An Open Letter to Christian Students
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Gregory Maher

Beetle Child
Miho Nonaka

dear lodestar, true north
John Fry

Bekenntnis der Sünden
Jennifer Raha

Junius R. Sloan (1827–1900) was a Midwestern painter who belongs to the stylistic grouping of nineteenth-century American artists known as the Hudson River School, artists who used a realistic approach to capture the grandeur of the American landscape. Sloan's son Percy H. Sloan and his estate gave Valparaiso University more than 275 works by his father, a gift that led to the establishment of an art museum on campus. This particular painting is a study for the much larger canvas currently on display in the Brauer Museum of Art. Both the study and larger piece depict in dramatic fashion a Hudson River landscape that unfolds in deep space and glowing autumn color. The structure on the left is the Catskill Mountain House, at the time a popular tourist destination.

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whatever is **TRUE**
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if anything is excellent or praiseworthy
—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8
**IN LUCE TUA**

*In Thy Light*

**Learning and the Virtues**

The beginning of the school year brings a familiar chore for teachers, revising and updating our course syllabi. As Peter Meilaender notes in his column, “Education for Bureaucracy,” this routine task has, in recent years, been getting more burdensome. While syllabi once were usually fairly concise and straightforward documents, they are getting much longer as new requirements keep getting created. Many of these are easy enough to satisfy. For example, attendance policies and grading schemes must now be spelled out, which most teachers already were doing. We also must notify students of various forms of aid available to them, such as tutoring or disability assistance. I am skeptical that a syllabus is the best way to convey this kind of information to those students who most need it, but there is no harm in including it, so I copy and paste the recommended language and don’t think much about it.

However, one requirement has proven more challenging. We now must specify in our syllabi how specific parts of our courses will help students achieve the Student Learning Objectives, a university-wide set of goals adopted a few years ago and referred to (apparently without irony) as the SLOS. A few of these SLOS cover the kinds of things that students would do in any course, such as demonstrating “content knowledge” and learning to “communicate clearly and effectively.” Others, however, are more ambitious in that they focus on things like becoming “active learners,” learning to “interact and collaborate effectively in groups,” and even cultivating “the virtues of empathy, honesty, and justice.”

So I am left to ponder, what part of my class helps students cultivate empathy? Does that happen during class discussions or pop quizzes? Will reading a particular journal article lead them to practice justice? Like most professors, I don’t much like new rules that make my job harder, but I cannot deny that there is value in taking time to consider what kind of long-term impact my courses might have on students. The end of an education is not simply to learn things; it is to become the kind of person who lives a life of learning. And as Mark Schwehn helped us recognize in *Exiles from Eden* (1993), scholarship is not a solitary pursuit. Universities are communities whose members join together in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding and who also seek to cultivate virtues that are appropriate and necessary to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, virtues like self-discipline, humility, faith, and charity.

This issue of *The Cresset* explores this relationship between learning and the virtues that learning both needs and nurtures. In “Knowledge and Beauty,” Messiah College’s Peter Kerry Powers asks first-year college students to approach their education as a path not to empowerment but to humility, an opportunity to become aware of all they do not know. In “The Imponderability of the Past,” Thomas Albert Howard of Gordon College explores how the study of history cultivates the virtue of prudence as we both learn from the past and recognize the limits of our ability to know it. Harold K. Bush of St. Louis University reviews James K. A. Smith’s *How (Not) to Be Secular* (Eerdmans, 2014), a book that guides readers through the writings of philosopher Charles Taylor and reflects on how to live a life of faith in a post-Christian, secular age. And in “Thinking About Love,” Ian Clausen, a Lilly Fellow at Valparaiso University, demonstrates how Christians can engage in philosophical reflection on the nature of love.

What happens in a university classroom inevitably has much to do with character formation. This does not mean that teachers should act like moral scolds, but that teachers have a responsibility to help students cultivate certain habits and virtues. In our classrooms, students are introduced not just to new ideas, but to new ways of thinking. As important as learning the subject matter is how they learn to engage it and how they learn to engage one another, as members of communities dedicated to the pursuit of learning.

—JPO
Knowledge and Praise
An Open Letter to Christian Students at the Journey’s Beginning

Peter Kerry Powers

I BEGIN WITH A SIMPLE QUESTION FOR THE class of 2018, though it is really a question for all of us: Why higher education? Why are you now in the place where you find yourselves, whether in the great urban universities of New York or Chicago, at my home institution of Messiah College, or perhaps Valparaiso University in Indiana, or in the shadow of mountains at Bennington in Vermont, where my son is attending this fall? Until very recently, a very small percentage of Americans chose to, or even had the opportunity to, attend a college. Only two or three generations ago, the large majority of Americans went to work after high school, or started families, or joined the military. To these generations, the question “Why go to college?” was real and urgent, and people who did so were considered unusual, if not strange. Now, going to college is for many, though certainly not all, nearly as common as owning a cellphone, as natural to our culture as breathing, such that collectively we hardly stop to ask after its purposes in any serious way. At least not until recently. But going to college is not, after all, breathing, and so it can be worth stopping to ask yourselves why now, of all the possibilities you could imagine and conceive, you find yourselves on a college or university campus.

Your specific answers are many. Some of you have moved excitedly into the dorms and are awaiting classes because you want to get a better job, some because your parents made you, some because you are ambitious to learn, some because you had nothing better to do, some because your girlfriend or boyfriend came before you, some because you want to change the world. Most because of some combination and calculus of these various possibilities.

I assume, however, that all of you would say that you are here to get an education. To what end do we pursue this apparently never-ending enterprise? Consider the graduating class of 2015. By May of this year, they will have spent at least seventeen years in formal schooling, counting kindergarten. Many will go to graduate school for two, three, or four years, or even more, which means that many can count on spending more than a quarter of their lives in formal schooling. Counting all my years of graduate school, I spent twenty-five years under the formal designation of “student,” a bit less than half my life to this point. Add to this the truism that we should be life-long learners and we can conclude that education is never-ending. Life is education. To be a human is to be a student.

Moreover, we pursue this lifelong enterprise in a tremendous variety of ways. There are many important ways you are similar to one another, but there are also important differences of gender and culture, of nationality, and a host of other particularities. Not least, you are different in your educational biographies. Many of you attended large public high schools; others, private Christian schools. Many of you were home schooled; others have been educated in other cultures. Few of you will receive your entire college education from the college you now attend. Some of you are traditional transfer students
from other institutions. Others have received college credit from dual-enrollment programs, or have taken summer courses at community colleges. Many of you will study abroad. Some of you are beginning your semester at a traditional four-year college while simultaneously enrolling in an online course at a for-profit university. All of these institutions agree that education is essential, but all speak of education with different languages and achieve it in very different ways. Collectively they underscore rather than answer my question: What is education for? What is your education for?

Like you, I have had a multitude of different educational experiences. I attended a Christian college, and attended both a flagship state university and a private research university for my graduate education. I finished my primary and secondary schooling in the public schools of Oklahoma. My education began, however, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, where my father started a hospital and my mother ran a school for indigenous children in the Wahgi Valley. I completed part of my early schooling via correspondence courses, our very low-tech version of distance learning. Partially home schooled and living on a mission station that had electricity only two hours a day, I had a Lincolnesque beginning in learning to read by candlelight and by the flickering light of a kerosene lamp set on our kitchen table.

My formal education began in a two-room schoolhouse located in the village of Banz, about four miles from our mission station in Kudjip. Every morning, a half-dozen missionary kids loaded into the back of a flatbed truck for the half-hour trek along a rutted dirt road leading to school. Arriving at school, in rainy season and in dry, we stood in ranks by grade, singing “God Save the Queen” as the Australian flag fluttered up the flag pole. Our school divided six grades into two rooms, and initially we had only one teacher, Mr. Garth, who shuttled frantically to and fro between the rooms delivering our lessons as best he could. After a year of this we, and I think especially Mr. Garth, were excited to welcome a second teacher, Mr. R____, who came to teach the lower grades.

At that time, like most colonial schools, the rooms were divided by gender, with boys seated to the teacher’s right and girls seated to the left. To teach vocabulary, Mr. R____ would walk from one side of the room to the other, having all the boys stand or all the girls stand and spell words aloud together. Mr. R____ taught these words in sets of antonyms so that we would better perceive their meaning. Good, bad; black, white; open, closed; and so forth, sometimes pointing to different objects or pictures in the room to reinforce our lessons. One week we were taught the words “ugly” and “beautiful,” and “stupid” and “intelligent.” As was his common practice, Mr. R____ asked all the girls to stand. Then Mr. R____ had all the girls point at themselves, and required them to spell aloud together the word “ugly.” He then had them point together toward him at the front of the room and spell together the word “beautiful.” Mr. R____ then crossed the room and had all the boys, point together at him and spell out the word “intelligent.” Then, on cue, we pointed at ourselves and, chanting in unison, we spelled the word “stupid.”

Mr. R____ didn’t last long at our school, and for the most part I have forgotten every other thing about him.

I should hasten to say that I loved Mr. Garth, an excellent if too-harried teacher, as so many are. He was the first to perceive in me some level of intelligence and the first explicitly to...
encourage me to take learning seriously. I will also say, however, that I have never forgotten how to spell the words "ugly" or "intelligent" or "beautiful" or "stupid." We had received, after a fashion, an education.

Of course, I don't think that what we received from Mr. R even constituted an education in the deepest and most important senses of that word. In his lack of respect for the humanity of his students, he was in many respects the antithesis of Mr. Garth, the antithesis of what teachers are and what they should attempt to do. Nevertheless, as I have reflected on him in the decades since, it has seemed to me that my old teacher had embodied the dark extreme of a common assumption about education, one so deeply ingrained that we unthinkingly assume its virtues: that knowledge primarily concerns a quest for power.

So far as we know, the aphorism, "knowledge is power," was articulated first in modern Western history by the scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon, but the idea itself is much older. It is also common in pop culture, stretching from the old School House Rock jingles to the Star Wars movies. A Google search conjures images of Superman and other superheroes that adorn posters designed for elementary schools, the phrase "Knowledge is Power" splashed in bold captions beneath bulging muscles. These superheroes sometimes carry books as they fly through the air, flexing their muscles as they go, as if reading builds slow-twitch fibers.

The idea that knowledge is about self-empowerment is very much a part of the enterprise of higher education. It is found in the notion that we primarily get an education to get a job, pursue a profession, and be financially successful. Knowledge means a job, which means money, which means power. This is the rhetoric of our politics. Presidents from Eisenhower to Obama have argued for strengthening education, believing that knowledge is the engine of our economy, and that a strong economy is at the root of national power. Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, our political leaders have all essentially agreed with the sentiment that education will ensure that American children will continue to lead the world, that the United States, through education, will remain a global power.

The connection between knowledge and power is also found in scholarly traditions that seem far removed from business or the American political scene. In Plato's allegory of the cave, in Enlightenment idealizations of Reason, and in the many diverse traditions of the liberal arts and sciences, the pursuit of truth through philosophy or science is thought to empower us to free ourselves from mists of ignorance and falsehood. A good thing, an ideal to embrace.

Nevertheless, the desire to understand the world has very often been driven by the desire to control it. In Toni Morrison's great novel Beloved, the main character Sethe discovers, to her consternation and finally to her horror, that the slave master sees her and her children as specimens to be studied; the quest to know about others was continuous with the effort to enslave them. Plato believed that philosophers should discover and understand the truth. He also believed that philosophers should be kings.

A cartoon that I hung on my office door captures this general sentiment about the purposes of knowledge. A father, in the posture of elder sage imparting wisdom, tells his son matter-of-factly: "Knowledge is power.... The power to make other people feel stupid." A lesson, I think, that my old teacher in New Guinea had learned well. I hung this cartoon on my door to remind myself of the temptations of false knowledge. The temptation of false knowledge—whether you are pursuing your education to become a CEO or to understand the mind-bending complexities of theoretical physics—is to imagine others as lesser than yourself. The Greek philosopher Aristotle is said to have asserted, "Educated men are as much superior to uneducated men as the living are to the dead." One does not get much more superior in one's own mind than that.

To recognize this temptation is not to reject the fact that education is empowering; nor is it
to suggest, if you are attending college in part because you want a better job or because you want to “improve” yourself, that you’ve come for the wrong reasons. If it is possible for us to seek knowledge in order to enrich ourselves at the expense of others, it hardly follows that poverty and dependency are ideals. It is still a good thing, as the adage goes, to teach a man to fish. Nor, frankly, should the fact that false knowledge can be falsely used be seen as an excuse to wallow in ignorance. Sloth of the mind is no more of a virtue than that of the body.

And so, my claim here is not against knowledge rightly understood. My claim is that the desire for a better job or a more secure life, or the desire for a more sophisticated understanding of the world, all these represent only partial virtues. They are good things that can become bad things, true things that become false things, if they are not grounded in a larger and more generous vision. In this view, an understanding of knowledge that is primarily about self-empowerment and self-aggrandizement falls short of a properly Christian view of education and its purposes.

That view of education assumes that learning empowers us, first and foremost, to love. The goal of our education, both in this place and in the schoolhouse of our lives, is to deepen, broaden, and strengthen our capacity to love both God and our neighbors, and as a consequence of that love, to offer praise to God who is in, through, and above all things, who is the Author of all Knowledge.

At first blush, direct linking of the pursuit of knowledge and the capacity for love is counterintuitive for many Christians; indeed, some view learning and love as if they are antithetical. American Christians especially have been notoriously anti-intellectual because, as we know, knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

Contrary to the notion that the noxious flowering of knowledge is pride, I believe that all genuine knowledge begins in humility. A story: At the age of eighteen I was on the verge of setting off for Wheaton College. Having grown up in a strongly sectarian household, I was the first child in my entire extended family to attend a college other than one sponsored by our denomination; this fact was the subject of family discussions and perhaps a few family prayer meetings. In our view, Wheaton was a “so-called Christian college,” one my family felt sure was bursting with liberal ideas, or at least ideas that were not our ideas. At a party in my honor shortly before leaving home, I was sitting in a chair receiving gifts and congratulations when an older cousin came up and knelt down next to me. Taking my hand in hers and eyeing me carefully, she said, “Now, Peter, I want you to go up there and give those people the Truth.”

This impressed me terribly. My cousin’s admonition fit pretty well with my own sense that at eighteen I knew just about everything I needed to know. College would be a formality. In those days, when I looked at Pete Powers in the mirror, I pretty much liked what I saw. It was as if I looked in a mirror and saw the universe. But narcissism is the opposite of knowledge, not its culmination. The ability to learn, like the ability to love, depends first on a conviction that we are not sufficient, that we are not complete, and that we don’t yet know what or as we really ought to know.

The ability to learn, like the ability to love, depends first on a conviction that we are not sufficient, that we are not complete, and that we don’t yet know what or as we really ought to know.
to see ourselves more truly and others more generously.

Mark Schwehn, a Professor of Humanities and formerly provost at Valparaiso University, says the following about learning and humility:

Humility... does not mean uncritical acceptance: it means, in practical terms, the presumption of wisdom and authority in [others]. Students and faculty... are far too often ready to believe that Kant was just... murky or that Aristotle was pointlessly repetitive, or that Tolstoy was... needlessly verbose. Such quick, easy, and dismissive appraisals preclude the possibility of learning from these writers... Some degree of humility is a precondition for learning. (Exiles from Eden, 49)

Contrary to our received cultural images of vain and violent intellectuals from Faust to Hawthorne’s Rappaccini to Hannibal Lecter, such humility is a virtue that the life of the mind does not diminish, but nourishes.

Learning, rightly understood, is like entering a great mansion with many rooms. In each room we enter there are many doors. We choose doors to open by whatever light and desire is given to us. Sometimes we choose by happenstance and sometimes because we have nothing better to do, or perhaps because it was a door our father or mother opened, or perhaps because your Facebook friends liked a digital page, or perhaps because one door is first at hand and others a little further off. Each door opens to a room with many other doors. And so we choose and open doors to rooms with yet more doors. And choose and open. And choose and open. And on and on.

We grow in the knowledge of many things. And for all knowledge we can be thankful. But the fundamental lesson of my parable is this: we grow primarily in our awareness of how many doors we did not open, how many doors we will never open, and how many things we will never understand. This is the great irony of the life of the mind: knowing as we ought to know leads us into an ever-deeper awareness that we know so very little.

This suggests that the pursuit of knowledge, rightly understood, is a journey not into power and control, but into ever deepening awareness of mystery. Therefore, its ultimate destination is God. The sculptor C. Malcolm Powers captures this attitude in his bronze entitled “Intellectual Praise.” A scholar stands in a posture of praise, with arms lifted toward a heavenly vision. His or her arms, and even part of the torso, are rendered as books that the scholar is raising up to God in rapture. The scholar’s bookish arms echo the appearance of an angel’s wings, as if the scholar’s knowledge has become part and parcel of who the scholar is and part of what compels and lifts her toward a heavenly vision. One book lies at the scholar’s feet, perhaps an acknowledgement that we cannot possess all knowledge, or, as I prefer to think of it, an image of the scholar casting the crown of her knowledge toward the feet of Christ on the last day. However, the scholar’s gaze is not directed toward that missing book or even, in the classic rendering of scholarly activity, toward
the books she has in hand, absorbed and away from the world around her; the scholar’s vision is trained on God, brought to and loving God through knowledge and offering that knowledge back to God as the true author of the knowledge we have gained.

