
The St. John's Review

Volume XLIX, number two (2006)

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The *St. John's Review* is published by the Office of the Dean, St. John's College, Annapolis: Christopher B. Nelson, President; Michael Dink, Dean. For those not on the distribution list, subscriptions are \$10 for one year. Unsolicited essays, reviews, and reasoned letters are welcome. All manuscripts are subject to blind review. Address correspondence to the *Review*, St. John's College, P.O. Box 2800, Annapolis, MD 21404-2800. Back issues are available, at \$5 per issue, from the St. John's College Bookstore.

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ISSN 0277-4720

Desktop Publishing and Printing

The St. John's Public Relations Office and the St. John's College Print Shop

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The Fixed, the Fluid, and the Flexible: Achilles, the River, and Homer's World

Mera J. Flaumenhaft

Homer's Troy is a mainland city with access to the sea. Although Troy's riches have been acquired through trade with other cities, in the *Iliad* the seafaring life is almost entirely associated with the Greek flotilla moored on Troy's shores. We hear of Greek ships, Greek captains, and voyages from Greek lands across the sea. The army of the Greeks is enumerated in the catalogue of ships they sailed to Troy, while the Trojans and their allies are listed by the lands they come from. Troy has had a history of troubled relations with the god of the sea. An early king failed to pay the promised price for walls built by Poseidon, and the weakened city barely survived the sea monster sent to avenge this violation. Several generations later, a Trojan prince sailed "over the sea in seafaring ships" (3.46-47) and stole away with the wife of his unsuspecting host. In the *Iliad* Paris is the only prominent Trojan who is said to have gone to sea.¹ When the Achaean host besieges Troy to regain Helen and destroy Priam's city, Poseidon takes the side of the Achaeans.

But Troy's relationship to the watery realm is not entirely troubled, for the city also owes its prosperity to the river Scamander, which rises in the mountain above the land, meets a tributary, and flows down to the "broad gulf of the sea." The Olympian sea god Poseidon, "who circles the earth and shakes it," is, like Ocean, associated with water of the cosmos, universal water. Scamander, like all rivers in Greek myths, is descended from Ocean. But, like the others, Troy's river is local water, associated with a particular place; it serves

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as a symbol of its “habitability.”² It irrigates crops, provides water for drinking and cooking, as well as hot and cold water for the tanks in which the fabrics that so characterize Trojan wealth are laundered (22.147-56). There is no indication in Homer that Trojans, or others who come to Troy, navigate the river. Ships ply the sea from coast to coast, but inland places are usually reached by land. The river is lively; it eddies and bubbles, swirls and crests. Because of its yellow-brown color, the Gods call it Xanthus, but in Troy it has a personal name, Scamander (20.74), which is also the name of the grandson of the present ruler (6.402), the future heir to the kingship. Like its tributary Simoieis, another source of Trojan fertility, the river serves almost as a “landscape symbol for Troy itself.”³ As an offspring of the “river Oceanus” from whom all the gods are sprung (14.246, 302), Scamander is also a descendent of immortal Zeus (14.434; 24.693). The river has its own priest, whose name (Hypsenor, “high,” 5.75-78), like the epithet of his father (*huperthumou*, “high spirited,” 5.76-77), suggests his high status; the Trojans honor him “like a god” (5.77). They sacrifice bulls and live horses (21.131-32) to Scamander to insure the continued fertility of the land. An old story predicted that Troy would survive if its Thracian ally Rhesus—or his horses—could drink the waters of Scamander.⁴ It is fitting that Zeus lifts his golden scales to signal the death of Hector just as he and Achilles, on their fourth circuit of the city, come to the two springs that feed eddying Scamander (12.147, 208). When Hector dies, the city by the river will come to its end.

Scamander has another important function in Troy. Although its flowing and shapeless water can be removed by the mortals who dwell around it, the river itself remains channeled between steep banks, and its channel, which does have a set shape and location, divides the land that surrounds it. It is a natural landmark that, unlike the Trojan or Achaean walls, can never be erased. Homer charts the war geographically, as the sides repeatedly cross the river, waging battle, now at the Trojan walls, now at the Greek ships. At the end

of the *Iliad*, when Priam goes to Achilles’ tent to ransom Hector’s body, he leaves the relative safety of Troy and crosses into the no man’s land on the other side of Troy’s tutelary river.

In Book Twenty-one the river becomes the site of some of Achilles’ strangest encounters as he moves towards the walls of Troy, determined to take revenge on Hector for the death of Patroclus. The strangeness of this part of the *Iliad* has suggested to some that it is alien material, or that Homer here regresses to a more primitive mode of thinking.⁵ The book consists of four parts: the admired, realistic encounters of Achilles with Lycaon and Asteropaeus; the battles between Achilles and Scamander and between Scamander and Hephaestus, which scholars sometimes compare to episodes in other epics and folktales or describe as just plain weird;⁶ a reprise of Olympian wrangling over the mortals; and the Trojan retreat into Troy, where Priam awaits the coming of the man who will kill his son.

This essay will suggest that, rather than pulling away from the *Iliad*, Book Twenty-one points to the deepest meaning of Achilles’ experience. Part One discusses the three river episodes as graphic depictions of Achilles’ response to his own mortality. Part Two offers three alternatives to his tragic opposition to the threat of dissolution. The shield of Hephaestus and Homer’s poetry suggest the interplay of fixity and fluidity, stability and change, in the human soul and in the cosmos as a whole. Odysseus, too, exemplifies a kind of flexibility as a viable alternative to the tragic extremes of stable fixity and unstable fluidity as they are presented in Book Twenty-one. The essay concludes with a brief note on another river, the one to which Achilles might return, were he a less extraordinary man.

1

1. Battles by the River: Achilles, Lycaon, and Asteropaeus

However the book divisions came to be, Book Twenty-one is set off from what comes before and after it by its association with the watery world. As Achilles drives the Trojans towards the city, some of them “pour forth” (“streaming,” *proechonta*, from *cheô*, 21.6) in flight. Others are pent up in the “deep flowing river with its silver eddies, [where]...whirled about, they swam this way and that” (21.8-11). Homer emphasizes the noise. In addition to the usual din of battle, we hear the sound of flowing and splashing water, now disturbed by the confused and violent action between the riverbanks. The din will increase, as the river speaks in human voice and bellows in anger. At the end of Book Twenty-one, those Trojans who have survived the episode “pour back” (or, “stream,” *esechunto*, from *cheô*, 21.610) into the city. Between the “streamings” which begin and end the episode, Achilles literally battles the great Trojan stream itself.

He is first compared to a fire driving locusts into a river and then to a huge dolphin devouring prey in a harbor. We have entered a realm where all conventional restraints are about to be abandoned and where natural predation is uninhibited: big fish go after little fish, undeterred by pity, self-control, or the laws of nations. Revenge is the sole motive. In the catalogue of Trojan allies in Book Two Homer mentions a foolish Carian named Nastes who came to the war “all decked in gold, like a girl” (2.872) and was slain in the river by Achilles, who “bore off the gold” (2.875). In Book Twenty-one, Nastes is not named and Achilles has no interest in gold. Before the major confrontations, he pulls from the river twelve Trojan youths, dazed, “like fawns,” to reserve for sacrifice on the tomb of Patroclus. In the following verses, two other Trojans emerge from the river, only to be tossed back after their pleas for mercy are denied. Human sacrifice and the rejection of surrender violate the ordinary conventions of battle between civilized human beings.

The first of these two named Trojans, Lycaon, is a son of Priam who has only recently returned to battle, having been ransomed previously by a gentler Achilles and returned to his father's house. Now, desperately “unwilling,” he is destined for the house of Hades. Like the twelve anonymous youths, he is “dazed,” but, unlike them, he makes a personal plea for his life, promising many gifts if Achilles will ransom him again. Achilles hurls his spear, which misses him, but “stands in the ground” (*eni gaiê estê*, 21. 69-70), upright and fixed, an emblem of his own refusal to be moved. Lycaon's plea rests on his having a different mother from Hector, although he knows that did not deter Achilles from refusing to give back Lycaon's full brother, Polydorus, whose name ironically means “many gifts.” Achilles now sounds like Agamemnon at earlier moments when he brutally rejects pleas for ransom and vows to let no Trojan's son remain alive for ransom (6.46, 11.131). In their brief but memorable exchange, Achilles calls the naïve boy who begs for his life first “fool” (21. 99) and then “friend” (21.106), sardonically assuring him that he must die. Homer here reminds us that Achilles, despite his immortal mother, is no less subject to death than this hapless Trojan boy. Using a word associated most strongly with Achilles himself, Lycaon says he was born *minunthadion*, “to a brief span of life” (21.84). He dies as all men do in Homer's battles; his knees and his heart are “loosened” (*luto*, 21.114) and his dark blood “flows” (*rhee*, 21.119). In life, men are solid beings, distinct from their surroundings, upright and contained. In death, they dissolve, go slack, and lose their shape and outlines. Internal fluids, no longer contained within the channels and boundaries of a closed body, flow forth and gather outside it in shapeless pools on the ground.

Achilles flings more words at Lycaon as he flings him into the river. No longer governed by his own will, the precious son of the king of Troy will be carried away (21.120), passively, like an object, by the “eddy of Scamander...into the broad gulf of the sea” (21.125). The savagery of Achilles'

treatment of Lycaon is intensified by blasphemy. He throws Lycaon into the river as he says Lycaon has thrown many sacrificial bulls and even living horses into the silver eddies of Scamander. In a grotesque parody of Trojan piety, Lycaon is a human offering to his own river. Achilles cruelly taunts him by describing how the fish, actively leaping among the waves, will eat his lifeless "white fat" (21.127). The mutilation of human bodies by the fish of the sea is a horror even beyond that of the devouring of corpses by birds and dogs on the battlefields.⁷ Here the predators are even lower in the hierarchy of living beings, are themselves more subject to the flow of their medium, and lack the ability to express themselves, even in cries and howls. Their human victims are nibbled at, silently and out of view. With no bathing, burning, or funeral ceremony, they will not be touched again by human hands, and there will be no visible reminder of them to those who come after. They are, quite literally, dissolved.

By now, the river is red, literally a bloodbath filled with men, corpses and horses, and is "pondering in mind" (21.137) how to aid the Trojans. Achilles' next opponent is not a son of Priam, but a Trojan ally, Asteropaeus, the "star" (*astêr*) of Paeonia, who is said to be descended from "wide-flowing [*eurureontos*] Axius," his own local and "deep-eddying river" (21.141-43), the "fairest water upon the earth" (21.158). The ancestry of this new opponent is on Achilles' mind from the moment he sees him: "Who among men art thou, and from whence...? Unhappy are they whose children face my might" (21.150-51). Xanthus, angry at the pitiless Achilles for wreaking havoc beside his banks, puts courage in Asteropaeus's heart. Achilles now faces a man who is riverine in origin and proud of his ancestry. He is the only man in Homer who is said to be ambidextrous (*peridexios*, 21.163); his strength is not fixed on one side, but alternates between right and left or flows from both sides at once. Xanthus gives him courage as he "stands forth from the river" (21.144), holding two spears. In contrast, Achilles' single ashen spear, which misses Asteropaeus, "fixes

itself" (*enestêrikto*, 21.168) "up to half its length" in the bank. For all his ambidexterity, Asteropaeus is unable to draw out this spear, which again suggests the implacable hero's desire for eternal fixity. In this round, the fixed defeats the fluid. Asteropaeus wounds Achilles with his sword, making his "dark blood start forth" (21.167). But this wound, the only one Achilles suffers in the *Iliad*,⁸ is not fatal. It elicits, as he kills Asteropaeus, an account of his own genealogy, which he claims is superior to the one derived from the Paeonian river, and, indeed, from any water, however great:

Wherefore as Zeus is mightier than rivers that
murmur seaward, so mightier too is the seed of
Zeus than the seed of a river....With him [Zeus]
does not even king Achelous vie, nor the great
might of deep-flowing Ocean, from whom all
rivers flow and every sea, and all the springs and
deep wells. (21.190-97)

Achilles easily pulls his own spear from the bank and strikes Asteropaeus in his belly, from which all his bowels "flow" (181, *chunto* from *cheô*). The grandson of the river Axius is left in the sand, where the dark water "moistens" (21.202) him, and fish and eels immediately begin to "tear the fat about his kidneys" (21.203-4). Like Lycaon's, his body is no longer a shaped whole.

Achilles' claim about his superiority is a bit puzzling. He traces his origin, not to his immortal mother Thetis, but through his mortal father Peleus and grandfather Aeacus, to Zeus who, as he says in Book Nine, will honor him above all men. Throughout the book, it is understood that his death, anticipated from the beginning, is the legacy of Peleus. But in Book Twenty-one Achilles' mortality is suggested even in his immortal mother. To be immortal is to be fixed in an unchanging eternity. But Achilles' mother is a sea-goddess, the daughter of Nereus, the aged god of the sea. The old stories tell how, unlike other goddesses, who willingly marry mortal men, Thetis resisted marriage to Peleus. Fluid, she

tried to avoid his grasp by slipping through his fingers, metamorphosing into a lion, snake, flowing water, and even burning fire. He finally got hold of her while she was sleeping and unable to change her form.⁹ She married Peleus, and produced the swift-footed son destined to run through his brief life brilliantly, yearning for eternity even as he ages from moment to moment. Thetis is a minor divinity in the *Iliad*, with an ambiguous relationship to the more solid gods “who have their homes” on high Olympus. Lower than they are, she is at home in the depths of the slippery, changing sea. Lacking the clear, dry outline of Athena and Apollo, she appears, in the brief third simile in the book, “like a mist” (1.359), visible only to her son. By the time of the *Iliad*, she is wed to an aging mortal from whom she has withdrawn in distaste (18.432-35). But, despite her lesser, more fluid status, her marriage and mortal son were the conditions that insured Zeus’s unchanging reign. Had she married Zeus, her immortal son would have been greater than his father.

Cosmic equilibrium is bought at the cost of human mortality. The alternative would mean perpetual evolution, perpetual violent succession, perpetual disorder.¹⁰

At another time, she is said to have prevented the other Olympians from binding Zeus (1.396-406), again insuring his continued power.

When Patroclus is killed, Thetis and her sister nymphs, the Nereids, anticipate the death of Achilles himself. In a cave in the depths of the sea, they augment the waters with their tears, as Homer, in flowing hexameters, intones a mellifluous catalogue of their names (18.39-49). The character of Achilles’ divine maternal origins—eternal fluidity and slip—make all the more poignant his will to fix his character, reputation, and memory, in the even more mutable and less permanent world he inhabits, “the human order, where each generation must yield to the next.”¹¹ In any case, confronting the very fact of *descent*—on either side—is problematic for

the man who aspires to the autonomy of a god. It forces the hero to acknowledge that his being is dependent on those who generate him, even if these progenitors are themselves immortal. Those old stories also tell how Thetis tried to insure the immortality of her extraordinary child by dipping him in the waters of another river, Styx, the boundary line between the living and the dead. Instinctively, she held on to him to prevent his drowning, and thus neglected to dip the ankle by which she held him. Homer only alludes to the stories of his birth and death, but his ancient audience—and most readers today—knew that Achilles dies of an arrow wound in that undipped heel.

2. Battle Against the River: Achilles and Scamander

Homer quietly foreshadows the clogging of the river in Book Sixteen when Achilles gives Patroclus permission to enter battle. There, he points out that, if Agamemnon had not insulted him, the Trojans would be fleeing and “would fill the watercourses with their dead” (16.71). After the death of Asteropaeus, Achilles slays seven other Paeonians, until the river rises in anger. Slipping from god to man to beast, it calls forth “like a man” (21.213), bellows “like a bull” (21.237), and warns him to slay his Trojan victims on the plain, not in his waters. From now on, although it never assumes a human form,¹² the river is personified in its behavior. English translations, which require a subject pronoun, now call the river “he.” Throughout this episode, the gods refer to the river by its divine name, Xanthus, while the man Achilles calls it Scamander. The narrator raises its status by using both names or simply calling it “the river,” capitalized in some translations. The river’s streams are clogged with corpses and cannot flow down to the sea. Achilles’ rage and self-exertion literally have begun to interfere with the natural flow of things. Incited by Apollo, he leaps from the bank into the river itself, which sweeps along the bodies in his midst, tossing corpses up onto the land, and hiding the living in his deep eddies.

Achilles' battle with the river is a vivid image of what the *Iliad* suggests throughout: that his desire for undying glory is a desire to transcend human mutability, to become an unchanging god. Consider how he differs from Diomedes, the surrogate "best of the Achaeans" when Achilles is absent from battle:

... he stormed across the plain like a winter
torrent at the full that with its swift flood sweeps
away the embankments; this the close-fenced
embankments hold not back, neither do the walls
of the fruitful vineyards stay its sudden coming
when the rain of Zeus drives it on. (5.87-91)

Later, at the sight of Hector, who he assumes must be protected by some god, Diomedes gives ground, like a man who "halts in dismay at a swift-streaming river that flows on to the sea, and, seeing it seething with foam starts backward" (5.597-99). Here the river suggests a boundary; Diomedes recognizes his mortal limits and declines combat with a god.

But Achilles, confronting a real river, jumps right in. The verse itself now imitates the action of the river, as it concentrates all its force on overwhelming Achilles.¹³ We have seen how his desire for constancy makes him the uneasy progeny of a sea goddess. Thetis has always had to visit him on earth; he has never joined her and her sister Nereids in the watery deep. Now he actively opposes a fluid divinity, and it is clear that he is out of his element. While Achilles attempts to play the role of a god in what was supposed to be a theomachy (20.73ff.; 21.31-32), the river god behaves more and more like a human opponent. Against Achilles' rage, Scamander will not slacken his own fury (*menos*, 12.305). His proper motion is usually described as "fair-flowing" (*eürreês*), relaxed and horizontal; now he "stands up" vertically and beats down on Achilles' shield. But Achilles' land skills dissolve when he fights with the watery deep. The great hands that have killed so many men are powerless against water that cannot be grasped, or pierced with a spear. His swift feet, deprived of

solid land beneath him, cannot "stand firm" (*stêrixasthai*, 21.242) in the slippery flow. This is the same word used when Achilles' spear "sticks" in the bank; it is related to *stereos*, "solid" or "rigid." In Book Nine Phoenix says that Achilles "stubbornly" (*stereôs*, 9.510) refuses to return to battle, to "bend" (*gnamptô*, 9.514; see also 11.669; 23.731; 24.359). He remains in his tent, literally unbudgeable, until he finally allows Patroclus to enter battle. Now, fighting for his own life, he grasps a "well-shaped" (21.243) elm in an attempt to anchor himself. But the tree comes right up by the roots and dams the river with its thick branches, making it even deeper. Unlike Achilles' dead ashen spear that resists Asteropaeus's attempts to free it from the earth, here a living tree easily comes loose from the solid riverbank. Like it, the uprooted, godlike hero, unattached to his mortal, down-to-earth home in Phthia, is now ungrounded in Troy. Unlike the Trojans who also are whirled around in "deep-eddying" Xanthus at the beginning of Book Twenty-one (21. 2, 11, 15), he makes no effort to swim.

