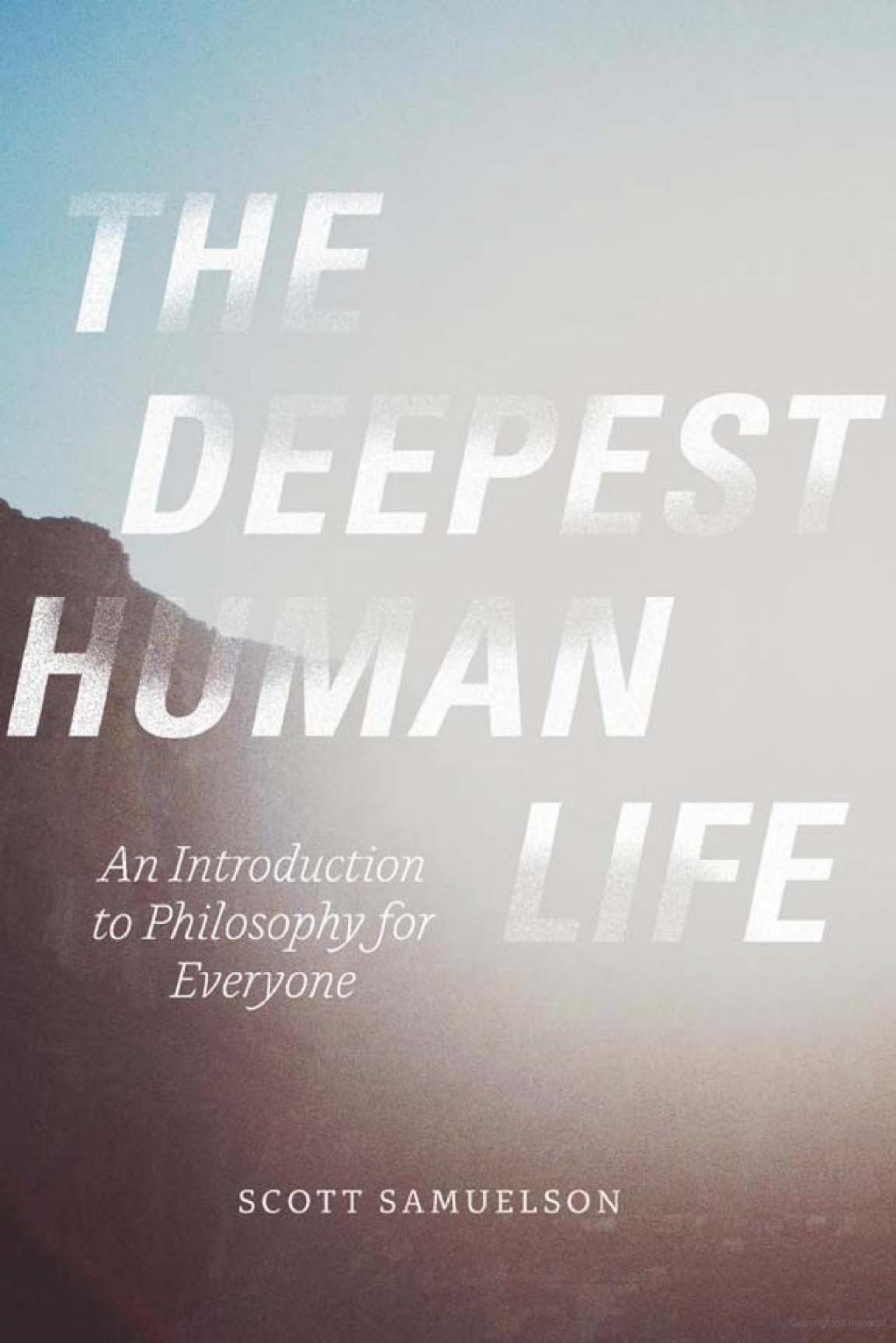

THE DEEPEST HUMAN LIFE

An Introduction to Philosophy for Everyone

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PRELUDE ON LIGHT POLLUTION AND THE STARS

We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened—Jim allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could a laid them; well, that look kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.

