical motion no matter where you are.

And here you may detect another distinctive feature of human being: the ability, even the necessity, of alternating between an inside and an outside perspective. The oscillation happens in any case, as between just doing your thing during the day and stopping to think about it in the evening. But ordinarily the second pole, the stopping to think, gives way to the other, to the day’s involvements: all your aloof remembering and planning, even your celebrating and regretting, fade back into submerged versions of dealing with things, some settled and some unsettled, sometimes going well and sometimes going badly. Some of us, though, take up residence outside — not just outside worldly concerns for material gain and loss, as ardent hippies and devout monks do, but outside looking back in and ceaselessly calling attention to “basics” forgotten or otherwise missed by everyone engaged chiefly on the inside. It is this latter, the stronger sense of residing outside while meddling with the inside, that not only characterizes something distinctive about our culture in the West, but has always and will always annoy those captured inside.

A central question, at least for those of us engaged in the Socratic tradition: How are we, aloof, to understand our relation to the ordinary? We have inherited at least the two possible understandings I have been harping on. Either we re-think what’s going on inside with a view to making explicit its own implicit measures (starting with Plato at least, the standards set by and for competent performance in crafts)

— and enhance our own residence in reference to the enhanced version of inside involvements. Or we first withdraw to establish a residence outside, with standards set by the need to construct it with no help from the inside, i.e. the need to fortify it against the possibility of its crumbling back into nothing — and only then look to the inside for the ingredients essential to *its* workings, and with a view to enhancing these workings from our privileged standpoint. The intense pursuit of the first possibility has left us with High Metaphysics, and the equally intense pursuit of the second possibility has left us with Low Metaphysics, each with its blessings and curses, according to whether the residence in question remains hospitable or not, creative or not — liberating or constraining, humble or arrogant.

Another question for those of us willing to engage in both pursuits: Can either or both proceed robustly and healthily without relying on their respective Metaphysics? This is a pressing question, not merely a curious one. While at their inauguration each has to gather its forces to oppose the languor of its hosting world, now the results of both have themselves become firmly embedded in the world: most clearly in our educational systems, where Low Metaphysics defines the “sciences” (which themselves loom large in political decisions regarding the workings of both the environment and the citizenry), but also in the moral culture of the West, dominated as it is by “values” carried over from High Metaphysics (largely under cover of Christianity: e.g., our peculiar individualism and its version of solicitude). And the only way of putting their recalcitrant ghosts to rest is to rethink them from their forgotten source — not, for heaven’s sake, either to rebuke or to defend them.

If you care to accept the challenge of rethinking our inherited condition without relying on either High or Low Metaphysics, you may find it helpful to note, as I have tried to do, how the two belong to the same family — as Staid Father and Prodigal Son, so to speak. But even to address this and other such questions you must, as I already said, proceed counter-culturally. For one factor of prodigality is its more or less profound contempt for, or at least profound distrust of, any effort to recover the truth and greatness of anything inherited. Essential to

the Prodigal’s commitment to the present-verging-into-the-future, is the refusal to distinguish the effluvium from its source. After all, the works of Plato and the rest, even the most recent efforts to rethink our condition, first of all *are* how others consensually take them to be. It requires quite a struggle to undo this “first of all,” the simulacrum of the original, the crumbs fallen to the ground. And perhaps the most arduous struggle lies nearest at hand: to undo the effluvium of Low Metaphysics itself.

Indeed, you may here detect another feature of human being: we cannot long suffer the achievements of yesterday or yesteryear, neither those we consider our own nor those we have inherited from others; we must find ways of reviving the spirit of those achievements — either that, or succumb to their simulacrum. And, unless anesthetized by soporific drugs or soporific entertainment, we are generally aware of the failure to live up to this burden — especially, of course, failure on the part of others, so we can hold them responsible for our present plight. In other words, to be human is to be dissatisfied — so unlike our cows and horses, cats and dogs, not to mention the birds in the sky and the deer in the woods!

Re-starting at the beginning, rather than at the end, has the advantage of allowing you to jump-start a whole circle of friends, whether living or dead — as I have tried to do by taking you the long way around.

It’s counter-cultural, as I have twice said already. Which means you are not going to get much help except from the friends you have resuscitated — a catch-22 predicament, I hear it’s called. In any case, individual accomplishment has its own joys, one of which is the hope that what you do will in fact spur others on to do their own, and in that silent way join your circle of friends.