Even when Achilles flees from the water to the bank, he cannot outrun the swiftly running river, which pursues him, overflowing its natural channel to flood the plain. At this fluid violation of boundary, obscuring some primal distinction between water and dry land in an organized world, Achilles is said to feel fear (21. 248). Again Homer emphasizes the impotence of swift feet and his inability to "make a stand" (266) as the violent river "weakens his knees" and "snatches the ground from beneath his feet" (270-71). In a peculiar extended simile, Homer reminds us of the connection between Scamander and Troy's continuing fertility: the swift river, now uncontrollable by the most powerful warrior at Troy, is compared to the artificial and directed stream that a farmer makes to divert water from a spring to his crops. He clears obstructing dams of pebbles, and the stream flows swiftly and "outstrips [*phthanei*] even the one that guides it" (21.257-62). Scamander, rising high, makes the "wave of his flood into a crest" (*korusse*, 21.306) like the crest of a

warrior's helmet. But unlike a mortal enemy, who would speak to him in battle, the immortal river does not address Achilles. This battle is strikingly devoid of the usual boasts and insults of the human contests, although the river does exhort his "dear brother," the tributary Simoïs, to help him save Troy. Also missing is the usual human audience of whom the fighting heroes are always conscious. Further distancing this part of the *Iliad* from the political context of the war, Homer does not here mention other Greeks or Trojans. To Achilles, death in these circumstances, like the drowning of a miserable swineherd (281-83), would be far more contemptible than death at the hands of Hector while making a courageous stand, exchanging speech, face to face, against a human antagonist, before a human audience. Scamander's speech to Simoïs echoes Achilles' taunt to Lycaon:

I deem that his strength shall not avail him, nor in any way his looks, nor yet that goodly armor which, I think, deep beneath the sea will lie covered over (*kekalummena*) with slime; and he himself I will wrap in sands and shed over him great store of shingle past all measuring; nor will the Achaeans know where to gather his bones, with such a depth of silt shall I enshroud him. Even here will be his sepulcher, nor shall he have need of a heaped-up mound, when the Achaeans make his funeral. (21. 316-23)

The worst disgrace for the shining hero, whose shapely glory distinguishes him from his surroundings, is to be "covered over." The way of the warrior Achilles is to stand forth—disdaining deliberate deception, surreptitious strategies, and indirect speech—and show himself, like a bright star, or blazing fire. He has never anticipated that his own fire might be "quenched" by a river. Now it is fire, in the shape of an anthropomorphized deity that must rescue him.

3. Fire and the River: Hephaestus and Scamander

At the end of Book Eight, the Trojans await their dawn victory over the Achaeans. On the plain between the Achaean camp and the streams of Xanthus, "a thousand fires" burn. This early juxtaposition of fire and water is an eerily beautiful scene of quiet peace before the expected slaughter. When the gods line up at the beginning of Book Twenty to fight on behalf of the Achaeans or Trojans, Hephaestus is listed as the opponent of Scamander (21.73-74). In Book Twenty-one, after godlike Achilles has substituted himself for Hephaestus, only to meet with disaster, the two gods finally do face each other. Hera calls upon the halting, crook-footed (*kullopodion*, 21.331) god to rescue the floundering, swift-footed (*podarkês*) man just as he has lost his footing and is about to be swept away in the seething flood of "foam and blood and corpses" (21.325). Hephaestus's shield has proven "helpless against the river" (21.317-18); he himself must now come to Achilles' aid.¹⁴ The enmity of Paris and Menelaus, Achilles and Hector, Greeks and Trojans, and of the partisan gods on Olympus is now expanded to include the cosmic elements themselves, as fire and water, primal nature deities, confront each other. Personified and quick with motion, changing but remaining themselves, they seem alive. The opposition of the river god and the Olympian has suggested to some the overcoming of a primordial "water world" of flux and "pure process" by a "sky world" characterized by "form and meaningful signs."¹⁵ Like a hot wind, Hephaestus "dries up"—we hear the word *xêrianô* three times (21. 345, 347, 348)—the plain where the swollen river has overflowed its channel. The fire consumes the dead Trojans on the plain and the living vegetation that the river nourishes, both in and beside itself. The musical catalogue of waving, abundant plant life transforms the river, now called "bright" and "fair," from the destructive aggressor of the previous encounter with Achilles into the helpless victim of the harsh fire. Its "blast" "torments" the eels and fishes that Achilles said would nibble the fat of Lycaon and Asteropaeus. Even under the "whirls"

or “eddies” of water, these animals, like the plants, are not fireproof. Finally, in a reversal of the natural quenching of fire by water, Hephaestus “burns” the river. Unlike mortal warriors, watery Scamander has no body parts that an opponent can grasp or upon which he can inflict mortal wounds. But Hephaestus can make the river seethe and boil like his own molten metals. Homer compares the boiling to the melting of solid hog fat into a shapeless liquid in a cauldron on a cooking fire (21.362-64). No longer does Scamander even “wish to flow forward, but is “stayed” (*ouk ethele proriein, all' ischeto*, 21.366). The closest the immortal river can come to death is immobility. It cannot be evaporated like ordinary boiling water, or consumed like corpses on a pyre; but Hephaestus can arrest its flow.

The battle between water and fire differs from mortal combat in another striking way: here, as with Achilles, there is no verbal exchange between the antagonists. Hera warns of Scamander's soft words and threats (16. 339), but Hephaestus, who in earlier passages is fully articulate, does not speak to his opponent. The silence of this terrible fire, in contrast with the speech and shouts of men and gods and the bellowing of the river, is particularly grim. The horror abates only when the river promises not to intercede even “when all Troy shall burn with the burning of consuming fire, and the warlike sons of the Achaeans shall be the burners” (21.375-76). This promise evokes the terrible image of the end of Troy, which the *Iliad* does not depict. Only after Scamander's promise does Hephaestus “quench” his fire and allow the river to rush down again within its bed.

The ancient nature-philosophers puzzled over the primal stuff of the cosmos. Impressed by the ubiquity of water in the world, Thales derives all heterogeneous being from this single substance, recognizing ice, water, and vapor as different forms of the same fundamental material. In addition to appearing in these three modes, water is infinitely changeable with respect to its own form: it takes the shape of any

container. Water itself appears relatively lacking in qualities, but takes on the characteristics of other substances; it can be blue, salty, hot, and smelly; and the intensity of these characteristics can vary. Solid lands appear to float on wider expanses of water, and all life arises from the moistening of seeds. If form and life are fundamental conditions of things that are, one might well conclude that all things are continually solidifying into individual particularity and dissolving into undifferentiated homogeneity, that all things are, somehow, water.

Heraclitus asserts the fluidity of such a world, seeing its transformations in both water and fire: all things flow; you can't step in the same river twice and you yourself are not the same “you”; dry things become moist, the moist become dry; there is exchange of all things for fire; it becomes sea or earth, and itself again; everything gives way, and nothing is fixed. But, if nothing self-same endures, the apparent multiplicity of stable, articulated particulars must be an illusion. Heterogeneity in flux becomes homogeneity, a solution of chaotically swirling stuff, not an ordered “world.” Furthermore, even Heraclitus's own assertion is unstable, since words themselves flow in time, and their meanings cannot be univocal or fixed. Heraclitus attempts to address this difficulty by imitating the condition he asserts in the syntax and diction of his language. His word order takes advantage of the fluidity of Greek, allowing, even more than is usual, for different predications, and his words have multiple, even conflicting, meanings. His readers are endlessly intrigued by the infinite slipperiness of his pregnant pronouncements¹⁶ and by the paradox of meaningful speech about constant change. Even the fragments that remain of his writings may be, not the victims of time, but deliberate attempts to mimic a “world” that lacks wholeness, continuity, and order. Diogenes Laertius says Heraclitus died of dropsy. The story is unconfirmable, but fitting: he drowned in his own fluids. “It is death to souls to become water.”

At the other extreme from Heraclitean flux in time and place, is Parmenidean fixity, outside time and beyond place. Pure, complete, and homogeneous in its unity, Being simply *is*; there is no beginning or becoming, past, future, or conclusion; all is solid, stationary; all Being is one. If singularity, homogeneity, stability, and permanence are the great sticking points of the Heraclitean hypothesis, multiplicity, heterogeneity, instability, and change slip up the partisans of Parmenides. Language seems inadequate to this view too, for predication itself requires multiplicity and an articulated cosmos. In Greek, *esti* can stand alone, but, even a nominal sentence, aiming at full identity of its parts, must have *two* elements. Human speech is *rhêsis*—the “flowing” forth of words in time. Heraclitus’s words, in brief fragments with fluid meanings, flow together; Parmenides’ words, even the lofty vision of the “Way of truth” in articulate Homeric dactylic hexameter, point to silence—or to mere pointing.

Homer, of course, does not speak the metaphysical language of the early philosophers. In his vocabulary, *kosmêô* and *kosmos* are not abstract terms, but refer to the setting in order of troops, dress, or behavior. But Homer’s stories and his people do, nevertheless, suggest his own thinking about what later writers call the “cosmos.” And, as we shall see, his own speech is shaped to depict a world that participates in and is informed by both fixity and fluidity, neither to the exclusion of the other. Angered by Achilles, whose attention is fixed first on immortal glory and then on eternal revenge, the river threatens to dissolve the world into Heraclitean flux. The episode suggests that both the desire for fixity and the response in mere fluidity would destroy a heterogeneous cosmos of changing beings that are, nevertheless, distinguishable and, in some convincing sense, enduring.

Homer repeatedly describes physiological or psychological collapse in terms of dissolution¹⁷ or as the liquefying of firm structure. Wine and tears can bring on this kind of collapse, and the “strength” or “limbs” of dying warriors are “loosed” (*luomai*). When Priam meets Hermes on the way to

Achilles’ tent, the old man is so overcome with fear that his “mind became fluid” (*voos chuto*, 24. 358), the word used for “pour” or “flow” (*cheô*) in Book Twenty-one. As Norman Austin says “It collapsed and lost its shape.”¹⁸ In the *Odyssey* Homer describes sleep as *lusimêlês*, “limb-loosening,” “relaxing,” (10.57), and Sappho and Archilochus use this word to describe the effects of eros or desire.¹⁹ We too know what it means to “drown” in wine or tears, to “be at sea” or “out of our depths,” and “to go down the drain.”

There are, in the *Iliad*, suggestions of destruction by flood of the solid, articulated world experienced by mortal men. When no Greek warrior rises to accept Hector’s challenge, Menelaus curses the Achaeans collectively: “would that all of you would become earth and water” (7.99), that is, disintegrate into their constitutive elements. Many of them will die in battle and their bodies will be reduced in fire, water, or in the bellies of scavenger dogs, birds, fish, and worms. Likewise, all human artifacts seem destined to disintegrate. Poseidon objects when the Achaeans build the wall around their ships, but Zeus assures him that it will not endure for long (7.446ff.) In Book Twelve, Homer tells how, at the end of the war, when the Achaeans depart, Poseidon and Apollo will bring all the waters of the world—rivers, rain, and the salt sea—to sweep away the wall:

Bringing against it the might of all the rivers that flow forth from the mountains of Ida to the sea—Rhesus [*speech*, or *flow*] and Heptorus and Caresus and Rhodius, and Granicus and Aesepus, and goodly Scamander and Simois...of all these did Apollo turn the mouths together, and for nine days’ space he drove their flood [*rhoon*] against the wall; and Zeus rained ever continually, that the sooner he might overwhelm the wall in the salt sea. And the Earth-shaker, bearing his trident in his hands...swept forth upon the waves all the foundations of beams and stones, that the

Achaeans had laid with toil, and made all smooth along the strong stream [*agarrhoon*] of the Hellespont and again covered the great beach with sand, when he had swept away the wall; and the rivers he turned to return and to flow [*rhoon*] in the channel, where before they streamed [*rhoon*] their fair-streaming [*kallirhoon*] water. (12.17-33)

The ease with which this wall will be destroyed is previewed in Book Fifteen when Apollo breaks the Achaean trench and wall, “as a boy scatters a sand castle by the sea” (15.360-64). This allows Hector and the Trojans to rush over the wall like a “great wave of the broad-wayed sea” (15.381-83). From the standpoint of the immortal gods, human life and its constructions are easily destroyed and slip quickly into oblivion.

We should note, however, that the predicted destruction will reduce neither the plain nor the beach to Democritean elements or to mere swirling chaos. Rather, it will restore them to their “natural” *shape*, stripped of human constructions, and marked only by the relatively permanent features of the landscape. The paths of rivers, the stony mountains, and the boundary between shore and sea are themselves subject to temporary disturbance and slow change but, compared to living and dying beings and their fabrications, they endure in shapely permanence. The exact location of the city of ancient Troy remained a mystery for centuries, but Scamander has flowed in the same place since antiquity. Men may come and go, like generations of leaves and fish in the sea, but the *cosmos* and the *kinds* of beings that inhabit it endure.

This is the condition for the belief of the hero that there will be others like himself, kindred men, to tell and to hear his story. Achilles does not explicitly acknowledge that he requires a bard to maintain his heroism, but the hero who asserts his autonomy is, in fact, doubly dependent: on his parents who give him life and upon the poet who keeps him alive in the minds of others. Nowhere in Homer is there the prospect of the destruction of the entire human race—by

flood or fire or any other means—or of institutions or teachings that would definitively wipe out the characteristic human quest for autonomy and immortality. Homer’s depiction of such human striving is tragic, rather than merely negative. The very qualities that make the hero outstanding are the ones that will destroy him. Achilles’ extreme heroic exertion finally meets its limit, but the world that produced him will produce others like him and they will continue to inspire awe in their fellows. The Homeric gods did not *create* the world and its inhabitants, and there is no suggestion that the gods will wipe them out. In such a world it is problematic, but not merely evil or delusion, for mortals to aspire to permanence. Some readers see similarities between the river battle in *Iliad* 21 and those in Mesopotamian flood stories like *Gilgamesh*.²⁰ Others persuasively contrast the floods in *Gilgamesh* and *Genesis*, where the story of Noah is meant to “drown the natural human aspiration to apotheosis through heroic deed.”²¹ Homer’s river Scamander puts an end to Achilles’ rampage, but men like him will arise again. Although, like the Biblical oversteppers, they do awful things, they, like the gods, *are*, somehow, awesome.

Perhaps the work of Hephaestus suggests how changing, continuous fluidity can coexist with enduring articulated form. On at least two occasions the divine smith has been hurled down from Olympus, but, of course, neither fall results in his destruction. In Book Eighteen he recalls how, on account of his lameness, Hera once hurled him down to the watery cave of Oceanus’s daughter Eurynome and the Nereid Thetis, “and around me flowed, murmuring with foam, the stream of Oceanus, an immense flood” (18.402-3). For nine years Hephaestus, himself misshapen, lived in this unshaped watery deep, but he spent his time shaping beautiful ornaments. His lame feet did not preclude, and perhaps they even contributed to, the extraordinary powers he developed in his skilled hands. Like the “ambidextrous” Asteropaeus, the smith-god is “strong [or, “bent”]-limbed on both sides,” *amphiguêis*. He is *polumêtis* (21.355), a “god of many

wiles,” and *poluphrônōs*, “of great intelligence” (21.367). In Book Twenty-one the only way he can counteract the flow of Scamander is brutally to burn and dry up all-threatening liquidity. But, in the face of the more gradual dissolution of all earthly things, he solidifies the fluid into form. On lofty Olympus, as in the deep sea, he liquefies solid metals into shapeless fluids, and then re-forms the softened materials into bronze houses and tripods, silver-studded chairs, golden wheels and handmaids, and greaves of “flexible” (*heanou*, 18.613) tin. His most memorable masterpiece is the solid shield of bronze, made of fused copper and tin, that he fashions for the unbending son of the tearful water goddess. What does it tell us about being and time in the cosmos as Homer sees it?

2

1. Hephaestus's Art

Scamander threatens to cover all Achilles' beautiful armor with slime (21.318). Although a shield may last longer than a man, it too is not forever. Like all Hephaestus's works, Achilles' shield is made of metals and glass, melted into fluids in “melting vats” (*choanisi*, from *cheô*, “flow,” 18.613), and then re-solidified into stable forms. But the figures on it are not static or frozen like the Achilles whom Patroclus describes as the pitiless offspring of grey sea and the rocky cliffs because his mind (*nous*) is so unbending (*apênês*, 16. 33-35). Nor are they like the stony frozen Niobe whom Achilles describes to Priam at the end of the *Iliad* (24.605-17). Rather, the wonder of the shield is that its figures seem to be alive and in motion. This is partly because, as Lessing points out, they come into being before our eyes, in words that take time, and partly because they are so artfully made that they appear to be actually engaged in the activities described.²² In the progressive form of Homer's verbs, the dancers are described as dancing, the ambushers ambushing, the bull lowing, and the field being turned over, although it is made of lifeless

gold: “this was the marvel [*thauma*] of the work” (18.549). Hephaestus makes an enduring picture of a changing life, albeit a life that will not satisfy the aspirations of the warrior hero of the *Iliad*.

The cosmos depicted on the shield combines the formal fixity of a stable world with the living, changing life of everything associated with the human beings who live in it. Even its river combines duration and change. The shield's dry riverbed—in another season, a watering place for the herds—is the scene of an ambush (18.520-21), and men fight beside its banks (18.533). Shortly after, the river is stable, contained, reliably watering the cattle that low and pasture

Par'potamon keladonta, para hroadadon donakêa
Beside the sounding river, beside the waving reed
(18.576)

Noting the way it appeals to differing senses, one reader has described this as the “most beautiful verse in Homer.”²³ Another calls attention to the “rippling dactyls,” alliteration, and chiasmus of the line.²⁴ The pictured people are not “immortal and ageless all their days” as the single-minded Achilles and other heroes might wish to be. They are of different ages, changing with the passing of time, and unlike the gods and eternal heavenly bodies pictured there, the mortals have no lasting names and fame. There are dead men and animals on the shield, and red blood stains some of the golden figures. But the elders will keep on talking, and the boys and girls dancing, even as Achilles holds them forth on the shield in deadly battle. The point of view of the shield is wider than that on the battlefield where Homer's “camera” zooms in on the horror of war for particular—named—people at particular moments. Hephaestus's view suggests that the life of men, as well as of cities, never merely ends, but has a cyclical character. Glaucus compares such lives to the “generations of leaves” (6.146). But the nameless leaves and crops and cows and river, and even the nameless humans depicted on the shield, are not merely ephemeral, “of a day.”