MARK TWAIN

An ever-growing number of people have their view of the sky obstructed by the light pollution of our cities. Some go years without once gawking at the moon or the stars. It's an apt metaphor of our whole human situation. There's a haunting line by Kabir, the mysterious fifteenth-century Indian poet, a kind of mystical Mother Goose: "They squander their birth in isms."[1] He's thinking of the few major religious traditions of his day, but the idea applies even more poignantly to our collection of religions, political affiliations, spiritualities, identities fabricated by marketers, and even theories constructed in philosophy departments. The glow of these beliefs, at their best, can guide us through life. But they often amount to a kind of light pollution. The feeling of possessing knowledge can be the worst enemy of the truth. Beliefs and theories, and the identities associated with them, are as indispensable and fascinating as politics, but they are, from the perspective of true philosophy, at worst impediments and at best starting and stopping points of a much larger journey, which involves going off into the darkness once in a while and taking a good long look at what shines above us.

The story I have to tell is about how, in the words of William James, "the deepest human life is everywhere."[2] The coordinates of a mean-

ingful life—the stars, in my analogy—are there for any of us to see and puzzle out. The questions, stories, and injunctions of the great philosophers aren't the speeches of angels loafing in their celestial abodes. Even the most formidable thinkers speak to us out of lives pretty much like our own, with their daily routines, their little aches and pains and pleasures, and their occasional upheavals. Their feet have no more wings than yours or mine.

This book is my attempt to bring philosophy down from its ethereal theorizing and put it back on the earth where it belongs, among wrestlers and chiropractors, preschool music teachers and undertakers, soldiers and moms, chefs and divorcées, Huck and Jim—you and me, in fact.

*

When I was sixteen years old, I stumbled on Thomas Aquinas's five ways of proving the existence of God. As I read his precise, exulted prose in the Iowa City Public Library, two feelings overwhelmed me: first, the idea of proving God was by far the greatest thing a human being could do; second, I no longer believed in God. Not that I had a clue what Aquinas was saying: I read the proofs with sublime incomprehension. I believed—illogically, wrongly, thrillingly—that to pronounce on the existence of God somehow proved that we were capable of inventing God. I was certain through all my adolescent uncertainty that whatever he was doing was the height of human achievement. I wanted in. Socrates, in the beginning of Plato's *Republic*, tempts his interlocutors into an extended conversation about justice by asking them to collaborate in the founding of a city. Thomas Aquinas, against his intentions, was tempting me into the founding of the universe. Though I hadn't read more than a page of philosophy, though I didn't even understand the page I read, I wanted to be a philosopher.

A little over a decade later, I was finishing a PhD in philosophy at Emory University. The obvious path before me was to drift into a full-time position at a decent institution, work my dissertation into a book, zero in on a specialty, publish some articles and reviews, and lick the necessary wingtips to get tenure. But some sense of destiny (I would have never called it that then) kept me from ever taking such a path seriously. Though I'd proven myself capable of publish-

ing articles and giving papers in the world of philosophy, I rebelled against the prospect of a microspecialty and the bureaucracy of tenure. Moreover, I hadn't gotten into philosophy in order to become a scholar of philosophy, however wonderful and necessary the work of scholarship can be.

When my mother called me from Iowa saying that she'd read in the local classifieds that Kirkwood Community College had a full-time philosophy position open, it seemed a reasonable way to get health insurance. The saying "a job is a job" is particularly poignant for philosophers. Diogenes of Sinope, one of our profession's early practitioners, used to beg money from statues. When asked why, he replied, "In order to get used to being refused." But he didn't have a pregnant wife. And neither my wife nor I really wanted to live in a barrel and relieve ourselves outside, as were Diogenes's customs.

Another decade later, my wife and two kids were sound asleep upstairs, and I was alone in the *selva oscura* (the "dark wood," a phrase from Dante's *Comedy,* which to someone with as little Italian as me initially looks like the "obscure self"), staring at the fire in our stove's belly, reflecting on the question of my destiny: exactly the activity I preach to my students, exactly the activity I'd been avoiding as assiduously as they do. You see, earlier that night, someone at a dinner party had had the gall to ask me, "Are you fulfilling your destiny?" The rude question was partially my fault. I'd brought up the subject of destiny, inspired by my recent perusal of the *Mahabharata,* the gargantuan Sanskrit epic of ancient India (it's about three times as long as the Bible), which narrates the fratricidal war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. To talk abstractly about destiny may be boring or fascinating, but to be asked if you're fulfilling your destiny has an archer's precision in piercing to the heart of the matter. I'd hemmed and hawed, wiggling out of an honest answer like only someone trained in philosophy can do. But now, before the fire, I had only myself to confront.

