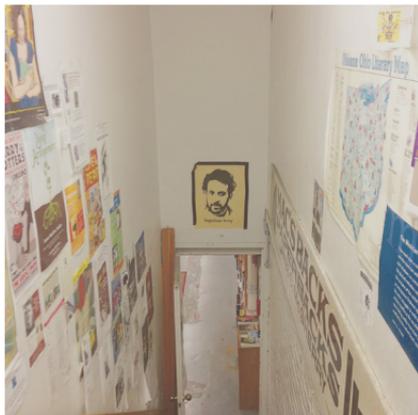
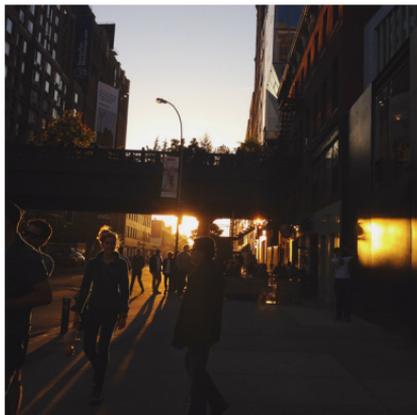
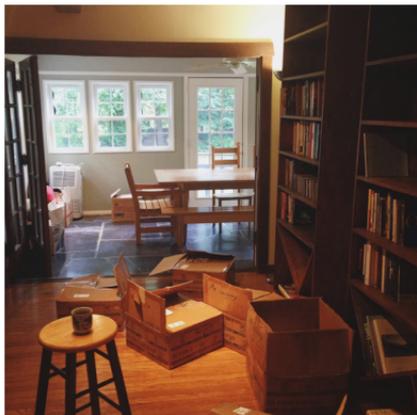


## SOLAR CALENDAR





# SOLAR CALENDAR

AND OTHER WAYS OF MARKING TIME

JEREMY BENDIK-KEYMER



PUNCTUM BOOKS

2017



SOLAR CALENDAR  
AND OTHER WAYS OF MARKING TIME

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Earth thought 27 of 365: I need a literature that speaks to me and makes me feel at home on Earth — neither philosophy which argues, nor poetry that wishes, nor religion preaching. A voice like a family member's, reflective at the pace of Earth time, arising with the part of us that isn't destructive or blind.

*for Malka Espagnet*

*N'allez pas trop vite.*



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# PREFACE

## **a. original academics**

“There is a radical opposition between the ancient philosophical school, which addressed individuals in order to transform their entire personality, and the university, whose mission is to give out diplomas which correspond to a certain level of objectifiable knowledge” (Hadot 2002, 260). I agree. And I object to what has happened. At the same time, we should not go back. Now is thankfully not then: who besides a control freak would assume that people ought ever to be totally grasped and completely transformed? The democratic assumption, true to every child, is that we come into the world with much that is powerful and right. It is not total transformation that we need, but humanity and, through it, capability. So we need something from ancient philosophy — learning that seeks to humanize and open up our whole being — but not its authoritarian residue. What is philosophy today if we take seriously what the ancient philosophical school got right?

At the end of his life, Pierre Hadot was a professor at the Collège de France — a “professor’s professor” — and he helped Michel Foucault, most famously, conceptualize ethics. Hadot devoted his career to recovering the ancient conception of philosophy, according to which

the discourses of universities are but a fragment of what philosophy is. His engagement with this theme helped me understand and develop a personal counter-culture to my academic work in the period leading up to and directly following my tenure as a university professor. Today, I understand this counter-culture as a kind of original academics, that is, an academics truer to the idea of the philosophical school Plato first developed in his *Ακαδημία*. Ironically, it is tenure that is now protecting me as I use it in the open.

Imagine the kind of philosophy book you might have wished for when you were growing up. Seeking a reader who would be patient and open-minded enough to live with her own questions and to walk around town with her thoughts, this book would not have a single thesis but would rather work through multiple problems and be an experience, born out of life experience. It would not be summarizable. It would be larger than the reader and open onto different kinds of readings. This is the kind of philosophy book that was at home in the nineteenth century.

In that brutal, colonial age, something amazing barely broke out—an unstructured chorus of the impulse inside Renaissance humanism: the power of people to “fashion the form that they prefer” (della Mirandola). The irony of history was considerable. The non-arbitrariness of people’s power came from the realization of the layers of significance that there are in the cosmos when we engage it with the ideals of justice, truth, and beauty—things that concern *every* human being and about which one can *object*. While half the world was in shackles and most of the canonical, European thinkers were still racist and sexist, here was faith in the power of thoughtful reasoning about what is good, and especially in the power of freedom to release human beings into their intelligence on many different levels. Moving between intuition and dreaming, cognition and bodily perception, experiences and fantasies, sense trickles inside our

shale and calcified pains; reaches to justice, truth, and beauty. And these values demand certain kinds of clarity in life by which we can live with dignity. And this dignity demands that we overturn subjection, counter-throwing the very discourse that educates us.

On these grounds, to the extent that the nineteenth century exposed the range of consciousness involved in European subjectivity *and intimated what would exceed it*, it is a century that primed democratic academics today for a world that demands a more thorough decolonization of people's minds to respect the plurality of people's intelligences. Hence, I take it to qualify Hadot's conceptual archeology, as I fully believe Foucault did as well. One day, I hope, decolonization will qualify it again and more deeply—there are communal ways of knowing academic culture has barely grasped.

What culture should the academy have? Whereas Plato was in some ways one of the first egalitarians by merit (especially concerning women), he was also deeply classist in his categorization of intellectual potentials. He effectively thought some people were stupid by nature having no *philosophical* worth (Rancière 2004). Hence the Ἀκαδημία existed outside the city, in practice exclusive and somewhat sequestered. It took me a while to get this geography right—see how ambivalent it is about people. Plato was traumatized by failed democracy. Understandably, but tragically, he overreacted. All of democracy was at fault, and people could not be trusted. They needed to be totally transformed and, when unable, to be kept in their place. We need only to follow out Rancière's analysis of political economy in Plato's foundations of policy to see how the academy was founded on class division and exclusion—on the very notion of a class of people as opposed to people in general. It was founded on the inequality of intelligence.

That was trauma, and trauma is not the origin, but the negation. Hence, it is not accurate to call Plato's idea of school "original academics." Original academics

would be found if we looked at a non-traumatized relationship with democracy, an accurate picture of people's power of intelligence. Hence the Renaissance—or as I have called it “nineteenth century”—qualification on academics, which I also think of as a priming inside the colonizing mind to decolonize the mind. Truly original academics begins with the power of people to find and make sense in the world out of freedom and a profound trust in our capabilities as human beings. It negates Plato's *Ἀκαδημία* at the point of its negation—where trauma and a rejection of democracy, a distrust of people, occur. Instead, let us demand justly democratic schools and original academics born of the power of humanity to find and to make sense in the cosmos. Let this, naively, include *everyone*—because that is right. Let it, *maturely*, always be self-critical. Whatever is of worth in Plato's academics must be saved within a thorough rejection of what is deeply distrustful of people and misunderstanding about democracy in that same *Ἀκαδημία*. Whatever is right in democracy must still pass through a critique of the subjugation still in democratic society, including its school systems.

Plato's vision of philosophy—at least as explained by Hadot—has the *practical* point of philosophy right, but this point needs to be rendered thoroughly democratic in the polyphony and multiple intelligences of people. Here is a point about method. Out of respect for people, Plato's method—called “academics”—must relinquish its traumatic repetition of violence in the need to control people by grasping and transforming them completely. Making people slaves to reason is still making them slaves. It is unreasonable. Despite obvious disanalogies, Plato's academic mentality coheres with the religious bondage of the Church and its Lord, the racist mentality of colonialism, and the insane pressures to perform that characterize capitalism today.

We do not need to be remade to be intelligent. In the openness found in trust in our power of sense-finding

and sense-making, we might experience a philosophy that—among friends formed just by grappling together with the work of making sense of life—aims at wisdom in an egalitarian life. Doing so coheres with what Foucault was after in his application of Hadot. It is also what I am after. We should welcome what is good from foundational academics and make it democratic, that is, opposed to dumbing down, complete control, and the creation of intellectual classes. We should learn from the anti-colonial current of the nineteenth century and explode the range of intelligence. We should oppose the latent traumatic-Platonism of the disciplinary academy, while preserving the *ethos* of a life centered around wisdom-seeking. Original academics via the birth of poly-intelligent being. Let us deepen the conditions for equality.

Just so, in the spirit of poly-intelligence, this book before you contains six oddities: a family portrait, a parody essay, a time-capsule poem, an exploded essay, a poetic record of an act, and an aphorism journal for a year. Their inspirations come from my Eurocentric educational system, where I found them *formally unnerving*: Epictetus' notebooks, Tarkovski's *Mirror*, and Apollinaire's roving "Zone." Also experiments in ecology—the study of home—the six originate in rifts that challenge us as growing people. They alternate between environmental problems and tensions within families, as if the fissures in love and in society wash back and forth between each other as we try to make a home in the world. Multiple times layer over each other like the sounds of a large, democratic city. The personal and the planetary intersect. The space before, and against, policy where politics arises as assertion opens up in glimpses, fragmenting the body and inertia of oppressive orders. Philosophy arises as a homely and idiosyncratic practice of multiple forms of intuition, reflection and intelligence for muddling through life. In solitary communion with oneself or with community out in the world, and

in much loved lands, we can open up the contemporary and tragic forms of power that keep everything in its awful place hurtling toward something that makes no good sense. Painstaking exercises in being human are *grounded* in the places we have tarried with our lives in unconditional love and in truthfulness—in the desire to become. They arise through the body and within the day as assertions of voice born out of long silence within the landscapes of our intimate time. Summoning sense is what it means to have a conscience.

Art, practice-work, literature—these serve as fragments of a larger whole, keeping life broad and open. They serve as resistances against the narrowing specialization and functionalization of mass economy, an economy that began by colonizing the labor and diverse minds of much of the world's people and continues today by colonizing the atomic fragments of our lives—the production of our bodily organs, the nuances of our self-styling, even the currency of our dreams and visualizations. This economy today over-determines the contested and contradictory place called “the academy” and shackles intelligence. But like early childhood learning, the expressive arts I here employ are imaginative after having first been experimental and seek to unfetter by creating a *human whole* first, a relational—not simply theoretical or practical—space, or actually, *time*.

I wanted to throw into the spin of text and image my whole human being, incomplete and fragmented at the edges and in its midst, summoning a world of trust in ourselves, against one that began in violence, expropriation, and competition.

\*

One of France's most erudite classicists and a translator of Plotinus, Hadot first came into the English speaking world through the bibliographies in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. In 1982, Hadot published

a volume on the history of ascetic practices in antiquity—practices he called “spiritual exercises,” a kind of work on the self. Two years later in *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault placed “practices of the self” in the foreground of his theoretical material. Though focused at first on ethical training, Foucault’s idea applies more broadly to self-development and the ways we fashion ourselves and modify our practices thoughtfully (Nichols 2014, ch. 6). If we looked at the United States of America, for instance—a limited example—we could find many instances and applications of what Foucault studied—yoga, self-help, religious exercises, interest-based groups organized by social media and taking place offline for the purpose of self-realization, multiplayer virtual gaming, athleticism, various modes of art as practice, and many others. We would also find them in many ritual practices among the indigenous of the land. But ironically, the contemporary university has not been explicit about spiritual exercises. It relegates practice work to student life and cordons off theoretical discourses within the disciplines.

Why should it? Discernment depends on practices, and knowers must develop virtues. Professionals are lost without character rooted in having a strong sense of self, that is, the ability to own beliefs, desires, intentions, and feelings. *All* of these crucial things—discernment practices, intellectual virtues, personal character and a sense of self concerning what one thinks, wants, pursues, and experiences are developed by spiritual exercise. As Hadot emphasizes in *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* the original schools of philosophy did not think of learning as theoretical discourse, but as a way of life. Philosophy, the center of learning, was as much practice as theory and was exemplified by a passionate love of truth and a restless attempt to be virtuous in one’s life. It is hard to see how such passion and restlessness, how excellence of mind and character, are not exactly what great science and professional leadership demand. So why such ignorance

in the structure of the university? Why so much technology without soulful technique?

In a remarkable essay, “Philosophy and Philosophical Discourse” (2002, 172–233), Hadot underlined the contrast between ancient philosophy and the contemporary academy. For ancient philosophy, discourses of truth were but a *mode* of the overall philosophical life—the heart of which was living wisely. One could be a philosopher without theoretical discourse, but *never* a philosopher without trying to live wisely. Now we live in an inverted world. The academic today who thinks his academic work is to try to live wisely is considered immature. In original academics, the life of the philosopher was essential, the theories not. And this life was fashioned through spiritual exercise—*askesis*—a concept that is at the heart of this book.

I love the tradition of irruptions in original academics, and Hadot marked them. They should be guides to our practice now. Petrarch and Erasmus wrote about the philosophical *life*. Montaigne practiced “the art of living” (263). Each of Descartes’s *Meditations* is a spiritual exercise (264–65)—reducing one’s life to a lucid skepticism through which one lives. Only an academy ignorant of Seneca does not see this. Kant—far from being the merely professional scholar he is often made out to be by the lovers and haters of theory—distinguished a philosopher from a mere “artist of reason” (i.e., a theoretician) (267). “...Schopenhauer, Emerson, Thoreau, ... Marx, Nietzsche, William James, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty and still others...conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world” (270). “There is an abyss between fine phrases and becoming genuinely aware of oneself, truly transforming oneself” (279).<sup>1</sup>

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1 Hadot believed that the way Christianity absorbed Greek and Roman philosophy neutralized its practical elements by conferring

The history of the academy has a counter-history, more vital to its humanity than the trumpets of theory admit. While Aquinas lectured in Paris, Bonaventure wrote poetically about the life of St. Francis—a discourse clearly intended for emulation and, so, a form of practice. Rousseau insisted that the *Académies* destroyed virtue, and he incited people to become Romantic. Kierkegaard spent every cent he owned to chastise his community for its hypocrisy. Frederick Douglass confronted people over and over again with a *living* fact. Woolf used literature to *show* the subjugation of women. Sartre suggested that any philosopher who only wrote about freedom was a fraud. And Freire developed thinking *co-constructively* with the rural and urban poor blighted by famine from a neo-colonial world of “structural adjustment.” The ancient conception of philosophy reappears whenever people realize that loving wisdom takes more than writing a theory, however true it may be.