Mortality and change make generation necessary, but generation itself insures a kind of continuity that even living and dying beings can participate in. They, like the vegetation and animals, and even their own artifices, are not immortal, but they do recur according to regular patterns and in recognizable forms. There are recurrent, recognizable *kinds* of beings in the articulated, heterogeneous cosmos; the most interesting of them are human beings. Tragically, human beings are often prevented from fulfilling the natural shape of their lives, but human lives do have natural shapes, and they generate others who are the same in kind.

Homer's mortals are not part of a historically directed trajectory of the sort described by the Bible, Virgil, and Hegel. But they do achieve a kind of permanence. Although the shield does not depict lasting personal glory, even for men like Achilles, it does not bitterly insist on the tragic futility of our desire for duration. Nor should it make us think, as C. S. Lewis did, that Homer's greatness lies in his depiction of the human and personal tragedy built up against a background of "meaningless flux."²⁶ Rather, Homer, like Hephaestus, depicts a beautiful image of *regular* change in time, and a world in which the tragedies of individual mortal lives are intelligible. What is perhaps even more important is that he makes us feel that these lives are *worth* our attempts to understand them.

The circular pattern of return is repeated on the shield, as if to emphasize the possibility of appropriate change that does not simply negate existence. Thus, we hear about the young men "whirling" (*edineon*, 18.494) in the wedding dance, the judgments given in the "sacred circle" (*hierō eni kuklō*, 18.504), the repeated "wheelings" (*dineuontes*, 18.543) of the ploughs and of the youths and maidens dancing in circles (18.599-601), and the agricultural cycle of the seasons. The word for these whirlings and wheelings (from *dineō*) is the one used to describe the "eddies" of the raging Scamander, as well as "deep-eddying" Ocean (10.511). But here on the shield it suggests ordered regularity rather

than Scamander's destructive turbulence or the meaningless chaos asserted by Aristophanes' Socrates who preaches that "Whirl" (*Dinos*) has replaced Zeus.²⁶ The beginning and end of the description of the shield call attention to circularity in the cosmos itself: the full round moon, the circular daily motions of most of the stars, and the Bear, or "Wagon," that "turns in place and has no part in the baths of Ocean" (18.488). On the outermost rim is the "great might of the river Ocean" (18.608), that same Ocean towards which Scamander and Simoïs and all the other rivers flow, when they are not unnaturally impeded. Unlike any other "river" in the poem, Ocean is *apsorroos*, "backwards flowing"; turning back into itself, it encircles the world. The edges of the cosmos do not dissolve into watery flux; rather, the world is surrounded, held in shape, by Ocean. Although the shield is called a *sakos*, the word usually used for a rectangular shield, we must imagine it as round.

Hephaestus's pictures include simple agricultural and musical implements—yokes, plows, baskets, pipes, lyres, and bronze tips on spears—evidence of human culture beyond mere nature. But there are no signs of more sophisticated human technology or art. Homer depicts Hephaestus, but Hephaestus does not depict himself and his own technology.²⁷ Also, although there are rivers and Ocean on the shield, Hephaestus does not depict any *ships*. They belong to a different world, one in which men sail off to distant places: to make war, to trade, and to learn how other men live. Ships point to progress, to radical change beyond that seen in the communities and natural world of the shield. Both Trojans and Greeks sail the sea, but Homer's *Greeks*—and, as we shall see, one Greek man especially—are particularly associated with the seagoing technology that brought the Greek army to Troy, but is not the focus of the human activities depicted in the *Iliad*.

Nor does Hephaestus include Olympus, the abode of the gods, or Hades, the destination of all mortal warriors, on his shield. The former is the clearly illuminated setting for many

scenes in both of Homer's poems. In the *Odyssey* we are told of the other realm, beyond the "stream of Ocean" in the outermost circle of the shield, a realm reached by crossing the roaring rivers of Periphlegethon and Cocytus (Blazing and Wailing), a branch of the dread (*stugeô*) River Styx. On Styx, the *Iliad* tells us, men and gods swear their most solemn oaths (2.755; 8.369; 14.271; 15.37). The *Iliad*, which depicts the deaths of so many men, contains no description of the land of the dead. But in the *Odyssey*, the "house of Hades" is a dark, "dank" [*eurôenta*, lit. "moldy," 10.512] place, and a whole book is devoted to exhibiting its inhabitants. The dead souls are misty and ungraspable, but recognizable, as weakly delineated shadows of their former selves. In the indistinct realm of the "un-seen" (*a-idês*), the shade of Achilles is now fixed, eternally denouncing his former desire for fixed and shining visible fame. He reveals his unchanged mind, however, in his joy at the report that his son is just the way he was.

Achilles' attempt to stop Scamander is a violation of the natural flow of things, of nature itself, although Homer does not use *nature* as a philosophical term any more than he uses abstract philosophical language elsewhere.²⁸ Achilles' retreat and his return to his main object, killing the mortal man who killed his mortal friend, is a forced admission that, despite his divine genealogy, he too is a mortal man. The course of the swift-flowing river can no more be stopped than the swift flowing of Achilles' life can be. But Hephaestus prevents Scamander's attempt to dissolve the hero who aims at fixity and to flood the dry land that ordinarily bounds the flowing water. The god of fire reminds us that mortality does not mean mere obliteration and oblivion, mere washing away, but orderly change in an enduring, coherent cosmos. The river is a river even when it flows outside its well-defined borders. The lives of mortal men do have shape, and so do the artifacts and stories that outlive them, even if not forever. The verbal description of the shield is Homer's likeness of the whole world, the longest extended similitude in the poem.

2. Homer's Art

In addition to the description of the shield, there is further evidence in Homer's *poetry* of both the whole unity and the articulated multiplicity of his cosmos. Book One introduces the major Greek characters of the *Iliad* in all their particularity. Here, for the first time, we hear their identifying epithets and see their first defining acts. Although the official enemies against whom they test themselves are Trojans, these men are concerned about who is the most outstanding, even among the Greeks. They are determined to distinguish themselves, and not to be confused with others. Thus, Achilles and Agamemnon dispute who is the "best of the Achaeans." Their quarrel is filled with comparisons, but each claims that he, as the best, is incomparable. There are only three brief similes in Book One (47, 104, 359), and two of them describe gods. The human actors are concerned, not with likenesses, but with singularity.

Book Two recounts how Nestor and Odysseus rehabilitate Agamemnon as commander and reunite the Achaeans after the quarrel. The latter parts of the book present Homer's warriors both as one whole, continuous mass, and as separate, individual elements of an articulated multitude. Like Homer's cosmos generally, the descriptions in Book Two point to the very things we have been considering in Book Twenty-one: the unifying fixity of the man who attempts to oppose a divine river, and the dissolving fluidity of the river that responds. As we shall see, Homer's epithets, catalogues, and similes have meaning only if one assumes a unified, self-same whole consisting of a multiplicity of differentiated elements.

The relative scarcity of metaphors in the *Iliad* is a sign of the poet's reluctance to completely collapse two compared things into an identity. Phrases like "winged words" and the "barrier of your teeth" are implied similes that identify the subject and the comparison so completely that the compared object almost disappears as its attribute is transferred to the

present subject. Epithets are adjectival tags, stable descriptions that characterize enduring intelligible individuals in an enduring world. Epithets, like names, are permanent.²⁹ Like the phrases above, the same epithet can contain an implied comparison when it is attached to different subjects, or an ironic reflection when it no longer suffices to describe their subjects. The implications of “swift-footed Achilles,” “Hector of the shining helmet,” and “white armed Helen” deepen and are more fully understood as the narrative unfolds and the bearer acts out his entire story.

Agamemnon announces his plan to test the troops at the beginning of Book Two. The people (*laoi*, *plêthus*, mass nouns) respond immediately as soon as the leaders or elders (plurals) arise. Homer describes this folk in a great, extended simile, comparing the companies to the tribes (*ethnea*) of bees that feed on flowers in the spring (2.87-93). The men, too, emerge in “many tribes.” Homer’s bee simile and the subsequent description emphasize the turmoil and noise of this “throng” as it rushes towards the water. The noise, like the buzzing of bees and the confusing urgings of Rumor, obscures the inner organization of the army. Stirred by Agamemnon, the men, like the bees, are seen as a great multitude (*plêthus*) that moves as the sea and corn move when they are stirred by the winds of Zeus. (2.142-49). The crossed adjectives produce a sub-simile between the two main ones: the “long” sea-waves move as the “deep” fields of corn do. The wave is simultaneously one and many, as are the field of corn stalks and the army of warriors. We have already seen, in the river incident in Book Twenty-one, the literal power of such waves to stir the articulated many into a homogeneous fluid. In these early similes the troops exhibit the same loose, or fluid character as they come pouring out of their tents on dry land. Although they shout “to one another” and come on in “tribes,” they are not fully articulate, either in speech or in body.

Prompted by Athena and by his own prudent assessment of the situation, Odysseus quickly does articulate the disor-

dered troops into the kings who “stand out” (*exochon*) and whom he addresses individually by name, and the anonymous men “of the people,” whom he beats into submission. His humiliation of Thersites further organizes the Greeks, forcing them to shape up, both as individuals and as groups, to confront the Trojans. Nestor proposes the separating out of the men by tribes and by clans (*phula*, *phrêtra*, 2.362). The extended similes that follow compare them to flocks of birds, recognized as distinct species, to undifferentiated swarms of flies around milk pails, and to mingled goats, more visible as individuals than the aggregates of birds and insects, but still not articulated by name. The only named individuals are the leaders who attended Agamemnon’s council. Agamemnon has spoken of the relative size of the enemy (2.123-33), but not until Homer sings the component parts of each army, do we have a concrete and vivid picture of how many are in the host, as well as how large it is.

Unlike the earlier similes in Book Two, the catalogues are characterized by specificity. The armies are now two wholes that are articulated and organized into parts identified by their geographical origins and by their leaders. The marshalling or ordering of the troops—the Greek word is *diekosmeon*—shapes them into an ordered whole, a *kosmos*. The many items in the catalogue are held together by the general categories it describes, but the detailed description of each item differentiates them from one another. The order in which the different companies are listed reveals much about the political organization of the two sides. The catalogues describe multitudes that are now articulated masses. They have more elaborate shapes than the two-member similes, which usually give the extended comparison first. The Trojans and their allies are also listed—although not enumerated—in a catalogue in Book Two as the leaders from the different cities lead them forth, each marshalling (*kosmêsamenos*) his own men. Among them are the same Trojans who “pour” or “flow” (*cheô*) into the river and city at the beginning and end of Book Twenty-one. But by then they have been floated off

from their allies; their former force has been dissolved into its elements, each of whom swims for his own life. No catalogue of names and leaders is possible in such devastating dissolution. We shall hear a few minor catalogues in the last books of the *Iliad*: the names of the mourning Nereids with Thetis in Book Sixteen, and the sons of Priam, in Book Twenty-four, for example. They remind us how the orderly, articulated cosmos, as we knew it at the beginning, has been disrupted by the horrors of war.

Like the epithets and catalogues, Homer's similes throughout the poem suggest that his cosmos is neither a fluid Heraclitean multiplicity nor a fixed Parmenidean "one," but an organized, enduring whole whose parts can be understood and related to each other. There is not only one analogy for each being; rather, similes contain other similes and are interwoven and overlap. They cover the cosmos with a flexible net, not a rigid grid. The cosmos is intelligible because, in some way, "all nature is akin."³⁰ The beings in this world have stable characteristics by which they themselves can be recognized and by which they can help us to know other beings and ourselves. Despite their special characters, even fire and water are stable elements; this is, in fact, the necessary condition of their occasional attempts to encroach on each other. The gods too are stable combinations of related characteristics; they may disguise themselves before mortals, but they do have enduring and intelligible natures. Aphrodite, Athena, Ares, and, as we have seen, Hephaestus are all understandable as coherent collections of characteristic qualities, ways of being, in a coherent cosmos. Even those associated with the fluid elements in Homer's world—Poseidon, Oceanus, Thetis, the Nereids, and the river Scamander—remain *consistently* fluid. Beneath his many shapes, Proteus, the changeable old man of the sea in *Odyssey* 4, can slip from shape to shape, as lion, serpent, leopard, boar, tree, even "fluid water" [*hugron hudôr*, *Odyssey*, 4. 456-58]. But, at last, he can be held down and made to speak as "himself."

In the extended similes the hero can be *like* a god, great oak (16.482), mother bird (9.323) or the "most baneful star in heaven" (22.26-31) only if gods, oaks, mother birds, and Sirius, complex and multifaceted as they are, have consistent, recognizable meanings. There are few proper names in similes; the likenesses are not between particular individuals, but between a particular individual, for example, and a general category to which he is compared. People who are said to be "like" particular named gods (Ares, Aphrodite) are compared to them as personifications of generalized attributes (Might, Beauty). Although the gods sometimes call things by different names (1.403; 2.813; 14.291; 20.74; 18.487), there is no indication that human subjects are merely projecting their own perceived structures on a chaotic or differently organized "real" world. Homer weaves together a picture of a natural world that is whole and shaped, in which and by which mortal humans can take their bearings. This is why, as Norman Austin has shown, not only similes, but paradigmatic myths, omens, dreams and other symbols have meaning both for gods and humans in the poems, and also for those who read and interpret the stories.³¹

The last way in which Homer avoids both the Charybdis of Heraclitean flux and the Scylla of Parmenidean fixity is seen in his own poetic language, which is not confounded by the language paradoxes of either philosopher. Syllables, words, lines, episodes, narrative and direct speech, the structures of parts and the whole, are clearly recognizable even as the singer's speech (*rhêsis*) flows (from *rheô*) on continuously for hours and hours. There is nothing fragmentary about the *Iliad*; it is an ordered whole. The regular and sustained dactylic hexameter rhythm is heard even when the meter deliberately departs from it, and the intelligible diction and syntax endure throughout, even as we delight in the sounds, puns, and verbal flexibility that guide our thoughts and feelings. Homer is as subtle as Heraclitus in conveying multiple meanings by the artful arrangement of sound and

syntax. But one rarely feels that one has lost one's footing or that there is no footing to be had in the deep flood of his verse. Homeric wonder does not call into doubt the stability of the multitudinous cosmos, or the adequacy of human speech to describe it, even as it faces tragic paradoxes and the most shattering human experiences. Similarly, unlike Parmenides' vision of the "Way of Truth," the unity of Homer's world does not strain against the rich multiplicity of the individual beings that dwell together in it.

The character of Homer's poetry has offered one conclusion to this discussion that began with Achilles and the river. The other is to be found in the man who represents the most interesting alternative to both the fixity we desire and the dissolution we fear.

3. Amphibious Man

This story, like most stories in the *Iliad*, points to Odysseus. Although the quarrel about the "best of the Achaeans" that begins the *Iliad* arises between Achilles and Agamemnon, the natural and conventional contenders for that title, it is Odysseus who offers the most interesting alternative to Achilles. In the *Odyssey* we do hear of a quarrel between these two over who was the "best of the Achaeans" (8.75-78). In fact, Odysseus and Achilles are incommensurable, as they exemplify two entirely different ways of being human. Achilles single-mindedly pursues individuality, purity, and permanent glory, thereby suggesting the Parmenidean perspective: unity, fixity, being. The life of Odysseus embraces multiplicity, change, and becoming, but it does not abandon the conviction that, although human beings must suffer and die, they can lead coherent and integrated lives in a stable cosmos. In a lived life, as opposed to a philosophical quandary, one *can* step twice into the same river and one *can* go home again. Homer's two poems offer an extended meditation on the difference between immortality and endurance. Unlike Achilles' tragic embrace of early death as a means to immortal glory in an infinite future, Odysseus's

goals point always to continuing life in the foreseeable future. Achilles is Homer's hero of fixity, the man who can only make a stand on land. A brief examination of Odysseus in both poems does not see him as Achilles' opposite, the hero of Heraclitean fluidity, but as the flexible man, the one who can endure in any medium.³² It is no surprise that Odysseus has a special relationship to Poseidon, the earth-shaking god of the rolling sea, a relationship that must be stabilized before his story can be completed.

Our first view of *polumêtis* Odysseus in the *Iliad*, displays the "man of many wiles" as a sailor, when he commands the ship that crosses the "watery ways" (*hugra keleutha*, 1.312) to return Chryseis to her father. Unlike Achilles of Phthia and other mainland Achaeans, Odysseus rules over several small islands in the extreme west of Greece. His special skill with ships and his versatility generally have something to do with his origins in a small rugged "isle in a surging sea" (*poluklustôi pontôi*, 4.354), "sea-girt" (*amphialôi*, 1.385) Ithaca. Always at sea, he is never at sea; Derek Walcott calls his later incarnation "sea-smart Odysseus."³³ More than any other Homeric hero, he delights in the pleasures of a warm bath (10.576; 6.210; 7.174, 296; 10.360; 19.356-473). His ablutions in both books aim not at Achillean purity or absolution, but at restoration and the *continuation* of a life that he accepts as mixed, stirred, stained, scarred, alloyed. Hephaestus sponges himself before dinner after a day's work at the forge (18.414-15). Similarly, Odysseus, returning from the dirty work of the ambush in *Iliad* 10, washes off, first in the sea, and then in a bath, to "refresh" himself or to "lift his spirits" (*anepsuchthen*, 10.575). There is no indication that he thinks what he has done to Dolon and Rhesus requires purification.

In his own book, he is characterized by an extraordinary flexibility. Achilles strives always to move forward and remain erect; Odysseus is always willing to bend over and curl up, to turn back and change direction, in order to preserve himself. Again and again, we hear how he is able to improvise a solid

platform to make a stand, even on the unstable sea. Repeatedly he emerges from dangerous waters to dry land, having endured the repeated attempts of Poseidon to swamp him in “deep-eddying Ocean” (*Odyssey*, 10.511). The amphibious hero is at home in all elements, and equally prepared to resist threats of petrification and dissolution, both of which would undermine his integrity as a stable, although changing, being in time. Achilles’ furious swift motion and his refusal to move both assert his absolute independence of outside influences. Odysseus recognizes—or learns—that viable autonomy and self-reliance sometimes require external tools and coordination with others, rather than head-on opposition. He is *polumêchanos*, a man “of many devices.” Achilles’ most important “tool” is his spear, which seems almost an extension of his own arm. His lyre accompanies a song he sings for himself. Odysseus, in contrast, is an enthusiastic user of tools and of other men, whom he skillfully uses as tools. Unlike Achilles’ song, Odysseus’s stories are often tools to achieve desired ends. He has a bow, not a lyre, in his storeroom.