My initial morose thoughts were that I should be doing more with my talents. As much as I loved teaching at a community college, it was, after all, a community college. Friends of mine at more prestigious institutions, my family, even some of my students, had all prodded me, with various degrees of subtlety, to work on advancing my academic career: a path my choices in life had essentially made vanish. My dark thoughts wandered—though maybe that's the

wrong verb—to a story from the *Mahabharata*, the very story that had provoked the bewildering question of my destiny after I'd told it at the dinner party.

A certain Ekalavya, a member of the most despised outcaste tribe, asks to study archery with the great guru Drona. Arjuna, the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita* (one short chapter of the *Mahabharata*), becomes through Drona's tutelage the greatest archer in the world. But Drona disdainfully turns down Ekalavya, despite his considerable talents because the smelly presence of an outcaste would upset the other students. So, Ekalavya goes off to a secluded place in the woods and carves a little sculpture of Drona, which he sets up as an idol to oversee his solitary practice with bow and arrow.

One day Arjuna is out hunting. His dog runs off into the woods and starts yipping at the outcaste archer, who gets irritated and sends off a volley of arrows so expertly that without causing injury they instantaneously plug the dog's mouth. The dog runs back to his master, who looks in awe at the gagged beast. Arjuna then sulks back to Drona and whines, "You told me you'd make me the greatest archer in the world." "And I have," the teacher responds. Arjuna points dejectedly at his pet, obviously the work of someone greater.

Drona and Arjuna head back to the woods to find out what's going on. They discover and watch in amazement the lone archer practicing with his carved idol of the great teacher. Finally, Drona goes up to him and asks, "Am I your teacher?" The archer bows deeply, honored by the guru's presence, and says, "Of course you are." In India at the time it was customary that teachers weren't paid until after they'd successfully taught their students; but after graduation they could ask for any fee they saw fit. So, the teacher says, "Your abilities prove that you have graduated, and now I ask for my payment." Even more deeply honored, the student says, "Whatever you ask, teacher." To which Drona responds, "I ask for your right thumb."

Ekalavya takes out his knife, unhesitatingly chops off his right thumb, and gives it to the teacher, who then turns to Arjuna and says, "There, now you're the greatest archer in the world."

What's the story of Ekalavya about? A teacher who chooses the elite over the common. A student who offers the teacher a fulfillment of his calling. The possibilities of participating in the highest economy of education. The psychological blockages that prevent such participation. The brutal tragedy caused by the stupid divisions

we draw. The story, it seemed, fragmented into two clear images: the possible me and the real me. I'd chosen to teach Ekalavya, but something in me was clinging to the prejudices of Drona.

Suddenly, out of the darkness of my obscure self, moments of the past ten years began flickering: self-forgetful times when I was in the presence of philosophy, not philosophy as a professional activity, but philosophy as it really is: the search for wisdom, a way of life. My mind beamed with faces of soldiers, housewives, plumbers, nurses, future professors, prisoners, sanitation workers, kindergarten teachers, cancer patients; any number of souls whose current or future profession I never knew; real people of all ages and degrees of literacy, hung up on the very questions—the very same questions—that shaped the tradition I'd been inspired to join after reading five proofs of God. If Simone Weil is right that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer," then I had been in the presence of God during multiple conversations that took place on my classroom's hideous carpet.[3] The stars were beginning to shine.

I used to read Plato's portrayal of Socrates's conversations and lament that they were inconceivable in our age. Now, whenever I read the passage in the *Apology*, where Socrates questions the luminaries of Athens only to conclude that he's the wisest of all, because at least he knows that he knows nothing, I think of my student Jillian, a nurse's aide, who, though she'd never read Plato, reenacted that very story at the hospital where she worked. When I read Epictetus, the eloquent Stoic philosopher of the first century, I think of James Stockdale in the twentieth century, who maintained his sanity and even his happiness while being tortured in a prison camp by means of what he remembered of Epictetus from Philosophy 6: The Problems of Good and Evil with Professor Philip Rhinelander. I can't think of Kant's moral philosophy without recalling a middle-aged mother who asked me with tears in her eyes if Kant was right. For every philosopher I've taught I've found at least one student whose soul faithfully returns an echo. The teacher has learned from his students that the likes of Plato and Kant are more than the root of complex isms.

