

WHAT IS DISCUSSION?

Some discussions are plainly better than others. People who spend time discussing usually get better at it. Some groups of people regularly have better discussions than other groups. Even so, discussion gives the illusion it is not a positive presence worth studying. Like window glass it keeps itself transparent. Just as we lose sight of a window when we look through it at things on the other side, so we lose sight of our talking as we fasten on the things we're talking about. Next to these objects that hold our attention our ways of speaking with each other seem trivial.

The things we talk about are subject matters existing in their own right, objective as the subjects I've learned in school all my life. They belong to the world of things, the world I apparently live in. What topics could be more important?

But a single question has nibbled at me, termite-like, over the years. When I know about things, how does my knowing help? The knowledge of them I gain is objective knowledge. It tells me what goes on in the world outside me. But none of the events out there need me the observer. So what does my knowing about them add? I seem peripheral, in fact irrelevant.

Even when I learn psychology or philosophy telling me of my own consciousness, I gain new information, this time about me. But that me turns into another objective process to watch. The one observing is again exiled from meaning. A thinker like Kant writes of this watcher free of the processes he watches, but I read Kant as yet another objective idea to be understood correctly. Kant is a book I can get right or wrong. I still feel exiled. I still have the question, so what? Maybe all the information I gain is

accurate. But how does my knowledge make me anything more than a dedicated gossip about things of the world, in the know about all their doings?

I myself, am I nothing? Does my own questioning, mistake-making life not participate in truths of the world? Can they not touch me directly, as water touches me when I drink it? I suspect I'm touched this way twenty, forty times a day. But since I don't know how to pay attention well to myself, I'm not very aware of what happens.

I realize why I don't pay attention well. Most of my life I have been taught that I don't matter. My own person is too personal. In myself I am only anecdotal evidence, with little objective weight. Weight, I have been taught, is in objects out there independent from me. The personal is not relevant. I, again, am not relevant. My participation is merely a means toward the end of uncovering objective fact.

In recent years I have heard people rebel against this teaching. "Make our studies relevant to us," they say to colleges and universities. "Make our lives the measuring rod." But these people appear to know more clearly than I do what their lives are. They seem confident that their life has the recognizably objective shape of a race, for instance; of a culture; of a sex.

I find myself, however, touched at odd moments in so many ways. No few shapes cover them all. When something vital makes contact, it generates a me participating with it, but this me that I suddenly am often eludes forms I'm familiar with. Sometimes it is not even what I habitually think of as personal. Still, I can tell I'm participating. Being genuinely in what's going on is very different from being stopped short by an intrusion from outside.

Here is the difficulty. All through my schooling I've assumed, when I've thought about it at all, that I must get acquainted with outer facts and

ideas in order to fit better into the world. Learning the systems which many of these form, I can see what they require of each other. But what do they require of me? What do they have to do with me?

'Everything,' learned people leap to tell me. 'They're part of your life. Some are the physical earth you walk on. Others form the European tradition of ideas that give you the vocabulary of your own thought.'

Here once again is plausible objective information. Of course this scenario of facts and ideas collects into a world. Of course it could be somewhere, and someone could be living in it. But is that world *here*, where I am? Is it *my* world? Unless I participate in it, it may not be mine at all. It may be nothing more than someone's ornate daydream, palpable as Disneyland and as thickly visited.

Yes, I see all around me details of the information these learned advisors put forward. It fills the landscape. It crowds the pages of the books I read. But it's all *objective*. Independent from me, it joins me nowhere. I don't feel connected to it. So I can't tell whether it's the world I myself am part of.

A symptom I will confess to you is this. After a long time with the books we study, I have discovered I frequently don't know why I read them. I go through them without resistance because they are famous. They're prominent institutions it never occurs to me to question. Too much of the time I can't find where the books matter the way I matter to myself.

Where do they demonstrate they are the facts of *my* life, given to me like my problems and my joys? Once shown they are mine, they are plainly my duty. I have a right to them and a responsibility. But if they are not mine, then truly I am a gossip. Reading them I pry into matters that are none of my business and waste my life's time to boot.