Odysseus delights in the liquid warmth of good wine—apparently mixed with water—with no adverse effects. But he intoxicates the Cyclops with a deliberately undiluted fluid (12.205, 209) unfamiliar to the monster, and slips through his hands by concealing himself horizontally beneath a dumb ram. He sails by the Sirens in his natural position, rigidly upright and attentive to their song, but is able to remain standing at the mast only by arranging to be tightly tied to it. He liberates himself by being willing to bind himself, overcoming his human limitations by resorting to a clever device: he uses knots to maintain his freedom. Like the ambidextrous Asteropaeus, Odysseus prepares to face the monster Scylla with “two spears in his hands” (12.229). When his ship is shattered in the “wine-dark sea,” he deals with the whirlpool Charybdis, not by opposing her turbulent (*kukômenê*, 12.238), sucking waters, as Achilles does Scamander’s turbulent (*kukômenos*, 21.235) streams, but by

waiting patiently for his mast and keel to be flung forth again. He has discerned that the whirlpool, like the Cyclops, has absolutely regular habits.³⁴ Like Achilles in Scamander, he is not able to “plant his feet firmly” (*stêrixai posin empedon*, 12.434) to save himself from her. But, unlike Achilles, in whose hands a rooted tree comes loose from the riverbank, Odysseus manages to cling to the branches of a tall fig tree that remains firmly rooted. By turning the rescued keel into a boat and “rowing with [his] hands” (12.444), he makes it to Calypso’s island, the “navel of the sea.”

Seven years later, he builds the raft that carries him from Calypso’s “sea-girt” (“stream-surrounded,” *amphirutê*, 1.198) isle. Zeus speaks of the raft as an instrument of Odysseus’s self-liberation; he will return home by his own devices, “not by the escort of gods or mortal men” (5.32). Achilles never *makes* anything; productive labor is base to the man who seeks only to make *himself* worthy of immortal glory. His man-slaying hands and the weapons they hold are useless against Scamander, and he almost dies the ignominious death of the drowned. In contrast, after seven years of enforced inactivity, Odysseus seems to come to life again. With forged tools, rather than forged weapons, in his hands, he constructs a seaworthy raft with sides, mast, oar, and sail, and even a device to move it from land into the water (5. 252-61). Here, and throughout his story, he works in wood, a material of less duration, but greater pliancy and flexibility than stone or metals. A long simile explicitly compares him to a skilled boat-builder.³⁵

Finally, it is no surprise that, unlike Achilles, Odysseus is a great swimmer. Swimming, like navigating, offers a paradigm for human activity that requires strength, skill, and calculation for self-preservation in an alien element. Unlike fighting, it pits man against nature rather than against his fellow men. But it requires a certain degree of knowledge and coordination with the opponent, rather than mere opposition aiming at his destruction. Achilles fights a river god with a will to destroy him. Odysseus saves himself from the sea, a

natural element in service of his own divine nemesis, by floating *on* and swimming *with* the sea. He knows not to fight it, but to have confidence in the water's power to support him.³⁶ In this respect, swimming is like "rowing with the arms and legs"³⁷ or sailing *with* the wind and current, rather than against them. Man's ability to move in water is a key sign of his extraordinary adaptability, his ability to cross boundaries, and his capacity to utilize, as well as oppose, the powers of the natural world. In this regard it is Odysseus the sailor and swimmer, rather than Achilles the warrior, whom Homer depicts as a paradigm of human excellence. There are no swimming or boating events in either the funeral games or in Phaeacia. This kind of prowess is not yet an occasion for leisurely recreation or for competitive display or glory.³⁸ But Homer clearly recognizes that it is in keeping with the other virtues of his third contender for the designation "best of the Achaeans."

As the raft nears Phaeacia, Poseidon whips up a great storm, "rolling before him a mighty wave" (*mega kuma kulindôn*, 5.296), and Odysseus's knees and heart are "loosened" (or "melted," *luto*, 5.406), in the Iliadic formula for dying warriors. In the dissolving element, the familiar metaphor suggests a more literal meaning than it has on dry land. Like Achilles in the river, Odysseus *tells* himself that an honorable death and burial on the Trojan plain would have been preferable to drowning (5.312). Homer even makes him think, at this moment, of the "dead son of Peleus" (5.310) who did not drown in the sea, but died gloriously in battle. A great wave "whirls" (*elelixē*) the raft around and beats down on him from "on high" (5.313-14), just as Scamander assaults Achilles. When the raft Odysseus has made with his hands can no longer withstand the assault of Poseidon, he heeds Ino's exhortation to "swim with [your] hands" (5.344), to the land of the Phaeacians. Unlike the *Iliad's* chivalric, horse-drawn heroes who carefully dress and arm themselves for battle, Odysseus rides one recovered raft plank "as though he were riding a horse" (5.371), and strips himself of Calypso's

garments as he prepares to face his enemy. With "arms outstretched, eager to swim" (*cheire petassas, nêchemenai memaôs*, 5.374-5), he flings his naked body into the sea.

He swims, and then "is driven," or "wanders," (*plazeto*, 5.389) for two days and two nights, and on the third day catches sight of Phaeacia. But he soon realizes that there are no harbors or low places on which to land; again, his "knees are loosed and his heart melted" (5.406). For Odysseus, as for Achilles in the deep river, it is not possible to "set both feet firmly" (*podessi stêmenai amphoterōisi*, 5.413-14). He clings to a jagged rock, until the waves rip him away. At this point, we are told that he would have perished, had not Athena given him "prudence" (*epiphrosunên*, 5.437). Homer does not mean that Athena saves him, but that he follows his own characteristic instinct not merely to oppose nature—the waves—with brute strength, as Achilles does the river, but to discern its behavior, as he did with Charybdis, and to coordinate his own powers with those of the sea. Thus, he makes his way "out from" (*exanadus*, 5.438) the main current of the wave, and "swims alongside" (*nêche parex*, 5.439) it to the mouth of a river. This river, like the Trojan Scamander, is called "fair-flowing" (*kallirooio*, 5.441). Unlike Achilles, who impiously attempts to fight the Trojan river god, Odysseus prays as a wandering suppliant to the Phaeacian river god who stops the stream and holds back the waves. Odysseus lets his "knees and strong arms bend" (*ekampse*, 5.443-44) and emerges from the river to kiss the solid earth, a gesture unimaginable in godlike Achilles. That night he curls up in an improvised bed of dry leaves that protect him from "bitter frost and fresh dew" (5.467), watery enemies that still threaten to overcome him. The last leg of his journey home begins with this improvised shelter and the home offered by the hospitable Phaeacians. Nausikaa welcomes him by allowing him to wash off the brine and salty crust of the sea with fresh water from the now-calm river (5.224-26).

As we have seen, Odysseus's ability to make or to elicit offers of new homes does not preclude attachment to his

original home. Ithaca does not float like the windy isle of the shifty king Aeolus, the home of a peculiarly static and inbred tribe. Rather, it remains in place, awaiting the return of its king to his ever-aging wife, son, father, and subjects. Odysseus's landfall on Ithaca is in the sloping harbor of Phorkus, another "old man of the sea," whose headlands keep back the great waves of the open ocean. An olive tree grows beside a cave sacred to the Naiads, river nymphs who weave beside the "everflowing streams" (13.109), Thetis's companions who had wept for Achilles in the watery deep. After twenty years at sea, Odysseus sleeps at last beside his own native waters. When Athena reveals them as his own, he again kisses the earth and prays to the Naiads, vowing to dedicate gifts to them. Just as he identifies the island by its flowing streams in the cave, so he is identified by Eurycleia when she washes his feet and the water in her basin "flows out" (*exechethuso*, 19.470). His homecoming culminates in the identification of the wedding bed he crafted from a still living, rooted olive tree. In contrast, Achilles meets his match in a turbulent foreign river on whose bottom his swift feet cannot find firm footing, and of whose waters his man-killing hands cannot get a hold. Fixed on the promise of unchanging eternity, Achilles loses touch with his past and rejects the prospects of a living future. Odysseus declines Calypso's offer to keep him at her static island in the sea and to make him "immortal and ageless," in effect, to make him stand still, in time. He chooses to return to his own island in the sea, where nothing has stood still in his absence. Paradoxical as it sounds, he holds onto a *flowing* human life in time.

The peculiar nature of his relation with Poseidon is resolved in a strikingly Odyssean way. As punishment for helping Odysseus emerge from the threat of immobility and invisibility and return to life in a world of change, the Phaeacian ship that delivered him is immobilized, turned to stone, like Niobe at the end of the *Iliad*, and their city is covered over with a great mountain (13.149-52) and lost sight of forever. The enmity between amphibious man and

the unstable sea is to be concluded after the adventures that constitute the *Odyssey*. Odysseus is told in Hades, and he repeats the prophesy to Penelope when he returns home, that he will soon have to make another journey, this time inland on the solid earth. After traveling a great distance he will come to a place where the inhabitants are so unfamiliar with the watery, salty ways that have been his life, that they will mistake the oar he carries for a winnowing fan. Planting it among them, he will serve as an ambassador for the unruly god who has been his nemesis, and who is thus also responsible for some of his strengths. Life away from, as well as life protected from, the vicissitudes of Poseidon is not a full human life. The shifting sea of risks and the virtues it fosters is a more interesting, seasoned life than the immortal life of Calypso and the protected lives of landlubbers, Aeolians, and Phaeacians. Gods and Phaeacians may zip from element to element, "swift as birds on the wing or thoughts" (7.35; 5.50), but a mortal man must make his way through rough waters and seas of pains and troubles. The viable alternative to Achilles' attempt to fix time and oppose watery flux is not a becalmed flat sea, or a freshwater lake with no "deep eddies," but a life in time that builds, sails, swims, endures troubles, governs men, loves a like-minded woman, and generates a maturing son to continue life when his own time has come to an end.

Epilogue

The man who, at the beginning of the *Iliad*, claims to be the "best of the Achaeans" is nearly overwhelmed by the fluid, churning force of the Trojan river. In Scamander, Achilles faces an opponent beyond his experience. From this point on, he fights only on land, where his swift feet can make a firm stand or can outrun an opponent whose enduring shape is visible, and who runs in only one direction.

But Homer's use of the episodes involving Scamander points to a related fact about the "best of the Achaeans": Achilles has his own tutelary river in his own homeland,

Phthia, the land where mortals waste away (*phthiô*) and die, where neither life nor time is fixed forever. Like Scamander (21.268, 326), it is called a “heaven-fed river” (16.174). It too marks, fertilizes, and protects the land, and from it occasionally spring forth mortal children like the Myrmidon Menesthius (16.173-78), just as Asteropaeus’s father sprang from the “wide-flowing Axius” in Paeonia. The proper name of the Phthian river, Spercheius, points to Achilles, for *sperchô* means “to set in rapid motion,” or, as a middle participle, “hastening, impetuous, without loss of time.” In Book Twenty-three, when Achilles prepares Patroclus’s body for the funeral mound, he cuts a “yellow lock” of his own hair to place in his dead friend’s hands. The Greek word for “yellow,” *xanthê* (23.141), might remind us of the immortal Trojan river, called Xanthus by the gods, against whom Achilles strives in Book Twenty-one. Now, at Patroclus’s funeral, he says that his father had vowed that he, Achilles, upon his return (*nostêsanta*, 23.145) to Phthia, would offer this hair and a hecatomb to Spercheius, and that he would sacrifice fifty rams into his waters. Such sacrifices were often dedicated to local rivers by boys (and girls) when they came of age.³⁹ Hesiod says that the daughters of Tethys and Ocean, the nymphs, with the help of Apollo and their brothers the Rivers—which include “divine Scamander”—bring young boys to manhood.⁴⁰ That it was Peleus who made the vow suggests that for his swift-footed son, there can be no normal coming of age, and no return (*nostos*) to the swift-flowing river of his native land. Like the rest of his story, the savage slaughters and mock sacrifices near the Scamander in Book Twenty-one bear witness to the Homeric paradox that the fully developed heroic excellence exemplified by Achilles must alienate the hero from the very wellsprings of his own life.

¹ After Troy falls, Aeneas undertakes the extended voyage that takes him from Troy to Italy. Homer only alludes to this future (20.302-08).

² Oliver Taplin, *Homeric Soundings: The Shaping of the Iliad* (Oxford, 1992), 237.

³ Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (Berkeley, 1984), 75.

⁴ This seems to be an unstated motive for the ambush of Rhesus and his men and horses in Book Ten of the *Iliad*.

⁵ E. T. Owen, *The Story of the Iliad* (Michigan, 1966), 210-12.

⁶ Taplin, 228.

⁷ But see James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago, 1975), Note 15, 250.

⁸ Taplin, 224.

⁹ Proteus, the “old man of the sea” in *Odyssey* 4.365-570 is also hard to pin down.

¹⁰ Laura M. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad* (Berkeley, 1991), 103.

¹¹ Slatkin, 113.

¹² Perhaps this is why there are very few visual representations of this incident, either in extant Greek art or later.

¹³ Richardson, N., *The Iliad: A Commentary*. Volume VI: Books 21-24 (Cambridge, 1993), 72. Note to lines 21.233-50 on enjambment, and the progressive piling-up of sentences.

¹⁴ Atchity, Kenneth John, *Homer's Iliad: The Shield of Memory* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois, 1978), 243.

¹⁵ Redfield, Note 15, 251.

¹⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus* 179E-180B; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1407b9-18.

¹⁷ Austin, Norman, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's Odyssey* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), 112.

¹⁸ Austin, 113.

¹⁹ Sappho, LP, fr. 130; Archilochus, West, IEG 196.

²⁰ Michael N. Nadler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley, 1974), 149ff.

²¹ Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York, 2003), 167.

²² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York, 1968), 114, 120-22.

²³ S. E. Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* (Berkeley, 1938), 156-57.

²⁴ W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer* (London, 1965), I.xxii.

²⁵ C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York, 1970), 31. Quoted also in Mark W. Edwards, *Homer: Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore, 1987), 322.

²⁶ Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 379ff. Trans. Alan H Somerstein. *The Comedies of Aristophanes*, Vol. 3 (Chicago, 1982), 46.

²⁷ Atchity, 243.

²⁸ The word appears only at *Odyssey* 10.304 to describe the *môly* root that Hermes gives Odysseus.

²⁹ Vera Lachman. *Homer's Sun Still Shines: Ancient Greece in Essays, Poems, and Translations* (New Market, Virginia, 2004), 83-84.

³⁰ Plato, *Meno* 81D.

³¹ Chapter 2 of Austin's *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* is the best discussion I know about Homer's "analogical" thought, the unity of the cosmos, and correspondence between human and natural order.

³² For an extended discussion of Odysseus, see Mera J. Flaumenhaft, "The Undercover Hero: Odysseus from Dark to Daylight," *Interpretation*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January, 1982.

³³ Derek Walcott. *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (New York, 1993), 1.

³⁴ Austin, 133.

³⁵ Again, compare the sailable, steered raft that Odysseus builds with the merely floating ark that Noah makes, not by his own ingenuity, but by strictly following God's instructions. Kass, 167-68.

³⁶ B. Franklin, "Learning to Swim," in *The Ingenious Dr. Franklin: Selected Scientific Letters of Benjamin Franklin*. Ed. Nathan G. Goodman (Philadelphia, 1974), 41-45.

³⁷ Franklin, "On Swimming," in Goodman, 48.

³⁸ Herodotus (8.89) remarks on the number of Persians who died at Salamis because, unlike the Greeks, they did not know how to swim. Thucydides reports that the Athenian ships preparing to sail to Sicily strove to outdo each other in appearance and speed (6.31) and raced with each other as they left Athens (6.32). Elaborate boat races begin Virgil's

funeral games (*Aeneid*, 5) where the events have a more communal, or political, character than Homer's.

³⁹ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*. Trans. John Raffas (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 174-75.

⁴⁰ Hesiod. *The Theogony*. Trans. Norman O. Brown (Indianapolis, 1953), 63.



Making Up Our Minds

Robert Richardson

*With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the drift-wood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.—Thoreau, *Walden**

1

“I...am sensible of a certain doubleness...” The feature of experience that Thoreau remarks upon here is both remarkable and commonplace. This sense we sometimes have of being apart from ourselves is an instance of what I believe to be the constitutive feature of human thinking, its doubling power.

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We notice things and notice our noticing; we observe events and appraise them, hear statements and affirm or deny them, act and assess our actions; we see one thing as being like another and employ it as a simile; we make something into a sign and, like a string around our finger, let it stand for something else. We count, tell time, chronicle the past, anticipate the future and memorialize the dead. We worry and regret. We can speak the truth or tell a lie. We play with words and pun; we laugh and tell jokes. We wear clothes, apply make-up and use deodorants. We accept little pieces of paper with faces stamped on them in exchange for the goods of life. Without “a certain doubleness,” without the ability to stand apart from the things and feelings we experience, and momentarily at least, even to be other than ourselves, we would not do any of this.

“We are not wholly involved in Nature,” as Thoreau reminds us. Our doubleness brings us into the sight of ourselves and sets us apart from everything else. It marks us off from our animal kindred who, if they share in it at all, do not partake fully in the ability to observe themselves from afar. Animals close to us in evolutionary terms and those born and bred to share our domesticity display something like our doubleness at times, but this power seems rudimentary in them at most. Despite their lively awareness and evident intelligence, it would be a stretch to suppose they can stand aloof from themselves and appraise their own actions as humans habitually do. They are “wholly involved in Nature” in a way that we are not.

We do have, it is true, moments of active work or play when, fully immersed in our actions, we think of nothing but what we are doing and do not think to watch ourselves doing it. These vivifying moments, complete and sufficient as they are, give us a sense of what it means to be at one with ourselves.

When we experience it deeply and for its own sake, the power of witnessing can induce in us a blissful state of oneness, which is at the other pole from our immersion in

immediacy. In such a moment the notion of an undifferentiated, enduring, and unalterable consciousness overarching all of existence and containing it, yet neither affecting it nor affected by it, is but a thought beyond. “Indra in the sky looking down” in Thoreau’s account is, according to the ancient Indian religion, a manifestation of the highest consciousness: “He is the unseen Seer, the unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, the ununderstood Understander.”¹ “The witness, the sole thinker, devoid of qualities....without parts, without activity, tranquil, irreproachable, spotless.”² as it is characterized in the *Upanishads*. This Vedic conception has affinities with the view found in the western theological tradition that the divine mind is eternally single, simple, whole, unchanging, and impassive. It knows no doubleness. (The old Greek gods were of a different sort. Sharing everything with humans but our mortality, they were as double-minded as could be.)