The typical way of conceiving destiny is that what seems chancy is clandestinely ordered and rational. But it's stranger than that. As my fire glowed, and I glimpsed my life in the sudden light of destiny, randomness and rationality seemed synonymous, just two words stuttering after the same reality, two faces made by the same face.

Certain internal patterns can pour out of us and make sense of time's zigzags and vicissitudes. All those students who'd been situated by chance, a.k.a. destiny, in the rickety desks before my cheap metal podium formed into a momentous set of constellations, if looked at right.

*

What follows is nothing more or less than the practice of the philosophical life—in part, the story of my own journey, not simply in the sense of personal reminiscences, though I do recount a few, but an exploration of a memory shaped in large part by staring at books and talking to companions about the things of the spirit. I relate the stories and ideas of some great philosophers to the lives of myself, my students, and my friends. In a larger sense, this book is about the journey of philosophy itself, an intensely personal journey that has become the journey of human civilization. The chapters proceed both thematically and historically. Thematically, they're organized around four questions built into the structure of the rational animal. What is philosophy? What is happiness? Is knowledge of God possible? And, what is the nature of good and evil? Historically, the chapters leap from mountaintop to mountaintop (the image is Nietzsche's), beginning with the ancients and proceeding across the ages to the present—in its own way, the collective quest of Western culture. I don't ignore the great religious traditions, which are intimately bound up with philosophy. There is, I hope to demonstrate, an underlying pattern to the search for wisdom, even though the quest often leads to fascinatingly different places. I'm inclined to think that the shape of our individual quests is written roughly in the history of civilization and that the entire journey of civilization is more or less encoded in each of us.

Though philosophy sometimes needs a fire and solitude, it's most fully present in dialogue with others, some possessed by a desire for the truth, most adamant about their fragment of it, like the blind folks in the Sufi fable who have each felt one part of the unfamiliar elephant. I've found philosophy, the real thing, even among those who roll their eyes and nod off at their desks. In one of those foundational paradoxes, I'm never more a student of philosophy than when my blazer is smeared with chalk dust.

PART 1 * *What Is Philosophy?*

How—I didn't know any
word for it—how "unlikely"
ELIZABETH BISHOP

"I see, my dear Theaetetus," Socrates says, "that Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder."[1] Samuel Taylor Coleridge adds a touch of poetry to the point, "In Wonder all philosophy began: in Wonder it ends: and Admiration fills up the interspace."[2]

"Wonder" is a wondrous word, suggestive of both puzzlement and awe. Pursuing little mysteries—like why a stick appears broken in water, or why the neighbors believe something different about God, or if you see the same colors as everyone else, or why we're always fighting—has shaken up entire lives and entire civilizations. Older students of mine often remark, with a mixture of reverence and disdain, that philosophy reminds them of their little kids' habit of asking why, why, why. The wonderings of childhood, which help civilization to be absorbed and remade, are definitely of a piece with the stern texts of Aristotle and Kant.

My hunch is that even our little intellectual puzzlements flow from a more basic awe. Often this initial awe pertains to the meaningful root of words like "morality," "happiness," "evil," "beauty," "love." We suddenly experience what those words really point to and are compelled to try to understand them. Marguerite Yourcenar has written, "There are souls that make you believe in the soul."[3] There are also beautiful experiences that make you believe in beauty, evil events that make you believe in evil, and a few rare moments that convince you of the reality of happiness. If philosophy isn't to degenerate into

pointless bickering, it's important for us to remember and seek out these sacred manifestations.

There's an even deeper awe at—for lack of a better word—*everything*. Let me explain by relating an initial wonderment of my own.