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I betray these books as long as I continue not to find where I participate with them. I make them trivial, with no enduring significance for me. At the same time, blind to my own concerns, I betray myself.

So where do I find contact? One place is the moment when a book or another person speaks out so that I feel directly spoken to. As soon as anything in me answers, I participate. With that book or person I am together. This is the moment of discussion.

Now it's clear why discussion is important to investigate. I need its help to show a way past the things outside me to the ones inside, that join with me here where I am. Already I've seen hints of a direction. Every now and then members of a class at this college will face a reading, as well as each other, vulnerably. Discoveries occur which make a difference to the people present. Then, with two other tutors, I have come on a new way to discuss seminar papers with their writers, a way marked also by a deep and vulnerable listening. These discussions have been powerful. But too much of my work is flat. The powerful moments come too seldom.

Asking what I might do to help my work be better, I find myself thinking of Plato's Socrates in jail. Moments before his death he sits with friends in his cell recalling his youth. As a young man he was always asking why things are the way they are. One day he heard an impressive line from a book, one of the works of Anaxagoras. To Socrates it sounded like a great book. Convinced he could learn from such great books, he read Anaxagoras' writings hungrily. But all they offered were physical, mechanical explanations.

'They were the sort of account,' Socrates tells his friends, 'that would say I sit here in this cell because my bones can move in their joints and because my sinews can hold my bones in a sitting position. You and I of course

know that the real reason I sit here is that Athens thought it better to condemn me, and I thought it better to obey her command.'

Socrates knows the real reason is the reason which includes him. Physiological, mechanical descriptions for all their accuracy do not touch the questions put by the one asking. They remain outside.

This image from Plato gives me a picture for my own condition. Outside me are the objective lessons I have been taught ever since I could read. I am helpless before them all. It's like the moment of a discussion when someone reads a long passage from the text which joins nothing anyone has been saying. Here the effect is different from just any unrelated remark out of the blue. The authority of the author ringing in the words almost wins it a place in the conversation.

But a ring of authority is not enough. I don't know where to go with a remark whose only recommendation is that it quotes someone prominent. I don't know where to go with all the prominent facts simply *quoted* to me in this way by books and teachers.

Quoted facts do for me what bones and sinews did for Socrates. They have an independent existence. Out there on their own, apart from my questioning, they do their job like machines without any need of me. Solid as metal, mechanisms never waver. Independent of my wandering questions, they never share in my uncertainty. Mechanisms are too true. Who could doubt that Socrates has bones and sinews, and that they keep him erect in a sitting position on his cot?

But that is not the help Socrates needs. Socrates can see different possibilities. He might sit here in Athens, or he might escape to sit more safely somewhere else. Why does he sit *here*? What touches him powerfully enough to keep him in Athens?

Anaxagoras, citing bones, does not touch Socrates' question. When people learned as Anaxagoras cite, for instance, a European heritage I apparently belong to, they do not touch me as I search for my way. Here I begin to see that no fact helps if it's offered from outside the line of my own asking. My heritage, whatever that is, is no more within my asking than the bones and sinews of Socrates' own body are inside his question.

Objective facts like these are a mechanism even when they look more exalted. With grand names like 'Platonic forms,' 'essences,' 'human nature,' 'law,' they are bones not of one person's body, but of the world. So they act the same. That is, they don't help.

To give an example I think of something as seemingly non-mechanical as number. In imagination I put myself into a seminar on the *Iliad*. A woman troubled by Achilles says, "But what does honor mean to him if he knows he's going to die? What does his *life* mean?" A man with an impatient manner further down the table says, "Well, I wouldn't know about life, but I think we'd all agree that seven plus five equals twelve."

I suppose we would all agree. But not now. Not here. The numbers have no connection to anything being said at this point of the conversation. The calculation is as far outside as any mechanism doing its work all by itself with clicking efficiency. Like a mechanism the numbers don't *speak* to anyone. We don't know here what they say. Not entering into us as we try to find our way, they don't respond to our questions. They don't meet us anywhere with help.