This counter-history is more vital to knowledge than the loudspeakers of technology admit. To train ourselves to be objective demands a rigor of mind and of procedure. It demands that we accustom ourselves to fastidious searching. The ability to take in many different viewpoints and penetrate them, or synthesize them, takes habituation. We have to *grow up* to be capacious, vulnerable and receptive while not being reactive. We

---

the *ethos* onto the *habitus* of the monastery. Monastic practices, Christian in form, took over the practice-work of philosophy. Philosophical practice was supplanted by the Christian way of life. This left philosophy with only theory. And as philosophical discourse was drawn into theological dispute, the monastery gave way to the Medieval university. Philosophy became Scholastic. And it was this scholastic, exclusively theoretical mode that provided a frame for the modern research university to adapt to theory-driven technology applications in which work on oneself was irrelevant. Capital could easily colonize this, and it has. When knowledge is driven by the market and personality is converted into performance, original academics are left far behind. They become radical.

must cultivate the independent space for truth and curiosity as ends in themselves to actually advance knowledge. The situation is indirect, never merely direct as the instrumentalization of education would mythologize. There is simply no way around the need to develop yourself. Even if all that goes into being human were the production of knowledge, you would still need a sense of self. And of course there is way more to being human than simply being a big, cogitating mass. Technology means nothing without values that provide its ends. And these values are shams if they are not expressions of humanity. The counter-history of the contemporary university is necessary for anything resembling knowledge, let alone humanity. Spiritual exercises are necessary.

As old school style sometimes does to the new, Hadot's work rejuvenates what academic practice is. In the early 1990s, Hadot wrote a book on Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* called *The Inner Citadel* (1998 in English). There, he painstakingly showed the ways Aurelius disciplined himself through his nightly writing of notes-to-self. These notes-to-self were the *Meditations*. They involved theories—often confusing ones—yet the *Meditations* was not primarily useful as a work in theory. Instead, it was beneficial as a *practice*. A journal based on the ideas of Epictetus's Stoicism, the *Meditations* documented Aurelius's self-transformation, accusing his faults with his conscience, focusing his emotions for the day ahead. It showed him owning what he thought, wanted, pursued, and experienced. Here was vivid work in habituation to uphold the public good. It was profoundly human and frequently brave.

I worry that the contemporary academy makes us cowards. If academics has lost its grounding in spiritual exercise, is it any wonder that it instrumentalizes students as it instrumentalizes learning? Then what is outside the academy in actually human ecology is more vital to wisdom than the academy itself. Democratic spirit becomes the promise. What if philosophy were around

us in the homely intelligence of everyday people — that is to say, in democracy? What if the original impulse to philosophical practice were found whenever people search restlessly to live more wisely, more virtuously? Could we “define the philosopher not as a professor or writer . . . , but . . . as a person who leads a philosophical life?” (Hadot 2002, 274) Here is a critical thought that manages to make something useful of Plato’s Ἀκαδημία and its reactionary intellectualization. Bravery lives in the carved out spaces of freedom that keep us human — and not in the exam.

Yes, I think so. Why distrust people’s minds? Why repeat the colonialism haunting our intellectual hierarchies? Why shackle yourself to the scale or the curve? And this: without the elitism that Plato’s Ἀκαδημία inaugurated in the figure of a sage who conforms to the ideal, living a philosophical life as the equal of anyone else implies nothing more nor less than muddling through the difficulties of our social ecology as just one person among many, living with friends and with family, being with many — neighbors, fellow community-members, citizens, far off people on this planet, the riotous polyphony of other forms of life — and hearing the voices of future generations, and past ones, as cardinal minds. This muddle involves poly-intelligent modes of exploration, and it involves bravery — descendent spiritual exercises fashioned in semi-successful and searching ways to carve out spaces of freedom. There, we begin to feel, desire, believe, act and be human.

Please imagine me, *zanni* that I am, riding next to you on an above-ground metro line in Cleveland, New York, or in Paris — places I’ve lived or tarried, these minor and major nodes of the colonial world-economy across the last centuries. As you read, I’m standing, looking around at the city in the evening light. What cities are there inside you? What lives are here around us? Everything circulates around when people try to understand each other.

### b. Chicago Commons

I used to walk to school in the early morning in Rouen, France. I was eighteen. It was Fall. I was studying as a Rotary Exchange Student at the Lycée Pierre Corneille. I had no real idea about the violent subjection that constituted, and still constitutes, the history of my world. As I walked from the LeFebure's house out a side street to the busy avenues, the light would be deep blue-lavender between the buildings.

This book attests to the consequences of early childhood environments on adult development and to the validity of democratic education. But, at first, a lot of it has to do with trying to approximate something I glimpsed when I was an exchange student in France and later a young member of the literary scene in college. What I think I understand better now is the *political* dimension of what I glimpsed—especially as it applies to academic politics. By “academic politics,” I do not mean in-fighting within departments or university committees. Nor do I mean the international, polemical exchanges between professors with different research agendas. I mean the *structural conditions* of academia, in particular with regard to the *equality of intelligence* (Rancière 1991)—the moral axiom of learning in a democratic manner.

This strange axiom, so easy to misunderstand, holds that the point of learning is *to discover and to construct the sense of the world*, and that every single person—and other forms of life as entrusted to our interpretation—have a role to play in that. None are ruled as incapable of having something to contribute to thought—which is shared and public. The “you can't think” (“yet,” or “quite”), so typical to academia's hierarchical subjection of intelligence by an illicit act of will, is ruled as the major moral violation of this philosophy. We need only read hooks (1994) or Douglass (1994) to see how this violation constituted colonialism—as well as Plato's

political economy (Rancière 2004). Our world—academia especially—is drenched in it. Can't we think yet?

I know I can—I always could, from the moment I cried for breath as a newborn, rending the space with need and awareness.

Eighteen years later, I lived in Rouen, France for a year, fraternizing with both French friends and the Section Norvégienne that was lodged at the Lycée Corneille. I immersed myself in a world of literary culture where people discussed philosophy in cafés as part of being a teen and where difficult writing was promoted institutionally, taken as the lifeline it can be between people.

The following year, I began college at Yale University and was lucky enough to fall into the newly revitalized scene of the *Yale Literary Magazine*, the oldest college literary magazine in the United States of America. This heterogenous community met nightly at a table in the Alternative Food Court of the Yale Commons. At the table, I found people who aspired to a literary culture similar to the one I had found in France.

I wanted to find people who were both literary and philosophical, who engaged in the difficult communication of writing while searching for justice, truth, and beauty in this life. I could sense that some of my colleagues were roaming; yet the cynicism of the United States of America and the corrupt power of Yale stank up the air. The Yale Literary table risked corruption despite itself by aspiring to the status-conscious life of the aesthete.

I had to find a way to use the literary mind to ground me in existential relations. Writing can be a lifeline. Right after I graduated from college, I met the philosopher and painter, Megan Craig when she took the course, *The Problem of Evil* with Susan Neiman in 1994 (Craig's first book oddly falsifies this date in its preface, covering over the wonderful, nineteen-year-old freshperson who walked into Connecticut Hall's seminar room at Yale's Department of Philosophy). For several years, Megan

and I wrote back and forth to each other in different media: letters, postcards, paintings, drawings, notebooks, sketches, photographs, subway poetry placards, pieces of daily life, leaves, and philosophy papers intended for our respective classes. Megan was working at and painting the life of a daycare center called Kid Space — it was lovely and reminded me of my own family's environment when I was a child. The experience with Megan of philosophy as a daily, interpersonal correspondence stretched my sense of what is possible and marked the outer edge of the literary mind that I'd internalized. I wanted something egalitarian and democratic that stretched through New York City and Chicago — the places I and my friends lived at the time. Not snobbery, populism. Not simplification, people's real complexity.

But this intense discovery made me feel *dissociated* from the University of Chicago, where I had gone to study due to its seemingly being the most rigorous and scholarly place to study philosophy in the United States of America at the time. The University of Chicago's philosophy department seemed more open minded than any other program without sacrificing objectivity. But its mind was open *conditionally*.

You can get a sense of this environment by reading an exchange I had with the chair of the program over twenty years after I entered it:



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Dear Professor Richardson Lear,

One of the things I learned while earning my Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago was the importance of constructive criticism. After many years, it is clear to me that the Department of Philosophy of the University of Chicago in the period when I attended (1994-2002) deserves some constructive criticism. It took me many years to realize how degrading aspects of the experience there had been to me—many years, and much work. I write this note in the hope that your department is different and is working to make a respectful and supportive environment for graduate students.

When I arrived at Chicago in 1994, the Anscombe Lounge had the following slogan on its door, "Possibility is the destruction of contentment." What reigned in the department under that slogan was an idealization of harsh criticism as a mode of philosophical education. But given the hierarchy of the relationship between professors and students, given scarce opportunities beyond school in the market and in school with departmental fellowships and prizes, and given the hands-off attitude of much of the faculty, the ideal of harsh criticism easily became a rationalization for disrespectful behavior, lack of recognition, and the inevitably repeated hierarchies attempted by subordinates over each other, in this case, graduate students. The social environment of the department was judgmental, competitive, and fear-driven. It was frequently degrading, and one could not speak freely. We know these environments to be abusive ones.

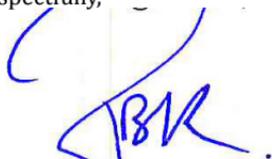
I wish to underline that I experienced a number of individual faculty members to be supportive. The problem was in the *ethos*.

As an alumnus of the program, it is my wish that the University of Chicago Department of Philosophy creates a warm and respectful environment for everyone who works there. That I can anticipate a snicker at such an elementary human request suggests that my memory of the time there still has the capacity to trouble my faith in human relations.

More generally, the discipline of philosophy is beginning to wake up to its abusive mode of operation, the way it has historically normalized

degrading conversational patterns and the ways in which its unexamined life has adversely affected graduate students, minorities, women, and other “abnormals” (!). I sincerely hope that your department is taking a lead in changing the discipline.

Respectfully,



Jeremy David Bendik-Keymer  
Beamer-Schneider Professor in Ethics

Apr 4

Gabriel Richardson Lear <grlear@uchicago.edu>

to bendik-keymer

Dear Professor Bendik-Keymer,

I'm sorry to hear that your time in graduate school was not a happy one. I have always found this to be an unusually supportive department and do hope—and believe—that it is a supportive environment for our graduate students as well. But of course, ethos changes with the individuals in the program, so it is something that needs continual attention.

Best wishes,

Gabriel Lear

Gabriel Richardson Lear  
Professor and Chair, The Department of Philosophy  
The Committee on Social Thought  
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How often are we willing to be horrified about our own institutions? Of course, my time wasn't simply unhappy in graduate school, nor was my point about personal happiness. Assuming that it was minimized and displaced what I wrote. I wrote my note, because there were problems of basic decency between people camouflaged as licenses of intellectual rigor. These involved degrading conditions.

My letter was also not about individuals. It was a call for clarification from an alumnus of the program about the *institutional structures* in place to protect graduate students—that is, the structures in place to *protect the equality of intelligence* (Rancière 1991). There could be many things said in reply to such a probe and piece of constructive criticism, but the Chair's note said none of them.

More typically, the letter showed a lack of interpersonal wisdom. When you are dealing with someone who has been traumatized by an institutional failure, you should be careful not to minimize that experience acting as an authority figure of the institution in question. This risks what is called, “re-traumatization.”

I believe that all three of these conditions—turning disrespect into a temperamental choice, pinning anxiety and depression on individuals rather than on subjugating structures, and lacking interpersonal wisdom—are common to what I am calling “academic politics,” especially in philosophy. In various ways, they each reinforce the *in*-equality of intelligence—camouflaging the abuses of will, hiding the inegalitarian axiom, and ignoring the human truth.

Half a decade after I entered graduate school, however, I found a learning environment that cultivated communication that is both philosophical and artistic through a range of exploratory and expressive media. I consider this learning environment my first truly *liberating* school system. Interestingly, it reminded me of the early childhood environment my parents had made for me (and

for others in my mother's Head Start school) and of the socialist school I attended in Ithaca in the early 1970s, the East Hill School. The places where education happens in my country are the places of early childhood.

The effect of meeting a liberating school while at the University of Chicago was amazing. True to the best in my country's democratic culture, the Chicago Commons was a public school system in Chicago woven as *family-centers*. I was fortunate to study it with two amazing researchers, a married couple who had made their life exploring learning among the underprivileged and the ostracized (Scheinfeld et al., 2008 — I helped co-construct some central chapters significantly). The family centers — adapting and developing what they had learned from the Reggio Emilia Municipal School System — saw children as *centers of intelligent agency seeking to explore the world and become a part of it*. They promoted inquiry through *all* our expressive modalities and believed in dialogues across many different media. They were also *challenging*, but as a way to share the world together — what Rancière (1991) would call the necessary supposition of the object to create true equality.

Minds were absorbed here, emotions quiet, everyone with more space in *their* minds than any theory could contain. When I first entered the Chicago Commons Family Center across the Dan Ryan Expressway from the now-gone Stateway Gardens projects, I thought I had entered utopia. Here was *understanding* around the walls and in the hundreds of representations of different kinds making up the common and evolving mind of this school that joined children and their families with staff from the very community the center served.

Time circles around our development like years around the sun, and the simplest, humane acts can create the profoundest effects in a life. When I was a child, my mother and father created a kinesthetic and imaginative environment for me — something for which I will forever be grateful, especially to my mother who led the

way as, literally, a coal miner's daughter from Southern Ohio. Looking back at my early environment, I have to ask: what are the consequences of growing up feeling that exploring human meaning, in whatever way works with one's imagination, is every person's *right*?

The Chicago Commons, the Scheinfelds more generally, and the presence of Martha Nussbaum's attention to capabilities and philosophy of education (a saving dignity in the University of Chicago) gave me the *outside* to the normal system which did not *deserve* to be normative. They reminded me of a *decent upbringing* made in an environment of human kindness.

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There is a scene in ordinary life and a space in families and friendship circles where philosophy most properly lives. That the academy knows it from the books we read but hardly crafts it institutionally is both frustrating and at times tragic. Personal responsibility, clumsy human immaturity and humble human maturity; rolling with the ways friends and family can speak with each other and help each other see and feel — these are needed in a philosophical life. They are humane realities.