I must have been about ten years old, and was over at my friend's house. Being two grades ahead of me and hence keener on girls, he thought that we should practice our kissing techniques, using pillows as dummy girlfriends. So there I was, face smooshing around in a strange pillow—for all I knew, a butt of one of my friend's jokes. Somewhere in the darkness of the linen, trying to imagine a certain classmate's blonde curls and sea-blue eyes, my consciousness inexplicably broke and spilled into the eeriest experience, stranger even than kissing, where everything felt extremely iffy. Why does anything exist? Why should I have been born? Who am I? What great cosmic mystery led to my making smooching noises into a pillow? By the same logic, why did the sun, which warms our planet so nicely, catch fire? How could there be other minds, full of the same feelings and questions, haunting the people around me? How could there be strangers? How does time move? Why does time move? Why did another of my friends have to get hit by a speeding car, puff like a horrible balloon, and die? It was as if I'd fallen through some wormhole in the pillow and entered into the numinous zone before creation, where God was scratching His head over possible worlds.

Yes, I was filled with intellectual puzzlements. Even though I was long years from reading philosophy, I managed to formulate the problem in the words of the great metaphysicians: Why is there anything rather than nothing? I know, because when I cracked Martin Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* as a pretentious seventeen-year-old, I was floored to find my deep bafflement so coolly expounded. But the experience involved more than the formulation of intellectual puzzles; it was as if those questions were jolting through my nervous system with supernatural electricity. I felt all the variations on why and how as one big holy creepiness. My hunch is that all the philosophical perplexities of the past three millennia are contained in such experiences, like how the five hundred generations of an oak's leaves are bound up in an acorn, or how the whole universe is present, if the physicists are right, in three minutes worth of exploding matter.

Being one of those timeless times, I don't know how long it lasted or quite why it ended: I probably just needed to take a breath. In any case, I emerged from the pillow, reoriented myself to the tenuous existence of my friend's bedroom, and in my naïveté tried exuberantly to tell my friend, whose lungs had held out no longer than my own, about my time travel to the beginning of everything. I'll always be grateful to him for what he said. His words were the germ of my whole future in philosophy. He shrugged in the nonchalant way of a companion, "Oh yeah, I've felt that before, too."

1 Portrait of You as Odysseus

A Dialogue between two Infants in the womb concerning the state of this world, might handsomely illustrate our ignorance of the next, whereof methinks we yet discourse in Platoes denne, and are but Embryon Philosophers.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

"What is philosophy?" Dr. Donald Livingston used to ask us graduate students. After a numbing pause, this old southern gentleman in various crinkled hues of white, a bright handkerchief spilling disconcertingly far out of his breast pocket, would then muse in his sonorous drawl, "If a biologist asks, 'What is biology?' he is no longer doing biology. There is no mathematical formula that answers the question, 'What is mathematics?' But when we philosophers wonder what we're doing, we're doing our job." But let's begin with the more burning question for most of my students: What is class participation?

Fearing the silences of the dazed classroom, I used to follow the custom of giving a certain number of "participation points," which could be earned exclusively by asking and answering questions in class. In my first year teaching philosophy at Kirkwood, I had in class a woman about my age who spent each period scrutinizing me in silence from her cheap desk in the rear of the room. As I'd bumble through lectures and discussions, her stony gaze never left me. But no matter how hard I'd try to stare her down after my most riveting question, she never participated.

Maybe because her brow spoke unmistakably of having earned her bread by its sweat, I began to second-guess myself, imagining that she was stewing to herself, "Who does he think he is, lecturing me on life?" or, "Unbelievable they pay him to do this." Sometimes I consoled myself that she wasn't thinking much of anything, that she

was simply punching the clock and struggling to understand enough basics to pass and move a rung up the economic ladder.

I teach a lot of students, upward of 125 a semester; so it's hard for me at first to affix names to faces without the advantage of the notes I scribble on my attendance sheet. It wasn't until I passed back the first assignment that it dawned on me that this was Deanne Folkmann, the author of the best paper by a long shot. Though a little rough around the edges, hers was the only essay that demonstrated a nuanced sense of the text, that quoted and reflected on passages we never talked about, that beamed with the unfakeable glow of real thinking. It was not a prelude to a career in philosophy. It was philosophy.

Other than the greatest thing of all, putting a good book in someone's hands, I'm not sure how much I did for her as a teacher that semester. What I had first taken for punching the clock was in fact a monk-like silence. She was taking in whatever bits of knowledge I dispensed and then revisiting Plato, Epictetus, and Kant in order to illuminate her life. She believed, naively and correctly, that Plato, Epictetus, and Kant could be of service. She reminded me of the sunlit world of philosophy, the world that dawned on me when I first held all the wisdom of Thomas Aquinas in my ignorant hands.