So far the man has said nothing. His comment has no insight. Where insight is missing, the truth of the arithmetic cannot make its grip felt. Though the remark about seven and five may be utterly correct, it comes into the conversation like a rock through the window. It's no more than a

disturbance.

The same numbers linked the same way are no mechanism at all when Kant brings them into one of his discussions. There they help him wonder how we add. How are our sums necessary, he asks. Twelve is not part of anything we know beforehand about seven or five. Startled, I begin asking along with him. I come to see what I use as I add and how I arrive at twelve. Twelve now starts to make sense. It answers my question about seven and five joining. The answer twelve holds up, I see. It's true.

But only here, only when the fact of arithmetic is not mechanical, does the truth stand firm. Before the insight reached through conversation, twelve's correctness had no roots. Twelve was how I *behaved* with seven and five, that's all. It was a custom, like eating with knife and fork instead of chopsticks. It was a quotation, a tiny pledge of allegiance to first grade.

As with seven and five, so with something larger like the thought of Plato. I see I have to stop reading Plato for a system of 'forms' underlying the surface of the world, similar to Anaxagoras' system of bones underlying the surface of the body. In the objective knowledge of Plato I thought I had, I would read off features of his thinking that appeared to me linked together like parts of a smoothly-running machine. Reading him this way--that is, *quoting* him only--I turned his thought into a mechanism.

When I used to say, 'This is how Plato goes together,' I was adding him up like that man in the seminar with his gibberish about seven and five. I was being destructive. Perhaps my facts about Plato are true as twelve, but without insight, I realize I don't know.

Facts offered like these, as simply what's correct, do nothing. As I think back on classes that have failed, I remember people pressing to get objectively clear on what a book is saying or doing. They try to get these

facts straight without any particular direction, assembling them like details of an encyclopedia article. But when a book is heard this way--as information to be catalogued--it loses its power to provoke us. It's much less able to challenge our previous certainties, melting them into the deeper questioning which leads toward insight.

Encyclopedias give facts, not insight. Eager to inform, they do not encourage that fertile ignorance in which questions grow. A class with the attitude of an encyclopedia gives questions little space. Listening to them gets harder to do, since that can seem a distraction from demonstrable facts about the reading. When someone's question alludes to one of these facts, a classmate frequently rushes in with a short lecture on it, never pausing to find out what the questioner is really asking. At the end the question has been blocked and the questioner frustrated. But the focus has returned to facts. One fact is soon disposed of. Another can be reported, and another, and another. Breaks occur often. Interruption fits naturally into the rhythm.

Now I see the danger. It is dangerous to turn what an important book says or does into objective facts one can report like an encyclopedia. It interferes with people working together to reach insight. Trying to establish such facts is wrong. Persuading others to accept them has to stop. Debates destroy discussion. The facts they strive toward are finally quotations from texts or from the world itself, and the quotations are empty when merely stated as Anaxagoras would state them. They are empty because they don't speak inside the discussion where the participants are.

Discussion is the necessary way for a class, but how does discussion do its work? Somehow it is directly a part of the people speaking with each other. It is inside where they are, sharing the same place, perhaps *being*

that place, like a building they move through. If I can find where the doorways of this building are, I will use them. I won't try to force my way into a room through the wall.

Where am I as I speak with others? How do I speak? Surely by way of language. I am in my language. Not only does it give me the words I use, but also the thoughts. Concepts, attitudes are embedded in the ways of expression familiar to me. They were in place before I was born. In a way, then, I quote them every time I talk. Solidly in place, they can be observed as clearly as the mechanical working of bodies described by Anaxagoras. They're a mechanism.

Am I once more a victim of machinery?