If this book works, I have thought, it will leave the reader turning to growth and truth in her or his own life. That is what it means to philosophize, as all ancients intended to, from oneself. I want to give the reader a chance to construct the conditions of a personal relation to philosophy — location of voice, then crafting of speech; affirmation of humanity, belief in a world where together *we* make sense. I want us to speak about difficult things in a loving way — something I will do in the first study of this book when I explore true kindness with my family. I sometimes feel that in our smooth, performance-subjected culture, people do not know how to go through difficult things anymore.

Against the kind of colonization of philosophy that extracts labor through subjection and makes humanity off limits in its *form*, I want you to feel that you can explore *anything* through reading and writing and *in any imaginative way*. I want you to see how philosophy can be an expressive and flexible medium, satisfying the greatness and breadth of life. At the same time, I don't want to promote irresponsible avoidance of what matters in life—the tough objects, or rifts, that face us, and that provide us with the challenge by which we can truly grow. Everything, everything human comes down to communication—soulful, embodied, intelligent, objective, free.

Mostly, though, I want to talk with you. Because this book has been a collection of studies in a musical sense, of études, because it has been a sequence of “spiritual exercises,” it has always involved my person, or as Charles Larmore (2010) would say, my “self.” It has acted as a *book of becoming* that deepened my life and my relationships. I am grateful for its power, the power of philosophizing in the ancient sense that I unknowingly practiced during my first years as an adult with a literary mind.

We can create tragedy in our lives by stopping searching, by no longer crafting the conditions for the lives we truly love. Committing ourselves to our feelings, beliefs, and intentions is the still turning point, the center, of accountability in each of us from which we can relate with, and be accountable to, each other (Larmore 2010, Hadot 2003, ch. 11). As we err, our commitment to self-accountability and mutual understanding is comic. Even if we have not yet found the worlds we might idealize, we can still stumble toward a more humane reality. Here is a teleological art.

Jeremy David Bendik-Keymer  
early July 2016  
Shaker Heights, Ohio

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THE IDEAS START  
IN THE KITCHEN

*Family portrait*

**The walk from Alésia**

was made of many things,  
A coronated bird  
with lavender feathers,  
the sixty-year-old woman,  
herself, alive.

Even a tree was lop-sided,  
making noise in  
the wind.

28.7.06  
on a postcard  
to Sardinia.



*Alésia is a metro station in Paris, on the purple line 4 out near Porte d'Orléans. I was walking in the direction of Parc Montsouris at night in late July 2006. The window, above, is from Porto. Reminds me of my Aunt Irene.*



*Bottom of Paris Rd., New Hartford, N.Y., 1978.*

What is kindness? When I was a child, I learned to read slowly. I was in the brontosaurus reading group. I spent all my time in wood shop or drawing. The way I drew was to take an elementary writing book with broad lines next to a blank page. I wrote either *home* or *war* on the right. Then I action-drew on the left, blank page. “America” was coming out of the Vietnam War. When my parents separated for a year in the mid-70s, I remember a collage at the home of my mother’s friend: a charred, melted toy baby on a field of paint and scraps.



*Graffiti in Porto against the war in Iraq taken weeks before the war between Israel and Hezbollah broke out, 2006.*

Some common sense becomes radical when it extends through the details of life. The development of kindness takes us to support human rights and a form of biocentrism: attitudes, customs and policies that express respect for all living beings. The extension of kindness also modifies a range of institutions—e.g., education, science, business, the law, punishment, and politics. It makes us utopian out of common sense. It leads us to respect a being's drive to live and to be free.



*African Hoopoe in Sharjah, 2007.*

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Imagine me at thirty-seven. I live in the United Arab Emirates. I teach philosophy, learning it over and over with students like myself. Philosophy is an organic part of my life, and I am happiest when it is alive in me.

I don't think philosophy is first and foremost a theoretical subject or even a discipline. It is the part of us longing to create a better life in a world that makes more sense.

Philosophy is my love for the often overlooked or bypassed order in the world. Figuring something out can change the world—and so can realizing what matters and why. Often I've disagreed with my academic discipline. I trust it to make me skeptical. What keeps me thoughtful is people who are insightful in daily life and the possibility of the world making more sense, especially when I work with a group of people who are creative.



*Zlatan and Amir—two Bosnian friends who made it through a war, 2007.*

Kindness is my new idea — not mine as in “I own it”, but mine as in “I belong to it.” I’ve had two other ideas like this before. They probed the details of how war ends and home begins. As an undergraduate, I wrote on forgiveness, because I felt that the act founding human community is the act where we repair and move beyond a failure that hurt someone. Being forgiving became the virtue for interpersonal life and the heart.

Later, in graduate school, I began to write on healthy imperfection. Someone who is healthily imperfect brings his imperfections to light and works with the imperfections of others. That establishes trust. “Healthy imperfectionism” became the name for my outlook.

Kindness fits people who are healthily imperfect, and there can be no kindness without being forgiving. Home is made of imperfections that work together, and war is made by refusing to give an inch.

These are ideas that could feel alien in the Middle East and looking back to the geopolitical strategy of my country that marked the world into which I was born. Yet without some version of them, I doubt society anywhere would be sustainable. Humane realities exist relatively incognito in the fabric of everyday life, even in authoritarian states. In my country, they ease the relentlessness of competition, the lock of perfect images; the long, grinding shadow of colonialism, and the sad undertow of distant explosions in a country perpetually at war. We seldom acknowledge them — the explosions, the shadows, the imprisoning images, and the realities — fully.

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My classrooms are usually in a semi-circle so that we can see each other's faces and be people to each other. It depends on what the class wants. I rarely lecture. I'm just not suited to much besides conversation. I like comedy to be a part of the subtext, because we can connect around our imperfection. Teaching is a balance between relaxing the pressure of competition and refocusing interests once they pick up within the space of trust. People learn naturally, resisting only from distrust or tooling themselves in their own heads. Students come to class with insecurities and want to feel at home. What makes you feel at home?



*Macaroon on the nose at Deira City Center, taking a break from preparing for departmental accreditation, 2007.*

From my family and friends, I've seen the centrality of giving talk for any formative relationship. By "formative", I mean what humanizes us, for we—as Kierkegaard wrote—have to "form [our] heart[s]." Some relationships humanize us by forming our hearts, and while the most significant are intimate, there can be formative classroom relationships. Anywhere and everywhere we are, we are human, and it is possible to connect with most others in realness and fellowship. Giving talk (not "giving talk" or "giving talk" but "giving-talk"—talk that gives) is communication in its best sense. There is then a space between us, a ~ , as a friend of mine, Dan Scheinfeld, drew one night on the paper cover of a table at a restaurant in Chicago.

\* \* \* \* \*

I want *humane reality* to be my *principle of construction*. As when a child builds a large structure on the floor, stretching from wall to wall and door to door on the strength of long, solid blocks—so I try to build my world in blocks of giving talk. I hope environments with giving talk form the societies of the future.

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Window in San Francisco, December 2006. When I was fifteen, my father suggested a book I might like for my first research paper ever, a paper in Advanced Placement Western Civilization. The book was Thomas More's *Utopia*.

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I grew up with talk happening around the dinner table. Sometimes, there were meta-arguments on meta-arguments or the fearsome, recurring volcano. Mostly, though, we had good talks. My mother endured a condition that went unnamed. She would often get overwhelmed and upset. My father did not know what to do and approached things intellectually. This wasn't always the best way, but he was trying to be helpful. We lived in a world that did not understand, where we couldn't be open without risking judgment. None of us knew what to do. The table anchored me.

It was round, white, modern, and had a single, round and thin, concave base. If my body tensed up, I could always look at the smooth and the round, touch the cool, white tininess. *Ting. Ting.*

And then on most nights, we had such interesting talks at the table.

\* \* \*

I return to words. The feelings are undeveloped, but they circulate to the side, spreading over the words as the words dip into them. Every "I" a "You" injects in a rotating void of mental space trying to come to terms with the feelings as they soak through and exceed words.

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I could tap my feet at the edge of the white, metal base rolling smoothly around just a foot in from the table-top's edge.

\*

In my family, we cooked good food. So the table would fill with experiments and staples in cooking, there under the lamp suspended down from the ceiling.

\*

And the greeting cards would flutter in the windows of the winter storm, multi-layered with cutouts of Norman Rockwell sent from my paternal grandma, Miriam.

\*

In that circle of blizzarded light, we'd talk about the day, its meaning, politics, art, books, music, family, worries, ties, hopes, vents, schools, works, and more. I'd stake the search for meaning and truth—the coming to light of things.

Sometimes, I'd be blue. Sometimes Mom would be, too. Outside, the streets were soft and impossible in the grace of death.

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What makes a “philosopher?”

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The streets filled up with barely a rut that could thread them. Cars drifted sideways at the corner and the mote of snow colled in. In me, praising my family in a protected fragment the other side of which was anxiety, did I idealize love because I found only fragments of sense? What good was idealizing? But I also *felt* a great deal of love. It was confusing.

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How have you found sense in your life? How have you loved? What words do you have for “wisdom”?

The conversations I had with my parents settled in my peculiar mind. They were complex. Usually about interesting topics both intellectual and emotional, they could also become unstable and scary. As a result, I am hyper-attuned and show elements of what I call “Attention Surplus Condition” — ASC.

For the most part, I am sunny and loving. But sometimes I have very little tolerance for things. When fear settles into the body, it lives there as unease. You forget it. Then some memory is stirred — and the anxiety swells up. But you don’t know why.

When life is stable and I feel safe, I am intuitive, full of life, popping with connections, excited by the day. There is a calm center to my mind and things fall beautifully into place. Then I am somewhere — here, in fact.

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I married my fear. I found a situation to break me.

I overcame it when I had no self-respecting choice but to give up. My fear surfaced as shadow morality.

Divorce.

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As I’ve grown, I love with less immediacy and more understanding. I see what another can do, what I am capable of too. I disengage.

Today, I want to be thoughtful and to take distance on what is chaotic, so that I can respond well and co-create humane reality through it.

There are many voices. Listen.

\* \* \*



When I was little, my family lived in Aurora, New York. Aurora is a small town by Cayuga Lake. There are hills rolling down to the lake, a boat dock and glassy water. We lived in an old house renting half of the second floor. The house was named after its architect of some note.

Mandel House had angles. Its stairwell was lit by one translucent white curtain of a window. The stairway was broad, dark wood with a square banister to hold onto. The apartment bent around in a C: first the living room; then a long, thin kitchen to the right, next my parents' bedroom, a hallway to the right, and finally my room.

In my room was *a stump for banging nails, a balance beam six inches from the floor and a tire-swing hanging from the ceiling*. Imagine the world.

The playground in my room was mostly the invention of my mom, who drew from her work in early childhood



*Mandel House in Aurora, New York, 2004 — the front, second floor windows lined our apartment in 1973.*

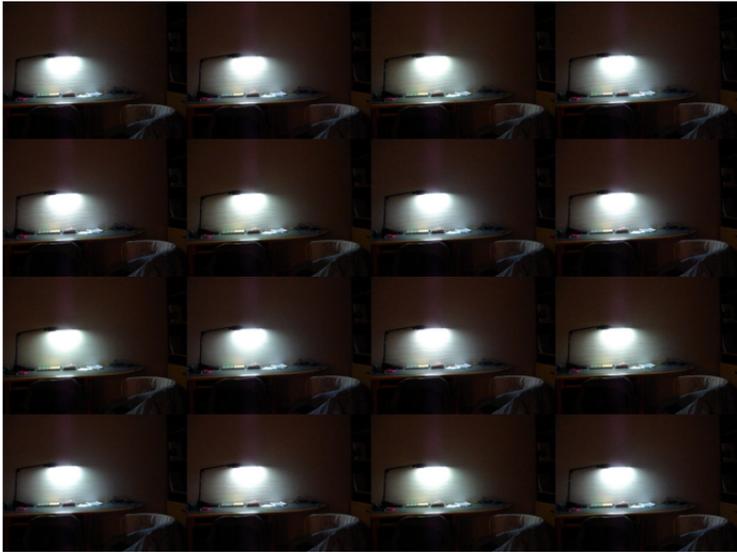
education to give me the best environment possible. That environment let me feel okay as the person I am when I am creating or experimenting. It let me try things out at my own pace. The troubles for me entered when I felt that I had to please people whom I sensed were either self-centered or bullies. I had trouble picking my battles. On my own, I was content. The environment was a block of kindness.

Later when I studied early childhood education, I learned that you can't overestimate the effect of early environments on children's possibilities. We didn't have much money when I was little, but my mom went to the lumberyard and asked for buckets of wood pieces that were waste from the production process. As a result, I had a vast collection of building blocks that I used to create cities on the floor of my room large and intricate enough that I could not leave my room except by jumping from the bed to the nightstand to the door. I referred back to this experience of building cities when I wrote the introduction to my dissertation twenty-eight years later.

I think we should build a society that accommodates our varying abilities and which gives us time, space and understanding to acknowledge our own vibrant reality. This would be humane: a space where each is allowed to be her own kind. Call that "kindness."

Today, children grow into a world that wants them to perform according to models that micro-manage each part of their productivity and success. Perfectionism becomes anathema to humanity. I am arguing for an imperfect space.

Pascal wondered whether we are angels or beasts (leave to the side that beasts are never demonic). We have this sublime ability to love each other in deed and in creative form — to make institutions that are humane. Yet we have not created a society that accommodates uniqueness.



*My room in Paris—Summer 2006—where I switched from the idea of conscience to the idea of kindness.*

What was most important is that I was loved unconditionally as a child. Trauma is a source of philosophy, especially in Plato, but I believe the memory of love is more important. Without it, I would not be building this block structure along which you are running, trying with your eyes, hearing with your ears.

How will you use it?



My mom, Esther, came from a working class, Slovak family. Isn't her name like quiet rain? A family like that sticks together, can be both fiery and humble, and has strong religious and moral views—although not necessarily reactionary ones. A family like that also does not have language for its darkness. There were generations of darkness in that family. I see it in my mother's sisters

with ripples I identify in my cousins as well. We never talk about it. The silence continues, but I have observed how everyone in the family has made choices throughout their lives to cycle free parts of their lives. We move in half steps.