I wish I'd kept her papers. Nowadays, as a more experienced teacher, I'd pull her aside and ask her to tell me about herself. Maybe it's just as well our dialogue went on indirectly, though something in me longs to have heard her voice. At least I had the presence of mind to jot down in my journal what she wrote at the end of her final, the sole personal note she ever struck with me, so personal I almost can hear something of her voice's timbre in it:

> I've realized my quest for knowledge will take me away from my job as a factory worker. For many of my coworkers the paycheck is enough. It's been enough for me at times. Not anymore. Knowledge can take me on a journey to places I can't yet imagine. Strange, but philosophy has made my job more bearable, and it's also made it somehow unbearable. Powerful words to live by: "An unexamined life is not worth living."

That's class participation.

*

We often define human beings as the "rational animal," the sole thing on this earth with the capacity to reason. Michel de Montaigne, one of the wiser human beings who ever lived, tells the story of a fox that inched close to a frozen river and then put his ear to the ice—presumably because if a current was audible, the ice would be too thin and treacherous to walk on. Wasn't the fox, Montaigne wonders, performing a kind of deduction? Doesn't the fox's syllogism—if I can hear water, the ice is too thin; I can hear water; therefore, the ice is too thin—prove that foxes are also "rational animals"?[1]

Once I was watching a feisty young cat by the name of Georgiana who had just discovered that she could climb a certain tree to the tiptop. One time, to her delight, the squirrel she was chasing ran up that very tree. The squirrel got to the topmost branch and realized that he could go no farther. Looking down, he saw the cat darting confidently nearer; then he turned and looked down at the ground, perhaps thirty or forty feet below; then he cast one more glance back at Georgiana. Wasn't that squirrel doing some split-second reasoning? After looking back and forth a few more quick times, the squirrel jumped—with an almost hopeless abandon—and plummeted gracelessly toward the ground. Didn't the squirrel *calculate* his best chance of survival? Isn't the squirrel also, then, a rational animal?

Now, maybe our fox and squirrel were simply acting on instinct. But even if we believe, as Montaigne and I do, that they were performing a mental calculation, we can still distinguish human rationality from animal reckoning. Rationality, at least as it was intended by Aristotle when he defined us as the *zoon logikon* (the rational animal), is more than calculation. Our rationality involves a strange looping in our nature. We're capable of revising our very being, of reordering our values, of turning our calculating abilities back on ourselves. This looping is perhaps most dramatic at the level of politics, where we occasionally engage in revolutions. As yet, there's not been a Marxist honeybee who tried to organize his fellow worker bees to overthrow that queen who's always exploiting their labor. Wolves may fight for who should be the alpha of the pack, but it has never occurred to them to organize their packs into a larger unit that would be governed by a majority show of paws. But we do just such things, and

not just in times of revolution. We all ask, "Who am I? What am I supposed to be doing with my life?" And the very act of asking transforms us. We sometimes even wonder if life is worth living at all. Hamlet's famous soliloquy is not, after all, the speech of a madman. The squirrel's internal monologue began,

> To die by claw for sure or else to live
> After the fall perhaps: that is my question,

not, "To be or not to be." By the way, the squirrel lived and limped off as Georgiana looked on from the windy heights with indignant disbelief.

The overarching goals of our fellow animals are pretty clear to them: eat, sleep, protect the pack, stretch, et cetera. If and when they "reason," it is to calculate how to attain those goals. We, too, inherit a complex of similar goals; we, too, spend a lot of time figuring out what to eat for dinner. But we also have the ability to question our goals, to change our minds, and to measure how meaningful our lives are against our conceptions. Through tools, images, and words, we extend who we are into a relatively open space that then curves back on itself. We are, so to speak, the philosophical animal.

Admittedly, philosophy is not the only way we participate in our rationality. Another important—fundamental—way in which we turn our unique power onto ourselves occurs in poetry, art, and music. Inspiration aids us in defining a style of human existence. This musical expression of rationality comes to full bloom in religion, which is God's revelation of a way of life, at least according to the religious believer. But it also includes the overlapping practices we now call culture: our way of life—"ours" not because any of us individually thought it out or even, most of the time, consciously assented to it, but simply because we were born into it and it feels natural.