In Dante’s *Paradiso*, as Dante comes to the conclusion of his pilgrimage through hell and purgatory and into heaven, he describes his divine vision of the glory of Christ on his throne, saying:

And so my mind was totally entranced
In gazing deeply, motionless, intent;
The more it saw the more it burned to see.
(Canto XXXIII)

This passage suggests that humility is not only the precondition of knowledge; it is also the substance and end of knowledge that leads to praise. The more he saw—of Christ, of the world made through Christ, the world sustained in Christ, the world of men and women made in the image of Christ and loved by Christ in all their abounding variety—the more he saw, the more he burned to see.

As you begin or continue your studies of literature and art, of history and music, of theology and biology and physics and sociology and psychology, of business and nursing and all the rest, as you open one or two or three of the infinity of doors that lie before you, it is my prayer that the more you see, the more you will burn to see. If that is the education that you pursue, I believe that you will find yourselves compelled to join together with the Apostle Paul, singing the great hymn from scripture (Romans 11:33–36):

O the depth of the riches and wisdom
and knowledge of God! How
unsearchable are his judgments and
how inscrutable his ways!
For who has known the mind of the
Lord? Or who has been his
counselor?
Who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Peter Kerry Powers is the Dean of the School of Humanities of Messiah College. This essay is based on remarks presented to the Messiah College Convocation of August 2010.
The Imponderability of the Past

Thomas Albert Howard

In the late 900s, the Byzantine Emperor Basil ("the Bulgar Slayer") led an army from Constantinople against the Bulgars who had invaded his territories in Greece. Defeated at first, he raised new armies and kept returning to the fray. The turning point finally came in 1014 when his imperial troops managed to capture fifteen thousand Bulgar warriors. Instead of killing his captives, he decided to blind them, except for one in every one hundred, whom he left with one eye each so that they could lead their comrades back home.

One hundred and fifty eyes short of the blind leading the blind, the image of the mutilated Bulgars marching home, defeated, possesses an arresting, suggestive power. Those of us who attempt to know the past and claim that knowledge of it affords some guidance to the present might well identify with the one-eyed Bulgars: we see in part and we have a capacity to lead; but we recognize our defeats and limitations, the stubborn lacunae of what we cannot see and do not know.

This awareness was driven home to me recently on a study trip abroad, in which I led several former students to Italy, to the cities of Orvieto, Florence, and Rome. Afterward, I continued traveling on my own to Istanbul, Turkey, the erstwhile "Nuova Roma" or Constantinople (330) until its sack by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, a red-letter date in world history. It was this latter, personal leg of the journey that prompted me to read up on the history of Istanbul, during which I encountered the curious story of Basil and the eyeless Bulgars.

But for the theme of this essay—the imponderability of the past—the first part of the trip with the students and the solo one afterward must be understood together. For the study trip to Italy, we had selected as our topic: "Virtue and Vice: Explorations in History, Ethics, and Art, and Place," a capacious set of foci, I admit. Our joint readings included Dante's Purgatorio and some short works by the twentieth-century Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper, notably one of his classics, The Four Cardinal Virtues. In it, Pieper discusses the cardinal or classical virtues of Prudence, Justice, Courage, and Temperance, which first appear in Plato's Republic. They were later baptized into Christian thought, most influentially in Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae, and subordinated to the New Testament theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love.

During our trip, we paired our readings with actual sightings of the virtues, frequently rendered as female allegorical figures in medieval and Renaissance art. They appear on the walls and ceilings of the Vatican museums, for example; in several places in fact, but most dramatically in Raphael's stanza della segnatura, in the same room as his famous School of Athens. We discovered them often in Florence: on the doors of the Duomo's Baptistery, on the side of the Duomo's bell tower, at the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, in the Uffizi museum, and above the head of Thomas Aquinas in a provocative fresco, "The Triumph of Saint Thomas," painted...
by Andrea di Bonaiuto da Firenze in the chapter room of the Santa Maria Novella, once the leading Dominican monastery in Florence.

The iconography of the virtues fascinates. For the novice, Justice is the easiest to recognize among the cardinal virtues. She is usually associated with temporal power and fair treatment and portrayed (sometimes blindfolded) holding a sword and measuring scales. Fortitude or Courage, often depicted with a lion, usually wears armor and holds a mace or another weapon; she is prepared to die honorably for the good. By contrast, we found Temperance portrayed with a sheathed sword (the sheath symbolizing the limits of wrath), pouring a moderate amount of wine (a caution against drunkenness), or with a horse’s rein, suggesting the restraint necessary for the moral life.

But the figure that I found most captivating was that of Prudence (prudentius), the virtue that is least understood today. It is also the virtue most relevant to thinking well about historical knowledge and its limits. Artists depict her in several ways. In Raphael’s stanze, seated between Temperance and Courage, she holds a mirror to herself, suggesting that the prudent person must possess accurate self-knowledge: know thyself. Often she holds a snake, an oblique reference to the Gospel of Matthew (10:16) where Christ admonished his disciples “to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” On the Baptistery doors in Florence, she is portrayed with a Janus face, one face looking forward, the other backward, suggesting that the wise person prepares for the future through memory and knowledge of the past.

Dante employs a similar iconographic image in his Divine Comedy, portraying her with three eyes in her head (one fixed on the past, one the present, and one the future). In this guise she appears in Canto XXIX of the Purgatorio. Here, when Dante has almost completed his sanctification and is ready to sojourn heavenwardly with Beatrice, he encounters first the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love, and then the cardinal virtues, led by Prudence:

Upon the left hand four made festive
Vested in purple, following the measure
Of one of them with three eyes in
her head (tre occhi in testa).
(Dante, 651)

Perhaps if the Bulgars
were better led against
the Turks in 1014 by
the “three-eyed one,”
as Prudence is called
in some translations
of Dante, they would
have retained their
own eyes. But this only
invites the question
of exactly what pru-
dence, understood as
a three-eyed virtue,
is supposed to mean,
and what is its rel-

The first thing that should be said, however, is that prudence, in medieval and Renaissance moral philosophy, was not regarded as a “stand-alone” virtue. It constituted one virtue in the seven-fold scheme of the cardinal and theological virtues, as I have already suggested. Josef Pieper nicely sums up the general moral template:

First: the Christian is one who, in faith, becomes aware of the reality of the triune God. Second: the Christian strives, in hope, for the total fulfillment of his being in eternal life. Third: the Christian directs himself, in the divine virtue of love, to an affirmation of God and neighbor that surpasses the power of
any natural love. Fourth: the Christian is *prudent*; namely he does not allow his view on reality to be controlled by... his will, but rather he makes... [his] will dependent upon the truth of real things. Fifth: the Christian is *just*; that is, he is able to live “with the other” in truth... Sixth, the Christian is *brave*, that is, he is prepared to suffer injury and, if need be, death for the truth... Seventh: the Christian is *temperate*; namely he does not permit his... desire for pleasure to become destructive and inimical to his being. (1988, 20-21)

While in the Christian scheme of things, love (*caritas, Agape*) commands the place of highest honor, the virtue most exemplifying *imitatio Christi*, prudence possesses an indispensability all of its own. Thomas Aquinas insisted, for example, that all virtues, theological and cardinal, owed a special debt to prudence, because moral rectitude always depends on accurately sizing up reality, knowing the truth. Thomas even wrote, *Omnis virtus moralis debet esse prudens* (all virtue is necessarily prudent).2 The achievement of good action always entails an unconfused, sobered-minded view of reality, an honest, probing “taking stock” of how the world and human nature *are*.

Understood in this sense, prudence is a matter of Being, of what philosophers call ontology: a predication of right understanding and good action on how being is, how human reality is in fact constituted. In his discussion of prudence, Pieper puts it this way:

All duty is based upon being (*Sein*). Reality is the basis of ethics. Goodness is the standard of reality. Whoever wants to know and do the good must direct his gaze toward the objective world of being, not toward his own sentiment or toward arbitrarily established “ideals” and “models.” He must look away from his own deed and look upon reality. The “soundness” of justice, of fortitude, of temperance, of fear of the Lord and of virtue in general is in the fact that they are *appropriate to objective reality, both natural and supernatural*. Conformity to reality is the principle of both [intellectual] soundness and [ethical] goodness. The precedence of prudence indicates that the realization of goodness presumes knowledge of reality. (1988, 20–21)

Knowing things *as they really are* constitutes the soul of prudence. But prudence is not meant to be a matter of knowledge alone, but a knowledge that disposes one toward right action. It is not a “theoretical virtue,” in other words, but one that operates to help the moral actor comport herself well and thereby contribute to human flourishing. In the words of Pieper again:

Prudence... [seeks to] transform... knowledge of reality into the accomplishment of the good. It encompasses the humility of silence, i.e., unbiased understanding, memory’s faithfulness to being, the art of letting things speak for themselves, the alert composure before the unexpected. Prudence means hesitant seriousness..., the filter of reflection, and yet also the daring courage for definitive resolution. (1988, 20–21)

For anyone trained in history, parts of this definition suggest a prescription for sound historical inquiry. “The humility of silence”: listening attentively to the past for every nuance and shade of meaning. “Unbiased understanding”: trying insofar as humanly possible not to let one’s own commitments and prejudices contaminate insight. “Memory’s faithfulness to being”: validating the importance of individual and collective memory in our constructions of the past. “The art of letting things speak for themselves”: bringing to life actual historical voices. And “alert composure before the unexpected”: readiness to alter or abandon one’s understanding of the past in light of new knowledge or countervailing evidence.
But, once again, prudence is never divorced from action; it is meant to help one achieve a "definitive resolution," to pursue the good actively. The three-eyed allegorical image bolsters this point: prudence scours memory and the past to assist an individual or a collective in the present, so that they might pursue a right and just course for the future.

And yet—and yet. The question arises, given the distorting power of self-interest and the limitations of our knowledge, can one ever know enough, or know in the right manner, to make a wholly prudent decision? Is the fabric of human understanding more akin to the one-eyed Bulgars leading their blinded comrades home than the ebullient, dancing three-eyed lady in Dante's Commedia? As Cicero observed in his On Duties, are not many circumstances in which we find ourselves "perplexingly difficult to assess" (Cicero, 165)? Or, to refer back to my title, are not many historical moments simply imponderable? The word imponderable and its kin "to ponder," revealingly, are derived from the Middle English word, meaning to weigh (pon-dren), which we still have in the word "pound." In this etymological light, are many constellations of historical events simply unweighable, impossible to make sense of fully, elusive in pointing moral actors in the present to a prudent course of action? Put in the language of the virtues themselves, how ought one prudently reckon with the limits of prudence, given that these limits are in fact very much a component of the complicated, lived human reality that prudence asks us to understand?

Such questions tugged at my mind during my time abroad: in Italy, but even more pressingly in "New Rome," today's Istanbul. I had some knowledge of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires, to be sure, and of the secularizing reforms of Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s that established modern-day Turkey. But encountering, first-hand, the intoxicating complexity and otherness of Istanbul's past, while inciting curiosity, left me, finally, with an unsettling feeling of disquiet. This disquiet crept over me while standing with Muslims at the tomb of Mehmet II (The Conquerer), the sultan who had sacked Constantinople in 1453. I sensed it again at the Mosque dedicated to Eyup Ensari, one of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed who had died in an attempted siege of Constantinople in the 670s. I felt it at the Hagia Sophia, once the grandest church in Christendom; at Topaki Palace, the home of the sultans until the eighteenth-century; at the Galata Bridge that crosses the Golden Horn into Boyoglu, the hip, Westernized part of the city. And I certainly felt it upon entering the city's many Ottoman-era cemeteries, ubiquitous reminders of countless bygone lives, unknown and unknowable to most passersby.

I suppose it was, finally, this unsettling feeling of bygoneness, of immense irretrievability, that permeates the city and which I found arresting, worthy of reflection. The Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk connects this feeling with the Turkish notion of melancholy (hüzun) in his memoir, Istanbul: "No matter how ill-kept, no matter how neglected or hemmed in they are by [more recent] concrete monstrosities, the great mosques and other monuments of the city, as well as the lesser detritus of empire in every side street and corner—the little arches, fountains, and neighborhood mosques—inflict heartache on all who live among them" (101). Defeat is present too, at least for the historically attuned. For not only did the city nourish two of the world's mightiest empires—the Byzantine and the Ottoman—but it also witnessed their demises,
the Byzantine spectacularly in 1453, the Ottoman ignominiously as a consequence of World War I. "Defeat goes deeper into the human soul than victory," writes the Arab historian Albert Hourani; "to be in someone else's power is a conscious experience which induces doubts about the order of the universe, while those who have power can forget it, or can assume that it is part of the natural order of things or adopt ideas which justify their possession of it" (300). Like few other cities, Istanbul has known the surge of power and its evacuation.

**To be sure, the historian has many tools in her kit to reconstruct the past, to separate the important from the insignificant, to draw trenchant parallels between present and past. These tools should be used vigorously and with a high sense of purpose; the achievements of modern historiography, with its quest for firm evidence and objectivity, are galloping victories of the human spirit.**

But one must, finally, recognize their limits: a thick cloud of unknowing always accompanies the retrospective gaze. This reality places stark bounds on the acquisition of prudence. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas recognizes this. He divides prudence into three parts: 1) deliberation, the art of thinking well and bringing the relevant bits of particular knowledge, historical or otherwise, to the table; 2) judging well, making appropriate sense of deliberation, with an eye toward; 3) right action, deciding accurately and behaving well with a view to achieving the good. Among the many deterrents to prudence, Thomas lists ignorance and forgetfulness, the inaccessibility of the relevant past to the moral agent. Moreover, he also speaks of the "infinite variety" of particular facts that no human being or collective can possibly master and reflect well about "in a short span of time." In pedestrian terms, prudence then is an art, not a science, a matter of probability, not certainty, a virtue of the mind suspended between the rich possibilities and stark limitations found in the "various and uncertain" aspects of human knowledge, historical or otherwise (Aquinas, 12–14).

The nature of these limitations were exquisitely probed in an essay from the nineteenth century entitled, straightforwardly enough, "On the Limitations of Historical Knowledge" by the now-forgotten Swiss scholar Wilhelm Vischer, a colleague of Friedrich Nietzsche at the University of Basel. Originally delivered as an academic address, Vischer attributed great importance to the rise of modern historiography in the context of the German university system, then the envy of the world. But, as the title suggests, he sought to remind his fellow historians of the "fixed and unalterable" limitations placed on knowing the past. Historical knowledge "can never be total," he proclaimed; "it will necessarily contain gaps, and in order to fill these gaps... we shall be obliged to resort to a connecting activity of our understanding or to the observations of others, most frequently both at once." Daily lived experience, he continued, points out the elusiveness of ascertaining what actually happened: "much that we remember slips out of sequence and becomes unmoored from its original relations, and the unceasing activity of the understanding and imagination will create ever new images out of the remains of our observations, imperfectly retained as they will have been in our memory, and none of these will be exactly identical with the image we had just a moment earlier. Such is the uncertainty even of that source which comes to us from our [own] observations and experiences" (Gossman, 41).

Plumbing the experience of people remote in time from ours is thus all the harder. "The uncertainty is increased in proportion as the observations we have to work with are less immediate... Two accounts of the same [past] event, even by the most reliable witnesses, will never completely coincide, they will always differ from each other, at one point or another, more or less considerably, and not necessarily only in the inessentials. But quite often the witness is actually unreliable. And the very question whether he is or not, which is the first question we must answer, can be an exceedingly difficult one that will be resolved by one historian in one way and by another historian in another." And
when it comes finally to writing and publishing history, Vischer sighs, “how many are the distortions... produced by ignorance and lack of understanding, preconceived ideas, or the partisan intentions of editors” (Gossman, 42).

Goading those positivists in the nineteenth century who wanted to turn history into an “exact science,” Vischer avers that our knowledge of the past will always be “distorting” and “fragmentary.” “In the realm of historical knowledge no absolute certainty can ever be attained, that all we can ever reach is probability, and that even facts which we are accustomed to accept as absolutely certain and reliable rest only on the testimony of human beings who are intellectually and morally imperfect and subject to error.” In fact, history is sufficiently distant from science, he concludes, that we might do better to consider it akin to poetry: “History cannot immediately reproduce facts in their naked reality or integrality. It can evoke the image which impressed itself on the mind of the participant or the observer and to which he gave expression—not directly, but through a process of conscious or unconscious poetic creation, through art. Thus every historical narrative—even those that are relatively most reliably and most immediate—falls into the category of poetry” (Gossman, 49).