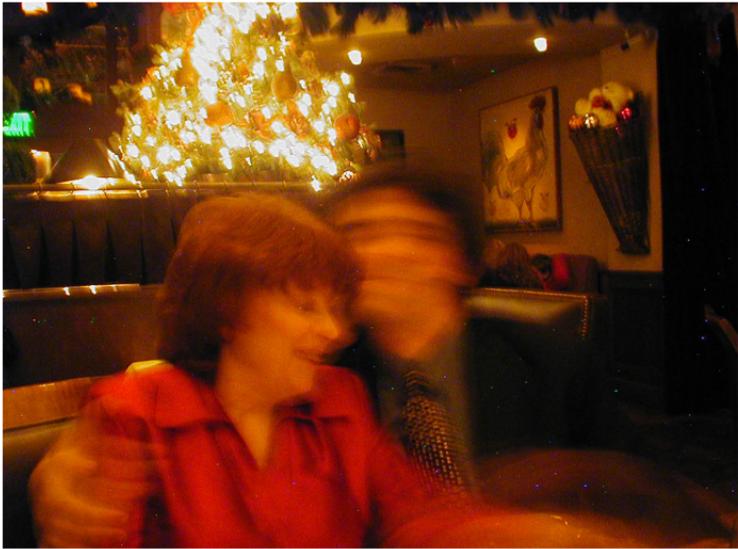
The Bendiks are a social, tight-knit family. There is a spark of independence throughout. Grandpa Bendik insisted that it is all right to dance in the Slovak meeting hall with a partner other than your spouse: who are you to know what goes on in another's mind? He also thought it was all right for my mom to go to New York City to sing and to act when this was seen as almost sacrilegious in their community.

Like her dad, my mom had music in her bones, and she was a singer before she went into early childhood education. Highly intuitive, she can sense a person with foresight that is remarkable, and she is known to light up rooms when she enters them on social occasions. Esther reflects her surroundings — like the crystal bowl of water in which she floated bougainvilleas for a time.

They grew up on a farm in rural, southern Ohio — not far from West Virginia. Grandpa Bendik worked in the coal mines, having had to leave school before ninth grade to help support his siblings. They were all formally uneducated and relied on their Lutheran church to provide a framework. My mother was the first of anyone in her extended family to go to college. She won a scholarship. When I imagine how far she had to walk to develop a sense of her inner landscape, I understand her better. The world emerges from half-light on green, lush hills with interiorly scored mountains.

At a certain point, my mom left the theater. She wanted to have a child. She became involved in low-income early childhood education with African-Americans. She became aware of psychology and joined women's consciousness raising groups. She turned from expression to development, from pleasing others to trying to grow. How did motherhood help her?

When my mom decided she wanted a child, she gave a great deal of thought to it. She wanted to create a world for me that unworked the constraints she had felt. If she'd had a language for her darkness, I believe that she would have unworked that as well. History isn't an idea. It takes time, and only the perfect see time as an enemy.



*Giving my mother a kiss on her hair at my parents' 40th wedding anniversary, 2004.*

Often when I am teaching or writing, I try to relay the core realization that I felt through my parents' care. That memory comes largely from the environment my parents provided for me and which was a central intention of my mother. We have dynamics within ourselves that can counteract dynamics outside ourselves.



*Students from Sharjah—themselves from numerous countries— at the Harvard Model United Nations, February 2007. Caught at times between the material excess of the U.A.E. and traditions that deny their autonomy, I wanted them to have a life of possibility like the one my grandfather wanted for my mother and my mother for me.*

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I have not told you about my father, Dave, whose name I carry as my middle name.

Animals love him. Dogs quickly sense his body language, non-threatening and relaxed. Cats decide that their independence can hang out with him. He used to send me letters marked with stickers of insects and had a tree frog tattooed on his upper arm when he was sixty-five. Without his being an environmentalist of any kind, there is a kind of Earth ecology spreading out along his being as if he had never left the origin of species. A mid-twentieth-century, Cleveland intellectual, this one.

He has often been my friend, going together to movies or to the bagel store before school, hanging out over coffee, taking a drive up to Gold Country in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to enjoy the day reading, talking, playing music and goofing off. I remember one time we had a great conversation by a lake with fresh, cool water far back in the mountains. The conversation was about all the people who deserved Nobel prizes in literature but never *got* them — our bad grammar.

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When I was married, I helped raise a boy, Isaiah. Careful not to confuse his relation with his dad, I loved him as “pop” — Isaiah’s name for me. My dad loved him too — my dad had also been a stepson. He wrote *The Many Strange Adventures of Isaiah Egg* and the *Sockman* detective stories for Isaiah — complete with scanned pictures of socks and videos of sock hand puppets. He led Isaiah through the complicated Master Detective’s license with *Sockman* that involved shadowing me around the house without my knowing it and learning code with a decoder ring from the 1950s.

When I think about these things, I want to hug my dad.



*Before he shaved off his beard, after having finished his portrayal of Mr. Green in the play of the same name, Dad did “the mountain man,” 2007.*

Yes, him.

I think of Isaiah, too, who thankfully has a loyal dad who loves him. Isaiah is a part of me that I keep protected and quiet. I rarely talk about him.

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Perhaps because my dad had to develop a strong will to interact with his single mother, he assumes that others will be as strong-willed as he is. His own father left when he was young. He turned to books.

This self-protection contributed to the dynamics of my family growing up. I grew up with the feeling of a larger-than-life-size task that, if only I could conceptualize and figure it out, would clarify the situation in which we lived and make everything well.

I want to have a tattoo on my inside forearms where the skin lies gentle. On the left it will say, "It is there," and on the right it will say, "but we lack understanding."

^ ^ ^

My dad wants people to figure things out for themselves. This has good and bad sides. I developed an inner layer to my personality where fear settled, beneath which my personal dreams would circulate. I often felt that I was not really sharing who I am with people, because it was dangerous to do so. This was mostly in my head.

Yet one of the things that most mattered to me growing up is how my dad quietly, indirectly gave me support when I felt down—sending postcards about nothing, doing this every couple weeks when he knew I felt lost in my twenties, that identify-adrift time that also included grad school. The entrance of those messages into my hermetic world reminded me of the humanity outside myself.

My dad has been a straight shooter whenever I seek practical advice. I go to him and lay out the problem, and he helps me sort through it, honest about his limits and practical.

What from my father is in my understanding of kindness?



*Being especially serious in an unguarded moment in Moscow ~ you know, it's OK to be serious. This self-portrait is the picture of me to which I feel closest from my mid-30s. I think it shows what goes on underneath my social persona and the way I at bottom am registering some undercurrent of my world most of the time when I am awake. Maybe this is why sometimes I don't fit in. Or maybe it is because I don't fit in that I am this way underneath. I felt calm in this photo. Maybe what was surfacing was old — family-structural — searching. 2006.*

When I was in high school, my dad averaged close to a book a day — also finding time to cook after work while talking with us in the kitchen. Philosophy, arcane history, science fiction, detective stories (especially those), popular science books, natural history, fiction, poetry, plays.... The only major gaps I see in his reading are Kant and Hegel, whom he read but who didn't grip him. Diderot, Erasmus and Guicciardini are more his style.

I grew up wondering where my father was when he disappeared inside a book. What went on in his mind? How did he see the world? How did all these words connect up in his world? How many layers did he think in?

At the same time, my mother went deep into questions. When she read, she read slowly and deliberately. While my father took in books at stretches and drew connections between them, my mother looked out windows. If my dad showed me intellectual texture, my mom revealed the depth.

Here were people growing out of fairly uneducated families in the Great Depression. How did they live throughout the twentieth century and its cycles of difficult self-consciousness?

What I'm trying to say is that philosophy comes from families, too. There is a tendency to view philosophy as the outgrowth of raw intelligence, or rebellion, or as a sublime art that some initiates have learned how to practice. But I want you to understand how philosophy comes from home. The ideas start in the kitchen.



*Peaches in a Moscow apartment, 2006. I love Tarkovsky and Dostoevsky. Dad thinks Tarkovsky is painterly but boring. Ach. (He loves Last Year at Marienbad, however, however; he loves Last Year at Marienbad, at Marienbad; He loves . . . etc. [Last Year is one of those modern films that repeats itself endlessly, endlessly; it repeats itself . . . etc!])*

Ideas for living—the useful ones—are expressions of the facts that people are complex and that our complexity can become beautiful if given time, space, and *challenges*. The book of becoming is not always quiet, but sometimes becoming is the quietest thing, and our complexity is the most mundane unfolding, as the sea absorbs the sky and the sky absorbs the sea in their lapping, eddying movements.

In the kitchen, quiet, settled after school and long before night begins, with parents elsewhere and light coming in through the broad window by the side road, you might find yourself thinking unexpectedly, surprised by a sense of the world. This is the world's childhood,

and it comes to you around the kitchen's things, around the bowl of peaches, apples, and plums.

Here, it is complex—your family, some brokenness. Here, it is possible too: the mending out of the backdrop, the allowance, of love.



*Dad and I clowning around during my visit to their home in Modesto, California, summer 2007. This is probably why I clown around in class. I loved it myself as a kid and found it lightened me up. Mom took this photo.*

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I want to end with some remarks about two near members of my nuclear family — my mom's cousin, Ruth, and my emotional brother, Steve.



*Aunt Ruth is kind and philosophical. Will people like her in the future support the drive of all living beings to live and to be free? Summer 2008.*

Aunt Ruth is what I call “relatively incognito.” An everyday person in New York City, you wouldn’t normally find her in a tabloid—although in 2009, she made international news when her wallet was found in Central Park inside a tree that they were cutting down. It had been stolen 27 years previous during the New York City marathon she was cheering.

Without people like Ruth, the world would go to hell. She is a nurse, has a web of friends, and was active in her church. In 2001, when the airplanes became missiles fired into the World Trade Center, she was on a bus to go downtown to provide medical care.

When I would visit, we walked—often through Central Park or out to a restaurant—and talked about everything that mattered to us—just as I am doing with you now.

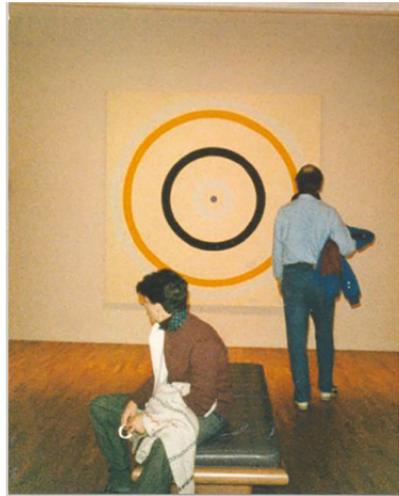
Before it closed, Ruth’s and my favorite place to go eat was a Hungarian restaurant with waitresses that looked like they would either insult you or offer you timeless wisdom. Here was a dinner table in New York City where we could talk about anything.

The educational psychologist Lev Vgotsky called a region where you can grow without focusing on it a “zone of proximal development.”

Visiting Ruth, I experienced the itinerary of people who seek independence.



*Ibn Arabi quote, twelfth century: "I follow love's caravan wherever it goes, because love is my religion and my faith." Calligraphy by the Iraqi-French Hassan Massoudy. 2006. My one concern with the quote is something Immanuel Kant located six hundred years later: if love is the guide for our will and if by "love" we mean a desire, then the caravan follower is amoral. However, if by "love" we mean a sense of moral duty, then the caravan follower is worthy of being religious. The problem is that people today, I suspect, pick up Massoudy's postcard in France and think, "Great! I will follow my heart's desire!" But is the heart best characterized as a site of desire, paradoxical as it may sound to question that? I think we are neither in desire nor in duty primarily, but in relationship. And that is why love involves duties and also desires.*



*Questions: Dad and I at the Guggenheim, 1986.*

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In summer 2006, there was a clearing in my life. I lived and walked around Paris and rode the above ground metro as Edmond Jabès had done. My friend, Steve, had introduced me to this poet of overlapping voices.

As I walked and rode, shaking free years of graduate school and my first disciplinary job, I began to think about kindness.

I turned over ideas, composed short statements and many book outlines. Mostly the city was loose around me, writing quiet.

I no longer heard the judgmental voices of my discipline telling me to shut up if I wasn't producing knowledge according to their schema. I trusted that people of independent mind will read a note written even on a napkin and see all the experience that goes into it. Relays are the building blocks of humanity.

I walked to hear voices around me. I had done this often. One of my favorite memories from college was of reading Derrida's *Limited Inc.* — a book that I did not particularly enjoy — while walking around the old campus's main quad where Derrida had taught and from where he had been fired.

Walking made the book fun. The tedium of open academic warfare was released into the air by the sounds coming from dorm rooms and feet on the walkways.



*Esther Bendik and her son, Jeremy. 1970, New Haven, Connecticut.*



*Picasso's sculpture as an old man. Jeremy walked into this museum in summer 2006 in Paris.*



*1986, New Hartford, New York. Jeremy at fifteen rebelling against a conservative town, also being a typical teenager. Since his family tended to work things out, philosophy made sense to him.*

One of the amazing things about us is that we can look at ourselves as another. I remember my dad explaining this to my class on Aristotle's ethics at American University of Sharjah when he sat in sometime during the Spring of 2006. We can be just to ourselves. Aristotle didn't say this exactly, but I agree. Looking at oneself allows one to try to be objective, and it also allows one to be more kind.

Being kind to yourself is a condition on being independent. When I was a graduate student, professors spoke as if kindness and independence conflicted, or they implied that independence was needed first. Typical to the stultifying academic environment in which they unconsciously lived, they denied the originality of kindness, its core role in an uncertain and stable human life.

After all, it's hard to be free without feeling it's alright to be yourself, and I don't think that such a feeling is possible without kindness to self. The place where independence and kindness begin is in self-openness.

By being open with ourselves, we show kindness to ourselves in trusting our personal intelligence as a strength. Just so, we are in that self-relation independent.

It is funny, I say this and think about the many people with whom I have worked who are thoughtful and purposeful, disingenuous and aware. I think of each of us solitary in our worlds in a moment, creating the conditions of accountability by being kind to ourselves—and being kind to ourselves by being *accountable* to ourselves.

Kindness is neither hard nor soft. Made with integrity, it is forthright.

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So during one evening in July 2006, I walked home from the Alésia metro station to the Cité Universitaire. The sky was deep blue-lavender fading to dark. Rousseau showed that to become who we are, we should get out of the house, not sit sunken in a room like Descartes. Ideas mixed with cities are alive. Philosophy comes from the neighborhood—the sounds of kitchens coming across courtyards in the evening air.

I think of Steve, birdsongs in his tree-crown of an afro, coming around the block. When I was twenty-one, he was the first person to suggest the connotations of the word “togetherness” to me. Mixing what I think are two memories together, I remember one night saying good-bye on the steps of his apartment and alluding to Emerson like we were mentioning someone nearby.