In the fifth century BC, the common funerary custom of the Greeks was to cremate their dead. Not too far away in India, the Callations' practice was to eat theirs. Once, Darius, the great Persian king, gathered representatives of both groups and asked how much money he could give the Greeks to eat their forebears and how much he could give the Callations to set their dearly departed on fire. No amount of money was sufficient for either group. (Is there a price for which you would take even one nibble of your dead uncle's flesh?)

Each, as you might imagine, was deeply offended that the king would even suggest something so contrary to "nature." Herodotus, who reports all this, draws the conclusion that "if one were to offer men to choose out of all the customs in the world such as seemed to them the best, they would examine the whole number, and end by preferring their own."[2]

Yet everyone does discover, like the Greeks and Callations, that there are different kinds of music, different ways of expressing our humanity. When it dawns on us that there are religions other than our own, that peoples of other cultures have formulated startlingly different images, stories, and rituals in which to encapsulate their humanity, we stand on the brink of philosophy. As the philosopher al-Ghazali observed a thousand years ago, "the children of Christians always grew up embracing Christianity, and the children of Jews always grew up adhering to Judaism, and the children of Muslims always grew up following the religion of Islam."[3] As soon as we wonder, "So who's right—if anybody?"—we enter a new stage of our rationality: philosophy.

*

In a recent article for the *New York Times*, the literary critic Stanley Fish claimed that philosophy is "a special, insular form of thought," and that "its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game."[4] He went on to say that philosophical theses like moral absolutism are at best "rhetorical flourishes" that don't make any difference in how we actually live. As a description of most academic philosophy, his characterization is probably right. Whether in graduate seminars or introductory courses, teachers and students of philosophy often play the game of trying to construct a perfect theory. We criticize weaknesses and inconsistencies in inherited views of goodness, beauty, and truth. We try to construct general explanations. We fidget with questions and answers in the smooth spaces of the mind.

But as a description of real philosophy, Fish's definition is wrong. He makes the common mistake of taking one part of philosophy—the intellectual scrutiny of various positions—for the whole of it, which involves the fullest exercise of our rationality: the seeking out of a meaningful life. Philosophy begins and ends in the realm of plumb-

ers and love and aching backs and hangovers and beauty and painted toenails—in short, the world we regularly confront. Yes, philosophy takes a detour through an often disorienting world of reflection. But all ideas under philosophical discussion, in the end, must be judged on their ability to help us live well.

The great historian of ideas Pierre Hadot has demonstrated that the body of ancient philosophy isn't primarily a bunch of theories but rather a set of spiritual exercises intended to get people back to their true selves. For the ancient Greeks and then Romans, philosophy was anything but "a special, insular form of thought." To engage in philosophy was to commit oneself to the improvement it offered. People turned to philosophies like Stoicism and Epicureanism because their lives were plunged into worries, beliefs, and desires that had alienated them from living good lives. They were after the good life, and philosophy was the discipline of hunting it down.

To some degree, the ancient practice of philosophy in modernity was transformed into a theoretical discipline intended to clarify the concepts of science and morality. But that's not the whole story. I believe that philosophy has never lost its character of being a way of life. When the great modern philosophers wrestled with science and morality, as I will try to show in my later chapters, they had very pressing reasons for doing so. In the seventeenth century, Descartes sought out a certain foundation for knowledge in large part because the world was crumbling around him. In the twentieth century, Hans Jonas reconceptualized God and evil in large part because his mother had been killed at Auschwitz. When a student of mine, a mother who'd authorized a surgery for her son that led to his death, asked me in tears if Kant was right that the consequences of an action play no role in determining its moral worth, I realized quite clearly that evaluating Kantian ethics was much more than a game to be played in the insularity of the mind or the classroom.

When everyday life is deeply satisfying, philosophy is indeed the leisurely activity that Stanley Fish describes, simply a pleasurable exercise of our native desire to know. But when everyday life is less than fully satisfying, there will always be people who set out on a quest for meaning. All of a sudden that leisurely desire to know becomes a pressing desire to find the good life. And when the normal course of everyday life offers very little satisfying to our natures, when we regularly feel the dull aches of bad work, empty leisure, and


image
not
available

> because you already knew that I knew. I know it by strolling over the Hao."[5]

Master Zhuang (Zhuangzi) and Master Hui (Huizi) symbolize, among other things, two different sides of philosophy, each important in its way. Zhuangzi is wise, funny, religious, poetic, calm. Huizi is logical, serious, prosaic, scientific. However, just like in the famous yin-yang diagram, each contains the seed of the other in him.