I seem to be. Even within myself I quote. My face is my mother's. I clear my throat the way my father does. My last name is his. My first name and middle name are my grandfather's. Attitudes that make me up my outlook came from my family. Other attitudes are part of the larger family I grew up in, my culture. Traits of my personality arose in a community of experiences I have had in the past. Acting as I habitually do, I quote earlier moments of myself when I reacted in ways that have stuck. Opinions I have and quickly give are quotations of earlier conclusions I've come to, though I usually don't remember why I came to them.

Free myself from quotations? I'm a sounding library of them. I seem nothing at all but quotations glued together into the shape of a person.

Is this so? I'm asking now. I don't know. If bones and sinews make it possible to sit, do they then have to be the things that really do the sitting? Do they sit, not I? Does the mechanism of language speak, not I? Sitting and speaking, do I really just quote these mechanisms as the real authors of my actions?

Is there finally, beneath all the layers of quoting, no I at all?

As I first asked how I speak with others, language came to me as the answer. I realize now more clearly what I was really asking. How do I, an individual isolated from others, reach across the space separating us? At that moment an object independent as a mechanism seemed necessary. All of us could see it, since it was outside us all, more universal than any one of us in particular. I see that I wanted something else to do a work of speaking when I couldn't see how to do it myself. In effect, what I wanted was an explanation.

Language as a mechanism acts to explain for me something mysterious. It tells me how speaking is possible. I realize that what I mean by 'possible' is the form of an event independent from me, safe from my bewilderment. 'Possible' means solid and successful as a mechanism.

Everything I've seen connected with language serves also to explain me to myself. I'm a son of parents, the child of a culture, the descendent of a personal past. Lines of descent explain how I do what I do.

But explanations say what goes on behind the back of the one asking. Giving conditions outside my question, or before it, they don't speak directly to me. They ignore where I am in my asking. They give me as little help as bones and sinews gave Socrates wondering why he sat where he sat.

Here I am, still looking for an answer. I don't know what I am. I don't know how I speak with others in discussion. I don't know how to help my work be better.

What can I do?

Someone might answer, "Language makes speaking possible. Let language help you."

But that's useless. It's as though I stand thirsty in some dry country,

and someone walks up to me, water bottle sloshing at his hip. He looks me over a moment and says, "Water would help you."

"I can't find any water," I say. "Could you give me some? A swallow?"

"Fluids," he says. "The body's got to have fluids. Without fluids it won't function."

If all I get from this person is explanations I will die of thirst. I'm facing here Anaxagoras at his most boneheaded.

Now I realize who the 'I' beneath all the quotations is. It is the one thirsty that no explanation reaches. The one that needs direct contact. The one that sees he's being excluded. The one, at bottom, who does not know, and asks, and thirsts. Here is one who can be surprised by something he hears. He wonders about it. He is open. From him comes the response of further questions.

But again, *how* does he ask? What can I say here to myself that will answer yet not be a barren explanation. I need something not outside myself and outside the discussion I am in. More clearly I see I need to know the shape of the building I am in. I am inside it. Where am I *inside*?

To describe some outer fact of the world again asserts an object beyond me. Then I only quote the world. A fact, like a machine, excludes me from participation and silences my speaking. I can't give an objective fact. Instead, I'll try a metaphoric image. --Metaphor.

In my imagination something says, 'Go down to the water of life.'

The water of life? I have to listen a moment before I catch any meaning at all. At the first hint of a sense I realize I hear water and life meeting. As they face one another, certain aspects of each of them come forward, others recede. It's as though the word 'water' begins to say something in response to the word 'life,' and the word 'life' speaks back.

The metaphor is like a conversation between the two of them. They are both in the conversation. Inside it.

I listen to the conversation. After all the trouble from objective mechanisms nothing tempts me to explain the metaphor away. An objective fact common to both water and life would appear to make 'possible' their partnership. But I don't see such a fact. Instead I see them meeting like hands in a handshake. The two hands grip nothing in common, neither one holding anything held by the other. Whatever trait I might uncover that water and life share, like 'able to change shape' or 'sometimes deep,' they say yet more to one another. The more I listen the more I hear. Having no standpoint outside what they do together, I listen in a sense from within their conversation. I listen as any participant might who happens not to be talking. I am inside the place water and life make.