When I was twenty-one, I gave Steve my kitchen table. He took off its base and for years used its top as a low round, covered with African cloth. We read Plato there; Edmond Jabès too. Steve drummed on it—*ting ting ting*.



*Still in the talk, we discussed justice in a café, surrounded by pigeons, people and traffic. Summer 2007.*

Togetherhness. Togetherhness grows through conversation, provided that the conversation is open and that the people have loving integrity. Then the world in a certain light: the glow of sun-fall in the photo, not unlike Plato's Good.

Be within it and range freely.



*End of a walk in New York City, 82nd and Third, Summer 2007.*

*Annotated monologue  
by a university professor /  
essay by a neighbor*

2 / I  
DON'T  
WANT  
TO BE  
THOUGHT-  
LESS

The air around me is light, moving through my hair and along the collar of my sweater even though it is zipped up tight. Cars far off accelerate, and brake. Finally their swell subsides. The moon makes pale patterns on the voids of earth in the deep blue grass.

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The textbooks sit silent back in my apartment, beaten at the tip of the spine. Grades and credit hours, the loan debt numbers of my students tighten my memory. Can philosophy be learned in the classroom?

I can breathe, here, now, but there is no security with what we're doing. Big children shell inside genitals that work as pumps and motors. We've done this; we do this. I teach "virtue" without any of us growing. These aren't score, I mean scare, quotes. They are something merely mentioned, seldom used. For the life of me, I am not singling people out. I accuse myself. The *form* of schools, of my classrooms—even the progressive ones arranged in a circle—are not virtue prone. They are misshapen verbs. If virtue is above all a habit, to teach virtue without habituation is not to teach virtue. Plato's Ἀκαδημία wasn't this way. It, it was hylomorphic.

The personal and the professional peer at each other across the thin, black line of a contract. When do the soldiers leave the trench? In second grade, my stepson fills out bubbles, boxes and half-written lines. Under-surface your mind. Later, Sunday, he runs onto the diamond with my old, leather glove, the opportunity he fields. Sunlight is everywhere, kids colliding.

"Exercise" comes from the Greek *askesis*, the root of *ascetic*. Wiki will tell you that. What are professors for? It depends on whether we are only laborers of industrial theory. Form delivers content, a game of sudden opportunities within lazy life. Run and run, until your shins are green and the glove bends away from you with

swollen weight. Lopsided, what's consistent. The form of a credit hour learns the game. Old white man clicks the Powerpoint.

What is powerful? The *Ἀκαδημία* put the form of a way of life into practice: call it “hylomorphic.” Is there an orchard in the mind beneath the mind? And how do we walk in it?

You're on board a corporation, schooled in the midst of commerce, professor to the test. BP wants PR; professors, orthodoxy. We need right *belief*, not BP's appearance. But it is possible neither appearances nor propositions are the scene of learning—a strange and demanding thought. Suppose ethics were a groove in the body, before and beyond abstraction. Am I concerned with “ethics” or with ethics itself?

The moon makes pale patterns on the voids of earth in the deep blue grass.

Sometimes, I feel as deranged as a cubicle in industrial theory. I imagine hylomorphs running their backs along the underside of the floor, quieter than the city in an office high above the ground. I can't tell what the university is after. Only the universe we sense. Theory's point becomes power. Where is truth in our limbs? If I were concerned only with propositions, I would be content with concepts. If appearances quieted me, I would hear voiceless words. In my body, the reason is so silently inscribed. When the couple danced on the dance-floor with her hair run down their arms, no proposition spoke the truth of it, though they danced as blue truth in the depths. Knowing how, not knowing. And so knowing. Words fly out the room.

The context, the city. The industry, the globe. To grow, I need to approach learning personally, in a way that allows me to be, or to become, a person. No soldier shout: ethics taken ethically, philosophy philosophically. The space of the person—it will be hollowed out. Can writing serve original academics?

My point is that someone concerned ethically with virtue will be concerned with virtue itself. The point of virtue is to live excellently, or well, and, for a person concerned with being ethical, the point of investigating virtue is not to know virtue, but to *become* virtuous. That Aristotle took this as self-evident shows he took his investigation ethically. The point of learning is growing. The thing itself, philosophy, wisens. Erosion until curves. It's more weather pattern than mastery. And I see no difference when it comes to love or to democracy. Braking even won't do. Step out of the car. I want to study original academics, just as musicians study music by playing it.

Forms of life are more important than any point in theory. Something is more important than this point. King, no clanking of concepts around personless space.

### **Industrial theory**

Now I am back in my apartment. I have to read my neighbor's *attempt* at philosophy. What was *he* thinking?

Philosophy's not the love, but the *appropriation* — the making personal — of wisdom (Schürmann 2003, 634–35, n. 26). In its ancient form, the point was to wise up.<sup>1</sup> *People* wise up, not footnotes, not rabbits. Rabbits learn how to go through the fence, evade predation. Footnotes, we chisel them into shape! Neither develops the triangle of conscious thought, unconscious body, and the mixed zone of our longing. The question is whether theory, and in general *the theoretical life*, seek the same goal as philosophy and *the philosophical life*? If they do, then the life of a theoretician seeks to become wise above all, and the practice of theory has in view wisdom in all instances.

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1 See Hadot (2002, 220–31, 42–50), where, for Socrates, wisdom appears as an unattainable ideal driving one onward.

The conclusion is a simple consequence of the relation of means to their ends, the end being wisdom.

Does the life of theory seek wisdom above all else? The answer to this question requires a definition of theory and a definition of wisdom. Theory seeks a comprehensive concept of things, a grasp anticipating (and so not needing) fact, the mental handle that in fact organizes fact. By contrast, wisdom speaks to us entirely and in many voices: goodness (for deciding), truth (for believing), and beauty (often hard won and taking work in the most important things, our relationships). The different lights of action, knowledge, and connection. Listening for far off sounds in the grove where the traumatized and eccentric Plato tried to learn something different by talking with friends and exercising the body around that talk, should we understand attunement as beauty? Only if we are willing to de-aestheticize beauty, a noble goal (Harries 1998). *Goodness. Truth. Beauty?* Theory is at most a third of wisdom. A third of wisdom, theory-industry. At your best, you want to understand comprehensively and to seek truth. But wisdom.

I am deranged tonight. I am a fool. Once you realize the logical point of philosophy, it is obvious that a theoretical life needn't be a wisdom-seeking one unless it is *taken* philosophically. Whereas wisdom implies an acknowledgement of theory's place in the pursuit of a life well lived, one could pursue theory without pursuing wisdom. Welcome to the industrial university, certainly the desert of the ideal. The grove outside ancient Athens would be an oasis, today, a shimmering mirage (and my hand, mirage-writing).

If you are a theorist trying to do philosophy, the question to ask yourself is whether you aim to become wise. If you do, then you do philosophy. If not, then you do not. And this is a separate question from how students learn "philosophy"—that subject—in university. What classroom leads one to take theory philosophically? The

textbooks sit silent, beaten along the tip of the spine.  
(The hand that threw them)

### **Weathered being**

In the context of being ethical, my worry about industrial theory is not that it's useless, but that it's *pointless*. Theory can certainly be useful. But theory seeks the true. Ethics, by contrast, seeks the good (then, in morality, the right). Theory concludes in truths (or realizations that truths are not forthcoming, a move in the space of the true). Ethics concludes in *deeds*. If I am trying to become ethical, to approach virtue merely theoretically is to make a category mistake, and—from an ethical standpoint—it is to risk the vice of being abstract with oneself, perhaps even self-deceived. Another way to put this concern is that if I want to do the right thing, it won't be enough for me to think about my character. I should *do* the right thing, make it my *way of life*.

How do we study philosophy philosophically then? Think about what *ethos* itself is; it is a way of life, it is character. If *ethos* itself is X, then a discourse that does not develop X does not develop *ethos*. Let us say, then, that *ethos* itself is—among other things—a living form of responsiveness in the body. And let us include the mind as an expression of the body here, a way of thinking as a way of doing or being. Why not call this “habit” and not put down habit as if it were merely bourgeois or as if it were something rigid, thoughtless and fixed? Even scholars of antiquity have come to understand that the habit that was implicit in classical philosophical conceptions of virtue is something *improving*, growing, as an artist grows in her craft (Annas 2011). Then a discourse that does not develop *ethos* as a living habit does not develop *ethos*, period. You'd have to develop virtue's bodily groove to study virtue ethically. What kind of study is that? It would be more like a musical *étude* than a textbook.

Suppose that philosophy is a living habit just as ethics is a groove within the body. Aristotle distinguished between two kinds of ways that thoughtfulness can become a living part of us. These ways could *be* idealistic, expressing an inclination weathered into us to become wiser. This weathered being was *ethos*. It consisted of virtues of thought and virtues of character (Aristotle 1999, 1103a5–11). The distinction corresponded to parts of the soul. Aristotle believed that a part of our psychology is purely intellectual, another part intellectual and part emotional. A failure to grasp logic due to a blunt mind is a different kind of failure than a tendency to erupt into angry outbursts. The outbursts are part of one's character, and Aristotle apparently thought that only matters of character are habits (1103a14–15).

This doesn't give enough body to mind, though. Aristotle was of the mind that only character requires habituation. Habit made quasi-rational emotions stay in place serving reason. Character needs a kind of behavioral reinforcement, whereas intellectual excellence is simply in the mind once learned (1103a14–15). Really? Aristotle wrote that the emotions must learn to *obey* (1102b36). Habit? Habit is obedience for unruly hearts. But he thought that the mind does not need to obey reasons — it just needs to see them. Aristotle created this picture of humanity: truth belongs to intellect; but emotions must be weathered into us.<sup>2</sup>

Is this anticipatory industrial theory? Learning how to think requires habituation, just as learning how to be courageous does. It doesn't take the arduous task of writing the *Critique of Pure Reason* to see this. Being objective — for instance, seeking criticism of one's own position — that is a habit of mind just as even-temperedness

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2 But notice how Aristotle himself throws the division between mind and heart into question at 1144a29–1144b1 and 1144b31–2. The virtue of intelligence as well as wise judgment both require habits of the heart.

is a habit of heart. I discipline myself to analyze arguments and consider objections using much the same *kind* of method—a practice—as I do when I discipline myself to stay level headed around disrespectful people. The practice results in habits: look for reasons; detach oneself from the goad of impulsive reactions in one's heart. On this one point, Aristotle's picture of the intellect is too disembodied, too unemotional.<sup>3</sup> Grooves of the body run all the way down beneath the mind.

Suppose, then, that we say simply: We will take learning *personally*. Suppose that the learning that we seek forms the person.<sup>4</sup> Then the learning that forms the person is personal. The way of relation would underlie truth. We'd change our way of being when we truly learn. We'd grow up.

Ancient philosophy had a tradition of writing that accomplished the complex, formal goals of philosophy suggested here. One school—the Stoics—called it “the examination of conscience” (Hadot 2002, 198–202). Like a shoot working toward the light, original academics—originally spoken—took this form of writing, moving

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3 Consider Dewey (1916, 142) on this point, remembering Greek gymnastics: “It may seriously be asserted that a chief cause for the remarkable achievements of Greek education was that it was never misled by false notions into an attempted separation of mind and body.” Here, there is a gymnastic insight that a trained mind is habituated like a trained body, a point Thomas Jefferson also held.

4 Happily, many ancient philosophers shared these assumptions. Generally, ancient philosophical schools aimed to train the whole character of people. According to Pierre Hadot, the primary method was “ascetics”—exercises designed specifically to develop virtuous habits in someone (Hadot 2002, 189–90). Wisdom came in the *form* of these “spiritual” exercises, which ranged from gym to dialectical drills and had at their center such things as the examination of conscience (Hadot 2002, *passim*). The most famous written examinations of conscience in the history of philosophy can be found in Seneca's *Letters* and—interestingly—in Descartes's *Meditations* (themselves modeled on Seneca's *Letters*?) (Hadot 2002, 264–65).

from the grove of the Ακαδημία to the orchard beneath the mind.

I am so upset this evening at the university and at myself! The hylomorphs are quiet in the night. I hold these papers in my hands, my neighbor's thoughts washed out by moonlight and carried back under my lamp. Why? Why give them to me, the failed professor? I imagine that under the tree cover and between the slats of porches around the park across the street from my apartment, the hylomorph's cold, green eyes blink.

### **Hylomorph**

"I do not try to change much in the world. But you have to be a decent person if you want to live a decent life. So if I wrong someone, I change my plans and make things good. And I have had some bad habits; I've tried to change them. These reasons are why I think that I am basically responsible.

"But I am confused. There have been times when I tried to do the right thing and had no idea what that is. Like ligament and bone, two things I thought I had to do pulled against each other. I'd want to protect my friend from pain but know I had to respect his freedom. These kinds of tensions are normal. Maybe some strain remains, but it fades after some weeks as we work through the consequences. This is not really confusion.

"Recently, I've encountered something different. I do not know what to do at all. I feel that something is wrong. My heart is bothered in the way that a series of hot nights build up slowly stripping away sleep, making me a little more, and then some more, irritable. I feel I have a mosquito buzzing around me, waking me up when I drift off. The mosquito is so small that while it keeps me dimly awake, it does not make me sit upright and deal with it. I feel edgy.

“Today I decided to deal with this junk building up in my body and gradually scattering my mind. I have time. It’s the weekend, and my kids are gone for a funny dad day with my husband. (I’m the *serious* dad.) The church a few blocks away just sounded ten A.M. It’s early June. A fan keeps me cool. I am going to do something I learned from the Jesuits. I am going to write for discernment. The technique goes back to Seneca.

“I want to make some progress figuring out what I am supposed to do. I am going to try to quiet my mind in decision.

“I turned off my computer. My phone is set only to let through my husband. I do not need to fix something around the house that doesn’t need fixing. The run can wait. So can the Internet. I want to shift things *in* me now.”

• \* \*

“What bothers me came in flashes—not new flashes, but antiseptic stories buried deep in the science section. Like far off lightning hidden high up behind the clouds, I knew something was there but did not focus on it. Oddly, these stories lit up something in my chest and stomach momentarily and then overlaid each other until a residual feeling kept. I came across them trawling the Internet, scanning magazines lying around the office, or in snippets of talk before lunch arrives and between the weather and sports: “hey, did you hear?” And I picked up one of my daughter’s course books when she was home for Spring break. The author—a professor at New York University—wrote:

Many biologists believe that the sixth major wave of extinction since life began is now occurring, and that this one, unlike the other five, is being caused by human action (Jamieson 2008, 6).