An animal never leaves nature. The Most High, according to many traditional accounts, lies beyond and never enters it. We dwell somewhere in the middle, between Nature and the pure Empyrean, confounded and confounding, looking up and down.

One of our muddles here in the middle is what to think about our own thinking. That we can think about thinking at all is, of course, a consequence of our doubling power, but we are often confused by this ability even as we exercise it. What we are doing when we look at our thinking, how we look at it and what we think we see—as well as what words such as ‘looking’ and ‘seeing’ are doing in this context—are among the most vexing of questions.

In thinking about these aspects of our experience I have arrived at beliefs which, although not unique to me, are far from the usual ones. My aim in what follows is to state my beliefs as boldly and simply as I can. It would please me to find that they are more widely shared than I suppose, but I am afraid I cannot count on this. To put the matter provocatively, I am not trying to sweep the cobwebs out of the mind, but to

sweep the mind out with the cobwebs. Preposterous as it may seem, I do not believe we think in our minds or even that we have minds to do our thinking in.

2

When we want to express our thinking we do a peculiar thing. With lips, teeth, and tongue we bite and rend and pummel the air. Out of our breath we sculpt our thoughts and send them on their way. The medium of the air—so nearly unresisting it scarcely seems to be a body at all—briefly, evanescently, takes the shape of thought and carries it abroad to rap at the portals of the public ear. Speech is a plastic art. Our words are not so much winged as wind-carved. Perhaps we ought to pause now and then in our palavering and pour a libation to the mellifluous air.

It is utterly remarkable that so slight an alteration in such a thin and subtle medium could produce such great effects. Of all the capacities we have for shaping things this is surely the most potent. No human activity has done more, directly or indirectly, to change the world than the artful expulsion of these little bursts of air.

Speaking is a public art and a public act. Once the art is acquired it may be privately employed but that is an accidental feature of it. The possibility of its private employment is derived and secondary, not primary or essential. An individual who learns to speak acquires what is never the learner's alone. The common tongue belongs to all who speak it. It lives in the customary practices of its users. If all the beings who know how to employ it cease to exist, it dies with them. Its being is in its active use. While it is alive, it is a potent influence, yet it is nowhere locatable. A language, the common practices of a people's speech, is not in the organs of propulsion or reception; it is not in the air between; it is not in the brains of its speakers and hearers. Its occurrence may require all of these, but it does not belong to or inhabit any of them.

We can see, though, that there is a doubling here. The art of speech is more than the making and hearing of sounds. The sounds can be names that stand for things. In the giving of names we stand apart, like an Adam in Eden, and know both that the thing is other than the name and that the name stands in for it. This capacity arises from the doubleness already noted—the power to be seer and doer, observer and actor at once—and it greatly enhances it. Only with the burgeoning of speech, it seems, does our doubleness reach full and telling strength. In speech doubleness finds a vehicle that once and for all, for good or ill, transports us out of nature. Double now, our fate pronounced, we rise—or fall—into the world, there forever to contend with the partial stranger each of us calls 'myself'. Givers of names, bearers of names, we are now fully and forever beside ourselves.

Language and doubleness are at least fraternal twins. To say which deserves the elder's status is probably impossible. The evidence which would establish the birthright of either one is lacking. No testimony can be given until we have learned to speak, and then it is too late: the witness is impeached.

Like talking, the doubling power is physiologically grounded and it, too, is an acquired skill. It develops over time, improves with practice and is enhanced by circumstances and structures which invite it and support it. We see this in children as they grow. Early in life they start to notice and attend to things around them and learn their names. They begin to distinguish between themselves and others, to ask questions, to deliberate and choose. They become capable of thinking about persons and things which are not immediately present, they undertake projects and pursue goals. In time they become aware of possible opportunities or dangers and learn to direct their own conduct and look out for themselves. The developing skills of language grow along with this process and are instrumental to it. Through doubleness and its linguistic accompaniments humans extend their awareness beyond what is immediate and present at

hand, thereby increasing their ability to meet their needs, satisfy more of their desires, and pursue their long term interests.

Something like this must have happened to us as a species, too, although we cannot say how or when. Our remote ancestors, who were anatomically and perhaps emotionally very much like us, apparently existed for hundreds of thousands of years before they began to speak. Not very long ago in the span of evolutionary time, their doubling power developed and languages came to be. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, perhaps to buttress his claim that pity is so natural to humans that they could not even have learned it at their mothers' knees, imagines the first humans living solitary lives practically from the moment of birth, gradually acquiring language, then becoming social beings. But this is surely backwards. Language and doubleness grow out of our social nature. In the presence of others who respond to our gestures, return our gaze, alter their facial expressions and aid or hinder us, we begin to speak and to recognize ourselves as belonging to a community which simultaneously contains each of us individually yet is separate and apart from us.

We are not born into Nature, but into an established world, a world founded in our doubleness. This world is shaped by the language, customs, beliefs, institutions, artifacts, and practices of the people we are born among. It has developed over time, may have undergone many changes, and may be changing even as we are born into it. Any particular instance of it may be in conflict with itself, threatened from outside, and gathering or losing its influence, but it is our human home. It is what gives or denies meaning and significance to what we do. It shapes who and what we are, provides the boundaries—more or less plastic—of our thinking and acting, and establishes the grounds of worth.

The self is the private counterpart of the world. It develops in dialogue with it, sometimes in discord and opposition, sometimes in seeming consonance. I am partly

the story I tell myself, partly the story the others in my world may wish me to be, allow me to be or take me to be—and also something as yet to be disclosed in the on-going reciprocity of self and world.

Neither the self nor the world is primordial. Both are artificial productions arising from human effort, articulation, and invention. (Artificial is not, here, the antonym of real.) Both are fluid to varying degrees. Each can change relatively independently, but changes in the one can, and often do, affect the other. Nothing metaphysical need be implied by the existence of this pairing. Self and world are names for patterns of activity that have been and may continue to be shaped by deliberation and choice. They are especially intimate and important to us since they represent for us the extremes of our existence; the mine and not mine; what I am and what I am up against, what I want and what is available to me. They are akin to poetry and myth, but not necessarily illusions because of that and certainly not without meaning.

Our bodies and the natural forces at work in the things around us energize the stories of self and world and are in turn incorporated into their unfolding episodes. From our cultural surroundings, our personal experiences and our thinking—including forays beyond the cultural givens—we frame the story of the world, and under the impetus of our aspirations, interests, and fears we undertake to act in ways that will make the details of our own adventures in it come out as we want them to.

When we use written marks to communicate instead of making sounds, our doubleness is doubly confirmed. If proof were needed for the fact of doubling, the writing and reading of any sentence would provide it. Without the conventional marks employed by the writer as stand-ins for words there would be no sentence to read, and if the reader were not able to see them as standing for words they would be taken only for the little squiggles they really are and they would have no other meaning.

Writing, like speaking, depends upon and enhances our doubling power. It gives our words a more permanent body than air, extends their reach and greatly increases their sway.

We are inclined to say that an author puts concepts, images, feelings, characters, or events in a text, but it would be more accurate to say that the writer, using the conventions of a written language, provides a set of tacit instructions which the reader follows in order to enact or constitute the thoughts or events which the work elicits. Literally speaking, there are no thoughts in any book.

We are also disposed to say that the thoughts which the work conveys enter the reader's mind and may be stored in the memory and later recalled. But it would be more accurate to say that in the act of remembering, the reader's initial activities when encountering and comprehending the work are reiterated, rehearsed, or re-enacted and thereby reconstituted.

Thus, just as we should circumspectly say there is nothing in the book, so we should also circumspectly say there is nothing of it in the mind or memory. When, as practiced readers, we look something up in a book, we do not attend to the marks on the page as such and scarcely notice they are there although they are the means by which we understand what the book says. When we remember something, the means by which the memory is activated are not available for our inspection, as the marks on the page are if we happen to distract ourselves by noticing them, but in both reading and remembering there are embodied procedures which make the acts possible. In the act of reading, static embodiments are re-activated by procedures dynamically embodied in living tissues; the procedures of memory are dynamically embodied in living tissues alone; we *know how* to read and to remember without, in either case, really knowing how we are able to do it.

3

It is surprising, when we stop to notice it, how much of our thinking lies openly before us. Thinking is manifest in all the things presently at hand. This table, the chairs, the carpet, the lights, the drapes, the pictures on the walls, the doors and windows, the walls themselves—all embody thinking. Our needs, interests, hopes, fears, and fantasies have forged out of the elements a multitude of things. Whether planes, trains, or automobiles the reality is the same: thinking makes them and thinking makes them go. In this respect, thinking is the least mysterious enterprise there is. We see it everywhere we turn and know it well.

Thinking is made evident just as surely, if less tangibly, in the ordering of our common life. Courts, colleges, corporations, cities, states, musical concerts, and baseball games are all embodiments of thinking. Our organized forms of work and of play, of commerce and of art, are beings of thought. Seemingly more real than the events and things they order, they cannot be directly seen or pointed to and have no actual location in space and time. They show up only in the activities they circumscribe. The rules of the game, the charter of the college, the laws of the land, govern invisibly. Much metaphysical hay might be made of this if one were so inclined, but there is no need to loft the formal aspects of experience into eternity to preserve what is real in them.

It would be pointless to ask, where is the justice system in the body politic? We can locate the courthouses and the statute books, but the system lives in the customs and practices, the activities of its constituents. Without buildings, books or human bodies, there would be no system, yet, real as it is, we cannot locate it in any one of them or all of them taken together.

Again, we might ask, where is the English language? We can point to dictionaries and grammars, as well as books that are written in it, but the language is not in them. It lives in the habits and practices of those who know how to use it, but it is not in their bodies. The language is real, it has effects and

consequences, the world is different because it is employed, yet it is not anywhere. Speaking the language and thinking thoughts are alike in this respect. The organs that make them possible are locatable, but the language and the thoughts are not.

Where is a game of chess or soccer? And where, we could also ask, are science and poetry? For that matter, where in the world is the world?

It is amazing when we stop to think about it how many things there are that cannot be said to be in any place and yet are constantly assumed, repeatedly invoked, and powerfully consequential. We speak a language. We speak our minds. There is a similarity worth pondering here.

There is a nearly unshakable conviction that the mind exists and can be looked into. Many tell us they have taken a look and have reported impressively on what they have seen. Withdrawing his attention from his surroundings and peering into his mind, Descartes plucked out his famous *cogito*. Hume took a long inward look and spied an assortment of discrete atoms of thinking which he called impressions and ideas. William James, stepping into the celebrated chapter on the stream of thought in his *Principles of Psychology*, says, "We now begin our study of the mind from within."³ In *Kinds of Minds*, Daniel Dennett declares, "It is beyond serious dispute that you and I each have a mind."⁴ And "...each of us knows exactly one mind from the inside, and no two of us know the same mind from the inside."⁵ We are not "something that is all outside and no inside like a rock or a discarded sliver of fingernail."⁶

Although all people and all schools of philosophy, according to William James, affirm this inner realm, although many heroes of thought have dared the labyrinth hoping to see what thinking is really like when it is at home, I must remain outside and cannot go in. I have read the accounts of these interior expeditions often enough over the years but I have never been persuaded by their individual claims or managed to see how their mutually incompatible certainties

might be forged into a comprehensible whole. I would cut a sorry figure now if, like some Quixote of consciousness, I plunged into this legendary space and went adventuring to see what I might rescue there, then returned to defend my fugitive darlings trolled up from the inner dark. No; better, I think, to close the hole.

The putative effort to look into our minds, if nothing else, takes doubleness for granted; the agent examines the patient, although they are 'really' one and the same. The mind observes the play of mind upon the mental stage. As long as we are speaking metaphorically, and know that we are doing so, such fancies are innocent enough. Figuratively, 'in' will do. Taken literally, it is a dose that is fatal to our understanding.

One important piece of evidence that this metaphor is taken literally is the fact that, ever since Descartes, thinkers of all sorts have made it the basis for what they consider to be a real distinction between the internal and external worlds: there is an inner world, intimately experienced, directly accessible, and certainly known, and there is an external world, which is represented in the mind in some problematic way that leaves its real existence doubtful. By some strange alchemy, what is so manifestly happening around us has been transmuted into an inner world with us, as knowers, somehow inside it. Once we have stumbled into this maze it is impossible ever to find our way back through our own mentations to reach the outside and see it directly and simply as itself again.

I am not ignorant of the circumstances and the arguments that led to this way of thinking about thinking, but in my opinion this picture of an inner reality and a represented but doubtful external world out yonder is exactly backwards. To stay for the moment with this inside-outside distinction despite its dubious character, I would have to say that thinking is constituted outside us and then imported. What is out there surrounding the body, encountered by it and engaging it, is the real. The inner world is its imaginary

simulacrum, an invented counterpart. In making up our minds, we bring the outside in.

I began with speech and language and spoke in passing of political and social structures as well as the making of things because these instances of thinking seem to me to have more to tell us than can be learned by trying to turn our gaze inward in acts of introspection. I want to stay on this outward path even though to nearly everyone else all the signposts seem so evidently to point the other way.

4

We are constantly telling ourselves how the mind works, and it is instructive to notice what we say. We forge an understanding, draw a conclusion, render a judgment, grasp a problem, shape an idea, build a theory, make a decision. We hit the nail on the head, are struck by a thought, see an idea clearly, approach a problem, keep things in mind, get a rough idea, have a touching thought. We *apprehend* and *comprehend*, but in either case, behind the Latinate terms for it, the plain English of it is, we grasp. All these motions of the mind are metaphors, grounded in our interactions with the things of daily life. Most of the time the mind is either a seeing eye or a grasping hand. The notion that the mind or consciousness does things—like a person moving in physical space—is itself a metaphor. The mind is, in short, the double of the body, its imaginary counterpart—and its mask. It only exists in a manner of speaking.

Recounting his efforts to observe his “palpitating inward life,” William James says: “Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning around quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head.”⁷ This picture of a mind pirouetting inside itself reminds us a little of the hope we had when we were children of stepping on our own shadow if only we were quick enough. We can eliminate such shadowy motions if we ascribe thinking to the body itself, something James often

seems on the brink of doing. Time and again his inner exploration of the stream of thought seems about to beach on the shores of the body, but he backs water and paddles away.⁸

One aspect of his inward journey is particularly illustrative of the difficulties such ventures face. Describing his struggle to follow and observe his thoughts, noting how they seem to be concentrated in the neck and head, he says, “My brain appears to me as if all shot across with lines of direction, of which I have become conscious as my attention has shifted from one sense-organ to another, in passing to successive outer things, or in following trains of varying sense-ideas.”⁹ Here William seems to have forsaken the role of scientific observer and taken up his brother Henry’s art. An introspective faculty so agile and penetrating it overleaps the possible and spies the brain itself is simply too uncanny to be taken for a fact.

We may describe the mind as Hume does as “a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations,”¹⁰ but the actors appear before the footlights costumed in raiment which the solitary spectator has unwittingly sewn backstage before the play began. Habits, conventions, language, and expectations are part of the story of what we see with our inward gaze. The inside story of our thinking is a work of inspired imagination. We do not look on thinking bare.

The mind is an idea but there are no ideas in the mind. The mind does not produce thoughts; it is a product of them. The mind is a name for a complex of activities. It is nothing over and above these activities, and apart from them it has no being. In this it resembles such terms as the English language, the judicial system, the game of chess, the college, or the city.

The mind is the ether of thinking.

We would do better, I believe, to speak of minding rather than a mind. The verbal form represents the facts more perspicuously than the noun. Activities are the real subjects here, and not a thing that acts. To quote James again, “If we

could say in English 'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows,' we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that *thought goes on*.¹¹

Our many mindings, although they reside nowhere, still go about their business unimpaired. The activities we denominate as sensing, feeling, wishing, opining, believing, liking, and fearing go on undomiciled, as do imagining, judging, reasoning, and the like.

Such terms, it is worth noting, are highly generic. When we think of the range of our desires, wishes, feelings, or beliefs we have to wonder if these general terms ever adequately express what occurs in any particular instance, especially when we notice how often these ways of minding infuse one another, commingling in varied ways and countless combinations. It is also true that many aspects of our thinking life are too indeterminate to be singled out and named. Subtle alterations of mood and inclination, flickering images, and passing fancies come and go without our pausing to acknowledge them, much less provide them with a moniker, yet they affect us and are often significant despite their lack of definiteness.

In contrast to this, some of our mindings are not only specified distinctly but are ascribed to particular faculties: the imagination, the judgment, the intellect, the understanding, the reason, or the will. This helps satisfy our inclination to provide a mental doer for every thinking deed, even though there is nothing that actually answers to these names. A thorough renovation of our thinking would require us to renounce our inheritance and refuse to take title to them. The absence of most of them, outside of philosophical discourse, would probably go unnoticed but—having gained wide acceptance since its invention in Roman times—the will is now something of a popular favorite and likely to be missed.

5

In denying the existence of an inner realm I do not mean to deny that each of us has experiences uniquely our own and known only to us. Although a lot of what we undergo is not known to us at all, and a lot of what we know about what happens to us is known in the same way it might be known by anyone else since we use common words and concepts to recognize it, report it to ourselves and comprehend it, there is an irreducible something in each person's experience that is that person's alone. You cannot have my headache, and believe me, you wouldn't want to. But if we look at this closely I think it comes to very much the same as saying that we have different bodies and different life experiences. I have mine with its sensations and you have yours and there is no possibility of the one being the other. We may mix our saliva in a kiss, but I cannot secrete yours and you cannot produce mine. We may extend our imagination to the fullest reach of its powers, but we can never know exactly what it is like to be each other—much less to be a creature like a bat.

If the mind is a metaphorical construct, as I believe it is, and therefore not a place for thinking actually to be in, where is thinking then? In the body? Well, perhaps, but can we say just where?

Often, as we struggle with a difficult problem or confront an issue important to us, we feel a mounting pressure in the chest, the heart pounds, the stomach churns. This might lead us to locate our thinking where most of humankind most of the time has felt it to be, somewhere between the navel and the chin.

When we are not trying to locate thinking it just seems to hover around; it is present without being anywhere. Sometimes it seems to float slightly above and before us, as if somewhere nearby in the sky. The cartoonists' use of the thought balloon may be as good a convention for locating it as any.