The parable begins with an observation that expresses a connection between Zhuangzi and the fish darting up to the surface of the water. It has a simple, musical quality to it. It's the kind of remark we're all apt to say in the presence of other animals, for instance at the zoo, where it's hard to resist seeing our inner lives reflected in the playful, sad, lazing animals. His remark represents the spontaneous way we have of relating to life. Huizi disrupts this spontaneity and questions the validity of its implicit reasoning: enter philosophy. Zhuangzi happily follows this new line of thought and doubles down on Huizi's principle: if one animal can't understand another, how can one human understand another? It's a potentially paralyzing conclusion. All of a sudden we are at the absolute opposite point of where we began. Our spontaneous connection to the world seems far away; now we seem to have no connection to anything at all: maybe nothing makes sense. This, too, is a moment of philosophy.

Huizi timidly admits that he can't know what Zhuangzi is thinking, except that if we accept his principle of exclusion he can't be thinking what the fish are thinking. Rather than continue down this dead end, Zhuangzi returns to the initial observation, only this time with a play on words. Huizi's original question could be more literally translated (so I am told) as, "Whence do you know about the happiness of fish?" It could mean several things. First, "How do you know that?" Second, "I don't think you really do know that." Or third, "Where were you when you realized that?" Zhuangzi playfully disregards the second (intended) meaning and answers the first and the third questions: "I know, because I am here; I know right here by the river." According to Guo Xiang's famous commentary, "Well, what things are born into and what they rejoice in—heaven and earth—cannot change this position, and Yin and Yang cannot take back this livelihood. Therefore, it cannot be called strange if one can know

sweetest of the singers, enters the soft down of a swan's body. Agamemnon, who was slain by his wife, turns into an eagle.

Last to choose in Er's story is wily Odysseus, who finds and selects a life neglected by the others, the life of a common person; he boasts that even had he chosen first he would have made the exact same selection. Perhaps, after his legendary journey, he'd come to see the truth of Montaigne's observation that "you can attach the whole of moral philosophy to a commonplace private life just as well as to one of richer stuff," or, as Dorothy puts it at the end of the *Wizard of Oz*, "if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard; because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with."[8]

You may toil, as Deanne did, in a factory (she's now a nurse, by the way); you may be cruising in a lucrative career; you may be an out-of-work father, a single mother, happily married, or desperately single; you may be or have been a rebellious teen, straight-A nerd, or wallflower; you may have a brain injury; you may even be a professor of philosophy; you surely have quirks, hidden hopes and fears, your own bizarre little ways of loving and passing the time, and a thousand and one other snowflake lacings of the basic patterns; and the soul of Odysseus, inspiration to the most engaging poem ever sung, could well have slipped into your body—*your* body—at birth.

So, let me end this chapter by addressing you as Odysseus, the searcher after a fully human life, the great hero of human rationality, whose cleverness with a wooden horse brought an end to the long Trojan War, who on his way back had to avoid giant cannibals, outfox the Cyclops, and survive the wrath of the god of the sea, all so he could get back home to Ithaca, the city that symbolizes the truth we're seeking. In the poem "Ithaca," the modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy employs marvelous tact in speaking to Odysseus before his momentous journey, neither completely revealing nor completely concealing the whole truth of what's to come.

> When you set out on your journey to Ithaca,
> pray that the road is long,
> full of adventure, full of knowledge.

Cavafy goes on to say that there's no need to fear things like the blood-drinking Lestrygonians or the man-eating Cyclops, because

you'll never encounter them "if you do not carry them within your soul." It's a tactful statement, because Cavafy knows that we do carry them in our souls. We're probably going to have to face them.

> Always keep Ithaca on your mind.
> To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
> But do not hurry the voyage at all.
> It is better to let it last for many years;
> and to anchor at the island when you are old,
> rich with all you have gained on the way,
> not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.
>
> Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
> Without her you would have never set out on the road.
> She has nothing more to give you.
>
> And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.
> Wise as you have become, with so much experience,
> you must already have understood what these Ithacas mean.[9]

What I love most about Cavafy's poem is that exhortation: "Pray that the road is long."


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