“My mind has been on mass extinction. I feel that we are undermining our home. I don’t want to exaggerate. At the same time, I do not like to think of humans as ultimately destructive. Mass extinction seems to point to our basic destructiveness. This reminds me of original sin all over again, but I left the church years ago in part because of the doctrine of sin. I believe that we can change the social world to protect our Earth inheritance.

“Over the last months, I did some amateur research and found that there is a range of estimates for the number of species that will go extinct during this century. Neither end of the range leaves me comfortable. The worst estimates say the planet will become like Mars with only 200 million *humans* left on it. That is insane. In such a scenario, most of our inherited life on Earth will have been wiped out, mostly due to climate change. I don’t trust these predictions — not because our technology couldn’t wipe us out, but because one thing I learned in my science classes was that there is a lot of uncertainty when we get to the level of the planet. Science is neither certain nor unstable.

“A more moderate estimate by a celebrated biologist at my nation’s oldest and most renowned university suggests 25% species loss over this century. Then there is a much-cited United Nations report from 2002 predicting that 25% of the world’s mammals will be extinct by 2032. And there are dire things to say about other kinds of species, too. One report discussed in *National Geographic* in 2004 put 1,000,000 kinds of land plants and animals extinct by 2050 due to global warming. Finally, on a more cautious note, I have heard of 20% of all species at “increased risk” of extinction over this century if the planet warms as it has over the past 50 years. But these old figures are superceded and adjusted all the time, almost always for the cautious worse.

“The general picture is clear, and it troubles me. There is a trend. Sometimes it grows less alarmist and

sometimes not, but its conclusions come through with increasing clarity. It goes like this: *we as a species* are pushing out of existence the species that came with us into our geological era, our inherited home. We have colonized the living world and squeezed out whatever we do not use in our system. We have off-loaded our waste, our unseen form of life, onto other lives — and we are killing as we do.

“The respected biologist thinks that we will lose at least a quarter of all life forms throughout this century. That is staggering. All I have to do is go outside or look through my window and imagine that out of every four varieties of plants, insects, birds, and the occasional mammal I see, one will no longer be found on Earth by the time the grandchildren of my grandchildren see the light of day. Certainly as I have read, many of the species that will go extinct include odd forms of life I never see: strange insects and remote salamanders — even things no human eye can see. But that doesn't help. I find these beings fascinating and part of life. Who am I to play God and say that they are worthless? We all came out of this stuff; we are all in some — very — extenuated sense kin; we are all part of a process so vast and ancient as to exceed human imagination. The least I can do is be amazed.

“I think about these things, looking at my hands paused over this paper, and the day becomes strange. A car rolls down the street, techno out its windows. My neighbor experiments with his electric clipper. Dogs bark. The lawn of my backyard is flat, green, and uniform to the eye, and I am erasing with my mind's eye one out of every four species.

“As I look into the thick, green texture of summer here in Central New York, instead of the four kinds of leaves I see, there might be only three found on this planet at century's end. Which one goes? All of them are pleasing to the eye and fascinating to look at more closely. And they overlap each other on this lush, summer day. I want

my children to see them. We can study them together and make comparisons.

“Of course my subtraction doesn’t make sense. Species don’t disappear in strict proportion. I’ve learned that species loss occurs mostly in ‘biodiversity hot spots’—areas such as coral reefs or tropical rainforests where life-forms co-exist densely. Also, I’ve learned that mass extinction will not work as proportionally as I’ve imagined due to the way that in mass extinctions, entire ecosystems disintegrate. Syracuse may not be affected so severely, whereas biodiversity hotspots around coral reefs already are. People at the United Nations talk about ‘uneven development.’ Ecologists should talk about ‘uneven extinction.’ A sizable chunk of estimated extinction concerns insects, amphibians, and so forth—‘ugly beings.’ I am showing my ignorance when I subtract species from my backyard. My backyard is already species poor compared to a wetland.

“As I did my research a little bit better, I found out that we *cannot* know for sure whether we are in a mass extinction. Even my favorite museum in New York State, the Museum of the Earth in Ithaca, got this wrong. The celebrated biologist at Harvard is an alarmist. Mass species extinction developed with paleontology and was understood through evidence from the fossil beds of former seas and oceans. There, water creatures with shells hard enough to fossilize left their mark and then disappeared from one thousand years to the next. To call something a ‘mass’ extinction implies a marked disappearance of ‘durably skeletonized sea creatures’ well above the ‘background rate’ of normal extinction. But the alarm currently being sounded comes from other kinds of evidence. We haven’t had time to see a new fossil record emerge! So we can’t know whether we are in a mass extinction.

“But this indeterminacy does not help. I am trying to imagine something unimaginable. Take the songs of birds I hear nearby. One of my favorites is the cooing of

wood doves. Will it go? Climate change throws off the hatching cycles of birds and insects, sometimes making it harder for birds to find the insects they need. Also, without birds and insects, much of life comes to a halt. Plants aren't pollinated as readily. And on the back of plants, so much life rests. What will protect the dove, or any of these sounds that remind me I am part of the vast process of life and shouldn't be self-absorbed? What will make me human by taking me out of the human?

"Should it matter whether my favorite species are still around if we humans have been massively destructive? And is it *fair* to pin this issue on our *species*? Isn't the problem my industrial civilization, my shortsighted, industrial economy? Why, too, think of these things as *mine*? Also, the fact that I have such ignorance about ecology—and that my society has even more—this bothers me. I am not representing things well. My science is a jumble. It is like I do not know or care for my home.

"I think these things. But I am unclear about what I should do. I don't hear the people on TV or around me at work talking about the unknowable risk of mass extinction—not beyond the brief blurb or casual remark by someone who picked up Kolbert's book. Extinctions weren't an item of politics in the 2008 or 2012 presidential election—and good luck for the 2016! There's a disconnection. My society is off. There are only 10,000,000 recorded species, but apparently countless more unrecorded. One weekend naturalist I ran into at a dinner party told me recently he'd read that there are as many as ten times more. Even if we lead a quarter of the known species to extinction, that is over two million species killed. I do not know how to think about this. I do not know my responsibilities here. I do not hear people discussing these problems in everyday life.

"Life flows about me in a wave. I love being part of it. But I feel that I am in a dream. Is this life we're living in the United States of America the anti-life?"

• \* \*

“My hands are tired. I sat on the porch for a while. It’s afternoon. I realized that I am writing this for you, Amina and Rasaan. You are my kids. I love you.

“As I’ve read, the main causes of extinction come from our population growth, transportation, consumption: mining and logging, fishing and monoculture, clear-cutting and real estate development. Then there is climate change, ocean acidification, nitrogen run off, increased UV radiation from depleted ozone. As we reach 9,000,000,000 by mid-century and continue an industrial form of life in a poorly politicized capitalist economy, our effects spread into every nook and cranny, depth and shoal of planet Earth.

“Yet a good portion of people hold life to be sacred, rare, respect-worthy, magnificent, or wonderful. We school our kids in it. For instance, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus all agree that non-human life is worthy of reverence. The indigenous nations of this state—the ‘People of the Longhouse’—are *grounded* in it. Reverence for life would appear to be justified to a large portion of humankind. So the duty to treat life decently is certainly *known*. What are we doing then?

“When I think about these things, I feel drained. My morality and my life do not connect. Am I just selfish? Is this how my society raised me?

“But I know that we do care, and I am not going to personalize the problem this way. People are roughly conscientious, and I take pains to do the right thing. So where does the problem lie? I am not wicked. But I am part of what’s wiping out so many processes of life.”

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“When I look at the life-processes we call ‘species,’ I realize that there is a moral split between species and individual living beings. It’s like thought goes in different

directions. The individual life calls out for the attention that anything living deserves, while the species elicits something different—awe. Here is a process patterning over generations, slowly changing, then one day fading from time.

“Suppose a living being crossed my path, a kind I’ve never seen. It has a strange set of traits. Its skin is as smooth as a worm, but it has legs. They are soft and malleable, unlike an insect’s legs. In addition, it has a coloration unlike any worm or millipede I have ever seen. I am so surprised that I take a picture with my cell phone.

“At the same time, this thing is going to get smashed on the sidewalk. I am not the kind of person who leads an ant outside the house when I find it inside, and maybe it’s better for this weird thing if only those members who don’t walk on sidewalks survive! But still. I think twice before going on my way. In this case, I don’t see why I shouldn’t usher it off the sidewalk. I don’t think it is the kind of thing evolution will help *not* walk across sidewalks. The sidewalks are our obstacle here. Too much thinking. I lead it off with a twig to which it attaches.

“I have a friend a few blocks away. He’s a weekend naturalist who is also a philosophy professor. He moonlights in entomology and knows scientists. Imagine he showed the picture I took around to colleagues, and imagine it seems I saw a mutant, what people a thousand years ago called a *monstrum*—an individual without a species. Does this mutant being species-less make it any less respect-worthy?

“I do not think so. If anything, its uniqueness calls for more consideration.

“As Spinoza said, every living being has its *conatus*, its drive to be. Why should I overlook the striving individual when the universal kind—the species—is abstract?

“Then what of species? The species is an abstraction. It’s even a biological convention. Species are rough placeholders of an organizational process happening between

ecologies and individuals through genetic lineages over millions of years.

“Could we say, then, that my concern for individuals involves *justice* — an attention *to* them — but my concern for species involves *wisdom*, an awareness *of* what matters? Take this geological process, ‘life.’ On our planet, it arose — seemingly singular of chemical events. Order constellated over millions of years — biochemical systems and evolving rules of life as my philosopher friend describes them. There were crashes in the system, mass extinctions a hundred million years apart for various reasons, and then life redoubled in their wake. Life is fecund as our planet is. All human beings are just a moment in its time. Here is a moral feeling — why?”

“I am bothered by two things. I am bothered by our unintentionally and thoughtlessly killing — our civilization a ‘maelstrom of killing’ as this guy Rolston wrote. And then, I am bothered by the *scale* of extinction — an *industrial* scale even — by the way we have managed to jar the planet, interrupt its flow, shift geology itself. Yes, it is either alarmist or inaccurate to claim we are in a mass extinction, but we *are* doing massive things, things that on a smaller scale would concern me, but which on an industrial scale unnerve and trouble me.”

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“It is late afternoon, and I am just getting to the core. I have read arguments claiming widespread species extinction is bad because of what we might lose when losing species. Suppose a species provides the future cure to cancer, but we make it extinct now. Therefore, we should protect species from going extinct in order to protect potential but at present unknown benefits to humankind.

“But this argument’s reasoning can be used against it. Any species *could* be useful to us at a later point in time. Yet protecting a species might block the way for

new species to come into their own, and the new species might just as easily help us, even better than the ones we protect.

“The deeper problem is that these kinds of debates do not grasp the gravity of a true mass extinction cascade. One scientist I talked with at the Smithsonian when I visited there last year said matter of factly that if a true mass extinction cascade begins, first, we won’t know it until it is too late, and second, the human species is almost certainly doomed. He wasn’t alarmist in tone. He said that the rules of life are so profoundly rearranged during periods of mass extinction that you cannot expect the ecological order on which species depend—especially dominant ones—to remain stable.

“Should we be debating our self-destruction?! But even if we are not yet in a mass extinction, not yet lost, I am concerned with how we are *being*, not just what we are *causing*. Saying extinction is bad because of what we might lose doesn’t get at what our actions say about *us*. *Our* obliviousness to what we cause, including our potential self-destruction, including our moral relations with species and living individuals—*that* obliviousness is also a problem! We should not be oblivious to abuse. After all, if species can be useful to us, it doesn’t matter whether we put them at risk or something else does. The risk is bad all the same. But there is a moral dimension to what *we* are doing that is different than the risk caused by mass extinction—from us or from a meteor strike.

“I do think that if half of the world’s species go extinct, it will hurt us. I believe that it will destroy us over a long, slow death increased by wars over what is left. The United Nations Environmental Program predicted in 2007 that by mid-century, we will see 150,000,000 people fleeing environmental problems in the world. These refugees will suffer, and the political and economic instability they are likely to cause will expand the circle of suffering beyond them. Where do you go when there’s no more livelihood or food? Whenever there is massive

species loss in the history of life, a point comes where food chains and then whole ecosystems collapse. This kind of collapse—what ecologists call ‘trophic level collapse’—is risky for us depending on how widespread it is. Think of our imminently deserted oceans. The UNEP report was focused on climate change—and so rising oceans and desertification—but you just have to iterate the problem out with a mass extinction cascade to imagine how bad things could become.

“Yet even if these warnings end up being alarmist, even if we head off the worst that we could do to ourselves, what bothers me is what we *are* doing to other forms of life, not just to ourselves. The beetles and bees, the microscopic lives in the sea, the many plants and birds—I am in awe of them whenever I stop to look closely.

“Friends have told me to stop being sentimental. They say it is ironically egocentric. They say that the narrowing of life’s lushness now leaves room for future life, for life-blooms then. Just as we emerged out of the shadow of extinct dinosaurs, so a mass extinction would clear the way for future development, for *new lushness!* There will be *new awesome beings* in another ten million years. What we do to life on Earth is insignificant from the standpoint of geological time unless we destroy the Earth itself. *Life keeps going!* If form gives way to form, devastation shouldn’t bother me. I should get over it.

“Is it just that I am attached to this world, to my species, to what has come to be? It seems arbitrary to hang the protection of species on what I happen to like, even deeply. Am I simply being selfish for the sake of my kids? Yet I am *bothered* by the scale of our destruction, and that destruction takes in countless species of which I do not even know, much less feel attachment.

“I am bothered by what all this says about *us*, about *my* society, and so about *me* as a part of it.”

“A thought occurred to me while writing. My speaking of ‘us’ is problematic. Who is this ‘us’? Your dad is African American, and I am Irish American. There are many indigenous people in this land—right here in Onondaga country—who do not deserve in any way to be part of this ‘us’ that is being cited as clueless in my writing today. Onondaga society is structured by a different kind of thinking that is mindful of future generations and has space in it to discuss mass extinction much more thoroughly than the United States of America, which colonized—and still colonizes—the Onondaga Nation and its sacred lake. We see this lake, ringed by private property, a mall, remnants of the industrial economy that polluted it. That’s ‘us.’

“Even your funny dad would have a different viewpoint, because to be black in the United States of America is to see how domination’s disrespect for lives works. I need to get to the bottom of something bothering me in the mainstream culture of my society’s economy and politics.”