Perhaps Vischer overplays his hand here, for there are good reasons to regard history and poetry as distinct enterprises. But by expressing the quandary of the historical knower in this manner, Vischer fortuitously points us toward some ancient reflections offered by Aristotle. In his Poetics, Aristotle opined that “the difference between a poet and a historian is this: the historian relates what has happened, the poet what could happen. Therefore, poetry is something more philosophic and of more serious import than history; for poetry tends to deal with the general, while history is concerned with delimited particular facts” (Aristotle, 18).

These sentences have furrowed the brows of historians for centuries. But risking the charge of heresy from my guild, I think Aristotle is on to something. Often the pursuit of “delimited particular facts,” as Aristotle calls them, takes on an exaggerated life of its own, to the exclusion of more general, properly basic human modes of inquiry that we might associate with poetry and philosophy. And I am not talking about the academic “fields” of “creative writing” or “analytic philosophy,” but something at once more common and marvelous. If I may return to Josef Pieper, I refer to what Pieper, quoting the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, called, “listening to the essence of things,” allowing Being, in its manifold complexity and as phenomenologically immediate to the individual person, to impress itself passively on consciousness. The “capacity of simplex intuitus,” simply intuiting or understanding, observes Pieper, is one of the most irreducibly human acts. Distinguishing between the medieval terms ratio and intellectus, Pieper associates the poetic and the philosophical, with the latter, not the former. The former, ratio, is “the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions.” Sound historical inquiry would proceed along these lines, and rightly it should. But if unwarrantedly absolutized, it would deflect the understanding from intellectus, a more passive, receptive, and I would add, elusive, form of understanding in which Being “offers itself like a landscape to the eye” (Pieper 1952, 9).

Historical scholarship requires ratio; contemplating the past as an aspect of Being—and contemplating oneself contemplating it—suggests intellectus: taking in, beholding, ruminating, pondering.

In our (post)modern times, it is difficult to make fumbling references to “Being,” as I am guilty of doing, without reference to the ponderous legacy of the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Let me make that reference explicit, then, by drawing from Heidegger himself and one of his intellectual heroes (and mine), Blaise Pascal. Together, they help us think well about the limitations of historical knowing and its bearing on consciousness, what I take to be an implicit element in Heidegger’s 1927 opus Sein und
Zeit (Being and Time) and in Pascal's wonder and dread at the "eternal silences" of time and space that encompass and impinge upon the searching mind.

Admittedly, it is often not time, but nature, especially the sublime in nature written of with such rhapsodic eloquence by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, that triggers the big philosophical questions, the keep-you-awake-at-night unfathomables about the immensity, terror, and beauty of it "all." This is especially true perhaps of one of the grandest questions ever posed: Leibniz's "why is there something rather than nothing?" But as Heiddegger recognized, it can just as readily be time, Zeit, that can induce the untethered, sleepless moments. Why am I here, seemingly thrown (geworfen) here, in this particular place and time, instead of another place and time, instead of no-place and no-time? It is this reality, the strange dialectic between what the scholastic philosophers called the "quiddity" (the this-ness) of the time-space-bound self and the zero-sum alternative of non-existence, that lies, I think, at the heart of Heidegger's Seinsfrage, his question about Being, his rapturous, circuitous, often impenetrable interrogation of what (and why?) it is to be and the relationship between individuals beings and that agonized-after Northwest Passage of Heidegger's mind: Being (Sein).

George Steiner, one of the more incisive commentators on Heidegger, has nicely summarized Heidegger's pursuit. "For the greatest majority of human beings," he writes, such questioning of the very foundations of Being looms "in moments of great despair, when things tend to lose all their weight and all meaning becomes obscured." "Or it can be experienced in flashes of vital brilliance, when sensory discrimination pierces the skin of things [the sublime?] But in most cases the question 'will strike like a muffled bell that rings into our life and gradually dies away.' For Heidegger, however, it is the one and only interrogation, the incessant asking without which there can be neither a proper humanity, nor a coherent mode of individual or social existence, nor any philosophy worthy of its name" (Steiner, 35).

The historian is properly preoccupied with "particular delimited facts," as Aristotle noted, and with them valuable assistance is offered in general understanding and in the acquisition of prudence. But as a human being, the historian, like few fellow inquirers, sits astride and busies herself with time, Zeit—the vast, multi-subjective chain and conglomerate of human experience—some recoverable, but most unfathomable, buried in a perpetually receding, inaccessible sludge of anonymity. If the historian aspires to be a human being and not merely a historian, she should sometimes—perhaps often—lift her spade from the particular and delimited (acquired through ratio) to the general and expansive (a matter of intellectus), from "the times" to the mystery of time, and from then—as Heidegger would have it—on to being: from Zeit to Sein. Reflecting on the limits of our knowledge, the imponderability of the past, suggests itself as a good place to begin.

Heidegger sometimes kept a picture of Pascal on his wall. For the Christian and religiously-inclined mind, Pascal's stance toward Being might hold yet more resonance. For Pascal connects the question of Being to the question of God in a way that Heidegger felt impossible, or at least terminally inconclusive, after the so-called "Death of God" in the twentieth century. But what for Heidegger was inconclusive, we might retain as possible—difficult, to be sure, under the cultural conditions of late modernity—but glimpsible under the guideposts of those higher virtues: faith, hope, and love. Writing after the Copernican revolution in astronomy, Pascal was among the first to muse on the infinitesimally small place of human beings in the cosmos and the challenges this posed for religious assent. We find ourselves, he wrote, "lost in this corner of the universe"; "the whole visible world is only an imperceptible dot in nature's amble bosom. No idea comes near it; we only bring forth atoms compared to the reality of things." And as he most famously observed: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread" (Pascal, 59, 66).
The dialectic of rapture and terror that shouted at Pascal from nature also whispered to him from his experience of time. He was captivated by how historical contingencies produced events that led to other events and, in turn, to other events, and so. If Cleopatra's nose had been smaller, he famously mused, the history of the world might have turned out differently, for Julius Caesar and Mark Antony might not have fallen in love with her. "Cleopatra's nose" became for him a shorthand expression to convey the phenomenological experience of time as a fast-moving accretion of seemingly fathomless contingencies.

Sometimes Pascal's reflections on time merge with self-reflection on the brevity of life. "When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after—as the remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day—the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity,..., of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then. Who put me here? By whose command and act were this time and place allotted to me" (19)? In the course of a life, Pascal felt that human beings were at once "incapable of certain knowledge or [of] absolute ignorance." We long to know, to gain wisdom and comprehension. But "nothing stands still for us," he continued; "We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up in the depth of the abyss" (63). The yawning gulf of time envelopes us; we strain to see, but our vision often blurs.

A melancholy pathos shrouds a lone traveler in a large metropolis, especially one of great historical significance. I could not shake this feeling while in Istanbul. On my last night in the city, I walked out on the Galata Bridge across the Golden Horn, which separates the Sultanamet district of the city (once the home of the sultans) from Boyoglu (where Genoese and Venetian merchants once set up shop). Few spots rival this one as a place to size up some of the deeper currents of world history. One can see the Hagia Sophia in all its resplendent night-time glory, the church of one empire, the mosque of another, before becoming in the 1930s a museum, perhaps the most telling institution of modernity. From the bridge, one can glance out over the Bosophorus, the narrow passage of water that separates Europe from Asia; who controlled this passage controlled the destiny of millions. One can look up the Golden Horn toward the Fatih district, where the Patriarch of Constantinople, the worldwide leader of Orthodox Christians, resides, now behind guarded walls and the thick presence of Turkish police. One can look southwest from the bridge and see the Suleymaniye, the massive mosque built by Suleiman the Magnificent, the most powerful sultan of the Ottoman Empire and one of the most dominant rulers in world history. Had his forces sacked Vienna in 1529, how would we read history today? We arrive back at Cleopatra's nose.

Beneath the sprawl of modern Istanbul and beneath the Ottoman legacy lies, of course, the memory of the Byzantine Empire, which ceased to exist on May 29, 1453. You can tell the perspective of the person you are talking to, Orhan Pamuk once observed, if they refer to this event as the Fall of Constantinople or the Conquest of Istanbul. Different narratives of this event and centuries-old accumulations of rival interpretations lend credence to either phrase. And if one digs back a little further, you will arrive, as I did, at the story of the Byzantine Emperor Basil, "the Bulgar Slayer," and the ghoulish train of maimed Bulgars that he vanquished.

For reasons not entirely clear to me, this image became to me a placeholder for the immensity and irretrievability of the past and for our limitations in encountering it. The study of history is a magnificent thing and there is much we can and ought to know. More precisely, penetrating knowledge of the past helps in the acquisition of prudence, that searching knowledge oriented toward foresight and virtuous action. At the same time, it would be arrogant—and therefore imprudent—to believe that the past can be "mastered," definitely
pinned down, encountered only in the spirit of ratio, discursive and analytic reasoning. The past also ought to awaken in us intellectus, a passive, more ruminative, poetic disposition of mind that enlarges the imagination in the very act of humbling it. Through intellectus, the manifold artifacts, beauty, and inscrutability of the past enable us to better “know thyself” by allowing us to see ourselves, in words of the poet Billy Collins, “stand[ing] in the tremble of thought / taking the vast outside into ourselves.” Or, in biblical language, it nudges us toward that “firm footing” that Pascal ardently desired, but only insofar as it helps us recognize that we know only in part, that we see in a glass darkly.

This essay is dedicated to Mark Schwehn, dear friend and mentor.


Works Cited


Endnotes

1. The following few paragraphs draw from material that I treated in Thomas Albert Howard, “Virtue Ethics and Historical Inquiry: The Case of Prudence,” in John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller, eds., Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian’s Vocation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

2. On the importance of prudence in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, see Nelson 1992.

3. This is reference to the Book of Wisdom, verse 15.
BEETLE CHILD

All summer, my poet friend was busy tending a beetle her husband picked for her instead of a cocktail dress. They named it after their favorite sumo wrestler. She and I share the same body type, dry skin and melancholy frame of mind, and we both remain childless. Beetles are not meant to survive autumn, even those fat, shiny ones from fancy department stores in Tokyo. They die like hollow chestnuts whether or not they receive food, water, and quality affection verging on desperation—she even fed her beetle with the sherbert flesh of an out-of-season melon that comes in a wooden box, a premium gift for the sick. Now, fallen leaves surround their house. As she rakes in silence, I fold a tiger out of golden origami, complaining about my drafty bed and frostbitten toes. Just like this, words are dry enough to burn, and fire is for sharing. We are at the end of the season, trying to close the door that isn't there.

Miho Nonaka
IN HIS VOLUME IMAGINING THE KINGDOM, part two of a promised trilogy on the experience and phenomenology of worship and formation in contemporary America, James K. A. Smith describes an unsettling experience. One day, he finds himself in the loud and busy food court of a typical Costco near his home. There he sits, innocently reading a book in the food court. But upon further reflection, this act of reading turns out to be a deeply unsettling and disturbing moment, because it is a book by Wendell Berry, environmentalist extraordinaire, being consumed in the belly of the beast: a place that Smith decides might represent, for Berry, "the sixth circle of hell" (8). Smith's self-reflection on his own cognitive dissonance between what he thinks he believes and what he in action believes and actually lives, illustrates precisely why I delight in studying the prodigious works of one of the most thoughtful Christian observers of American culture today. Especially since I feel that pain too: like Smith, I adore Berry even as I head to the nearest superstore to fill my trunk with bourgeois goodies at discount prices. So as I read Smith's confessional observation, I'm busted too.

Imagining the Kingdom, and its predecessor Desiring the Kingdom, are books at the top of my short list for recommending to friends and colleagues looking for a great introduction to the writings of Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin College. Both contain scores of wonderfully illuminating moments of self-instruction about the ways our own "worship" permeates our everyday lives. If you think worship is something that happens only on Sunday mornings (and perhaps Wednesday nights, or during the moments of devotion many Christians carve out at the beginning or end of the daily grind), Smith's books might shock you. Smith argues powerfully that virtually everything we do constitutes some aspect of worship; everything we feed ourselves will form us, whether we recognize or accept that reality or not. And if you are an educator like me, you will discover that what you are primarily called to do is not dispense "information," but to foster "formation." And you will be engaged in a thoroughgoing examination of just about everything surrounding the mundane life you are now leading. In effect, you will be forced back to the best of Reformed thought: Calvin's insistence, as Matthew Boulton has recently described it, that "even ordinary Christian life is a disciplined life, a life of discipleship formed in and through a particular suite of disciplines, and so at every turn in his theological and reforming work, Calvin sought to serve the church's broad program of practical formation" (13). And so, yes, if you take seriously such an account of discipleship as described by Calvin, you may even find yourself challenged by the food court at Costco, or by any number of other pre-cognitive choices you must make, virtually every day, in postmodern America. Thus Smith is not for the faint of heart, and his writing will shake you up, if you let it.

All of this is preliminary to the book under review here, because it helps to know a little bit about Smith's earlier works and predispositions. It is no exaggeration to suggest that his voluminous works are achieving a kind of epic sweep.
Smith may be a philosopher, but his works have wide relevance throughout the humanities and, I would think and hope and pray, throughout the church as well. I find him to be one of the most engaging writers on issues of Christianity and culture today, though his work is often not so easily digested (he is as fond of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Merleau-Ponty as he is of Tom Wolfe, Homer Simpson, and Death Cab for Cutie). And so, I am treating this review as a bit of an introduction to Smith's most recent work, along with a review of his splendid, yet accessible and brief overview and discussion of what is arguably the most widely discussed work of philosophy of the last twenty years: Charles Taylor’s magisterial *A Secular Age* (2007).

Taylor’s work is already highly influential and very well known among not only philosophers but also many people working in literary studies, religious history, and other fields. Taylor was already well-known before the appearance of his masterpiece; his most famous book before *A Secular Age* was his analysis of Western subjectivity in *Sources of the Self* (1989), and his Gifford Lectures were published as *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* in 2002. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor addresses the problem of the foundations and content of moral value and all that such value involves, a problem greatly complicated by challenges such as Nietzsche's famous claim that God is dead. Taylor asks, what is the most compelling account of life, and what is the normative status of this way of life? He is hardly the first analytic philosopher to have recently taken on strong Christian commitments. But what distinguishes Taylor (and, say, Alasdair MacIntyre) is that these two heavyweights deploy Christian commitments within the framework of their analyses of the current moral order, and how we got here.

Taylor charts the historical development of the main option that best characterizes our secular age: what he terms “exclusive humanism.” He describes exclusive humanism’s diverse legacy from the early nineteenth century up to our own day, and then explores several current options of belief and unbelief, especially in terms of how these options deal with suffering and evil, and the wide variety of ordinary life. Taylor rejects powerfully and persuasively what he calls “subtraction stories”: accounts of the development of a secularism that emerges by subtracting features of transcendence, and thus freeing us from illusions or limitations that confine us. Think of subtraction stories as accounts stressing how an individual, or a culture, has decidedly “grown up”: how any intelligent being must get beyond childish belief by rejecting superstition, or by suddenly waking up and realizing that it is all simply myth, as in the wildly condescending language of Richard Dawkins (or, in the nineteenth century, someone like Robert Ingersoll, or even his great admirer Mark Twain). For believers, subtraction stories are certainly condescending: they come across as very much like the ravings of highly intelligent people who are nevertheless tone deaf regarding matters of religion and belief. That is how I have often felt when this arrogant attitude has raised its ugly head in what had been friendly conversations. Taylor is very good at describing this phenomenon, and for unmasking it as a potential foe. Subtraction stories, for Taylor, are merely the misguided rants directed toward a relatively weak and unconvincing straw man, not a very serious argument at all.

Smith's book, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, is thus to be highly recommended for the wonderful help it provides in navigating the heady waters of Taylor's masterpiece. Not only has it helped me
decipher the complexities of Taylor’s work, but Smith’s lucid commentary has helped me master a solid vocabulary of Taylorisms for use in my own work (the book includes a very handy glossary of terms). In short, Smith has taught me much more about Taylor than I learned by reading Taylor on my own. But this volume also reveals Smith to be a master teacher; he tells us in the book’s introduction that the idea, and the manuscript, emerged from a semester-long senior seminar with philosophy majors at his college, and he gives a grateful nod to his willing students, who all committed to reading the entirety of Taylor’s intimidating tome together with the class. What a challenge! I’ve done *Moby Dick* with seniors, usually over about three or four weeks, so I know the difficulties of Smith’s gargantuan task—the selling of a highly complex work of genius—and the marathon-like quality of assigning such lengthy works (especially among the current crop of so-called “digital natives”). I admire Smith’s courage and panache. His greatest gift may be his ability to bring it all back down to earth, and make it come alive, for a group of contemporary undergraduates. Bravo for that.