When we are conversing with a friend and trying vigorously to make a point, thinking seems to be located in the space between us. If we were cracking a safe we might feel it to be concentrated at our fingertips, and at the end of a stick if we were using it to feel our way in the dark over rough ground. With a little practice I believe we could learn to place it almost anywhere—on our back between our shoulder blades, or perched on our shoulder—if we were persuaded by a likely enough story to expect to feel it there.

There is, of course, something experientially plausible about locating thinking in our heads. The vocal organs are in the neck and head and, since so much of thinking is a kind of silent speech, as the stranger points out in Plato's *Sophist*, it is easy to feel that the mind is there, too. Likewise the organs of hearing, sight, smell, taste—and even touch if we consider the tongue—are in the same vicinity, so it is not surprising that we might come to take it for granted that our many mindings are housed somewhere in our heads. However, it is our present understanding of physiology and not the experience of thinking itself which leads us to locate thinking in our skulls where the brain is found. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says, “nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.”¹² So, too, there is nothing in the activity of thinking itself from which we could infer that it goes on in a brain.

Although we frequently are aware of activity in many parts of our body—especially the heart and lungs, the digestive tract, and our major muscles—and we can increase our awareness of these activities to some degree by paying attention to them, we have no sensations from the part of the head where the brain is housed, and the brain, unlike some other organs of the body, does not enter our awareness. The unnumbered firings of its synapses, those diminutive and distant cousins of the lightning bolt, do not crackle in our ears. Thinking doesn't gurgle, wheeze, hiss, or hum. This absence of sensible experience is laden with consequences and merits further consideration, but the main point of this

quick survey is to see how irrelevant it is. No matter where we decide to place thinking in the body and no matter which bodily organ we attribute it to, when we look for it there, it is not to be found. Open head or belly or chest, look at brain, heart, liver, stomach, or spleen and nothing like thinking appears. There is no mind there. This is too obvious to need pointing out, perhaps. Still, it ought to cast a shadow of suspicion over the use of the word “in” when talking about our mental activities. The fact that “I do my thinking in my study,” and “I do sums in my head,” are grammatically similar expressions does not imply that both refer to equally locatable places where thinking actually occurs.

Thinking is a mode of bodily activity. It is like walking, swimming, playing a musical instrument. There is no place where these activities reside when they are not occurring. The fact that I know how to play the piano does not mean there is music either in the piano or in me.

Saying that thinking is a bodily activity invites us to compare it with other fundamental activities of the body. Breathing, like thinking, is something I would not do without my body. It seems locatable in a fairly straightforward way, even though there is more to respiration than simply filling the lungs with air and emptying them. All of its components (excepting, some might want to argue, its impulse) are physical things moving in physical space in detectable ways. Thinking is not so straightforwardly locatable. That the brain is a central organ in the process of thinking is surely true, but we cannot find our thinking there. The motions and activities in the brain are to some extent locatable, detectable, and measurable, but they do not reveal our thinking. In this respect thinking is like living. In both cases the body is indispensable. We say, speaking loosely, that life is in the body and when we die it departs. But if we are more circumspect, we realize that life is not a thing, and is not in the body except in a metaphorical sense. The body's fundamental activity is living. All its organs, motions, and processes participate in this activity, although not all in the same way, of course, or

necessarily all at once. When the body is no longer active and all its motions stop, we say life departs although there is nothing to go anywhere or anywhere for it to go. In this way, life and mind are alike. They are substantive fictions that name complex activities and treat them as entities that are real.

Not surprisingly, the effort to understand thinking has about it some of the same difficulties that confound the attempt to understand life itself. It is a wonder that life arises from a combination of chemical elements. No explanation seems commensurate with this amazing occurrence, just as no account seems to explain adequately how the energies of the body are sublimed into the vapors of thought.

The body, to varying degrees and with alterable intensities, can be aware of itself and its activities, its thinking, its sensations, its feelings, and its impulses. It can also be aware of this awareness. Neither in the first instance nor the second is any other entity—substantial, spiritual, or metaphysical—required either as a medium or an agent. The body's ability to do all this is prodigious, manifold, complex, astonishing—and not well understood. But it is the body and only the body doing it. There is nothing else to do our thinking for us.

6

The activities and excitations of our bodies, especially of our brain and nervous system, are correlated, we are sure, with our sensations, desires, ideas, and feelings, our thoughts of every sort. But how does this work? It may be as James says, that "the passing Thought itself is the only *verifiable* thinker, and its empirical connection with the brain-process is the ultimate known law."¹³ Making this connection, however, is no easy business.

One problem is that the physical part of the correlation is not open to direct inspection. Even if I can see or feel what I am thinking, I cannot see or feel my brain. Another observer cannot see directly what I am thinking, or see directly what my brain is doing, even if my skull is open and the would-be

observer is looking inside with the finest equipment available. Seeing what is going on in the brain requires a lot more than simply looking.

It is probably too obvious to need stating, but a scientist examining brain processes employs theories, models, and metaphors. The atomic theory of matter is taken for granted along with its attendant explanation of chemical reactions. The theory of electrical discharges and other more specialized theories about cells, neurons, and synapses, are part of the picture as well. It might even be necessary, as some are now suggesting, to utilize quantum mechanics and the indeterminacy principle. Additionally, some investigators embed the affairs of brain and mind in the context of evolutionary theory. Thus it is safe to say that no account of how the brain works can be direct and literal. Oddly enough we can see it do what it does only because we have garbed it figuratively in thought.

Even to suggest the possibility of correlating thoughts and brain states might seem to imply that our mental life can be reduced ultimately to a complex of deterministic mechanical causes. But this prospect is less worrisome than it might seem to those who fear it and a great deal less likely than it is presumed to be by many who remain committed to it as the goal of their inquiries.

One significant deterrent to such a mechanical mapping is the complexity of the task. To every subtle difference, distinction, nuance, and gradation of every different thought, feeling, insight, or perplexity, some specific bodily event or series of events—a brain-state or a brain-process—must correspond if we are to be told the whole affair. Imagine an account, in terms of neurophysiological activity, of all that any one of us has experienced since rolling out of bed this morning and arriving here—all that we have felt, imagined, remembered, considered, decided, seen, heard, tasted, liked, disliked, sought, or avoided. It would make for a mighty long story, even though for most of us nothing of much significance happened. But suppose a loved one had died, or we had

converted to Islam or become a socialist, survived a near-fatal accident, won the lottery, or been elected president? What would be the neurophysiological effects of such life-changing events? When the meaning and deliverance of everything changes, what goes on in the brain? Some physiological alteration must correspond to every change of every kind if the law which decrees their correlation is to be upheld. Where is the meter for this? Who will write the equations that capture it? Compared to this complexity and subtlety the motions of the planets are simplicity itself and the atom smasher, with its tinier and tinier fragmentations, a mere toy.

The crux of the matter, however, is not the size of the task. The mode of explanation contemporary science allows in these matters—the correlation of a mental event with an underlying mechanism or mechanisms—can work in only one direction if it works at all. A physical change in the brain may be asserted to have a mental consequence, but as the one turns into, produces, or somehow causes the other, explanation loses its grip. The thought or feeling resulting from a change in the brain cannot enter as a term into the mechanical relationship that is said to have caused it. By the nature of the case it is immaterial and can have no mechanical efficacy. There is no mechanism on the thinking side of the presumed relationship that would make it possible for mental activities to have consequences. There are no levers to shift us from thought to thought and no thinking wheels to spin the brain. This not only makes it impossible to say how one thought leads to another but also to say how any thought can alter a brain state. There is an explanatory gap here that mechanistic explanations fail to bridge.

Beyond this problem lies a deeper one. Scientific mechanism—somewhat ironically, given its historical roots—is a determined effort to explain natural phenomena without invoking ends, goals, or purposes. Thinking, however, is naturally forward-looking and goal-oriented in many of its manifestations. Whatever a complete account of thinking might ultimately look like, if it should ever emerge, it would

have to do justice to our purposiveness, our capacity for self-direction, our ability to deliberate and choose, our powers of originative making. These are aspects of thinking known to us directly, and are fateful in their consequences. Our powers of choice may not be always as extensive as we suppose, but they are real nevertheless. A science noticing that it could not exist or hope to go forward without them and thus enlightened by the vision of their actuality might in time pursue these powers to their natural ground and by describing their physical basis help us understand more fully how they do what they are able to do. But it will not work to rule out from the beginning and by fiat all purpose and direction and then attempt to conjure from this paucity the full story of how a human body thinks. This is not a demand that the idea of purpose be put back into our account of natural processes. It is only a recognition that whatever the place of thinking in nature may be, much of it is clearly purposeful and no tale can be persuasive which denies this telling fact.

7

Taking the mind out of the picture and acknowledging the body as the thinker ascribes to thinking its proper origin, gives credit where credit is due, and brings home to us the body's true nature as an intelligent being. Even those researchers and theorists who take the reality of the mind for granted are unlikely to be satisfied until the mind's doings are understood in terms of body and brain, so one must ask them what explanatory aid this imaginary entity actually provides. It seems to be a real hindrance, multiplying entities beyond necessity and requiring additional explanatory principles without producing cogency or clarity. We have thought the body and its powers too small. If we let our minds go and think again we may see that it is proper-sized and will suffice.

The body and its energies are the foundation of the real. Although I know it only confusedly and imperfectly, I feel my body's encounters, its urges, its aims and intentions, and know that my being is grounded there. I know some of its

capacities, am aware of many of its possibilities, and know its vulnerabilities all too well. I know it can be injured, get out of whack with itself, be invaded by other agents, and become diseased. I know that it grows old and dies.

I am entirely a body, I can know only what can be known by my body and do only what it can do. In acknowledging this I do not deny to myself any of the real capacities or possible attainments that an embodied consciousness, mind or soul might claim, save one: I never have and never will go anywhere without my body. The end of my body is the end of me.

In a bodily sense, I have some inner awareness: some of my innards make something known of what they are doing some of the time. But speaking strictly and literally I have no such inner awareness in a mental sense. I can be aware of my thinking, but I cannot see into my mind. Except metaphorically, I have no inner being, no inner life, no mind. Those elusive sprites of consciousness—bare sentiences, raw feels, immediate awarenesses, pure sensations and all their evanescent kin—are strangers to me. When I try to look for them, they fail to appear. If I could see my own unmediated thoughts I would be like a playwright seeing my own play without having written it. I can enter such a drama only by passing through the looking glass and becoming a fictional character myself.

Although I have no inner life, in the sense in which it is usually avowed, I am not a robot or an automaton. I think and feel robustly and am vividly aware of it. I tend to muse incessantly and am constantly contending with myself. In fact, it is these musings and reflections, this almost obsessive monitoring and self-examination, which has led me to conclude that there is no mind lying open to our direct inspection and that we do not do quite what we think we do when we try to examine it. It is not the fact of these musings, feelings, urges, and sensations that is at issue here, but their nature and ground.

What I am aware of when I am known to myself is my story, the life adventure in which I am engaged, and which I endure, enjoy, anticipate, and almost unremittingly recount to myself. I wake to it in the morning and, if I am able, put it to rest at night. My dreams rise out of it and into it. Beneath its episodes are energies, urges, inclinations, and desires whose origins and destinies exceed my understanding. I seek to guide them as they move me. I am boy and dolphin, black horse, white horse, chariot and charioteer; a protean shape-shifter that all the powers of science, philosophy, poetry, and myth have not pinned to earth or caused to yield its secret up.

With its obscure prologue, its brief and feeble aftermath in public memory, this story, because it is the meaning of life, means as much as life itself. This is what passes in my experience for a soul.

8

Since 'the mind' is a story the body tells itself, how did it come to fall for its own fantastic tale? The lack of sensation associated with thinking is part of the answer. In physical work or play, when it is vigorous, the body lets us know it; the heart pounds, we begin to breathe rapidly and perspire. But we can think long and hard without ever breaking a sweat. Thinking arises with such magical ease—like a genie rubbed up from the lump of the body—nothing at all seems to be doing it or to be needed in order to do it. The casual way our thoughts drift off in memory or in reverie to far away times and places or worlds that never were makes it easy to suppose this mortal clay to be but a prison house from which we might be freed. We might, it seems, be able to think without a body. The myth recounted in Plato's *Meno*, purporting to show that all knowledge is only the soul's recollection of what it saw in a prior existence, is plausible enough as far as direct experience can testify: so much of what we know seems to come to us out of nowhere, bearing

no traces of its origins. Some more or less likely tale is always required to say how our thinking comes to us.

But there is a darker side to the story. When thinking—bright Ariel spirit—looked down, detached and self-aware, and saw itself bound to the body of a beast more rude than Caliban, it revolted and began at once to sew itself a suit of clothes. But this disguise was not enough: the body and its excrements still offended the delicate appraisal of its own nostrils. Worse yet, it lived by devouring its animal kindred after tearing them limb from limb, and when it ceased to live it betrayed its earthy origins, succumbed to a foul corruption, stank to heaven and drew flies. Wanting no part of anything so base, thinking revolted, took out an option on a place in paradise and began to dream of a bodiless bliss.

I would not claim much plausibility for this mythical portrayal of the ultimate doubling act, but without some such affront to our appraising gaze it is hard to understand what could have led one misguided expositor to say, and multitudes before and after him tacitly or explicitly to believe, "...I [am] a substance whose whole essence or nature consists entirely in thinking; and which for its existence, has need of no place, and is not dependent on any material thing; so that this I, that is to say the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and would not itself cease to be all that it is, even should the body cease to exist."¹⁴

How desperate for safety and certainty a man must be to willingly undergo, even in thought, such extreme self-mutilation. Yet to this day we are haunted by this dictum of Descartes—and still have trouble disbelieving it.

¹ *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, trans. R. E. Hume (Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1985), *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*, (-3.8.2) 117.

² *Upanishads*, trans. Hume, *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, (-6.11) 409 and (-6.19) 410.

³ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, (Dover Publications, New York, 1950), Volume 1, 224.

⁴ Daniel C. Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness*, (Basic Books, The Science Masters Series, Perseus Books Group, New York, 1996) 8.

⁵ Dennett, *Kinds*, 3.

⁶ Dennett, *Kinds*, 14.

⁷ James, *Principles*, 1.300, italicized in the original.

⁸ James, *Principles*, 1.301-302, is a conspicuous instance of this.

⁹ James, *Principles*, 1.300.

¹⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Niddick, (2d ed, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Bk.1, pt.4, ch.6, 253.

¹¹ James, *Principles*, 1.224-225.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961), ppn. 5.633, p.117.

¹³ James, *Principles*, 1.346.

¹⁴ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part 4.

What Good Are Friends?

Robert Goldberg

One might wonder whether theoretical books on friendship are really necessary. Aren't we all thoroughly familiar with friendship from our own experience? Is there anything about friendship we can learn better from books? Perhaps, however, our experience of friendship has not always been free from disappointment, confusion, and doubt. For instance, there may be times we feel betrayed by friends. At other times, we may ask more of them than they feel they can give or, in fear of doing so, hesitate to ask as much of them as we would like. We may have felt guilty on occasion for not giving as much of ourselves to a friend as we might have. Such experiences can make us wonder who our friends really are and what kind of person we ourselves are. We may then resolve to be more careful about choosing our friends in the future and to do better by those we regard as true friends. Disappointment, confusion, and doubt, however, may be signs of problems with our very notions of friendship and of what a friend is: we may be expecting something more, or something other, than what friendship can deliver. Reflecting on the experience of friendship we might ask: Just what *is* a friend? Is he someone who loves you for your own sake? Someone who cares about *you* at least as much as he cares about *himself*? Is the *true* friend one who is willing to give up everything for you, including, if need be, his own life? Are there *limits* to what friends owe each other? We might also ask why we form friendships to begin with—whether out of some need we have for the assistance of others, or rather for the sake of the

Lorraine Smith Pangle. *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*. Cambridge University Press, 2003. Robert Goldberg is a tutor on the Annapolis campus of St. John's College.

enjoyment we derive from their company, or perhaps because of the loneliness we would have to endure without them, or from some other cause. Such questions take us to the heart of what it means to be a human being. In pursuing answers to them, we are led to radical questions: On what grounds, if any, do we have obligations to others, including those who are closest to us? Are we capable of the extreme selflessness that good friendship seems to require? Does a life that is by nature good need friendship? Indeed, Lorraine Smith Pangle's remarkable book, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, shows that the issues of the relationship of friendship to justice, of the possibility of selflessness in friendship, and of the naturalness of friendship form the central themes of a number of classic treatments of friendship, particularly the one on which she concentrates—Books eight and nine of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Pangle 5).

The *Ethics* is a perennial favorite of St. John's undergraduates, one of the most memorable books read in freshman seminar and one often referred to in subsequent years. Of its various themes, friendship may be the one that students and other modern readers can relate to most directly. Indeed, the *Ethics* is one of the few books we read at the College, and the only philosophic one, that gives substantial attention to friendship; two of its ten books are entirely devoted to investigating the nature of friendship and its place in a good human life. Not surprisingly, every student recalls Aristotle's threefold classification of friendships developed in the second and third chapters of Book eight: there are friendships based on pleasure, those based on utility, and those based on virtue. But few remember the other twelve chapters of Book eight or the twelve of Book nine—and with good reason, for the rest of his analysis is not nearly so clear and concise as is his initial classification of friendship. It can also be disturbing, as Aristotle delves into such questions as whether we love others for *their* own sake or for *our* own sake and whether we really wish for our friends the greatest goods imaginable.

Because we have so much at stake in understanding Aristotle's teaching about friendship, and also so much difficulty in figuring out what that teaching is, it is a pleasure to recommend Pangle's book to our community. Pangle provides just the kind of guidance a student of Aristotle needs in negotiating the twists and turns of his astonishingly complex, rich, and nuanced argument. All readers will find her book accessible and engaging. In a mere 200 pages of lively prose Pangle takes us through Books eight and nine of the *Ethics*, with fascinating excursions into Plato's *Lysis*, Cicero's *Laelius On Friendship*, and Montaigne's *Of Friendship*. The book is chiefly an interpretation of Aristotle's text, but it also compares and contrasts Aristotle's views with the views of these and other thinkers and addresses the question why friendship is given so much attention by ancient thinkers while being largely neglected by such modern thinkers as Hobbes and Locke. True to its title, the book manages to provide a comprehensive treatment of the philosophy of friendship. For scholars, or those wishing to pursue alternative interpretations, the book has an additional forty pages of footnotes, largely treating other interpreters of Aristotle. These need not be read, however, in order to follow Pangle's own argument; they are wholly supplementary in character.