• \* \*

“I haven’t solved my problem, and I haven’t dissolved it either. I don’t have a clear conscience. When I try to turn to the species themselves and find a reason why they ought to be part of my reverence for life, counterexamples muddy the stream of my reasoning and prove that I do not have a sound position for revering species just as they are over future ones. I feel that my instinct to protect them comes down to my attachment to them, and yet I also know that my conscience suggests that I am doing a moral wrong—not simply a denial of my preferences—by participating in the cause of the increased rate of extinction on our planet. I feel groundless, and yet worry I am being unreal, misguided by abstract reasoning away from what any decent person would see looking at the scale of destruction we are slowly causing.

“So I am going to forget dinner and push on. You kids and your dad are still out having fun. Maybe I can be a little lighter by the time you all get home.

“What would a decent person see looking at the civilization I am in causing so much extinction around the planet? The speciation process is indistinguishable from the history of life. It is astonishing. Just there, on its surface, it thus deserves some respect. What kind?

“Decent people do not destroy thoughtlessly. They are not what we would call ‘destructive’ people, even if they at times have to take or destroy for well thought-out reasons. I think decent people would approach the loss of species through the prism of a vast, inherited order bearing the work of countless past human lives and bundled together through the ecological transformations of countless species that have evolved alongside us *humans*. I think this awareness of a vast, inherited order would allow decent people to grasp the gravity of species loss as it is currently happening.

“Countless species and the work they have done to create their environments form the historical and ecological order of the world as we’ve inherited it, an inheritance also inseparable from the vast amount of human labor it has taken to find a way to make a home on Earth, to develop agriculture, to figure out how to interact with the planet and its species. It’s not that everything we have inherited is perfect—or even good. Some things are awful—and life is largely inhuman, often cruel, and certainly indifferent in countless ways. But we have a fairly stable and workable world, an environment we can call ‘home,’ because we have not destroyed it but have rather *integrated* it with our flourishing in imperfect but some powerfully good ways, too. It’s *this* order that my civilization is playing with, risking an ecological collapse through the loss of species.

“I have an intuitive respect for order, unless good reasons apply to change it. Not only is living order more complex than what our best science can yet fathom,

living order is an especially wonderful thing *on the whole*. I don't know how to think of home or humankind without some awareness and gratefulness for it, including the order of species that have co-evolved with us. It's not just that this order is *useful* to us. It's that *humankind* is bound up with it and has made a home in it. In this way, the species around us are more like our kin than our objects. But my civilization seems to treat them as objects to be used up or as things that can be disregarded, like gravel on the side of its road.

"Being of this vast order myself, I feel moved by it as one moved by distant kin. The mass extinction of species is not simply a *reduction* of life as we know it. It is the *destruction* of our hard-won and hard-worked *home*. When we lose many forms of life, we lose their interrelationships, which make up the order we've inherited and on which many forms of life depend. We lose the efforts of living history that have profoundly shaped who we are. We undermine our own ancestors' having worked so hard to make a home in this world. In other words, we destroy the *quality* of life, not just its quantity. We are like descendants who dance on the graves of our parents by dancing on the graves of species.

"As I've said, there may be reasons to think that the species themselves that we render extinct might be balanced in some sense by future species that will evolve, that a new kind of sound will coalesce millions of years from now. Yet we are not presently considering the loss and the intervening silence. We are not discussing the loss of history, losses in the macro-order of life. We risk dead seas, deserts, and silent Springs—a world that is so unstable it is hard to know how to consider it except with dread. A decent person would therefore see that we in the United States of America—and in the global economy more generally—are *chaotic*. It's our thoughtlessness about all this that is most troubling. We thoughtlessly destroy an order we are lucky to have worked well to *inhabit*, and do so without a whimper.

“What does it mean to be a *destroyer*? It has taken millions and millions of years for the world of life as we know it to evolve, and in the last tens of thousands of years humankind has worked unimaginably hard and long to fashion a home in the world, to pass on wisdom about how to do so mostly through practices and technology. The forms we have inherited—including our own—are survivors of chance, ‘momentary cosmic accidents’ as Stephen J. Gould wrote. And we are also hard workers who have made the Earth *together*—not just us alone, but the order of life around us, with us, and *within* us, too. Even so, we hardly understand how this order of life fits together. We learn more about it every day, and we have more to *remember* about how our ancestors and fellow nations have learned about it, too. This vast order of life currently threatened by the risk of mass extinction is beyond anything we have ever created. We should show some *reverence*.

Reverence is awareness of human limits....You’re in the grip of something vaster than you are (Neiman 2008, 232–35).

“I read that long ago—it was recommended in the *New York Review of Books*. It describes what strikes me as a decent attitude: awe and humility before the complexity of life and the sheer *effort* it has taken for us to get here. That this order has come about both by chance and by unimaginable work is even more reverence-worthy. So at the least, hurtling thoughtlessly toward—even the risk of—the sixth mass extinction is wrong, because it is irreverent—of *the life out there* and of *us*.

“Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that conscience is the love of order, understood by him as a kind of hard won harmony of practice. Irreverence is seen in how we unintentionally tear apart, hard-won, fortunate order. It is shown in not really talking about and deciding together what we are doing, what should be changed, what can

be lost, and what should be kept, including kept off limits. These omissions show a flawed, societal conscience. We're not taking things in.

“Order that

feels  
 stirs  
 moves  
 breathes  
 swims  
 flies  
 grows  
 spreads  
 reproduces  
 blooms  
 drifts  
 becomes  
 labors  
 stabilizes  
 considers  
 interacts

...

“If a species led to the death of much human life, there would be a reason to render it extinct. If, collectively, we have good reasons to change our environment, we have good reasons—but are they good enough to respect our fellow humans on Earth? There is a big difference between this kind of justified, deliberate destruction and chaotic, thoughtless destruction. Our public sphere has almost no serious discussion of what we are doing, and there is very little awareness of the extent of the spread of extinction. My point is precise: thoughtless, *without a thought*.

“Especially since the industrial revolution began, in the space of only two hundred years, some societies have managed to set in motion a massive rending of our world's fortunate order. They (we) have done this on the backs of other, colonized societies, and without regard

for what most of the world thinks. Even if I can't argue that each living species today has a reason that it must be preserved, and even if chance will absorb our destructiveness in its branching proliferation of time, the way we in my nation are acting legitimately bothers me. It is shocking behavior, the kind I would never permit you or myself. Too much is at stake, we know too little about what we are doing, and we haven't stopped to think *together*.

"The manner of our living, the way we are heading into the unknown area where even serious scientists start shouting 'mass extinction!'—that is the problem. The thoughtlessness of how we act displays obtuseness to something meaningful in so many ways.

"Early this morning, I wrote that most people are conscientious and that most have reverence for life. Now I see how the problem goes deeper. We in the United States of America are acting chaotically. Our convictions and our behavior disconnect. But responsible people do not act this way. We shouldn't believe one thing in our hearts, then contradict it.

"If the problem is a failure of responsibility itself, the problem is located *behind* conscience, before we ever listen to it or think that we do. We have, first, to be in the habit of stopping and thinking for conscience to guide us. We have to be in the habit of listening to conscience. Irresponsibility undercuts both habits. Irresponsible, we're not in a position for having conscience. And when it comes to alarms about the sixth mass extinction—or simply widespread, planetary extinction—we show that we're in no such position. We have not stopped to think, not as a people, and nowhere in the capitalist global economy where I've lived. I am beginning to revise my view that we're conscientious, because I don't think we appear to be in a position to *be* conscientious. But that is an even worse kind of socially organized irresponsibility.

“Where is the source of the chaos I’ve been feeling these past weeks? I think the root disconnection is between effect and cause. Consequences matter when they convert our actions into something we don’t want them to be. The effect is widespread extinction, and we in this global economy are the cause, *because we support this economy, because we support the business as usual of the United States of America and many other nations*. But we are not owning up to the effect, taking it as our own, because the effect emerges from all of us in poorly organized society. We are acting as if we were not acting. Though the rumors of our effects have been in major media sources now for over a decade, we do not hear them and then go to confirm or to disconfirm them. Practically speaking, they do not matter to us, for as a Russian philosopher wrote (your dad had a t-shirt with this on it when I met him):

Do not listen to what they say — look at what they do!

—Vladimir Jankélevitch

“Alerted to the effects of our actions, until recently, I did not bother to find out if the rumors are true. I did not think I was causing anything, even by *supporting* something off. I did not have time. And politics is so difficult and so filled with corruption.

“But decent people resist. I’ve been mindlessly contributing to a society that destroys the vast order that our ancestors made into our home. This society shows little thought collectively, does not even attempt a deep discussion and qualified justification. Its idiots and moguls enter the elections, but *we* have to change this.”

## Aporia

“What a good sleep follows the examination of one’s own self! How tranquil, deep, and free it is, when the mind has been praised or warned, and has become the observer and secret judge of its own morals!”

—Seneca 1995; in Latin, III, 36, 1–3

Will *I* sleep tonight? I feel like a fraud. See: Non-academics do think — while I’m complaining about students who are legitimately scared. Should this come as a surprise, king? His exercise is not rhetoric, while mine often is. His goal is living itself. He is thinking about his kids.

I’m not thinking. But I should be: about the *form of questioning*. Hylomorphic, questioning that seeks know-how and reconnection is different than questioning seeking only knowledge. *The living person* thinks, rather than simply the intellect. *The living person* thinks.<sup>5</sup>

I could put it this way: the important thing is not just to make a person *think*, but to make sure that the *person* thinks.<sup>6</sup>

There is a world of difference between thinking about a detached intellectual problem that does not emanate from our hearts and an intellectual problem growing from disquiet deep in the chest, if I may put it like that.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Cf. “No longer are my intimate impressions ‘personal’ in the sense that they are ‘merely mine’ or ‘subjective only’: they are footprints of hyperobjects, distorted as they always must by the entity in which they make their mark—that is, me” (Morton 2013, 5).

6 I remember here bell hooks (1994), whose story of how classrooms compartmentalize ourselves *within* ourselves struck me.

7 One might object that a neurotic theoretician can feel heart-felt disquiet at a purely intellectual problem with no clear relation to wisdom. True, but I would say that he is approaching the problem philosophically, although making a mistake. He *thinks* his problem makes or breaks the world. Protecting the world is a good motive, but he is mistaken that his problem actually does that.

My neighbor's exercise came from—and seemed to orbit—heartfelt disquiet. That is its form of questioning. In so doing, his exercise made sure his reflection brought in his whole existence,<sup>8</sup> rather than just some part of it that can easily be compartmentalized as an intellectual pursuit and forgotten. But by bringing in his whole existence, he was *already* seeking practical and relational wisdom, whereas my so-called “academic work” appealing just to our intellects does not imply seeking any kind of knowledge of how to live. Existential connection is then key.<sup>9</sup>

Theory can have a practical effect on a person. But it is another thing to take theory in such a way that it has a practical *point* and a personal *connection*. That is what taking theory ethically—thinking out of an existential connection—does. Sometimes it's good to take things personally. If in philosophy the point of theory is living, taking theory personally is a requisite for using knowledge to become more human.

So the point of the exercise was in the writing, not in the reading. The ancients shared their spiritual exercises to spur each other to do their own. Keep your own notebook, said Plutarch. A reader can take most anything ethically, but in making the distinctions I have, I have focused on what the writing seems to do. It had a

---

8 An existence that seeks some view of the good. See Aristotle (1999, 1095b15–17).

9 This is a point Kierkegaard understood well (1988, 1983), making his writing far more fitting for virtue ethics than most virtue theory. He called his style “upbuilding”. See especially *Either/Or* (1843), vol. 2, “A final ultimatum”, where the style was first attempted. Also, note especially his invocation of the heart's disquiet in his most mature and elegant work, esp. *The Sickness unto Death* (1848), preface. Kierkegaard learned to write either from disquiet or from love. In either case, he wrote from conscience. Whatever the merits of his theology, his understanding of the *point* of virtue ethics, like Nietzsche's, is unparalleled today.

Again, see hooks (1994), too, on the role of *personal emotions* in the classroom space.

transformative point. If the writing aims, then, at wisdom itself, it proves that aim in the form of questioning. Thus, these pages from my neighbor are a different kind of thing than, say, a science textbook taken ethically by a reader or that same textbook happening to have an unintended ethical effect on a reader. They are deliberate work on his life in society.

Oh god, maybe I can go to sleep.



3 /

I

WAS

IN

THE

O P E N

THEN

*Moth-eaten time capsule  
for the far future*

1.

# Immed

The moon is in the gutter.  
—Nick Cave

iate<sub>task</sub>

or third or fifth or seven thousand  
arc coughing litany and void

wavelength of a storm in thunder

with hold

this process. In the dust room above the corner of  
53rd & Kimbark,  
it's summer, sleeveless, wet.

[...] auma in a room of notes  
*Acanemic hylomorph, industrial arm*

At 19,

Herr Stern sketched while  
a hunter in the sky with belts  
sang cave-light symphony of the Holocene.

At 40, I held the letter they sent in my hands.

\*

Lars' tape came in 1998,  
four years before defense.

I had no way to include '89

that fresh, open time

when the Norwegians mixed

their three hundred year bent streets with gone, drunk  
legs

at Big Benneth's clock & barre.

Gothic polyp of dyed black hair  
& Max Von Sydow's intelligent dying lit Julie Delpie at a  
distance.

Tarry & *Traum*, they gesticulated mildly  
and fretted

Tarkovsky the ceiling round

the wavelength of a storm,

later alight over the bridge I crossed daily on clouded  
water.

I didn't know how to include, and so, I write this  
now.

\*

*Earth thought 66 of 365:* “All one needs is a system. Once a day to do some small thing: fill a glass of water from the tap. Flush it down the toilet, only that. The world would have to change.”

\*

*Earth thought 27 of 365:* I need a voice that isn't philosophical and isn't poetic. Which isn't religion. Which is experiment. At the pace of Earth time, with the part of us that isn't destructive or blind.

\*

*I need to tell you why I writ this thing.*

A pall — in air — strained, we carried  
branch and bronze.

Years of frost.

The first things are fresh weather.

Slowly heard and cavernous –  
their history scratches out chalk,  
*tic, tic.* The kid-bearing Summer,  
the kick.

Century's early, crawler.

Supper's late, *bawd*.

Open-end the cry & never ever-  
*stop.*

*I stood on the floor, the rain of Europe behind me.*

Who

wept as you walked through Paris?

Only Beckett heard  
 your sky-zinc slouch, the reflections along the bar in a  
     room of sweating men.  
 I was nineteen; you were Folio,  
 a pocket-book bought on the ark of dying animals.