Here I will try to boil down major elements of the book’s narrative. Since the goal of the book is to explain and summarize the content of Taylor’s volume, we can assume Smith has broad agreement with Taylor. He rarely argues with, or disagrees with, Taylor’s claims. According to Taylor (and, evidently Smith agrees), the modern world emerged when an internal and self-sufficient humanism began to become imaginatively available as a real opportunity. The single goal of this humanism was nothing more than human flourishing, and slowly intellectuals began to realize that perhaps belief in God was unnecessary for such an arrangement. And so a new concept of life emerged: the “secular,” which Smith describes brilliantly. This new world is not characterized so much by the absence of God as by a “sort of contested, cross-pressured, haunted world that is ‘secular’—not a world sanitized of faith and transcendence, flattened to the empirical” (17). Smith shows how the church became, in Taylor’s view, complicit with the changes in belief: “Taylor focuses on Christian responses to this emerging humanism and the ‘eclipses’ we’ve just noted. What he finds is that the responses themselves have already conceded the game; that is, the responses to this diminishment of transcendence already accede to it in important ways (Taylor will later call this ‘pre-shrunk religion’...)” (51). In short, Taylor (and Smith) argue that there is in fact much to admire about the new order, even as there is much to despise; for instance, our contemporary obsessions about “freedom” are only imaginable within a modern, human-centered frame. But more broadly, this new, pluralistic, and open-ended culture represents the progress of the human imagination over many centuries: “exclusive humanism is an achievement: the development of this purely immanent sense of universal solidarity is an important achievement, a milestone in human history...” Indeed, discovering immanent resources for fullness and meaning in this way will become the charter of modern unbelief...” (57). In many ways, this new “secular” spirit has fostered inclusion and other forms of justice. So there are good, as well as bad, results of this “achievement,” a revelation hard for many Christians to comprehend.

In this new order, questions of theodicy have become foremost among the challenges to Christianity. Smith is excellent in describing these challenges, via Taylor’s engaging and thorough recognition of the seriousness of these challenges. “People in coffee houses and salons... begin to express their disaffection in reflections on divine justice, and the theologians begin to feel that this is the challenge they must meet to fight back the coming wave of unbelief. The burning concern with theodicy isn’t framed by the new imagined epistemic predicament” (52). In other words, many Christians today do not take seriously the challenges posed by widespread violence and horror, what philosophers call the problem of evil. This line of reasoning, the recognition of the need for a humble theodicy in light of evil, may remind some readers of the recent volume by David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*. Hart’s ingenious point is that most believers have not taken Ivan’s (and Dostoyevsky’s) argument in *The Brothers Karamazov* as seriously as they should. This epic novel—considered by many to be the
most definitive account in literature of the theodicy problem—represents, for Hart and Taylor, a crucial challenge in the history of Western religion: “Those Christian readers who have found it easy to ignore or dispense with the case that Dostoevsky constructs for Ivan have not, I submit, fully comprehended that case...” (Hart, 42).

As Taylor puts it: “The failure of theodicy can now more readily lead to rebellion, because of our heightened sense of ourselves as free agents” (306). Strikingly, it is the church that is least prepared, at present, to deal with horrendous evils: largely due to its unreal grasp of evil’s fullness and its implications. Evangelicals, in particular, are nervous about admitting to the grand silences of God or their own inability to offer up a quick, scriptural remedy to any problem. But while the church struggles to grasp the moral implications of genocide and tsunamis, the fallen world totally gets it. Taylor, Hart, and presumably Smith all agree that the formulation of a satisfactory theodicy must become a crucial point of emphasis for Christian belief and practice today. But instead, the church fails to present a convincing response.

In effect, and like it or not, our highly touted “freedom” in America has in fact led to all sorts of new positions and new options and endorsed them all equally. The epistemological cat is out of the bag, in other words, and we should be dubious about any feeble attempts to rebag it. There is grandeur in that realization, as well as some real challenges. Identifying the causes of this shift is at the heart of Taylor’s (and Smith’s) project: “the positive shift that really made exclusive humanism a ‘live option’: a theological shift that gave us the impersonal god of deism coupled with the intellectual and cultural Pelagianism that found the resources for an ‘agape-analog’ within the immanence. This gave us a way to be rid of eternity and transcendence without giving up a ‘moral project’—a vision and task that give significance to our striving” (Smith, 60). One example of Taylor’s vocabulary for describing these momentous shifts has become my own personal favorite: the “nova effect,” which is “an explosion of options for finding (or creating) ‘significance.’ The cross-polemics that result from new options for belief and unbelief ‘end up generating a number of new positions... so that our present predicament offers a gamut of possible positions’” (Smith, 62). There are just so many options, and opinions, out there: just ask today’s students, inundated with too much of everything. “[W]e see ourselves adrift and cast into an anonymous cold ‘universe,’” says Smith (71). And as Taylor elaborates in a chapter entitled “The Dark Abyss of Time”: “Reality in all directions plunges its roots into the unknown and as yet unmappable. It is this sense which defines the grasp of the world as ‘universe’ and not ‘cosmos’; and this is what I mean when I say that the universe outlook was ‘deep’ in a way that the cosmos picture was not. Humans are no longer charter members of the cosmos, but occupy merely a narrow band of recent time” (Taylor, 326-7).

Dark abyss, indeed. Perhaps readers might be forgiven if they find much of this analysis fairly bleak, if not abjectly hopeless. Taylor (and Smith) offer some tips for the church and individual believers, but their work is largely descriptive, not prescriptive. The bottom line is this: our secular age presents unprecedented challenges not only for belief itself, but also for the simple presentation, and the long-term progress, of our narrative of truth, the Gospel.
that might help us, as the church, to find our way forward. In a word: it is practice, the disciplines of our faith. The search is on for real, vibrant communities of hope in the midst of this dark abyss we call the secular age. Any hipster can sit at Costco, sipping coffee and reading Wendell Berry. But as my own college students are fond of asking me: where are the living, breathing, authentic believers in God to be found? They search, in other words, because somehow they know intuitively that it is within the disciplines of a beloved community that we might learn how (not) to be secular.

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**Works Cited**


Thinking About Love
How Love Reveals Where We Are, Where We Are Going, and Why
Ian Clausen

To think about love is less exciting than to feel it, and perhaps that is why love receives scant critical attention. As often as we invoke it, we seldom stop to think about it, and this leaves us assuming that we agree on what it is. But can love be defined, or should it? There are those who think that love defies all definition. To define it takes the wind out of the sails of love's passion, and spoils the spontaneity of its dynamically radiant presence. Love, it seems, stands outside the remit of reflective knowledge, transcending our meager attempts to lay hold of its content. And at any rate, who among us has the right to define love? Surely no one but the lover in whom love comes to dwell, we insist, has any right to define the feeling and its ultimate significance.

Modern philosophy is not much better at thinking about love, though for somewhat different reasons. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion expresses outright dismay at the silence of modern philosophy on so crucial a topic. Surely philosophia, the love of wisdom, has abandoned her vocation upon failing to tend to the basis on which her discipline rests. Marion’s project is to recapture what he calls “the erotic phenomenon.” This is the condition without which philosophy becomes unintelligible to itself and on which hangs the intelligibility of even calling ourselves human. Surely the basis of our humanity commands closer attention! Love in fact invites us to examine its form, structure, and content, in order to derive from it crucial insights into the human condition. With all due respect to Descartes, Marion puts it thus: “I love, therefore I am.” Try as we might to isolate love from the self—the project of modern philosophy, in a nutshell—the self becomes intelligible to itself only by existing through love.

If this is so, then in order to learn the truth about ourselves, we need to reconceive ourselves as lovers on the way. That invites us to think again about the meaning of love, and to seize upon the questions that this thinking provokes, in order to open up a conversation on the significance of love for revealing essential aspects of the human condition.

Love is a Place

The first claim we wish to make is that love is a place; love, that is, presupposes our placement in the world. To occupy a place involves several components. One major component is the presence of a beloved, an object to which one feels attracted and summoned. No one loves in a vacuum. The statement “I love” is a vacuous one; it cries out for some description of the object one loves. By object, of course, we do no mean mere object or “thing.” We are talking about the grammar of the activity of love, the fact that we cannot love without also loving something (or someone). This condition presupposes our placement in the world. In order to love something I need to be somewhere, for that somewhere serves as the condition for the possibility of loving something. Here is a good example: I arrive on the university campus for the first time as an undergraduate, when suddenly a beautiful face overtakes my field of
vision. This face might have caught my eyes in a different setting, a different place, but the present context renders my encounter with this face rather special, and indeed, I come to believe that I am “falling in love,” as freshmen are wont to do in the first weeks of term.

In this encounter, the significance of my placement comes home. It feeds my deep need to establish roots through belonging, and it makes this foreign place the “university” more inviting, investing my presence there with significance and purpose. All that may seem straightforward and trivial on the surface, but it conceals an incredible truth about the thing that makes us human. For this condition ultimately reveals something important about ourselves: we cannot simply describe ourselves as individual monads, selves-in-isolation, but rather find our “selves” ever searching for a place to belong, a place to call home. Freshmen know this feeling well. On campus for the first time, they are separated from home, and the isolation shapes their initial experience of the place they now reside. Not to belittle their encounter with that beautiful face, but falling in love seems to effect for them a necessary transition by initiating the next phase of their journey to adulthood. It solidifies their sense of place by giving their love a concrete object and by granting them freedom from their former affective attachments (such as a high-school sweetheart). What is more, parents recognize this change is taking place, and good parents remain patient with the transitioning process. Conversely, it is tragic when the child fails to form attachments, only to return home feeling despondent and disillusioned about the future. Though quietly they may relish their child’s longing for “the way things were,” parents know that their child needs to form new bonds of affection lest the time at university fails to facilitate his or her development.

But this process does not signal merely a transition to adulthood, important as that is, but it also indicates the child’s opening to a much larger world, indeed the world, as well as to the question that is implicit to the journey. This question will occupy us momentarily. First, I want to call attention to an account of human love that to my mind precisely captures this oh-so-human experience. In his recent book Love: A History (Yale, 2011), British philosopher Simon May argues that true love is misunderstood. It isn’t unconditional, disinterested, or impartial, despite our assumption that these constitute true love. Rather true love is thoroughly conditioned by the object that attracts, and more importantly by our desire to find a home in the object. May puts it thus: “Love... is the rapture we feel for people and things that inspire in us the hope of an indestructible grounding for our life. It is a rapture that sets us off on—and sustains—the long search for a secure relationship between our being and theirs” (6).

May’s definition of love no doubt invites a thousand qualifications. Does it really capture what we mean by the word love? Is it not an overly romanticized, even religious definition, one that deals far too much in feelings and emotions? Yet according to May, the confusion really lies with us, particularly, that is, with our modern devotion to “unconditional love.” To understand true love as essentially unconditional, May argues, renders opaque the true nature of the human love-relationship. However we might define the true nature of God’s love—and May has his doubts about the project—it does no good simply to transplant the standard of divine love to the realm of human relationships where it makes no sense. In fact, May argues that, conceptually speaking, there is no such thing as unconditional love. Love involves by definition some kind of
condition, some modicum of a need and desire that must be filled. To return to our previous example: the freshman student who falls in love has one basic need, one condition that governs and inspires her longing, and that is her desire to find a place to belong, an object/person that can grant her an “indestructible grounding” for her life.

In the end, May argues, it is our desire to “come home” that conditions and complicates the human experience. Yet there is more than meets the eye in this conception of love, and this requires adding another component to flesh out our understanding. Love is not only a place. It is also, and perhaps first of all, a direction.

Love is a Direction

Rowan Williams puts his finger on precisely this issue when offering a pithy account of the human condition. In his Lenten book Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment (2003), Williams writes: “The hardest thing in the world is to be where we are” (21, 89). I take it that Williams is not intending to be literal—though sometimes it is literally hard to be where we are, e.g. in a boring lecture!—but rather gesturing to the claim that we opened this essay with: the fact that “to be” implies our status as lovers. Love, however, is never simply a state we inhabit, but a dynamic process of exchange and intimate participation. It is in fact a direction much more than a state, for to love someone is to move with them and be moved by them. Yet even before we are moved by the one we claim to love, we are restlessly seeking someone or something to love. Thus, the phenomenon of freshmen falling in love brings to light the desire that implicitly drives us. Not that this desire must always seek romance, though it often does, but that it always stands behind and directs our existence as a powering motivation of the restless human heart.

Williams’s message is that “where we are” invariably invites a struggle. That is because of who we are as lovers on the way. Philosophers like to call this the “ecstasy of being.” The Greek term ekstasis means “to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere” (Wikipedia). It involves a kind of displacement of the mind or soul, which in turn explains love’s search for a place to call home. Understanding this aspect of love is critically important. The Christian mystic Simone Weil, in a moving essay entitled “The Love of God and Affliction,” describes the peril that surrounds our misconception of love. “It is only necessary to know,” Weil writes, “that love is a direction and not a state of the soul. If one is unaware of this, one falls into despair at the first onslaught of affliction” (81). By affliction Weil means more than suffering, and much more than physical suffering, though it must include that. She defines affliction as “physical pain, distress of soul, and social degradation, all at the same time,” an experience she likens to a “nail whose point is applied at the very center of the soul, whose head is all necessity spreading throughout time and space” (81). To unpack the riches of this description would take an essay in itself. To give it some initial context, Weil is clearly referring to the Crucifixion of Christ. The Cross of Christ, she suggests, provides the perfect model of “extreme affliction,” for here is concentrated all the horror of human depravity and cosmic necessity. And yet, Weil further suggests, it is enough to know, even in this darkest moment, that love is not a state; it is a direction. “The hardest thing in the world is to be where we are.” But to know that “where we are” is always in some sense incomplete; that we do not find here the ultimate grounding for our life, even despite the loves we so deeply and rightly cherish; to know that much, suggests Weil, not only prepares us to endure affliction, but also the quiet question at the heart of human existence.

The freshman who falls in love may well fall out of love, and through this she may come to know herself as a lover on the way. One fears, however, that the way in which we moderns experience romance has caused us to lose sight of its transcendent horizon. And not only romance, but also the love of wisdom: that rapturous desire which once seized hold of Augustine and Boethius, Catherine and Hildegard, and today Williams and Weil, as well as countless other saints and figures dotting the Western cultural
landscape. Where did it go? Does the love that moves us, directs us, no longer open us to the big questions?

Love is not just a place, not just a direction: it is fundamentally a question that is given to us, and which invites us and entices us to make a response.

**Love is a Question**

To make this claim, admittedly, moves us beyond easy agreements. One can expect general agreement that love is a place and a direction, but to derive from these aspects of love a corresponding *question*—a question such as “what is the meaning of life?” or “why am I here?”—strikes some moderns as dangerous thinking or simply a dead-end. One example will suffice. In an interview with the English philosopher Simon Critchley, the interviewer asks Critchley to respond to the challenge posed by Nietzsche: if God is dead, wherein do we find meaning for our existence? In “human finitude,” responds Critchley, and he goes on to explain:

> [T]he answer is given in the question. The only answer to the question of the meaning of life has to begin from the fact of our human finitude, of our vulnerability and our fallibility.... [W]e have to, in a sense, give up the question of the meaning of life, or at least hear it in a particular way... [O]nce we’ve accepted that the meaning of life is ours to make, we make meaning. Then we accept that we live in a situation, or, rather, that we inherit a situation of meaninglessness, and out of that meaninglessness we create meaning in relationship to the ordinariness of our common existence. (quoted in Stauffer 2003, 1)

The point of citing Critchley’s response is not to take him out of context—readers should visit the online interview to hear his full opinion—but to show that what we think about love has cosmic significance and forces us to face questions that destabilize assumptions.

Critchley may well be right about the meaninglessness of modern life, but does his proposal that we create meaning finally satisfy as an answer? How might this be determined philosophically or otherwise? The simple fact is that we cannot just determine it abstractly. The answer, or rather the question has to be lived with and through, and this requires time and patience as we labor in search of truth. I very much doubt that many people have a desire to “live with the question,” to borrow another phrase from Williams, but that reflects more a culture ill-attuned to such encounters, and possibly a bit adverse to any “threat” of disruption.

On this score, I must agree with Critchley’s proposal of acceptance as the first step to us admitting we have a question to face. What I cannot understand, though, and what makes reading thinkers like Critchley exhausting, intellectually and spiritually, is that the answer to our deepest question lies ultimately *in us*; that “we make meaning” can create for us the home that we desire.

There is another perspective, another *mythos* of desire, that distills the human condition into a simple but startling truth. It is a truth that thinkers like Critchley believe has had its final say, and yet it is a truth that continues to form a people learning to live with the question.

A strange intervention takes place in Genesis 3:9. Humanity has tried to recreate itself to be like God, knowing good and evil, and God reenters the story to pose a curious, destabilizing question: *Where are you?* And that question, should love possess the characteristics we described, might well sum up the journey that humanity
undertakes. It certainly helps to organize our preceding reflections by bringing love's meaning to a culminating point. That point finds expression in the famous words of St. Augustine: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Conf. I.1.1). By reflecting on the love that both places and disrupts us, we re-embbody the (dis)position that awakens us to the question. Nothing determines outright that we shall answer it as Augustine does, but then nothing can force us to disregard the answer he gives either. A true lover is ultimately a person who hears the question of existence and is unwilling to let it be answered by empty sentimental platitudes. The great challenge facing modern Christians is to resist such platitudes, and to learn ways of embodying the question God raises to humanity. Where are you? 