The Socratic Challenge

Pangle uses Plato's *Lysis* to pose the questions to which her analysis of Aristotle will eventually provide answers.¹ According to Pangle, Socrates in the *Lysis*

pursues the unsettling idea that all friendship is rooted in human neediness and defectiveness and is treasured only because and only to the extent that we hope to get from others things that we are unable to provide for ourselves. (20)

This appears to be connected with another of Socrates' contentions in the *Lysis*, namely, that the good for human beings consists of those things that remedy the illnesses and defects of our bodies and souls. Hence, Socrates uses medicine as both the prime example of something good for human beings and the key analogy for the human good as such. We love people and things only insofar as we believe them to be good for us. This view seems to be contradicted by our experience of friendship, which suggests that it proceeds more from our *virtues* than from our deficiencies. Our capacity to love, to devote ourselves to our friends, to rise above self-interest and care for our friends for *their* sake and not our own—all this comes very close to what we mean by virtue. This capacity may even strike us as what is best in us. Perhaps in recognition of our experience, Aristotle begins *his* treatment with the observation that friendship either *is* a virtue or *goes together with* virtue. But Socrates, for his part, is unyielding in his insistence that friendship is rooted in our neediness. Thus the question arises: Will friendship prove to be an outgrowth or sign of our virtue and strength or will it prove to be rooted in our weakness and neediness?

Pangle maintains from the start not only that Socrates' argument in the *Lysis* is implausible but also that Socrates himself would admit as much. Citing various features of the argument, she suggests that he exaggerates the neediness at the root of friendship in order to make an important point. It might be true, she concedes, that the greatest or most important human goods have the character Socrates ascribes to them. If so, we, no less than the young men Socrates converses with, would have to come to recognize this truth if we are ever to become healthy in soul. But this leaves open the possibility that other goods exist that have the character not of medicines healing diseases but of activities we engage in once health is achieved. Pangle tempts us to think that friendship might be one of these. Prior to achieving health, however, we may actually be harmed by friendship if it makes us content to remain unhealthy in soul. Perhaps it would be

more accurate to say that friendship in such a case is not genuine. Friends are supposed to be good for us, but if the love others have for us (and we for them) leads us to believe we possess a goodness we do not possess, we may never take the decisive step toward health. As Pangle puts it:

The great comfort of feeling that one belongs to others, that they belong to oneself, and that one is loved for oneself just as one tends rather to induce complacency. Pursuing the charms of such friendship can distract us from the task of thinking through what we need for true fulfillment, for these charms tend to mask altogether the neediness and unhealthiness of our souls. (35)

Friendships that harm us by concealing our defects lack what we think of as an essential characteristic of genuine friendship—that it is something good for us, perhaps even the greatest good. At least until we become healthy, according to Pangle's interpretation of the *Lysis*, friendship will have two roots: the main root of serious friendships (i.e., friendships between those aware of their defects and intent on correcting them) will be utility, and the root of friendship between the ignorant and needy who remain unaware of their defects will be kinship (35). So far, of course, we have been taking Socrates' word for it that the souls of the unwise—*our* souls—are sick and needy. What this means, however, is fleshed out by Pangle only in the course of the book as a whole; it turns out that sustained reflection on our experience of friendship itself, such as we find in the *Ethics*, brings to light the very defects in soul that friendship can help to conceal.

Aristotle's Classification and Beyond

Pangle's treatment of the *Lysis* provides a helpful introduction to Book eight of the *Ethics*, which then appears as a response to the challenges posed by Socrates to our

unexamined opinions about friendship. In this light, Aristotle's famous threefold classification of friendship looks like a deliberate rejection of Socrates' view: it leaves room for precisely the kind of friendship Socrates denied the possibility of—that in which one loves one's friend for *his* sake and not for one's own. Aristotle includes among lovable things not only the pleasant and the useful but also the good (which seems to be something other than the useful). As Pangle explains, love of a friend who is good may not exclude his being good for you (and your loving him for his usefulness), but it allows also for loving the goodness in him without regard to its usefulness to yourself (38). However, as Pangle cautions, Aristotle also asserts that everyone “loves what is or seems best for himself” as distinct from “the good” (43; *Ethics* 1155b23-6). If this assertion is taken to mean that *the* basis of our loving things or people is our belief that they are good for ourselves, then how exactly does Aristotle's position differ from that of Socrates, according to which need is at the root of friendship? Aristotle thus leaves us with two possibilities, according to Pangle: either friendship between those who are good provides “the highest benefits to both partners” (and is just a special case of friendships of utility), or friendships of pleasure and utility are those that provide to the partners pleasure and all benefits (high *and* low) while “virtuous friendships are fundamentally different” (43). In accordance with the second possibility, Pangle contends, Aristotle speaks of friendship “for the sake of the useful” and of friendship “for the sake of pleasure” but of friendship “*of the good*” (my italics). This evidence may seem ambiguous: it could be taken to suggest, for instance, that, however friendships of the good may differ from other friendships, they are alike in being *for the sake of* the useful and the pleasant (and not for the sake of the good). And in any case, as Pangle shows, the picture with respect to friendship becomes steadily more complicated as we move away from Aristotle's initial classification and into the intricacies of his full argument.

We come to see, in fact, that Aristotle's threefold classification of friendships is by no means his last word on the matter. For one thing, each kind of friendship has elements of the other two. If there *are* friendships based on virtue, the friends are also useful and pleasant to each other. By the same token, partners in friendships based on utility and pleasure may see each other as good, even if they do not live up to (or would even reject) the strict notion of human goodness that Aristotle articulates in the *Ethics*. As Aristotle himself observes, most human beings believe that they are basically good and that their best friends are, too (1155a31, 1166b3-4). Because we normally think well of ourselves and our friends, it seems that even friendships between those who do not possess genuine virtue may nevertheless be based partly on the supposed good character of the friends and not only on their utility and pleasantness to each other. Presumably, the chief difference between friends who are good in the full, Aristotelian sense of the term and those who are not is that the truly good are not mistaken about what human goodness consists in.² Complicating things further, Aristotle soon comes to speak as if the fundamental ground of friendship is none of the three things he initially describes as lovable—pleasure, utility, and the good—but rather the similarity or likeness (*homoiotês*) of friends to each other (48; *NE* 1156b19-23; 1157b2-3; 1159b2-3). On this ground, friends who are not good may be friends no less truly than those who are good. The significance of friends' similarity to each other will prove to be one of the key issues in Aristotle's analysis of friendship, most notably when he comes to call the friend, in his famous and paradoxical formulation, “another self.”

Montaigne, Aristotle, and Cicero on Devotion

Key issues that surface before then include whether we can love friends and wish them well entirely for their sake without regard to our own good and whether genuine devotion or self-sacrifice is possible. Indeed, in one of the

Ethics' most provocative passages, Aristotle makes the case that each human being wishes the greatest goods for himself but only *some* of the greatest goods for his friends (8.7, 1159a5-12). His argument here, and a number of others he makes in regard to friendships where the parties are not each other's equals (the subject of 8.7-8), calls into question our beliefs about friendship and is intended, according to Pangle, to incite in us a desire to examine those beliefs. Pangle describes the beliefs she has in mind movingly:

. . . that love is the very core of what is precious in life, that loyal devotion, even to one who fails to return one's love, is not foolish or ridiculous but is supremely noble, and that loving and being loved in return is the greatest blessing we can have as human beings. (64)

In order to explore further the possibility that we are not mistaken in these beliefs, Pangle turns to a brief but illuminating examination of Montaigne's "Of Friendship" and other essays, where he seems to support those beliefs. Although "Of Friendship" makes a powerful case for the view that friendship is the greatest good—"that the deepest longing of the human heart is for the simple communion of souls that occurs in true friendship" (56)—we come to see that "Of Friendship" actually supports rather than refutes Aristotle's implication that friendship cannot itself be the greatest good. The problems with Montaigne's case for friendship are pointed to by Montaigne himself. Among them is a problem with what he calls "noble generosity," the desire to do good for one's friend even at the expense of one's own good, a problem that Aristotle himself will eventually take up. Pangle explains the problem this way:

To be devoted to another is, after all, to be devoted to the good, the benefit, the utility of the other. But if each friend, being noble-minded as well as devoted. . . deeply desires to be a generous

benefactor to the other, then being such a benefactor is in fact a greater good in the benefactor's eyes than is the low-level good he gives away when, for example, he pays a friend's debts. (69)

After quoting Montaigne to show his awareness of this difficulty, Pangle gives an example of noble generosity that he offers in "Of Friendship":

To illustrate such noble generosity, Montaigne tells the story of Eudamidas and his friends Charixenus and Aretheus, to whom he bequeathed in his will not money, for he was poor and had no money to give, but the nobler opportunity of looking after his elderly mother and his unmarried daughter, and Montaigne tells us that both friends were well satisfied with the gift. (69)

To clarify what she calls "a problem and indeed an absurdity" that Montaigne himself appears to be gently calling to our attention, she elaborates:

The absurdity consists, at bottom, in a certain confusion or self-deception within each friend: Each is competing for the position he covets—that of selfless benefactor—but neither is willing to face squarely the fact that in doing so, he is seeking what he considers the greatest good for himself, and that this is a good he cannot share with the one he seeks to benefit. (69-70)

In other words, the greatest good from this point of view appears to be one's own nobility or virtue, which, in a sense, is purchased at the expense of one's friend (cf. 124). In the case of Eudamidas, we can say that he did the nobler thing by giving his friends the opportunity to exercise their nobility. Had he taken the trouble to look after his elderly mother and unmarried daughter himself, he would have deprived his

friends of this opportunity. He thus took the greater good for himself, a fact Montaigne himself points to by calling the one who gives such opportunities to his friends “the liberal one.” As for why virtue may be so important to us, consider Pangle’s quotation from another of Montaigne’s essays (“That To Philosophize Is To Learn To Die”): “Among the principal benefits of virtue is *disdain for death*, a means that furnishes our life with a soft tranquility and gives us a pure and pleasant enjoyment of it, without which all other pleasures are extinguished” (72; my italics). How virtue or, more precisely, the belief in our own virtue, could have the effect of leading us to disdain death, and whether that disdain is justified, remains to be seen.

The absurdity or self-deception we have just encountered—that one believes oneself to be more concerned with the good of one’s friend than with one’s own good—plays a central role in the analysis of friendship that Pangle, following Aristotle, develops in the course of her book; it is the one strand that runs through and ties together its various parts. A similar self-deception may operate elsewhere in our lives, whenever we believe we are devoted to something outside ourselves, as we learn in Pangle’s next chapter (4), “Friendships in Politics and the Family.” Commenting on Aristotle’s inclusion of religious associations among those that exist for the sake of pleasure, she speaks of the following “paradox”:

Even at the moments at which human beings are most clearly seeking to lose themselves or transcend or sacrifice their self-interest in devotion to something higher, they are also pursuing their own good by ennobling or sanctifying their lives, if not also through the pleasure of good fellowship.
(83)

If people believe they have transcended or sacrificed their self-interest, and thereby ennobled their lives by devoting themselves to something higher, whereas in fact the

ennoblement they achieved was a greater good for themselves than the goods they gave up, their situation is indeed problematic. Leaving aside such knotty questions as whether the object of devotion was truly higher and whether a coherent notion of “higher” can even be given, there would appear to be no devotion here at all: such devotion to something or someone entails rising above oneself, but in this case one serves oneself, indeed, it seems the deepest and therefore most precious part of oneself.³ And where there is no sacrifice of self-interest, there is no transcendence of self and hence no ennoblement of the kind Pangle is discussing. As to the character of the good we might seek to acquire through our devotion, a suggestion emerges from Pangle’s fascinating chapter on Cicero’s dialogue *Laelius on Friendship*. The dialogue “explores the friendship and the self-understanding of two noble Roman statesmen” (105), Laelius and his much more famous and intellectually impressive friend, Scipio. Pangle helps us to see the shortcomings Cicero points to in Laelius’s understanding of himself as the devoted friend of Scipio. She shows us how Cicero “quietly indicates that much of Laelius’s attachment to friendship is fueled by the promise friendship seems to hold of providing a bulwark against misfortune and death,” a promise latent in the feeling of *deserving* that attends “noble acts of selfless devotion” (120).⁴ Pangle seems to be suggesting that this feeling of deserving may be a root, perhaps even the principal root, of the belief in divine providence, the belief in a cosmos not coldly indifferent to such acts or to the worthiness of those who perform them. But in light of the problem already encountered, the notion that we deserve (i.e., are worthy of or owed) something as a result of acting for the sake of our friends becomes problematic. And so Pangle speaks of the “confusion” or “incoherence in Laelius’s claim to deserve honor or other protection as a result of his great friendship for Scipio,” an incoherence visible in his “claiming at once that such friendships are life’s

sweetest gift *and* that they entail heroic steadfastness and sacrifice" (121).

Aristotle and the Problem of Nobility in Friendship

A passage in the next chapter (6) offers further support for the contention that we act with a view to our own good and not from selfless devotion to others. In the context of treating a type of utilitarian friendship that Aristotle calls "ethical" (*Ethics* 1162b21ff.), Pangle notes a tendency of human beings to shut their eyes to their own expectation of a reward for their virtuous acts, an expectation that often becomes visible only when they fail to receive one (if only in the form of an acknowledgment of indebtedness). On this tendency she observes, "Shutting one's eyes to one's expectations at the time of acting does not make the act disinterested, but only confused" (127). This tendency points to "a great paradox of the noble: It is only when one can be indifferent to any reward that one seems to deserve it."⁵ The paradox appears to be this: ordinarily we do not think of someone's working hard and ably for the sake of a reward as a disqualification for his receiving it—for example, in an athletic contest or in tracking down a fugitive from justice with a "price on his head." The case of virtue is different. Here the purity of motive essential to virtue would be compromised by acting for the sake of reward. Rather than leave it at the assertion that the reward is our true motive, Pangle proposes as a thought-experiment "two ways to choose a virtuous action without confused expectations of reward." One is to choose it knowing that it is bad for oneself and one's happiness but nonetheless noble; the other is to choose it as not only noble but also intrinsically good for oneself, without expectation of reward (127-8). But do human beings ever act in either of these ways? Casting doubt on the first, Pangle wonders "whether such a disposition toward virtue and one's happiness is humanly possible" (127). Her doubt is certainly plausible: it may well be that no one who wishes to act virtuously really believes that virtuous action is noble but funda-

mentally bad for those who undertake it. Casting doubt on the second, she raises the suspicion that no one is so delighted by the purity of his own soul as not to harbor some hope of reward for it, also a plausible doubt. Having rejected these possibilities for avoiding confusion, however, Pangle proceeds to ask whether demanding that we banish all hope of reward for virtuous action and that we be content with the great good of having a noble soul is not "too strict a standard for perfect virtue": couldn't the reward be "a kind of icing on the cake," something we might believe we deserve and expect to receive without the reward being the *motive* for which the virtuous action was performed (128)? Yet, as she notes, we have a sense that virtuous action is deserving of reward. This implies that "we are unsure of whether virtuous action is truly good in itself, or we consider it good to do it, but not as good as benefiting from it" (129). Pangle suspects that virtuous men secretly believe it is good to give but even better to receive and that they cannot choose virtue for its own sake but always act with a view to reward. She asks a provocative question:

Can [virtuous men] be content endlessly to accept the lesser of two goods, endlessly to be on the less advantageous side of all their transactions with others, without reward? (129)

If not, Pangle concludes, then they must always have at least one eye on the reward and are to that extent confused about their genuine motive.

In addition to her own reasoning in support of this suspicion, Pangle has in mind several passages from the *Ethics* that suggest Aristotle himself agrees that the virtuous, no less than those who are not virtuous, aim above all at what they believe to be their own good. When treating *Ethics* 8.7, for example, Pangle cites Aristotle's blunt assertion that "each man wishes for his own good most of all" and might not wish his friends all the greatest goods (59, 64). And in the two chapters that treat self-love (9.4 and 9.8), as she notes,

Aristotle maintains that all the friendly feelings one has toward others one has toward oneself most of all (142; 170). Moreover, in *Ethics* 9.8—the first of two culminating chapters in his entire analysis of friendship—Aristotle himself makes the argument that Pangle has already found signs of in Cicero and Montaigne. In her words, this chapter indicates that “moral nobility is not something that accrues to the moral man incidentally as he goes about seeking to help his fellows; it is precisely the prize that he keeps his sights fixed upon.” Hence, “acts of apparent noble sacrifice, made by those who understand such nobility as the highest good, really are not acts of sacrifice at all” (175). She has prepared us for this conclusion by quoting such statements from 9.8 as the following:

The morally serious man. . . will do many things for the sake of his friends and his fatherland, and if necessary he will give up his life for them. He will give money and honors and all contested goods, seeking above all the noble for himself. He would prefer to feel pleasure intensely for a short time than mildly for a long time, and to live nobly for one year than indifferently for many; he would rather perform one great noble act than many small ones. Those who give up their lives perhaps achieve this, and they choose great nobility for themselves. The morally serious man will give away money so that his friends may have more, for they thus get money, but he gets the noble: He assigns the greatest good to himself. (172; cf. *Ethics* 1169a18-29)⁶

Here again is the confusion to which Pangle, following Aristotle's indications (as well as Cicero's and Montaigne's), has been calling our attention all along. The friend who sacrifices himself in the belief that it is noble to do so is really only trading a good he regards as lesser for one he regards as

greater. If the nobility consists in the alleged sacrifice, there is no nobility here at all. The morally serious man is merely confused. Pangle uses this line of reasoning to show the irrationality of the view that the highest good for human beings can consist in sacrifice (or in virtue, if virtue is understood to consist in self-sacrifice or to demand it). Indeed, it is one of the chief points of Pangle's book, following Aristotle, to expose the irrationality of this perspective (perhaps the perspective we all share to the extent we are morally serious). The irrationality of this perspective does not mean, however, that a rational human being will not act for the sake of others. That he may do so is confirmed for Pangle by Aristotle's statement that “intelligence always chooses what is best for itself” (176; cf. 1169a17). By reflecting on both the text and our experience, she arrives at the following conclusion:

The intelligent mind always chooses what is best for itself as a rational mind, and this means acting intelligently, consistently, with self-command, and guided by a full understanding of its own deepest concerns *which begin but do not end with the concern for personal happiness of the being whose mind it is.* (179; my italics)

In fact, Pangle's examination supports the view that all human beings, including the devoted friend or the morally serious man, choose what they believe to be best for themselves. The person who believes he acts out of devotion to a friend does not in fact choose his friend's happiness in place of his own; rather, he believes (in his heart of hearts) that his own happiness is best served through the nobility he believes he practices by “sacrificing” his own good for the sake of his friend. The intelligent mind differs from the rest, then, not in preferring what appears to be best for itself—the others do the same thing—but only in knowing what really is best for itself. That said, nothing that has so far come to light rules out the possibility that human beings, including the

most rational, will act for the sake of their friends as long as doing so is compatible with what they believe to be their own greatest or deepest good. If this whole line of argument is true, it would still have to be determined what genuine happiness consists in and what place friendship has in the life of one who has thought through the confusions about sacrifice, nobility, and virtue.