*Cloud tasting souls of cinder.*  
*Ash in the stones along the shore.*

With St. Sebastian, we cracked the spine. Was  
 that his name? I sat near the spire, silent near noon and  
     waves of air flowed from the clock. Street, knock,  
     Nick  
 Cadavrous:

*Pigeon dripped from vine.*  
*His dirty beard soaked in time.*

With that bum I red — a stranger thing. I *lift your hands*  
     *and sing*  
*together. We loved* the elements  
     or tossed hair,  
 sunlight in busses, the forgetful café  
     with plastic seats.

A car gear-shafted patiently, &  
     you poured out, and  
 out, you poured  
     wholly out  
 the wavelength of a storm, all

\*

*Euphoria*

Three days past tenure, I  
 started hearing drone. The  
 main was bad shoegaze  
     from the globalized nineties.

Lars sent  
 phylogeny as high art was Nan Goldin.  
 Mine energy was spentlet

me tell youlet  
 announcements fade.

*O there is nothing like dozing in a mystical city.*

6 A.M.

On mixed tapes from my last four years to defense,  
 I'd often place the song near  
     The End. Farther,

blue room and clouded time.

*historia.* My

[...]

\*

*Earth thought 3 of 365:* We have a right. But this morning  
 like last night, I have no idea where to turn to find the  
 world beside me as it should be. Or it should be of each  
 and every one of us.

\*

Only industry has grown and human population.

Or Earth's tense coil, the why that doesn't  
drift aimlessly for those who sense it.

Of course, no, I can't be right. "Transcendence,"  
floats. Behind all signs, life declines.

My room was narrow, heat-knicked, and long.

Almost nothing in the fridge. Iced coffee in a  
condiment jar.

and summer again.

|                     |       |
|---------------------|-------|
| Endlessly footnotes | mote  |
| on waves of         | sound |

beat box cars shaft gear so patiently, say:

*Small peas  
made from sugar bees*

*nursery tease*

*of my last memory.*

\*

*Earth thought 65:* Individualism in the 70s made the  
world inside the rage, while around us all, industry  
spewed junk into the

sky.

2.

*Histo*

# *ria*

*Child of the '70s*

Feathered hair and flesh on hand,  
'77 was hot. I was a kid, but  
you could sift evaporated  
care.

Corvettes swooned a teen-age back  
unconscious in the sheets. If  
troops sinned, weather-  
men underground. Way  
gay love on the side.

All blocks, tall cities  
popped corn to Skywalker drops.

Or ozone made a hole inside  
our kind, releasing  
mental night. Rococo  
Foucault, *so*  
*rock-n-roll*  
trigger. I  
am loud, my  
armpits shag,  
breasts unhassled  
twice.  
And T-shirt company's equal you  
suited corporate ducks.  
So come, boss,  
multi-orgasmic  
you  
friend your partner's last  
(Freud's asked). Our  
bacon days are  
shipped. And  
Anna brings home  
groove in buckets crude  
from oily trips.  
Our hips feverish in her  
neon pants.  
Untethered worlds are lies.  
I cannot believe that sweet  
infinity made linguistic  
tapestry  
travesty. Desire's a  
self-help book.

\*

*Earth thought 126 of 365:* I sat on the floor with students last night, revising their semester-long work. Harried and laughing, once near tears, they tumbled out of industry with barely time to lose. And we post-students are like them with our home improvements and loan accrument, our tasks, competition, dinners. We tumble out of time with barely life to lose.

\*

1945, '50s

A star of death invaded France  
 and engraved the Russian front.  
 History's in ruins. Civilization  
 cries — *on you, on all that I  
 love, on all the old memories.*  
 Fond, long bitterness—  
     my necrophilic bile.  
 The bureaucratic crime has just begun while  
     we were bleeding in  
     the streets of Normandy.  
 Coldness will set in. The winter of  
     our silent killing  
     beneath a planetary hush,  
     dying ocean.  
 And the water of the lapping shores  
     sends soft messages to overseas lovers.  
 We're concussed within our new-made homes,  
 appliances a whirl of light and humming.  
     My temples are drumming in  
     this new-made life. I  
     am so busy, I do not  
     see that I have spent intention.  
 My husband almost died while  
     my father lost his job and

my children will be full with  
 food and images:  
 a new made T.V. set.  
 There is money to be made in our appeasements.  
 There is money to be made in advertisements.  
 I know, Tom  
 told me, if  
 he made it home from work.  
 Things take off.  
 Big times win.  
 And all that we've wanted I've  
 forgot.

\*

*Earth thought 114 of 365*: Moral heroism needs new things.  
 Organizational decision puts the future incrementally  
 at risk. Don't stop a bullet with your body. Unlock the  
 patterns!

\*

*Rachel Carson, early '60s*

The housewives were the first to freak.  
 Birds died everywhere —  
 a carcinogenic binge.  
 War II's crew of industry all-  
 for-profit in  
 the chemical dawn. We  
 didn't know. The silent foe invades our bodies  
 as we slept. It was there  
 in dewy sunrise, calculated on the flowers and  
 the stacks of dying wasps.

Rachel'd had enough. Her breasts undone  
 as they metastasized, she  
 wrote clear messages in *The New York Times*.  
 Spelled "pesticide":  
 "cry."

*Dust the nightstand at a chosen time, and  
 make the lawn a green and uniform expanse –*

Then *your* family.  
 At sunset at dinner, *Tom!*  
 In mailrooms in noon, *Senator!*

We'd never have thought that man has all  
 the means to wreck our order. Once,  
 from blow or chains or hunger it  
 came. A soldier with a bright and steel-hard cask,  
 a nationalist. Or unhinged man alone  
 along the cold, wet streets at night, a  
 threat. But  
 how things change. They  
 slighen in the waning century,  
 are infinitesimal addition born  
 by Tom and Mary, the Senator, the shopper.

\*

*Earth thought 52 of 365: City of homes. Life passes  
 through like utopia. And this city is real, a billion years  
 of strength. The doorway, the species. The species: evo-  
 lution's stream of life. Phylogenetic tapestry. Portal of  
 time.*

But we throw the wavelengths off. Doorways shut. And  
 we close down the city for many million years.

\*

*Paleo-geography, 14,000 years ago*

It is windswept,  
 the forests all a roar of air like oceans  
 as mega-fauna falter  
 spear by axe and  
     hands eat the mastadons,  
 letting the carcasses fade to ground  
 half-done.

Atlats are points of time.

They, they are future.  
 Shaken rod stuck deep in bone, it  
     bled there  
 in the ice-chilled moon

\*

*Dubai, 2008*

I AM HAPPY though I didn't know  
 that beach and sand are served  
 as caviar in a tray that's  
 couched along a bay of ice  
 and bubbled by champagne brunches  
 made accessible to the *hoi polloi*.

Or

those from England, France, and Spain—  
 (while India's mostly off limits) and the Philippines  
 send thin-boned, gentle faces

to take our orders and our shirts.

Sri Lanka's there! China, too! Bangladesh!

And high Nepal.

The workers live together all in six foot rooms, a trunk  
 beneath them

with burners for cheap lentils.  
 “HISTORY RISING” said a sign stretched  
 far across the sea.  
 But time begins to shrink infinitesimally.  
 There’s a loop in  
 this scene and others.  
 I feel frenzied at  
 noon beneath the shade of three tall buildings.

Nightly, soft service girls pull men far out all along the  
 line.  
 They pinch them. By and by, they say:  
 “Take me.”

*Do not*  
*hit me.*

\*

*Earth thought 163 of 365:* Recently, the Alaotra grebe of Madagascar went extinct—another bird kind, an increasing number. The causes are clear—we took their home, moved in new species. Alaotra had nowhere to go, couldn’t cope.

Globalization’s just another name. Globalization is mass

# extinction

●

3.

I was in

the [ • • • ] then.

The macro-perspectives of geological time and of planetary ecology make it hard to keep in view, simultaneously, the human. I look at a book bag I bought alongside my father from Strand Books. On it, profiles of all different sorts of people. The warmth of that memory which goes back to when I was young. Every one of those faces holds different stories.

From within each of our worlds, our loves are so intense, and it would be inhuman to forget them.

\*

*New York, 1989*

Broadway began on 92nd nearby Symphony Space.  
The buildings were a shadow in the street.  
We paused  
    along the median waiting for the sign to blink.  
Charred coffee burns  
    inside paper cups.  
The homeless sift through ashcans seeking  
    stubs and stuff.  
Above, the sky was cloudless, blue, and inside March.

We weren't yet overrun.  
Do you understand?

Windows glowed when the sunlight died.  
Families fit together on the street.

~

1983. I felt the Rothkos in the room.  
Museums are not busy at 3 in the afternoon.  
Outside, Utica was cold with winter.  
Time to go to church and sing.  
There is more to life than what goes on  
beyond the richest family on the block.  
Like this space and song,  
an intimation of people, think.

Along Grace Avenue, snow rolled into slopes before the  
plow.

~

Then, Chicago in the 90s. A blue line at sundown.

Hold yourself to grain where  
light begins to crack apart. A  
wracked, repainted wall, an  
apartment with old heating. I do  
not believe in cheating and the  
market never was.

Everything was inside, nothing to show for it.  
The sounds of marimbas mixed with backbeat  
as ghettoized selves rolled to red octagons.

O — O

there is nothing like living in a genuine city.  
The incognito life is lost on houseplants.  
You steam cylinders with exhibit.  
Innocence is realness with no news flash,  
nor repayment in cash.  
No eternity ever was soundbit.  
But the people, the people are everywhere.

I once crawled down an apartment closely  
owned by a soul.  
She was searching for her way to give.  
In the cold, we went to eat in a rusty bar.  
Locals collected on Saturday and ate vegetarian soup!  
O truth be told, I remember you  
and November.

\*

What I first thought  
when I saw you off—  
the taxi said goodbye.  
I rode on.  
And on — you  
disappeared around  
the block

Your hold in pink-red fabric  
 a dress with roses  
 against your almost blue black hair.  
 When you talked,  
 you were alive,  
 twins inside,  
 your natal glow a mood  
 I could not cast off.

That is why you kept me  
 inside this memory of silence.  
 Seldom do I know  
 how to map existence.  
 Here is a corner in New York  
 where young lovers we once were  
 on the grass of the Munstitute.

You walk out of my life  
 \_\_\_\_\_→ away.

\*

*14th Earth thought of 365:* The look on my parents' faces  
 that night before their 45th wedding anniversary.

Money makes little difference beyond modest means.  
 Status likewise is a joke.

There isn't even pride in contentment. Quiet is the  
 need.

You'd think we'd approach our planet, indeed, through  
 the Significant.

\*

And then there was the translation, looking back.  
 Somewhere still in summer, I rang an old friend on the  
 line.

Cell-less, booted inside a phone,

the sun was old, yellow, alone, the city anticipating  
night.

Not a thing.  
Outside, the street, pavement, quiet.

It doesn't matter.

I was in the open then.

\*

*A wedding, 2009*

... subways, shot, sleeveless, wet ...

kitchens,

tubs,  
sinks,

child-washing,  
news, links  
sprawled  
photos  
bright colored toys, dark

tolls

long halls  
Mom Dad  
basket of

cries.

[adapted from a poem on May 18, 2009  
for Chris' and Mary's wedding]

4.

The psyche **sh**

atters slowly.

*Pink Angels* (Willem de Kooning)

Pieced, lean, inaccurate,  
events derailed time.  
Work is not an engine; know  
that the shape of pink is home.  
Willem stoved a studio  
as sex and Elaine slept.  
Rose and turned when images stay  
aligned in your mind, you wake.  
It took ten years to make  
the psyche shatter slowly.

I, no, you . . . am there.

Beneath us, the senses unbound,  
stalked on splinters, we allied broken with light.

Say what you want — it wasn't confessional.  
The mean and stuff of bodies seldom is.  
————— whether they are souls or limbs —————

\*

*Earth thought 1:* We are individualistic. We have missed it.

\*

*Earth thought:* The child's face in light.

\*

### *Aurora*

The lake open in the afternoon light.  
Tufts of wild down seeded wind-side into air,  
while grass wears a gauze of fine off-white.

We were *becoming-cloud* without anger and evolved.  
Water see-says the shore between lapped elements  
as scales silver bowl beneath green waves upturned.

*Do you see the graduates, long thighs along the dock?  
A boat stops near them, chats or calls. A shell  
catters softly beyond their point. Then  
the wake comes inward and the rocks splash black and wet.*

How could we be without animal order?  
Our shift beyond our border which the Buddhists try  
to make is something true,

where something softer,  
 unspoken  
 gives.

Wind lives as movement,  
 sidles unsuspecting into ours.

Once  
 I lay here at the landing's edge and heard the story of  
 the drowned.

I was struck soundly by the sad, sure truth.

How could some one in such a pure, lost water  
 cross silt to the billowing  
 plume of  
 forgetting?

*Knock.*

The summer day says we should become a festival.

Children splash wild shallows all a ring while spent flies  
 flick their legs on  
 tables.

Cool the clouds  
 blue wavelength of  
 a storm in wondrous  
 hunger.

Now there are voices!  
 carload headed for the leap

*We run too.*

5.31.10  
 Aurora, N.Y.  
*Walt Whitman's birthday*

\*

*Earth thought 131*: See the strata where I once lived,  
underwater, ocean, & strange. Overlays compel in ways  
advertisements do not. Shells don't seduce. They are  
coolish fact.

\*

*The impossible cities party*

Center and non-center. And similarly in  
ecological life.

How we maintain  
stable vision  
is that we bend sense to fit.

In our world,  
and beside it,  
then in yours,  
above.

We should outlive, but we die inside these tasks.  
Dexterities bound our funneled work,  
round and round in Earth.

Across the dusty galaxy, fists  
sky-scraper cranes and the dead,  
dozing, worker's eyes.

Some far-off place  
was spent.  
Dirt-street and florescent shop  
phone-card, plates of rice.

Sympathetic ears save silence.

We talk resistance. Let me be clear.  
This must stop.

\*

Suppose the sixth mass extinction were caused by us. A species is like a poem, but we erase genres. We pile up the library to the *auto-de-fé*.

\*

Then in a dream, I climb  
a stairway behind  
a friend  
whom I used  
to love.  
We  
hit Lex & 51st  
with the open  
life all around.  
That was the  
innocent  
disposition.  
Time, voice & life  
were one.  
How  
to make of  
weeds  
what sidewalks

do.