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DEAR LODESTAR, TRUE NORTH

dear drop of light spilled across 3am
sky asleep in the heart of the bear
you are asking again September questions
only the gone shine of your siblings long fallen
ago in an age of embers on earth
before the first humans traced you
in ocher & charcoal, painted you
on rock & skin, oracle riddled onto bones
of the dead your even more ancient
orbit alone knows the answer to
how could flickering you have known
a sieve slept in the little of your dipper
almost invisible to my homesick eye
wanderer, faraway, whispering lullaby

John Fry
Does the Symbol Really Function?
What Theology Can’t and Can Do

Robert Saler

When I teach systematic theology, a key early moment comes when we read Elizabeth Johnson’s classic text in feminist theology, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse. This 1992 text (since reprinted in multiple editions) remains a classic exploration of nascent feminist themes in the Bible and subsequent Christian tradition; however, what is particularly helpful about the text is the clarity with which Johnson argues for the importance of theological discourse itself in shaping our worldviews and ways of being human:

As the focus of absolute trust, one to whom you can give yourself without fear of betrayal, the holy mystery of God undergirds and implicitly gives direction to all of a believing person’s enterprises, principles, choices, system of values, and relationships. The symbol of God functions. Neither abstract in content nor neutral in its effect, speaking about God sums up, unifies, and expresses a faith community’s sense of ultimate mystery, the world view and expectation of order devolving from them, and the concomitant orientation of human life and devotion. (Johnson, 4)

Johnson’s point is crucial to her project, because the brunt of her argument is that the language that we use for God will have deep implications across our worldviews and actions, including how we treat others. If we can only envision God as male, then there cannot help but be repercussions that strengthen patriarchy across cultural and political realms. If we regard God as having ordained the United States of America to a status of exceptionalism, then that will have implications for how we engage geopolitical realities, particularly in times of conflict.

In the past several decades, this notion—that our ideas about God have a direct and discernible correlation with our political and ethical attitudes—has become entrenched as a standard justification for why theology matters as an academic and ecclesial discipline. Indeed, it has been virtually axiomatic within theological discourse that the manner in which we construe and depict certain theological symbols—salvation, the Eucharist, the person of Christ, the nature of divine providence, etc.—will have predictable outcomes upon the behavior of those who take such symbols seriously.

To take just a few examples:

- The elevation by “social Trinitarians” of God-images that emphasize God’s existence as Triune community rather than solitary monad is thought by these theologians to provide us with divine grounding for more open, vulnerable, and egalitarian communities on earth. On this model, Trinitarian perichoresis (that is, the indwelling of the persons of the Trinity within each other) becomes a model for more authentic/less dominating human interaction.

- The recovery—over against the popular apocalyptic perspective represented in, say, the Left Behind novels—of the book of Revelation’s vision of Christ’s redemption as encompassing all of creation, and not just humanity, is championed by ecological theologians as a framework for encouraging Christians to value the natural environment. If we understand nature as the arena of Christ’s redemptive activity
and not simply as the dispensable backdrop against which salvation occurs, so the theory goes, then Christians will be more motivated to care for creation.

- Explorations into the problem of evil that emphasize that God is capable of genuine suffering, in contrast to those strains of the patristic and medieval tradition that emphasize God's immunity from privation, are thought to promote a vision of power and love that is more humane and less patriarchal than their alternatives.

There is no question that this mode of theologizing—predicated on the belief that analyzing how embedded theological assumptions produce deleterious social effects in order to propose (or recover) other symbols that might motivate more salutary ways of being in the world—has catalyzed a great deal of excellent theological reflection across global and denominational lines. Feminist, black, liberation, womanist, process, and a whole host of other vital theological movements have constructed marvelously creative and faithful reworkings of core Christian symbols on the belief that these could be made to function in ways that might make the world a more just and beautiful place. These achievements should be celebrated.

But if “the symbol functions” has become an established piece of theological orthodoxy, then like all bits of orthodoxy it should be critically appraised every once in a while to see if it still can withstand the stress tests of Christian life in the twenty-first century. And in that spirit, we might have reason for concern.

First, we should notice that one of the effects, perhaps unintended, of this line of thinking is that it provides constructive theologians who might be anxious about the very legitimacy of their discipline (perhaps especially, but not exclusively, within university contexts) a seemingly unassailable rationale for their work. If our theological symbols and what we do with them have the power to make the world a better or worse place, then the utility of theology then becomes defensible on the same grounds by which one might argue for the use of political science or philosophy: critical reflection has political results. I know that I myself have been known to stand in front of classrooms and make impassioned pleas to rows of skeptical students that, because symbols function, theology has “real world” importance.

But here we might wonder whether it behooves theologians—who, after all, really ought to know a bit about how easily good intentions lead to delusion—to be especially self-suspicious when their methods of justifying their disciplinary existences end up highlighting the utilitarian value of God-talk in ways that make themselves indispensable on some supposedly neutral, rational calculus of what really “matters.” On a theological level, it seems that a discourse which has at its heart a broken criminal on a cross ought to be highly cognizant that nowhere does the fallen character of the world manifest itself more clearly than in agreed-upon standards for what constitutes “relevance” and “success.” Meanwhile, at ground level, it is not at all apparent that, despite the massive number of books and articles produced in the field of constructive theology every year, theology as a discipline has been particularly effective in its purported aims of changing human behavior. Put bluntly, if the axiom “the symbol functions” is predicated upon the potential of theology to change the world, then theologians should assess in all humility the extent to which that potential has been realized.

Such an honest assessment might lead us to realize that one of the most philosophically and theologically significant facts about human beings, religious or otherwise, is our deeply rooted ability to live in cognitive dissonance with (if not in outright contradiction to) that which we affirm to be true and good. Indeed, not only are we capable of massive cognitive dissonance, but a whole host of structures have the capacity to absorb our “correct” theologies into systems that remain fully undisturbed by our changed worldviews. As a Christian, I affirm the primacy of charity and God’s love for the poor even as my pursuit of a stable middle-class existence is, quite honestly, no less enthusiastic than that of my “secular” friends. If asked, I would affirm that I value family more than my career, but I suspect that my Outlook calendar would tell a different story. When I preach, I find myself telling congregations that the infectious joy of the Gospel is too
large for us not to share the good news of Jesus Christ, even as I am well aware of how easy it is for me to keep absolutely silent about my Christian faith in settings where I don't think that it would be welcomed.

A cheap solution to this dilemma would be to say that we must not “really” believe what we say we believe if there is no apparent correlation between what we affirm about God and how we live. But far better than such superficial stratagems would be to acknowledge that there is a certain naïveté in thinking that the connections between what we want to believe and how we actually live will ever be direct and predictable.

If we concede this, then all is not lost for theologians; indeed, far from it. When one looks to the depths of the Augustinian tradition, for example, one sees a whole host of powerful trajectories that explain how we are caught up in webs of self-deception and dissonance from what we know to be good in ways that escape our understanding, much less our control. Indeed, in recent years a whole host of secular philosophers (in deep contrast to the “new atheists”) have drawn appreciatively on specifically Christian theological themes in order to have conceptual material for articulating facets of the human project that standards of Enlightenment rationality simply cannot comprehend. And this has only been amplified in our global context by the West's encounter with modes of human flourishing that are quite foreign to our own traditions (and perhaps helpful for precisely that reason).

But to mine those insights requires that theology give up any pretense to being a self-sufficient discipline or a kind of Rosetta stone that can decode human actions and instead embrace deep interdisciplinarity in order to see how insights about the human condition are articulated within the realms that study it: literature, art, political science, philosophy, the sciences, and so on. Just as one cannot responsibly engage in theology without some basic levels of competence in these disciplines, then it does seem legitimate to point out that the development of these lines of inquiry have, throughout history, been so deeply imbued with theological notions (Christian and otherwise) that competent deployment of the symbols of theology have the potential to shed light on precisely the areas of wisdom that these disciplines seek to articulate. When the rewards of disciplinary dialogue are so potentially great, then monologue becomes not only impractical but also unethical.

Another way to say this is that, in theology, the distance between what we believe and the sort of systems of behavior that we perpetuate is in fact among the most interesting objects for investigation; however, that investigation is best carried on in collaboration and not the pretense of self-sufficiency. If we have had reason in these last decades to lose faith in our symbols’ ability to “function” in any straightforward or utilitarian fashion, then we should not yet give up hope that they can work in tandem with other realms of knowledge to shed some light, however imperfectly, on the ways in which our fragile attempts at realizing the good, the true, and the beautiful in our own experience are sometimes met with disaster beyond our control and sometimes graced with success beyond our deserving. Indeed, there is a good argument to be made that this is what theology has in fact always been: a discourse that seeks to make sense of the fact that both death and life (in the fullest senses of each term) are distinct possibilities at any time, and that how we orient ourselves toward God has implications for how authentically and humanely we navigate that uncertainty on earth until that day that “we know as we are known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Whether or not such discourse produces practical results, it might produce richer lives.

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He Said; He Meant

Tom Willadsen

"Every profession has its growing arsenal of jargon to throw dust in the eyes of the populace."

William Zinsser, On Writing Well.

Last summer I spent eight days at a seminar for mid-career Presbyterian ministers. I cannot remember a better organized continuing education event. As I tried to describe the experience on returning home, I remembered a conversation I had, repeatedly, with a member of my congregation.

"How are you, Lyle?"
"I can't complain."
"You could if you tried! Put some effort into it!"

Lyle could spend half an hour telling me why he does not complain, though he has some darn good reasons to; complaining is just not for him. Besides, he would add, "It doesn't do any good anyway."

I suppose I could find things to complain about. The third day at supper as I went through the buffet, I grumbled, "Cheesecake! Again?" But even this was a mere parody of the complaining that I am now completely indifferent to from members of my congregation. It was a high-quality event all around. I'm left to meta-complaining, complaining about the fact that there was nothing to complain about.

Some of my colleagues asked whether I was taking notes for one of my humor columns. And I told them, in all sincerity, "You're all so professional, ethical, healthy, and differentiated that there's really nothing funny to write about." Maybe the fact that this event was only open to mid-career pastors had something to do with the quality of our cohort. The first ten years of ministry presumably weeded out the incompetents and knotheads.

I found myself laughing at some of the jargon that we used. For example, one of my female colleagues said that her "growing edge" was "learning to say 'no.'" At a basic level, this is hardly a skill one needs to perfect. Your garden variety two-year-old has it down pat. Still, clergy tend to be "quivering mounds of availability," as we were reminded at the opening plenary lecture. Many of us find ourselves overcommitted, stressed, and facing professional burn out because we cannot say "no."

On our lone off-campus field trip we went to a variety store that could have been in Mayberry about 1961. For sale was a little battery powered device that said "no" one of six different ways each time its button was pressed. "No. "No, no, no, no, no, no." "No!" It's the kind of thing you can laugh at for thirty seconds, even though it will sit on your desk for twenty years. Still, it made me understand that there are lots of ways to say "no," and the savvy pastor should be able to say it more than one way.

There are different "no's" I use as a father too. Currently, one model I'm using a lot is, "My 'no' is not the beginning of debate." This one comes in handy with my fifteen year old. It has the finality of a cigarette snubbed out into a full ash tray.

When the president of my congregation's Presbyterian Women's group invites me to the fall retreat in Oconto, I cannot simply say "no." I need to say something like, "It's kind of you to ask me, but..." or "I'm flattered that you thought of me, but..."

Other invitations can be declined more forcefully. Miss Manners suggests using a combo-platter of "That won't be possible" and "It's simply out of the question" alternated until the favor asker gives up.

A few years ago someone taught me the different meanings of "Bless her heart," when spoken by Southern women. I now use this phrase as a verbal crossed fingers behind my back. I say "Bless your heart," but I mean:

- Each day in my prayers I lament that you had children, or
- As far as I can tell, your sole purpose on this planet is to irritate everyone you encounter, or
Given a choice between having white-hot tungsten spikes thrust through my lungs, and accepting your invitation, I'm going with the spikes, or

Remember that device I told you about that measures my hostility? Your request has rendered it obsolete, or

I hate you.

My favorite way to say "no," is "I'm sorry, I have a subsequent commitment." This one goes back to the Watergate hearings before Congress. There was confusion about the meaning of "subsequent," some witnesses used it meaning "prior." No one caught this then, and no one has caught it in the twenty years I've been saying it. It's completely honest. "Tom, wanna do this thing at my house that sounds tedious and awful?"

"No thanks, I have a subsequent commitment." And I always find that I do. Subsequent to the invitation, I am committed to doing something else, like playing Uno with my kids or vacuuming the station wagon or sitting in the living room staring off into space. These commitments I find much more rewarding than viewing the YouTube video of your visit to the podiatrist. Go ahead and think my commitment was prior to your invitation; I told the truth.

Sometimes ministers decline invitations by saying, "That's not my gift." One of the nice things about having twenty years of experience is the self-knowledge that other people are better suited to do something one has been asked to do. Not that this task is not worthy of attention, it is. Other people are better suited to do this.

Non-church professionals convey this same idea by saying, "I suck at that." I, personally, use this phrase in church settings; I find one of my gifts is to use vulgarity to jarring effect. It works for me; I shit you not.

Another bit of jargon I heard at the conference was, "Hold me accountable." As in, "When I get back to the office, I'm going to ask my secretary to really hold me accountable on this." The lay equivalent of this phrase is something like, "Nag me, please."

Clergy who are working too hard and need to step back say, "I'm giving myself permission to _______." I have always found this to be a tedious expression of desperation because usually we permit ourselves to take a day off, or not leave the shower to answer the phone. We have to excuse ourselves to live ordinary lives, as if we're slipping back into the phone booth and taking off the cape. Please. Take your day off, then take a second day off, from the guilt of taking your day off in the first place.

The bit of professional jargon I learned last summer was, "Let's unpack that." This is a very handy bit of verbal punctuation. The savvy pastor, when attacked, repeats the charge, then says, "Hmm, let's unpack that..." then proceeds to explain, calmly and clearly, using "I" statements, at least five different ways that the person making the attack is wrong, perhaps delusional. For maximum effect, the pastor should fiddle with a pipe.

Finally, I fell into using this phrase at the conference, "That's a Family of Origin Issue." I found, again for the millionth time, that my family of origin marked important occasions with food. We marked unimportant occasions with food. We communicated almost entirely with food. And we hated to waste anything, especially food. Food is more than fuel to us. It is currency; it is love. Food is what you eat; it is what eats you. So when I speared the last bite of cheesecake off a neighbor's plate (I really, really thought she wasn't going to eat it because her family of origin is from "The Anti-Clean Plate Club Planet."), it's a Family of Origin Issue. That sounds so much better than, "I'm batshit crazy." It really means, "Compared to the people who raised me, I'm pretty OK. You're not gonna leave that piece of crust on your plate, are you?"

At least that week I gave myself permission to do that.

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Images of the Invisible

Ryan Rickrode

When I was a kid I didn’t like Jesus. From first-century Palestine. That he was not immediately recognizable to his captors—that Judas had to identify him with a kiss—tells us he was, at least in the minds of the Gospel writers, an average-looking guy. He had dark skin and curly hair, and drawings from the first-century suggest he would have kept his hair cut short. The average height of a Jewish man in his day was only 5’1”, but it is not hard to imagine that he would have been broad-shouldered and strong; he was working class, the son of a carpenter or stonemason if we accept what Matthew tells us. He addressed crowds of thousands long before the invention of the microphone, and according to Mark he spoke with more authority than the established religious leaders of his day. According to the Gospel of John, he drove the moneychangers from the temple with a whip. He was not a soft-skinned weakling; he was executed as an enemy of the state. He was dangerous. He was also probably dirty and tattered and more than a little scraggly, as he walked almost everywhere. His weather-beaten face would have made him look older than his years, but I imagine he had a good smile. The Gospels make it clear that he was hugely popular, especially at parties, and that he was not against a little bit of wine. He had compassion and patience, and he liked people, especially the down-and-out and unimportant. He gave priority to children in a culture that routinely practiced infanticide, and he did not smite his disciples when they bickered with each other. From first-century Palestine. That he was not immediately recognizable to his captors—that Judas had to identify him with a kiss—tells us he was, at least in the minds of the Gospel writers, an average-looking guy. He had dark skin and curly hair, and drawings from the first-century suggest he would have kept his hair cut short. The average height of a Jewish man in his day was only 5’1”, but it is not hard to imagine that he would have been broad-shouldered and strong; he was working class, the son of a carpenter or stonemason if we accept what Matthew tells us. He addressed crowds of thousands long before the invention of the microphone, and according to Mark he spoke with more authority than the established religious leaders of his day. According to the Gospel of John, he drove the moneychangers from the temple with a whip. He was not a soft-skinned weakling; he was executed as an enemy of the state. He was dangerous. He was also probably dirty and tattered and more than a little scraggly, as he walked almost everywhere. His weather-beaten face would have made him look older than his years, but I imagine he had a good smile. The Gospels make it clear that he was hugely popular, especially at parties, and that he was not against a little bit of wine. He had compassion and patience, and he liked people, especially the down-and-out and unimportant. He gave priority to children in a culture that routinely practiced infanticide, and he did not smite his disciples when they bickered with each other.
According to Luke, as he was dying on the cross, he cried out, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." He would have looked nothing like the anemic, effeminate figure we find in much of Western art. As my friend Corinne once put it, "He probably looked a lot like Bin Laden."