However, Pangle's statement that our deepest concerns do *not* end with the concern for personal happiness comes as something of a surprise. The thrust of her main argument appears to go in the opposite direction, and Aristotle himself argues in Book one that the individual's end *is* happiness (see, e.g., 1097a30-4). Her formulation allows of two possible interpretations: that the rational mind (1) has concerns in addition to, but consistent with, the concern for personal happiness, or that it (2) has concerns for the sake of which it would be willing to *give up* personal happiness. Here in chapter nine Pangle argues that the rational mind or human being—the human being who has worked through the confusions she has treated and who is capable of living free of those confusions—might under certain circumstances give up his own good for the sake of a friend, though without any illusions about what he's doing (i.e., without believing that he is thereby noble and hence somehow deserving). In support of this possibility, Pangle invokes the example of Socrates, who gave up “a few uncertain years in exile and in decline so that philosophy might win renown, and so that his young friends like Plato, who had as yet written almost nothing, might prosper” (181). She concludes:

[T]he wisest man is the one most capable of both the truest self-love and the truest friendship, for only he has a mind that is perfectly good and lovable, only he can love what he is without inner conflicts, and only he can love another without illusions, without competition over the noble, and

without surreptitious expectations of repayments or reward. (181)

One implication of this conclusion is that it is possible to love another human being even after freeing oneself from all illusions that ordinarily accompany love. (I take Pangle to mean that it is out of love for Plato that Socrates could die at least in part for Plato's sake.) A little into the final chapter of her book, however, we learn that this conclusion was only provisional. To see whether it stands we must first answer the question of the *Lysis*: “Why would one who is self-sufficient treasure another enough to love him?” (183). In other words, assuming self-sufficiency is possible, why might a person who has it nevertheless need friends?

Is the Friend Another Self?

The opening sentence of Book nine, chapter nine, which according to Pangle contains Aristotle's “deepest reflections on the relationship of friendship to human neediness” (183), announces that it is disputed whether the happy man will need friends or not: “For people assert that the blessed and self-sufficient have no need of friends, because they [already] possess the good things” (1169b3-5). The chapter gives a series of six arguments, which seem to show that, contrary to this assertion, even a happy human being will *need* friends.⁷ The last three of those arguments appear to elaborate two suggestions of Aristotle's we noted earlier but have not yet had occasion to examine: (1) that similarity is a basis of friendship possibly more fundamental than pleasure, utility, or virtue and (2) that the friend is another self. Indeed, this famous formulation, which is used only three times in the entire *Ethics*, appears twice in 9.9 (its first appearance came in 9.4). And although Aristotle doesn't speak here of the *similarity* of friends, he does speak of the activity of one's friend as one's own activity, and “one's own” or “the kindred” (*to oikeion*) seems to be closely related to similarity; the two were linked by Pangle in her treatment first of the

Lysis and then in the *Ethics* (24, 48-9; but cf. *Lysis* 222b-c). Furthermore, in 9.9 Aristotle focuses on the activity of friends who are morally serious and whose activity is in that respect similar. Of the six arguments in this chapter, the first two (1169b8-10; b10-16) are brief, sketchy, and based more on "conventional opinion" than the remaining four, all of which have recourse to nature (186). The third argument (1169b16-21) merely *asserts* that "man is by nature a political being and lives together with others"; shortly after, Aristotle concedes (to those who deny that the blessed and self-sufficient need friends) that one who is blessed has no need of *useful* friends and little or no need of *pleasant* friends. But does this mean that he has no need of *any* friends? The last three arguments, which Pangle characterizes as Aristotle's "most serious" (186), purport to establish the blessed (or happy) person's need of friends on the basis of something other than utility or pleasure. What, then, is that something? Is it "the good," as Aristotle's initial classification of friendships would lead us to expect?

According to Aristotle's fourth argument, that something is instead the need the blessed person has to observe the actions of those who are morally serious or good. Pangle paraphrases this argument as follows:

[I]f happiness consists in living and acting, if the activity of the good man is good and pleasant in itself, and if what is one's own is pleasant, then observing the activity of good men who are one's own friends will be choiceworthy, too. (186)

If we look at the *Ethics* itself (1169b30-1170a4), we find that the full version of this argument contains seven premises in the form of if-clauses (five before he gives the then-clause plus two more at the end), whose truth Aristotle does not vouch for. Pangle shows that at least two of them are highly suspect. One is that we are more able to observe our neighbors than ourselves. This may be true of most of us, but in this chapter

Aristotle is considering the blessed person, of whom Pangle says, "the mature, wise, truly happy man, who sees his neighbors with perfect clarity, has no inexplicable failure of understanding when it comes to himself" (187; see her supporting reference to Aristotle's *Magna Moralia*). The other suspect premise is that the activity of a friend is also somehow one's own. Perhaps because Aristotle himself finds these premises suspect, he proceeds to his fifth argument, "which helps to put in perspective and explain the previous ones" (187). It improves on the fourth argument by giving due place to the fact that what matters most to us is our own activity rather than that of our friends. According to Aristotle, the life of a solitary is hard in that to be continuously active by oneself is not easy; it is easier to be continuously active together with someone else and toward others (*Ethics* 1170a5-6). If we act together with a friend, we ourselves will be more active. And, Aristotle adds, there might also arise a certain training in virtue from living in the company of good people. Pangle interprets Aristotle to mean that we have a tendency to flag and that an excellent companion can spur us on, inspire us, and confirm for us our own excellence. However, it seems that the fully formed human being under consideration here would not be in need of inspiring examples. This applies not only to moral action but to all endeavors, especially philosophy, which, in anticipation of Book ten, Pangle pays increasing attention to. She notes that in Book ten Aristotle will argue that "the wisest souls do not need company in order to remain active in philosophy" (188; indeed, Aristotle maintains not only that the theoretical man is least in need of other people but also that theoretical activity is the most continuous—see 1177a21-22 and a27-b1). This line of thought prompts Pangle to offer a striking suggestion: friendships at the peak of human existence would be "more tranquil and less intense" than friendships on the way up (189). In other words, the most intense friendships may be those between defective human beings. But what is the cause of the

intensity? Pangle does not spell it out but seems to have in mind here the need we have for those people whose assistance seems to us indispensable for acquiring the goodness we regard as a necessary, and perhaps even the sufficient, condition of our happiness.

Perhaps because he has yet to account for the necessity of friendship in the life of someone at the peak of human existence, Aristotle moves on to his sixth and final argument—"his profoundest account of the necessity of friendship in the happy life" (189). This argument depends on a number of conditions (expressed in a complicated six-part if-clause), one of which is that our enjoyment of our life or being comes from our *awareness* of our life, and another of which is that the morally serious man is disposed toward his friend as he is toward himself. After summarizing Aristotle's complex argument, Pangle observes that it does not answer the question of why a happy man will need friends because it does not show that one *will* be disposed toward a friend as one is disposed toward oneself; the argument hasn't proved that "friendship itself is a good thing" (189). Rather than consider this a fatal defect in the argument, as some other scholars appear to have done, Pangle takes a closer look at its details to see whether an argument for the necessity of friendship in a good life emerges from them. What she finds is this: in the light of our own mortality (one aspect of the determinateness or finite character of life that Aristotle refers to at 1170a20-1) "friendship becomes precious as a way of augmenting and intensifying the goodness—the full active aliveness—that we love and cannot keep" (190). Our aliveness depends not only on our being active but also on the *awareness* we have of our own activity, a point made by Aristotle partly through his choice of verbs. Our sense of being alive is heightened by engaging in activities with others who share our interest in them and whose responses therefore "reflect, confirm, and expand" our awareness. This, then, is the "deepest justification" of friendship: "its capacity to enhance the awareness

of activity and pleasure." The awareness of a friend engaging together with us in the same activity is good for us because it enhances our awareness both of our own activity and, as Aristotle makes clear again by his choice of verbs, of our very *being*—of our existing at all.

No sooner has Pangle developed this argument, however, than she raises a most serious question about it: "How solid a good is this good of enhanced aliveness, charged as it is by our awareness of life's brevity and the desire to find a compensation for it, if not to escape it altogether? Is it a good necessarily laced with self-deception?" (191) The self-deception she has in mind here differs from the deception involved in our notions of devotion and sacrifice, which she has treated at length in the course of her book. This new deception has to do not with the belief that we have transcended and ennobled ourselves through sacrifice but with the bewitching power of friendship to draw us out of ourselves and thus distract us from thinking about the finitude of our lives. (The two deceptions have the same root, however: they are ways in which we cope with the awareness—always somehow present to us—of our own mortality.) Pangle spoke of a related deception when commenting earlier on Aristotle's formulation in 9.4 that a friend is another self; at that time, she issued a caveat:

A clue to the real meaning of this enigmatic expression is found in its other appearances in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In each case, Aristotle shows how the friend who is loved as another self is, in some important way, cherished as an extension of oneself, an extension that can tempt one into the delusion that this other really is still oneself, and as such able to help overcome one's limitedness and mortality. (152)

That Aristotle has such a delusion in mind appears to be lent support by his prior use of a related formulation (in 8.12), which Pangle cites in this context. There Aristotle says of

offspring that they are “*like* other selves” to their parents, by having been separated from them (1161b28-9; my italics). Despite the possibility of these deceptions, Pangle maintains here (in chapter ten) that there is “nothing necessarily illusory about friendship’s power to magnify and enrich life, just as there is nothing necessarily illusory about the pleasure of being a source of good to friends”; we can enjoy the genuine good of enhanced aliveness that friendship offers just as long as we resist the temptation to escape the grip of mortality “by escaping ourselves altogether”—i.e., by going too far in “immersing ourselves. . . in the absorbing affairs of others” (191). At the same time, it is when we resist this temptation that we can be a genuinely valuable friend to another, helping him to attain the only solid happiness through “the shared activity of thinking and helping each other to think as clearly as possible.” This helping is itself a solid pleasure and hence an addition to our own happiness as long as we don’t fall prey to the illusion that we can truly live on in a friend when our own lives have ended. Drawing on the conclusion of 9.9, Pangle goes on to say that friendship is chiefly not about sacrificing for friends but living in company with them, and this means that friendship consists above all in conversation. As Aristotle powerfully puts it, living in company with others—in the case of human beings, as distinct from cattle—would seem to mean sharing in discussion and thought (1170b11-14).

I must confess that I remain suspicious of Aristotle’s arguments purporting to establish the need for friendship in a happy life, including the last and most powerful one. To mention just a few of the grounds for my suspicion, Aristotle’s fourth and sixth arguments depend on three if-clauses with a total of thirteen often elaborate parts between them that issue in two very brief then-clauses.⁸ Why do the arguments take so provisional a form? Where does Aristotle either show that the conditions referred to in the if-clauses are true or at least state them unambiguously as his own views? In addition, there are not only the explicit assump-

tions of the if-clauses but also more hidden assumptions in the various arguments. For example, in his preface to the sixth argument Aristotle points to the question whether human life is defined by perceiving or instead by thinking, but the sixth argument depends on the view that perceiving, not thinking, is paramount. In addition, four of the six arguments in 9.9 (including the three that Pangle calls, rightly in my view, the “most serious”) refer explicitly to the morally serious person, but, as Pangle has already shown, there is reason to think the highest type of human being (the happy one) is the one who is wise as distinct from the one who is *merely* morally serious and confused. Furthermore, Aristotle varies his terms in 9.9, referring not only to the morally serious but also at various points to the good and to the decent. Are these one and the same type, or is Aristotle calling our attention to differences among them that may be crucial to determining whether the blessed or happy human being has need of friends? For that matter, is to be happy the same as to be blessed and self-sufficient? If so, is self-sufficiency, and hence happiness, a possibility for human beings? And what does it mean to be blessed? By moving back and forth among these terms, Aristotle may be pointing to the question of whether the happiness we long for as human beings is available to us. Is he perhaps helping us to reason out the sort of happiness or contentment man at his best can achieve? And might it be the morally serious rather than the wise as such for whom friendship offers the sense of enhanced aliveness and for whom that sense is an essential ingredient of “happiness”? These are some of the stumbling blocks I find in accepting Aristotle’s well-hedged conclusion that “the one who is going to be happy, then, will be in need of friends” (1170b18-9; cf. b14-7, one last if-then sentence on which this conclusion depends).

Conclusion

Whether or not I am thus justified in doubting Aristotle's arguments for the necessity of friendship in a life by nature good, Pangle herself emphasizes that the good of friendship remains secondary to the greatest good available to human beings. Engaging in an activity together with friends may enhance our enjoyment of it as well as our awareness of being alive, but it is still activity itself that is the crucial ingredient in happiness. Having reflected on the experience of friendship no less than on Aristotle's text, Pangle concludes that what "matters most for happiness. . . is not the companionship that friendship brings but the pleasures and good activities it augments, and even its goodness as an enhancer of life would not be so very good if it were not for the inevitability of death" (197). Furthermore, as Aristotle will conclude in Book ten, it is not just any activity but rather the activity of philosophy that can bring the happiness of which man at his best is capable (see especially 1178a4-10). Indeed, the argument Pangle has developed through the course of her book helps to prepare us for Aristotle's rather surprising conclusion and to understand how the two books on friendship contribute to it (and therefore why they immediately precede Book ten). Pangle observes that in the books on friendship Aristotle

. . . shows some of his reasons for judging even this finest of active lives to be not quite the best simply. Even when the grave confusions surrounding self-sacrifice are cleared away, Aristotle insists that practical, political activity (under which he subsumes the work of moral education) is too much driven and constrained by necessities to be simply choiceworthy in itself. (199)

Once we see the true character of such activity, she continues, philosophy appears both as the invaluable source of the

clarity we need if we are to be truly good and as the activity that is the most delightful in itself, one not forced upon us by immediate needs. In view of such considerations, the happiest of friendships appear to be "partnerships in which the capacity to see and enjoy and think and reflect is given the fullest possible scope" (199). Pangle is now in position to answer the question of whether friendship is, or is rooted in, virtue: the impetus to friendship, Aristotle has shown, comes largely from "weakness, deficiency, and confusion." Thus the apparent disagreement with the *Lysis* is resolved. Book ten tellingly emphasizes "the self-sufficiency of the philosophic life, rather than the goodness of friendship within it." With this in mind, it seems to me we could say that friendship between those who possess what we may call genuine virtue (philosophic wisdom) is based on nothing more than their similarity (the deep interest each has in understanding things as they are), the pleasure their companionship affords them, and their usefulness to each other (three grounds that have not been shown to involve, of necessity, illusion and self-deception). If this is so, we could say that friendship between the best human beings differs from ordinary friendship in being admittedly based on nothing more exalted than similarity, pleasure, and utility. The strength of the best human beings would then be visible, at least in part, in their not even being tempted to believe that their friendship is rooted in or is an expression of self-transcendence.

Pangle's book always encourages us to return to the *Ethics* to test our conclusions and explore the issues further. It does so by fully engaging us in, and basing itself on, Aristotle's dialectical analysis of friendship. Pangle has given us a superb study of that analysis, one that guides readers through Aristotle's always dense and often uncertain arguments, helping us to follow his analysis in its gradual unfolding. If we ignore the details of Aristotle's arguments, we learn what he merely *seems* to be saying; with Pangle's highly competent assistance, we find that taking account of the details invariably leads us toward a deeper and more

adequate understanding of friendship.⁹ In addition, Pangle demonstrates how fruitful it is always to be thinking about our experience of friendship in order to bring to life what might otherwise remain sterile formulations and to enable us to use our experience and the text to illuminate each other. In reproducing here portions of what I take to be her central argument (which is far more ample than my abridgement of it might suggest), I have had to leave out much else that is compelling in her book, such as many more eye-opening thought-experiments and her evocative reflections on a vast array of phenomena associated with friendship, aspects of her study that make it not only thought-provoking but lively and even gripping to read. Pangle performs the invaluable service of placing Aristotle's teaching (and not only Aristotle's) within reach of the careful reader determined to understand what friendship is and what kind of good it is for human beings.

Notes

¹ Of special interest to the community is Pangle's lively engagement with the argument of St. John's tutor David Bolotin's book on the *Lysis*, which includes an excellent translation (*Plato's Dialogue on Friendship* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989]).

² Even here, however, there is a complication: goodness or virtue is an ambiguous term in the *Ethics*; it could mean either moral virtue or intellectual virtue—and the two do not necessarily go together. Is the good man, then, the man of moral virtue, or is he the man of intellectual virtue? Pangle, though clearly aware of the distinction, sometimes leaves ambiguous the sense in which she, or Aristotle, is using the terms "virtue" and "goodness."

³ Consider a kindred remark Nietzsche makes in responding to an objection to his critique of "disinterestedness": "But anyone who has really made sacrifices knows that he wanted and got something in return—perhaps something of himself in return for something of himself—that he gave up here in order to have more there, perhaps in order to be more or at least to feel that he was 'more'" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 220; Vintage Books: New York, 1989).

⁴ Perhaps this is one way in which virtue may lead us to a disdain for death, as Montaigne put it.

⁵ By "indifferent" I take her to mean that one would perform the act (1) even if one knew that there would be no reward of *any* kind for performing it and (2) even when it would be at enormous cost to oneself.

⁶ How Aristotle himself can know this remains unclear. It may require a thoroughgoing examination not only of oneself but also of others who believe they act virtuously not for their own sake but only or above all for the sake of others (or for virtue's sake)—the kind of examination we see the Socrates of Plato's dialogues engaging in (see, e.g., *Meno* 77b-78b). Aristotle may be offering not a definitive argument, then, but rather guidance in conducting this examination for ourselves, pointing out the crucial things to look for in examining ourselves and others.

⁷ The first three begin respectively at 1169b8, b10, and b16; the second three, at 1169b28, 1170a4, and a13.

⁸ St. John's tutor Joe Sachs' translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002) is the only one I know in English that accurately tracks these conditions.

⁹ This seems to me to constitute a proof that Aristotle's writing demands the kind of ingenuity and attention to detail that Pangle brings to the *Ethics*: only thus does one uncover many genuine questions about and problems with both friendship and our opinions about it that we would otherwise have to say Aristotle failed to notice, thereby calling into question his competence as a philosopher. As to why he chose to write in so opaque a style, Pangle shows us that the subject matter requires such writing, not only because it is intrinsically complicated but also because it touches on many sensitive issues having to do with how we understand both ourselves as human beings and the character of the world we live in.