It did not occur to me that Jesus was not a white guy until I was a sophomore in college. I was doing research for a paper on the Gospels, standing in the stacks at the library flipping through the second volume of J. P. Meier's Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus when I noticed that the Jesus on the dust jacket was a Semitic man whom I'd at first mistaken for Moses. In the moment this epiphany felt deceptively small—of course Jesus wasn't a white guy!—and it wasn't until I returned to the Gospels to read them not with the critical eye of a religion major but with the devotion of a believer that I felt the full force of this discovery. The problem was—and remains—this: When I try to immerse myself in the stories of the Gospels, to really absorb them, it is all too often the petty white Warner Sallman Jesus of my childhood whom I see healing the leper, teaching the disciples, crossing the surface of the sea. No matter how carefully I piece together the kind, scruffy person I know he must have been, that image is always shattered and it starts with his skin. I want to see it copper brown, the way it surely must have been, but that image is exploded with white, not just Caucasian white, but a fluorescent white that I'm sure would have made Jesus stand out to his captors on the night of his arrest.

Warner Sallman's famous 1940 oil painting The Head of Christ has been reproduced over half a billion times, on plaques, bookmarks, church bulletins, funeral cards, Christmas cards, calendars, buttons, coffee mugs, stickers, billboards, key chains, and, in the 1950s, on glowing "Inspira-Clocks" and "Inspira-Lamps" (Grimes 1994; Prothero 2003, 116). A copy hung in my grandmother's apartment, and I saw it after church every Sunday.

The painting's first printing in 1941 produced a hundred thousand copies that sold out in two months. By the end of the year over a million copies had been purchased, and the following year sales tripled (Prothero, 117). Many of these first prints were wallet-sized copies that were mailed to American soldiers fighting overseas or, later, distributed domestically through the "Christ in Every Purse" program, an initiative that aimed to counter the influence of "card-carrying Communists" by creating "card-carrying Christians" (117).

By the time the appeal of the painting began to wane in the 1960s, American culture had grown too divided for any one image of Jesus to displace Sallman's, so Sallman's Jesus became the Jesus, the Jesus of our culture's collective imagination, the one we regularly spot on burnt food, stained surfaces, fuzzy x-rays, and Family Guy episodes. The painting is, in the words of historian Stephen Prothero, "a twentieth-century version of the Shroud of Turin," an image that purportedly reveals not only Jesus' personality, "but also the shape of his nose and cut of his beard" (118).

Sallman himself allegedly claimed that the image came to him in a dream; there he was, seated at his drawing board, the picture already complete. When he woke he went to work recreating what he had seen, and while I don't doubt Sallman's heart was in the right place as he sketched, I am troubled by the way Sallman, his admirers, and his distributors have so readily removed Jesus from the world he actually inhabited. Gone in Sallman's work are the details of time and place that help us understand who Jesus really was. The painting came to Sallman in a dream, and its accuracy was attested to by people who encountered Jesus in dreams of their own.

In America we have always been good at taking Jesus out of context and refashioning him in our own image. Shortly after the Louisiana Purchase, Thomas Jefferson did it with scissors. He sat down with four copies of the Bible, clipped out all the Gospel passages he deemed "authentic," and created the first draft of what would eventually become known as the Jefferson Bible (Prothero, 23). The task, he later wrote to John Adams, was "obvious and easy," the authentic...
passages “as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill” (Jefferson, 1813). Jefferson’s redaction omitted 90 percent of the verses found in the Gospels—no healings, no miracles, no resurrection—and instead presented Jesus as a moral philosopher (Prothero, 25) who probably would have felt more at home with Jefferson in the Age of Enlightenment than in first-century Palestine where, as even some of today’s most skeptical scholars have pointed out, magicians and miracle workers who healed the sick and cast out demons were accepted as facts of life.

Similarly, during the ruggedly masculine era of Teddy Roosevelt American Christians published books that placed a heavy emphasis on Jesus’ virility, books with titles like Manhood of the Master and The Manly Christ: A New View. In The Masculine Power of Christ, Jason Noble Pierce told his readers that Christ possessed “virile power which every man may share, which makes every man great” in much the same way that Laurie Beth Jones, during the prosperous, politically correct mid-1990s, told her readers in Jesus CEO that Christ had “many feminine values in management” and that “his approach with his staff often ran counter to other management styles and techniques” that she had encountered (Pierce 1912, 2; Jones 1995, xiv). Even more recently, four days before the 2012 presidential election, CNN published an online article titled “Do You Believe in a Red State Jesus or a Blue State Jesus?” The piece came complete with a ten-question Cosmo-style quiz: “Do you believe Jesus was a healer who provided free universal health care?” (Blake, 2012).

It was at the end of the “manly Christ” craze that a teacher at the Moody Bible Institute encouraged a young Warner Sallman to take up the subject of Christ in his art. “Make Him a real man!” the teacher reportedly told him. “Make Him rugged, not effeminate. Make Him strong and masculine, so people will see in His face that He slept under the stars, drove the moneychangers out of the temple, and faced Calvary in triumph” (quoted in Doss 1996, 80). It’s not bad advice, grounding Jesus within the narrative through which we are able to know him, but it’s advice Sallman seems not to have taken.

While critics over the years have skewered Sallman for the androgyny of his Jesus, Prothero argues that the broader contextual ambiguity of the image may actually have been the key to the paintings’ incredible popularity:

Sallman divorced his subject entirely from the biblical narratives. Instead of interacting with his disciples or his mother or even with God, Sallman’s Jesus engaged the viewer directly, and he did so in a way that was inviting, reassuring, comforting, and intimate... Different Americans could read different Jesuses into it, and apparently they did just that. The picture sold spectacularly well among evangelicals, who claimed Sallman as one of their own. It was also popular among liberal Protestants and some Roman Catholics, in part because... it was not identified with any one denomination or any particular theological stance. (119)

Untethered from his historical context and narrative framework, Sallman’s Jesus was pliable enough to support or oppose any cause, including Communism. The painting sold well, as Prothero points out, not only among conservative evangelicals like Sallman himself, but also among Catholics and liberal Protestants who, in the 1940s and 1950s, were both eager to set aside denominational differences in order to present a unified front against godless Communism. The “Christ in Every Purse” program drew praise from both Dwight Eisenhower and J. Edgar Hoover (Prothero, 117).

The pliability of Sallman’s Jesus, however, can be seen even more clearly in the smaller behavioral “miracles” attributed to the painting. In Virginia, a businessman reported to Newsweek that no one in his office had cursed since he’d put the picture on his desk (Morgan 1996, 188). In the Midwest, one pastor’s wife made her son, whenever he acted out, stand before the portrait and “tell Jesus you’re sorry” (188). One copy even reportedly saved its owner from being robbed at gunpoint. “Lady, I can’t do it,” the thief said,
"not with him behind you" (188). In essence, by presenting Jesus apart from any sort of narrative or cultural-historical backdrop—and thus apart from any specific claims about who Jesus was and what he did or didn't stand for—Sallman created the perfect banner for American Christians to rally beneath: a nice Jesus.

In the Bible Jesus is called "the image of the invisible God," "the exact imprint of his very being," a living symbol, a synecdoche with legs (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Christianity has always maintained that by looking at Jesus we glimpse God, and so for Christians the quest for a deep and true historical understanding of Jesus is, in the words of New Testament scholar N.T. Wright (1999), "part of, indeed perhaps the sharp edge of, our exploration of God himself" (15). His skin color matters not because skin color should matter, but because accuracy matters, or should when we're picturing someone as important as God.

During the Reformation, many Protestant leaders attempted to do away with religious imagery altogether. Calvin reasoned that since it is impossible to picture God we shouldn't try, and he banned all representations of God in human form from his churches (McGrath 2006, 210). According to the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, the ideal church was to be free of any and all distracting and potentially idolatrous art, its walls whitewashed and unadorned to prevent believers from becoming distracted from the reading and preaching of the Bible (209). Such intense caution, however, as well-intentioned as it may have been, is not a solution to the problem of misleading religious images, but an error in the opposite direction. If a Jesus without context is ultimately meaningless, so too is a God who cannot be pictured. After all, isn't the God of Christianity a God incarnate, a God fond of parables and metaphor, a God who descends to meet us where we are? "It is a small step," writes historian Alister McGrath, "from declaring that God cannot be pictured to suggesting that he cannot be conceived as a living reality in the rich imaginative life of humanity" (212). He argues that the "failure of the Protestant imagination" helped give rise to the functional atheism (i.e. Christians living their daily lives as if God's existence didn't particularly matter) that contributed to the rise of outright intellectual atheism in the centuries that followed.

And so I choose to cast my lot with those like novelist Madeleine L'Engle, who shares with the Orthodox iconographers the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth "did not walk around Galilee faceless" (1980, 26). Though she's no fan of paintings that portray Jesus as a "tubercular, fair-haired blue-eyed guy," L'Engle still believes that a faithfully rendered image of Jesus can act as "an open window through which we can be given a glimpse of the love of God," and I agree (26). The images of Jesus I'm drawn to, the ones I choose to hang on my walls, are the images that somehow ask for my surrender, the images that draw me through themselves into a place where I am invited to contemplate who Christ really was.

In 2002, a forensic anthropologist named Richard Neave created a digital reconstruction of Jesus' face, that is, a reconstruction of the face of a typical first-century Galilean man (Fillon 2002). After examining period artwork, taking CT scans of skulls uncovered near Jerusalem, and studying the accounts of the Gospel writers, Neave confirmed what should have been obvious: Jesus was not a white guy. The face of Jesus, he concluded, would have looked something like this:
Which is to say that, for me, the face of Jesus is the face of a stranger. He is not someone I would recognize if I passed him on the street or sat next to in a pew, but maybe that's a good thing. Maybe it is the mystery that keeps me leaning in when I read the Gospels. When the two disciples on the road to Emmaus encountered Jesus they didn't recognize him. They spent the afternoon walking and talking with him—telling him about the rumors of his own resurrection—but they didn't recognize him, not even when he interpreted for them the things written about himself in their scriptures. It wasn't until he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them that he suddenly fell into context and they saw who he was. His identity was revealed to them, and he disappeared.

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Works Cited


BEKENNTNIS DER SÜNDEN

Confession is where my new church begins. Come clean early before rattling off hymns, remembering ourselves pious—Someone has chosen a new song. Even the choir mumbles through, except for Mrs. Maud. Discorded unity. We each hold a different note and I’m glad I don’t know the two girls laughing behind me, don’t join in like I used to. I’m a woman now, I guess. Like a good Lutheran, I’ve learned to carry on. We sing words unsure and sure our souls. Grace or mercy? At church camp, I never knew the answer. Learned faith was messy. Look at us. We imitate, render His sky with finger paint like kids paint people: no bodies, just faces, hands.

Jennifer Raha
Richard Linklater’s Boyhood
A Long Series of Goodbyes

Gregory Maher

Boyhood opens with a transition: the family around which the film revolves is moving out of their home, and we get the full sense of its home-liness just before it is gone. The family packs and prepares to sell their house; there is work to do. Single mother Olivia (Patricia Arquette) plops paintbrushes in her two children’s hands with orders to make the walls—which are well-graffitied with youthful art—look new. In this moment, in the face of erasure, we suddenly notice the marks that signify presence, the individual histories of the children. A wide shot shows the children painting—after some grousing—and then switches to a close-up shot of a doorframe. The frame is marked with the familiar etchings of height, pen and pencil scrawled to mark the stages of growth. Suddenly the marks are gone as a paint brush sweeps a thick glob of white downwards, seemingly erasing the progress of the children. Scene change.

This opening scene creates a kind of sick tension of moving forward into the unknown while saying goodbye to the present, the comfortable. And this tension carries the viewer through the film, through twelve years during which the characters age through fads, fashions, and relationships that stir us with the embarrassment and nostalgia of old Facebook photos. Director Richard Linklater plays Olivia against father Mason Sr. (Ethan Hawke), a divorced couple who cross paths time after time as they each seek their own fulfillment in other partners. Children Mason Jr. (Ellar Coltrane) and Samantha (Lorelai Linklater) follow Olivia from home to home in a fugitive cycle, tenaciously holding on to their family despite external circumstances and the unsavory cast of characters Olivia marries.

Texan Richard Linklater is masterful in his poignant use of reality, in all its awkwardness, its fleeting pain and joy. Treating the aspirations and obsessions of the 1990s, Linklater’s films often share “a concern with characters adrift. Everybody... is somebody in between, somebody who used to be a student or used to have a job, somebody who hasn’t quite figured out what he’s going to do with his life” (Rick Barton, “Grunge Cinema: Five by Three for X,” The Cresset, December 1994). Progression turns hollow in the face of disturbance and pain, in the realization that life cannot be contained in a lapse of grief, nor rest in happiness too long. His characters often seem to be stunned at moments into clarity, to then be lost again as they wage a futile battle with time. Think of Linklater’s Dazed and Confused, the story of an impulsive, hazy, all-nighter that is underlain with the knowledge that the moment will end, that dawn will come and the party will fade into a mythic past. A moment is ephemeral, undecided in the face of the constant, and distinctly human, push for control. Linklater finally leaves the essence of growth, of what a boy- or girl- hood is, at the potency of a moment.

Cinema often serves as a distraction from reality, but Boyhood can’t necessarily fulfill this purpose because it draws from the very grains of sand which comprise reality: endless seconds and moments of lives. Linklater’s style revels in detail: the warmth with which a mother strokes her son’s straw-like hair, the “likes” and adolescent colloquialisms of Mason, a point-of-view shot as Hawke unzips to put out a campfire the “old-fashioned way.” The movie is idiosyncratic in its span of creation: over twelve years the cast and crew gathered for weeks at a time to film. This allowed Linklater time for reflection as a writer, to respond to and include details of his actors’ lives as they aged with their characters. The dialogue, some of which is drawn directly from real-life conversations actor Ellar Coltrane had with girls at parties, is rehearsed, beaten in until it aligns with the rhythm of reality. This is not to say it was spontaneous or improvised—Linklater rehearses
his actors with vigor—but that there is a kind of reality that cannot be merely taped as documentary. Hand-filmed segments are necessarily limiting because they lack the effortful illusion of cinema. The director must allow the performances to appear as natural, human, and poignant as possible. More remarkable is the ability of these actors to both draw from their own experiences of aging, and to see their previous work edited and refined as reference before performing further scenes. The film becomes a theater of life, performance after performance, each responding to the last. You can't help but grow with the characters and invest in their lives.

Boyhood finds its greatest potency in reminding us that there is art in the moments that make up our lives. That—with each turn—from the first lost tooth to the first gray hair, there is some abiding enchantment. Too often the transitions, the ephemera of our lives, are cut away like lengthy hair to leave those few snapshots which lay framed behind glass. And sometimes we humans forget the art of living. It is easy to forget, say, the significance of a child's haircut, cleanly shifting appearance for a time, or the first scintillations of interest between two teenagers, shared in a walk or awkward conversation. Each moment passes by, streaks backwards with millions of other routine moments, stockpiled or dumped in our collective memories.

How, for example, can I not connect to my own youth? And doesn't this seem like Linklater's purpose, to draw us not merely into the rosy memory of nostalgia but to re-member, to confront the formative and often painful moments? As Mason's stepfather takes him to get his hair cut—"your hair makes you look like a girl"—the barber's Longhorns cap and shirt with old trucks make a painful caricature. Mason sits in the chair, hair drooping over his eyes as the barber goes to his age-old task. New stepfather Bill stands watching, lips pressed, belly pushed out and arms crossed confidently above. It's a massacre. You can see it in Mason's eyes afterward, the shock of losing an identifier, something which distinguishes and allows autonomy in at least that regard.

But this scene is moreover important in how it is echoed, indeed reified so many times over a child's boy-or-girl-hood. The father figure, otherwise fearing that his own manhood will be questioned, becomes a mouthpiece for unseen rules of gender. Manhood is displayed by not sticking out, and short hair fulfills normativity by not being noticeable; later in life Mason deliberately contradicts these norms by wearing purple nail polish and sporting an earring. Androgyny becomes a weapon against relentless stepfathers who resort to a one-track power trip: the I'm-the-one-who-pays-the-bills. It also reflects the kind of cultural androgyny toward which fashion and appearance shifted in the 1990s, think blue jeans and flannel for instance. I was struck, not by the eerie ease with which I could replace Mason with myself, and Bill with my own father, but by how I still felt the pang of discomfort, the vague feeling that perhaps I am still measured under these constraints. Boyhood for Linklater is a schema in which gender, like identity, is unfixed, constantly navigated through life, and perhaps unknowable.

It is easy to start consuming the film, to eat up the moments almost voyeuristically. The camera in this sense is very intimate with its characters, growing with them over the twelve years of the film. At times, it takes the place of an absent father, looking over its shoulder to the fighting siblings in the back seat as mother Olivia implores "Okay, we're going to play a game: Whoever can stay quiet the longest wins. And, go!" Or it nudges up to Mason's face, reveling in the awkwardness of half-formed
thoughts and conversations with girls. At its most revealing, it hovers tenderly above Mason in bed with girlfriend Sheena before a roommate walks in and disturbs the scene. The viewer pulls back with the camera, tingling with the awkwardness of the situation.

At its best, the camera allows close-ups in which micro-expressions reveal human experience (a credit to the actors). The viewer reads a character’s face as if in conversation herself, reminded of conversations in which each actor—in life—tries to get past the façade of another, to something more human. Sometimes it is unwanted, as Mason (often a stand-in for the camera, a silent observer) notices looks between his mother and men she meets. Here we see a look of perplexity, the child’s undesired experience of the thought that a mother might be dateable, attractive even. Poet Allison Joseph sums it up better than pop psychology: “Did you want to know that your parents were human too?”

How poignant, then, that Mason’s mother keeps falling into the same flawed cycle of new home and new husband who turns to alcohol, as her two children continue to age. This “character drift” is often a linchpin of Linklater’s characterization, a vague awareness that there is something terribly important to be found in a moment, an experience, or late at night, drifting within a black haze. But then the character wakes up, the next day has arrived, and that haze—and its accompanying mystery—has vanished with the routine light of morning. Ultimately, Arquette’s character breaks down as she helps Mason pack for college and realizes a new emptiness of her surroundings: “I knew this day would come, except why is it happening now?”

What happens, Linklater questions, in that push, in that demand to know, control, and live in a steady beyond, a future always one step ahead of the present? For Olivia, life becomes a series of losses: “I’ve spent the first half of my life acquiring all this stuff. Now I’m going to spend the next half getting rid of it all.” Artifacts do, after all, populate the movie. A birthday shotgun, a carefully-curated mix cd, a handle of Tito’s Vodka hid behind laundry detergent. Each object becomes a representation of desire, material fulfillment at surface level, but too often a sign of emptiness.

The potency revives in the final scenes, a heavy expectancy that gilds the fresh nervousness of Mason going to college. He meets his roommate, accepting an offer to go hike the rust red hills of a nearby park with his roommate’s girlfriend, and her roommate Nicole. Clearly a set-up. Mason and Nicole hang back, discussing how moments of life seize or are seized. With alarming clarity, Mason describes that in fact, they are always in the moment. Mason, who appears so lost to adult characters who question his identity, his drive, and his obedience to societal standards seems to emerge. Through the haze of a life half-lived, the view through the window beckons. Linklater uses the landscape of Texas—and a distinctly adrift family—to remind his viewers that life is rich with the present, even while so many films urge us to distraction, to escape. So Mason and Nicole sit atop sunset-crowned boulders as the conversation continues... and halts in awkward, warm moments of interest. “What next?” we wonder, as Mason stares searchingly into the eyes of this new companion. “What next?”

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Near the beginning of his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, the English art critic John Berger emphasizes that the act of seeing is more than just looking; rather, “we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.” As a result, Berger explains, images are more than just a perfect, objective record of what was seen. Instead, they “embod[y] a way of seeing,” the relationship between the person creating the image and the image itself. Take the example of the photograph. As Berger explains, “Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject.” In this way, an image is more than just a representation of a subject. It is also a representation of its creator’s relationship with the subject, as well as the viewer’s own understanding of the image and its place in the world.

While Berger’s analysis focuses on still images, his argument that the way in which we see affects how we understand can be applied to moving images as well. For example, the television show *Scrubs*, which aired on NBC (and later ABC) from 2001 to 2010, told the story of employees at Sacred Heart Hospital, focusing on a young doctor named J. D., who is prone to daydreams and ridiculous fantasies. Unlike many sitcoms, *Scrubs* used a single-camera setup, which gave the show a stark grounding in reality in spite of J. D.’s wild imagination.

The effect of this camera setup became particularly apparent during the season four episode, “My Life in Four Cameras.” The episode began with J. D. telling a patient he has lung cancer, Dr. Cox firing a cafeteria worker, and Turk and Carla (two of J. D.’s best friends) having relationship problems. After J. D. comments in a voiceover, “There are moments when we all wish life was more like a sitcom,” the camera setup shifts from the usual single-camera to a multi-camera setup, complete with bright lighting and a laugh track. Everything takes a turn for the better, leading up to a talent show that magically fixes all the earlier conflicts. As J. D. turns to deliver the voiceover to end the show, his patient collapses, and J. D.’s colleagues rush to help. J. D. looks on, saying, “Wait—this isn’t right,” a comment that draws attention to the incongruity between the cinematography and the direction of the plot. At that point, the camera shifts back to a single point of view, the lights darken, and reality sets back in. The shifts in camera setup throughout this episode underscore how the way in which we see affects how we interpret what we are seeing, a fact particularly important when analyzing the carefully constructed shots of television shows and films.

Thinking about these ways of seeing draws attention to a cinematographic technique used in two recently popular shows—ABC’s *Scandal* and the BBC’s *Sherlock*—that gives viewers a way of seeing moral ambiguity in the actions of key characters. *Scandal* centers on the character of Olivia Pope, the head of a crisis management firm in Washington, DC. Pope, played by Kerry Washington, is extremely good at her job, and she sees her work as a way to fight evil in the world. This is made very clear from the very beginning of the show. In the first episode, Olivia’s colleague Harrison tells a future employee what it means to be a part of Olivia Pope and Associates; he says, “We’re the good guys... Best job you’ll ever have. You’ll change lives, slay dragons, love the hunt more than you ever dreamed because Olivia Pope is as amazing as they say... I’m a gladiator in a suit ‘cause that’s what you are when you work for Olivia.” This theme
of being a "gladiator in a suit" recurs throughout the first three seasons of Scandal (the fourth season will air beginning in September 2014); multiple characters use this phrase to describe the work they do with Olivia. Olivia also frequently talks about wearing her "white hat" as she fights for justice, a phrase reinforced by the costumers of the show who dress Olivia in cream-colored pantsuits, white sweaters, and soft, light-colored fabrics. These elements work together to create the picture of Olivia Pope as someone firmly on the side of good.

And yet things are much more complicated than they appear. For starters, Olivia's personal life is morally complicated; she is having an affair with the married President of the United States. And while the first season showed Olivia clearly fighting to protect innocent people, seasons two and three showed her rigging an election, manipulating the lives of those close to her, and questioning her ability to accomplish anything good through her work in DC. The lives of those close to Olivia reflect this murky morality as well. Her sometime-boyfriend Jake Ballard is a shadowy figure who initially appears to be someone protecting the President, but later episodes reveal that he works for a secret spy organization. Huck, one of Olivia's associates, uncovers information key to many of her investigations, but he often uses torture to acquire this knowledge. Even the names of the second season premiere and finale—"White Hat's Off" and "White Hat's Back On"—emphasize the shifting, uncertain nature of what is right and what is wrong in Olivia's universe.

Returning to Berger's argument, the way in which the show is shot reflects this ambiguous morality. A frequently used shot throughout Scandal's three seasons—in fact, perhaps its visual trademark—shows various characters, but particularly Olivia, through glass, making them appear fragmented. For example, in one of the final scenes in the season three finale, "The Price of Free and Fair Election," Olivia tells two of her associates that she is leaving the firm, but throughout the entire sequence, there is not a single shot of any of the characters without some sort of distortion. Olivia's colleague Abby speaks of the moral certainty she once felt while working for her: "Over a cliff, Liv. Over a cliff! We went over a cliff for you and you just, you walk out on us?" Olivia reassures Abby that she will be taken care of, but the fragmented representation of this key decision calls into question this promise of security. Even though Olivia appears to ride off into the sunset on a jet at the end of the season finale, the uncertainty and ambiguity established by the cinematographic choices throughout the show leave viewers doubting that Olivia will remain outside of the murky morality of Washington, DC.

A similar cinematographic technique is used in Sherlock during the third episode of season three. Sherlock is a twenty-first-century retelling of many of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's classic stories. This particular episode, entitled "His Last Vow," is based on the story "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton." The episode pits Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Dr. John Watson (Martin Freeman) against a newspaperman named Charles Magnusson, who has information about most of the powerful people in England and uses it for blackmail.
Throughout the episode, viewers receive distorted glimpses of scenes. As it opens, we first see a blurry shot of someone’s glasses, with the camera positioned below the glasses and the fluorescent lights of the ceiling out of focus. Next comes a blurry shot of Lady Smallwood, a government official who is questioning Magnussen about his influence over the British Prime Minister, and we see that Magnussen is sitting without his glasses. As with Scandal, these noticeable visual distortions provide clues that this episode of Sherlock deals with uncertainty and ambiguity.

The nature of this ambiguity becomes clear shortly after the opening scenes when Magnussen visits Lady Smallwood and reminds her of compromising letters that her husband had written long ago. When she accuses him of trying to blackmail her, Magnussen responds, “Of course it isn’t blackmail. This is... ownership.” While blackmail is clearly a crime, ownership is a broader issue that occupies a less well-defined moral space. Magnussen’s use of information to influence politicians and even entire governments falls into this space and could be considered what Sherlock’s brother Mycroft calls “a necessary evil.”

While it would be tempting to attribute moral ambiguity only to Magnussen, the episode rejects such easy interpretation, both visually and in terms of the plot. Dr. John Watson’s dreams of combat in Afghanistan, interspersed with memories of Sherlock Holmes, are blurred around the edges. John’s visit to a drug house is marked with visually distorted shots as well. These visual effects are accompanied by moments of uncertain morality. Not only do we see John harm a man to gain information (and satisfy his own craving for danger), but we also see Sherlock himself on drugs, allegedly as part of his undercover work for a case. Midway through the episode, viewers see fragmented shots of Mary, John’s wife, as part of a secondary plotline involving Mary’s secret past. The cinematography used during these moments reminds viewers that Sherlock, John, and Mary are complex, fallible humans, rather than just heroes fighting evil.

However, as the episode progresses the ambiguity surrounding these central characters falls away. As Sherlock and John fall back into their old routine, viewers are provided with mostly clear shots of the two men, without any special effects. Shots of Magnussen, on the other hand, continue to be distorted. During his first meeting with Sherlock, Magnussen at first can be seen only reflected in the layered border of a mirror. Near the end of the episode, Sherlock tries on Magnussen’s glasses, giving the viewer yet another blurry look at this man who balances on the border between citizen and criminal.

The ending of the episode seems at first to resolve this distortion and to offer an exoneration of Magnussen. When he reveals to Sherlock and John that his vault of compromising information is kept nowhere but in his mind, Magnussen is seated in an all-white room, facing the camera, without any distortion or blurriness, a portrait of goodness and light. He even tells Sherlock, “I’m not a villain. I have no evil plan. I’m a businessman, acquiring assets.” But in spite of both this visual and verbal rejection of evil, it comes as too little, too late. The consistent visual and moral distortion of Magnussen throughout the episode is too strong to overcome in the end. His death at the hand of Sherlock brings instantaneous relief to the tensions in the plot; moral and visual clarity once more take precedence.
Although both *Sherlock* and *Scandal* employ similar cinematographic techniques to represent the ambiguous morality in both shows, the source of this distortion is quite different. In *Scandal*, the visual distortion comes from the outside, looking in at Olivia and her associates through a window or the lens of a camera. In *Sherlock*, on the other hand, particularly in the opening scenes, the distortion comes as viewers are looking at the world through Magnussen's eyes. This visual distinction suggests that Olivia's ambiguous morality comes as a result of external pressures, while Magnussen's lack of clear moral categories is an intrinsic part of his nature. Such a reading is further enhanced by a plot twist late in the *Sherlock* episode; the glasses Magnussen wears, which are the source of much of the visual distortion throughout the episode, are not embedded with a computer as Sherlock has supposed. Rather, the secrets Magnussen keeps are all stored in his memories, making his mind the ultimate source for his ambiguous morality. The visual distinction between *Sherlock* and *Scandal* might also explain why the only possible resolution of "His Last Vow" was for Magnussen to die, eliminating his inherent moral uncertainty from the show, while on the other hand, millions of viewers are still eager to tune in to *Scandal* each week, hoping to see Olivia push back against the world around her and find her white hat once again, maybe this time for good.

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**THE CARNIVORES**

'Then Jesus took off his sugarcoat
& walked into the wild

like an aborigine; 'there he met beast after beast
that beheld him. And he

countermanded them, turning their appetites
into his flesh. "Their tongues,

reconstituted as deviled meat,
he stored under the roof of his mouth; 
for he spoke

in parables. The hyena, caked
in blood, 'dreamed of a wedding cake.

L. S. Klatt
Each fall, when the new academic year rolls around, a professor’s thoughts naturally turn once more toward educational matters. Over the course of a summer, jadedness gives way to fond hopes for what students—under the professor’s wise guidance, of course—will accomplish. At the outset of Western philosophy, in the Republic, Plato taught that education was fundamentally about the shaping of souls, surely as noble a task as one could imagine embarking upon. Like the would-be philosophers in the cave, each new batch of students must be transformed. Their young souls must be turned away from the shadows on the wall of the cave so that they can learn to gaze upon the sun itself, gradually coming to understand the nature of the Good. How will I shape my students’ souls in this new semester?

I found myself pondering this question as I took up one of the annual tasks of the new year: updating my syllabi. Unfortunately, I was prompted to such reflection less by optimism or grand ambitions than by a sense of gloom at the degree to which the soul-shaping is these days driven by people with perhaps the smallest of all souls: government bureaucrats. It seems that we have some new syllabi requirements to comply with this year. I was reminded of this by an email from my associate dean, who was dutifully seeking to ensure that we faculty do what we are supposed to do, especially as the institution where I teach undergoes the decadal ritual of seeking reaccreditation. Not all of the reminders were about entirely new requirements, but one especially annoying and useless—even annoyingly useless—requirement was.

Beginning this fall, I am supposed to include in my syllabi “time-on-task” expectations; that is, I am supposed to indicate how much time I expect my students to spend, on average, completing the various course assignments. For instance—just to borrow a few examples from the new policy language in our college catalog—they might spend “3 minutes per page (approx. 100 words per minute)” completing their “assigned reading”; or, if they are asked to “participate in online dialogue(s)” (as my own students surely are not!), they can expect this to require of them “1 hour for 5 postings (original or in response to other posters), each of which consists of at least 5 sentences or 30 seconds of recorded material”; or, in an almost embarrassingly conventional assignment, they might need to spend “1.5 hours per finished page” completing the “writing/editing component” of a “researched paper.” (This is presumably the same thing as the more familiar “research paper.”) These estimates, I can assure you, are the result of considerable “dialogue,” much of it “synchronous,” but some of it also “asynchronous” and “online.”

As unlikely as it might first seem, I owe this inelegant invasion of my syllabi to the federal government. It is no secret that higher education has become a political issue of increasing salience in recent years. The Department of Education has therefore come up with a number of “Program Integrity Regulations.” Among its accomplishments in this regard is to have settled on an official federal definition of the credit hour, the lack of which has long been a source of profound concern among citizens of all political persuasions. The United States Department of Education defines a “credit hour” as an “amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutionally...
established equivalency that reasonably approximates not less than: (1) one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit....”

There is more, but that is the basic idea. Before continuing, let us pause a moment to ponder how much more successful Socrates might have been in educating future philosopher-kings had he only known this definition, the Form of the Credit Hour, if you will. Might he have been spared the hemlock?

The American public is overly prone to populist anti-intellectualism, but colleges and universities have made themselves increasingly easy targets over the last several decades.

It does not, of course, take a satirist of any great skill to mock this sort of thing. So let me preface the coming criticism by insisting that I do not intend here to engage in any special pleading on behalf of colleges and universities. They have only themselves to blame for becoming the objects of such scrutiny and have, indeed, brought this fate upon themselves. The politicization of campuses; the revolt against much of Western culture and its values, and thus against students' own homes and parents; the proliferation of pointless majors and silly classes; and, especially, the skyrocketing price tag for enjoying all of the above have made institutions of higher education into objects of profound cultural suspicion. The American public is overly prone to populist anti-intellectualism, but colleges and universities have made themselves increasingly easy targets over the last several decades. So one can reasonably defend the government’s motives (if not its actions or its common sense).

Even the time-on-task requirements have a reasonable explanation. The point of defining the credit hour is to protect students and their families against potential fraud. Ensuring that a credit hour represents some reasonably consistent amount of work, linked to measurable learning, enables more meaningful comparisons across institutions while creating barriers against watered-down programs, especially in new areas such as online and for-profit education, where students risk spending money to acquire paper credentials that are not what they claim to be. Nor is the government itself actually inspecting my syllabi (though the NSA has no doubt read them thoroughly, even before I have finished writing them). Rather, having established the definition of a credit hour, it entrusts the task of enforcing it in a consistent fashion to the accrediting agencies. And the easiest way for the accreditors to do that is simply to require me to document the amount of work that my course, which is ostensibly worth four hours of credit, actually requires of students. Hence the time-on-task reminder from my associate dean, especially in light of our coming re-accreditation review.

Even if this chain of cause and effect can be explained as the product of reasonable motives, surely the end result is absurd. Does any sane person really think that my including in my syllabi the amount of time it will take students to accomplish various tasks will improve their education? Surely not. But if not, why bother? What is really going on here?

At moments like these—which unfortunately are ever more frequent—I find myself wondering whether we are witnessing a new stage in the ongoing bureaucratization of society. Bureaucracy, of course, has long been recognized as a hallmark of the modern state; Max Weber famously explained it in terms of the increasing rationalization of society. But something like this time-on-task requirement—which is closely linked to the immensely powerful movement in higher education for “outcomes assessment,” alluded to in the credit hour definition’s reference to “intended learning outcomes”—does seem to reflect a more advanced degree of regulatory mania.
combined with silliness. (Readers in the field of education will know all too well what “outcomes assessment” is about. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, permit me simply to remind you that ignorance is bliss.) As a working hypothesis, I suggest that two social factors are combining to drive this development. The first is the growth of a knowledge-based economy, in which increasing numbers of jobs are white-collar and highly skilled workers are in ever greater demand. The second is the continually increasing number of Americans seeking a college education, fueled both by the knowledge that a college degree pays economic dividends and also by our continued political and cultural insistence that everyone ought to go to college.

This is a problematic combination. The economy demands more and more intelligent and talented people. So we seek to satisfy that demand by sending ever more people to college. It cannot be the case, however, that ever-increasing percentages of Americans are highly intelligent and talented. It would seem, therefore, that a society that produces increasing numbers of college graduates over time is necessarily producing increasing numbers of people who possess paper qualifications that overstate their actual accomplishments and abilities. (In this connection, it is interesting to note that the ACT, in its report “The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2014,” found that while 86 percent of those students who took the ACT in 2014 “aspired to postsecondary education,” only 39 percent of them, based on their ACT performance, had “a strong likelihood of experiencing success in first-year college courses.”) What are such qualified-on-paper-but-only-moderately-talented people to do? What sorts of jobs are suitable for them, jobs consonant with their own sense of achievement and merit but not actually requiring any great level of wisdom?

These are precisely the sorts of people who go on to become bureaucrats and middle managers, deputy assistant directors of this or associate junior manager of that. They constitute an army of people requiring work that seems important, regardless of how much truly important work there is to be done. They need to justify their existence, which they do by passing continuous regulations and revisions of regulations, which of course require in turn still more mid-level bureaucrats to oversee and enforce them. They derive satisfaction from doing things like requiring faculty to include time-on-task expectations in their syllabi, and perhaps they even believe that in doing so they are making the world a better place. Possibly they represent a new sociological phenomenon—a kind of combination of the “revolt of the masses” with the “iron law of bureaucracy”—in need of further study. Indeed, they would probably be happy to study it themselves. The Department of Education could create a special commission, naturally with numerous subcommittees, to study “Bureaucratic Expansion and the Knowledge Economy in a Global Age.” Such a committee could then issue a set of recommended “best practices” for the rest of us to implement, complete with expected outcomes and an assessment plan.

Tocqueville, as usual, saw it coming. Classical political philosophers like Aristotle understood democracy as the rule of the poor, by which poor majorities systematically sought to redistribute the wealthy’s riches to themselves. Tocqueville, writing as modern democracy took shape, understood that equality might take a somewhat different form and that majoritarian mediocrity, instead of targeting the wealth that emerged as talent’s effect, might pursue the more fundamental strategy of negating inequality’s cause by preventing the successful assertion of talent in the first place. In describing the new form of despotism that he thought was a possibility in democracy—a “brand of orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery”—he worried that democratic government extends its embrace to include the whole of society. It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and the most vigorous temperament cannot force their heads
above the crowd. It does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies...

Program integrity regulations for the twenty-first century: a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform.

As I comply with these enervating, stifling, and stultifying regulations, I wonder: How am I shaping my students' souls? When they see my syllabus filled with things like time-on-task expectations and learning outcomes, what impression does it make upon their conscious or subconscious minds? Time-on-task expectations, I fear, may send an implicit message that one should be satisfied with doing the minimum amount of work necessary to get by, clocking in for the requisite amount of time and then moving on to something else. But more importantly, will these young men and women mistakenly come to think that intelligent people—many students, God bless them, actually cling rather touchingly to the belief that their professors are intelligent—actually regard all of this stuff filling their syllabi as important? And if so, will they begin to think like that themselves, or worse, even aspire to become such people?

Perhaps such fears are unfounded. Students often have strong, sound instincts for detecting nonsense. But they also have powerful incentives to imitate behavior that appears associated with professional success. On more than one occasion I have had a student ask me if I had a "rubric" for grading papers. (The first time this happened, I had no idea what the student was talking about. I have since become better informed.) It would be disheartening indeed to think that by my compliance with these sorts of syllabi requirements—resistance, after all, is futile—I am being co-opted as a participant in the education of still more mid-level bureaucrats.

The Harvard political theorist Harvey C. Mansfield has long assigned his students, as a protest against grade inflation, two separate grades: their official grade, which appears on their transcript and follows a typical Harvard grade distribution, with lots of A's and A-minuses; and their "ironic grade," that is, the grade he believes their work really deserves, with an average closer to C. (The practice earned him the nickname Harvey "C-minus" Mansfield.) Perhaps I need to follow a similar practice with my syllabi. I could have two versions of them: Version A, "for students who, like Socrates, believe that the unexamined life is not worth living"; and Version B, filled with time-on-task expectations, learning outcomes, and whatever else is to follow, "for students whose ambition in life is to become middle managers and bureaucrats." As Socrates knew well, after all, there will always be many people who prefer to remain in the cave.

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Beyond Outrage

David Lott

So many cultural controversies have erupted on social media recently that it sometimes seems as if we have entered a new era of public denunciation. Twitter recorded the strong backlash against the outspoken writer/musician Henry Rollins, who was compelled to apologize for writing that Robin Williams’s suicide made the much-loved actor unworthy of respect. An outpouring of tweets also helped to force Mozilla CEO Brendan Eich out of his job as a group of his employees spread word that he had supported Proposition 8, California’s anti-gay marriage amendment. Student activists organized protests online against the academic dean of Duke Divinity School over remarks he made at a new-student orientation that they considered inappropriate and homophobic. And Dan Snyder, owner of the Washington NFL franchise, is under constant fire online for refusing to change the team’s name, widely considered derogatory of Native Americans. Many sports announcers and media outlets refuse to utter or print the name (which I won’t use here!).

Incidents like these are proliferating, and they have become the daily bread not only of political activists and media commentators, but of millions of social-media users. A prominent person or organization says or does something offensive and is pressured to retract or mitigate words and actions deemed socially unacceptable. The list is long: Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling, actor Alec Baldwin, television cook Paula Deen, Duck Dynasty patriarch Phil Robertson, and the late comedian Joan Rivers are just a few who found themselves in hot water for overstepping perceived bounds of decency in the last year or so. The fast-food chain Chick-fil-A has been subject to protests and boycotts because its late founder, S. Truett Cathy, contributed to groups opposed to same-sex marriage and gay rights. And my Facebook feed lit up with calls for a boycott of Burger King after the fast-food chain announced it was buying the Canadian coffee shop business Tim Horton’s and moving its headquarters to Canada, a move branded as a form of US tax evasion.

Each episode exhibits a by-now familiar pattern: an offending behavior is exposed, publicized, and “goes viral” through social media. Sites like Facebook and Twitter explode with calls for the offender to be “held accountable.” Corporate sponsors withdraw their support (or threaten to do so) until the offender goes into damage control mode and devises a suitable public apology or is otherwise censured. (And, to be clear, I consider the domestic and child abuse issues that have dogged the NFL early in its 2014 season to encompass an entirely different realm of objectionable, even criminal, behavior that deserves widespread condemnation and discipline, as well as recognition of the due process rights of the accused.)

These periodic flurries of intense public controversy typically culminate in a call for some sort of “punishment” for the offender: Sterling was forced to sell his team for his racist remarks; Baldwin lost his MSNBC show on account of homophobic insults directed at a photographer; both Deen and Robertson were taken off the air for their words and opinions—though both subsequently returned to television, their celebrity enhanced. Only Rivers seemed to flourish in the face of controversy, and usually with no apologies.

But the uproar usually doesn’t stop there. Typically, a backlash against the backlash ensues, and the efforts to sanction perceived offenders are decried as “political correctness run amuck.” Impromptu Facebook groups form to support the accused, and the “comments” sections of news outlets and websites are riddled with bitter defenses and furious charges of hypocrisy, often expressed more offensively than the initial incident that provoked controversy. Leaders of religious organizations frequently weigh in on the issue, and not always to effect reconciliation or peace between contending factions. What usually results is a brouhaha: serious discussion is lost amidst overexcited polarities and paroxysms of outrage.
During these outbreaks of cultural warfare, we are told that public figures must be "held accountable" for their words and actions. Tea Party activists, for instance, denounce Republican politicians whom most other people would consider already very conservative. They celebrated the defeat of former House Majority Leader Eric Cantor for not holding closely enough to their ideals. I've concluded that the intensity of their animosity is not strictly political and ideological. Rather, it masks a deep-seated urge to render a judgment and impose a punishment for everyone to see, and fear.

But what explains the heightened forms of cultural outrage increasingly displayed by self-identified political and religious progressives? People like me. We champion diversity and peace, tolerance and reconciliation, priding ourselves on being more fair-minded and even-handed than our opponents. Yet, we can be just as self-righteous and strident and unforgiving in our reactions to a perceived offense. What's going on here?

Progressives may respond by reasoning that we love justice and have contempt for hateful conduct, but even those honorable motivations can be corrupted by darker impulses to which all people are prey, regardless of their persuasion. Thus, we must give more thought to the increasingly poisonous tone of our public discourse, even if what we discover is discomfiting. Let me propose the following three, admittedly tentative, theses.

First, I think the urge to punish is our way of reclaiming power in a seemingly hostile cultural landscape. We know the incendiary or insensitive comments of a Paula Deen or Alec Baldwin may have a disempowering effect, especially upon those who feel targeted. But instead of responding with measured anger, we choose to demonstrate our power over those who earn our disapproval. We pronounce ourselves offended, then demand "accountability," a passive-aggressive way of showing that we, too, can hurt back. The language of reconciliation never comes into play (except sometimes, as at Duke Divinity School, from the offending party, which should always be met with healthy suspicion).

Second, anyone who has studied American social history knows that the marginalization of gender and minority communities has deprived millions from active participation in our nation's development. Women, racial and sexual minorities, the poor, and other disenfranchised groups have contributed to the many splendid achievements of progressive reform movements but continue to face barriers to full inclusion in American life. This creates an ironic situation for many who subsequently claim a place in a privileged white male world: the once-marginalized begin to use their newly acquired access to power in ways that can all too easily make them marginalizers themselves. Now it's our turn to exile and condemn.

Such reflexive marginalization—particularly when it is directed against public figures—often fosters in us the illusion that we inhabit a society and culture that matches our ideals. Anyone who punctures that ideal image must be sidelined or silenced or made invisible: take them off the air (Deen), fire them from their jobs (Baldwin), force them out of their positions (Sterling), take away their livelihoods (Eich). Never mind that millions of the so-called silent majority hold similar views but lack a public platform or media profile to make their voices heard. We prefer our cultural opponents to be invisible to us, and we will make them so, if need be. The power to marginalize is a temptation not easily resisted.

And this leads me to my third thesis: despite what we say, progressives are as ambivalent about free speech and civil liberty as our counterparts. We may deplore censorship and intolerance, we may declare our commitment to diversity and hatred for discrimination, but the diversity we recognize and accept has boundaries. Religious fundamentalists, cultural conservatives, and the
like are fair game for exclusion. Too often we announce our support for working-class people, but do we respect—or even hear—their often culturally conservative voices? We fantasize about the impact of corporate boycotts on wealthy executives and stockholders, but do we take into account their impact on minimum-wage workers and struggling franchise owners? We reject making employment subject to political litmus tests, but when public records reveal Brendan Eich’s $1,000 personal contribution in support of Proposition 8, we’re out for blood.

I think one reason why so many of us are absorbed by these unending cultural skirmishes is that we feel powerless when confronting intractable societal problems, overwhelming economic forces, and a political system that seems utterly resistant to meaningful change. Any apparent victory for “our” side—changing a corporate policy, getting an offensive speaker to apologize, removing an opponent from a position of power—creates a sense of empowerment in contrast to the despair that sets in when we contemplate systemic evils beyond our control. And, worse, it perpetuates the all-too-common illusion that our complex world is amenable to simple corrections.

Certainly, we must recognize and confront social injustices, demand change, and even urge personal atonement, but we need to better manage and focus our outrage, justifiable as it may be, and rein in our passions to expose and humiliate, exact revenge, and vindicate our positions. Progressives can justify our claims to being fair and open-minded by learning and exercising skills that help us argue for what we hold most dear, rather than brandishing the rhetoric and weapons of marginalization and disempowerment. Rather than decomplexifying the world, we can argue for a more dynamic view, even if that doesn’t fully comport with our ideals. We should choose our battles carefully and conduct them in ways commensurate with the values we profess. This is a first crucial step toward realizing the healed world we imagine and for which we hope.

David Lott is a freelance book editor living in Washington, D.C.

**DEATH IN LATE OCTOBER REVISITED**

The fawn didn’t understand steel and glass at forty-five miles an hour even to the point of impact. Even after glass and light shattered within its rib cage, and moths half disintegrated smote into dust between the grill and the skull. No hunt here. No stalking. No ivory fangs or frantic chase. There was only the road. One step. And darkness. The fawn lay on its ruined side in the gutter, still walking. Hooves hooving at nothing. Where is my breath? How could the fawn understand Roy Orbison crooning from the radio or the man shaking above her or the rock in his white knuckled fist poised forever above her one good eye?

John Allen Taylor
SABBATH GARDEN

After summer's gorge, that long humid shrug
of heat, a heft, and past, into her waning, even the first
frost would not undo its work, still the fingerling

zucchini's broad leaves browning and our tomatoes, green,
hanging in their cages, stems and leaves brittled black. A frost
will speak its truth, as over the night it rides some small

wind, crusting the tips of each thing in shadow. It does not
ruin, not yet. Some hardiness is ours: we can
—can't we?—grow there, know the rake, the hoe's

hand, like a grandfather's uncertain palms, big as moonpaws
through our hair. Until it snows, too early, the uncarved
pumpkins slicked with a slight shell of ice. Not Frost's

hoary glass from the water bucket, his apples
having done him in—it is sleep I think of, those three
raised beds, four red cabbage I planted late, my zeal

thick as any fool's—what to do with so much? Heavy
heads, their catchment leaves, fanning out
like a great purple grace, tilted to the sod, ready for rest.

Susanna Childress
Submission Guidelines

What We Publish: The Cresset publishes essays, reviews, and poetry, not fiction. Essays that we publish generally are not opinion pieces but expository, personal, or exploratory essays. We will, on occasion, consider interviews or selected other genres. Almost any subject is possible. We are highly selective about personal essays of faith experience and about homilies. The editor reviews all manuscripts and, when necessary, solicits opinions from members of an Editorial Board, consisting of faculty members at Valparaiso University.

Guidelines for Authors: 1. Our readership is educated, most with some church connection, most frequently Lutheran. Articles should be aimed at general readers interested in religious matters. 2. The Cresset is not a theological journal, but a journal addressing matters of import to those with some degree of theological interest and commitment. Authors are encouraged to reflect upon the religious implications of their subject. 3. Style and spelling are governed, in most cases, by The Chicago Manual of Style and Webster's New International Dictionary. 4. We do accept unsolicited manuscripts; however, before submitting a manuscript, you may want to contact the editor at cresset@valpo.edu about the suitability of your topic for the journal. Our review columns (film, popular culture, music, and so forth) are usually supplied by regular columnists. 5. The preferred method of submission is in Microsoft Word for Windows format. Email your file to cresset@valpo.edu or you may send your manuscript via USPS to: The Editor, The Cresset, Valparaiso University, 1300 Chapel Drive, Valparaiso, IN 46383. 6. Poetry submissions should be sent via USPS. Poetry submissions via email will not be accepted. 7. The use of notes is discouraged. Notes of supporting citations should be placed in parentheses in the text, listing: last name of the author, year of publication, and page numbers where appropriate, e.g., (Wright 1934, 232). 8. In a separate section entitled “Works Cited,” list alphabetically by author (and, within author, by year of publication) all items that are cited in the text. Provide complete bibliographical information, including author's first name, publisher, and place and date of publication. Examples:


ON THE POETS

Miho Nonaka is Associate Professor of English at Wheaton College. Her poems and essays have appeared in various journals and anthologies. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2007.

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John Allen Taylor lives in Spokane, WA where he is the fiction editor for Rock & Sling. His work has appeared in Booth: A Journal.

Susanna Childress has published two books of poetry: Jagged with Love, winner of the 2005 Brittingham Prize, and Entering the House of Awe, winner of the 2012 Society of Midland Authors Award. She lives in Holland, Michigan.
IN UPCOMING ISSUES

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