The force of their discussion I've joined carries me to see something along lines they suggest. Conversation between people now looks similar to this metaphorical conversation between words. Back when I was trying to explain how conversation works, I said that it depended on language. By language I meant machinery as secure in its configurations as a linkage of bones. But in discussion the security of language wobbles. Discussion confuses people as often as it communicates. Constantly people ask each other what they meant. The English everyone knows isn't enough. Speakers in discussion push English beyond its familiar pathways. In a sense new language begins, as when words talk with each other in new metaphors. Only now it's the people who talk, hearing and saying things new to themselves.

There is another obvious feature of conversation that I have overlooked. Just as water and life give each other a context, so do comments and responses in a discussion. A conversation's real achievement is not so

much any particular conclusion, but rather the fuller, sharper context which emerges. Issues stand out more clearly. Certain things are obvious that at the beginning were not. The topic of the discussion--a question, or book important enough to speak to us--is itself this context deepening inexhaustibly. The topic is no object outside us to be described in the manner of Anaxagoras describing bones.

By 'context' I don't imply some mechanical backdrop making possible what words can mean. Conversation's very work is the creating of its own, new context in which remarks gradually go together as they fill each other out. Though people's remarks apparently refer to a topic, that topic has not yet shown much of itself. So comments cannot simply, like bits of description, point to an object outside clear to everyone. Remarks point rather toward each other. Addressing each other, they build slowly a more detailed sense of the issue being discussed. People then see more clearly what to think or do.

The kinship between discussion and context gets more striking when I consider how a context of the simplest kind takes form. If I say 'bank,' no one knows what kind of bank I mean till I say 'river.' River and bank light each other up. Along their line other things add definition--rapids, a bridge, a dam. All of these work together to make a place where each belongs. Each helps tell what all the others mean, because like pieces of a metaphor they bear directly on one another. The pieces join as the unobtrusive, widening metaphor that is the whole context itself. No one of its parts stands above the rest as a higher-ranking universal stands above particulars, containing them all in itself and in that way guaranteeing them.

Remarks in a discussion speak to each other like these pieces of context. No comment is supreme. No comment is final.

But objective facts binding on everyone act like universals. They outrank the opinions of anyone in particular. Uttering facts, one speaks in the commanding tone of a general. One asserts. My comments in a conversation, however, don't have the spirit of assertion, even though I might state facts I see. Rather I speak in the spirit of confession. I offer up myself where I see something. *This* is what I see. Here is where I am in perception. It's where I've been brought.

A perception is not the same as a position to defend. I don't hold any position and push it at others. Positions are rigid, but I am liquid as water waiting for life. Though I see something, I don't know fully what it means. I can't be rigid. I have to listen to what further might come--both from others and from myself. Life shows what water can mean. What responds to me can show me further what I mean.

Since it's not a position, my speaking doesn't tell others what to think. It rather says where I am. It's my name and my address, which others can use to reach me. Reaching me, they will make larger the context I begin. They will teach me more than my words can say. They'll show me more than I can say, this I with so many difficulties--so often lost, barren of meaning, thirsty.

Across the table I see others no clearer about what they really want to say than I am. At the beginning they may grope awkwardly. But behind the awkwardness I can sense someone alive trying to speak. They are reaching for language. Alive as I, they are my partners. So I try to help them. I don't attack their first stumbling steps any more than I criticize a baby for falling when it first tries its legs. I listen and ask the questions which help open the person to himself or herself.

Any kind of assault harms the work we do together. People need con-

fidence. They need someone listening to them, helping them see they are real and worthy of trust. People don't need brutality. As soon as I frighten them, they will put up walls to keep themselves safe. In effect I will have thrown them out of the room.

A person puts up those walls on his own when he stays busy bricking over his life with quotations of various sorts. At these moments conversation dies. To help the person find what he himself really wants to say, I might ask questions that probe behind the brickwork. They can jolt someone comfortably sealed away like a hermit crab in a borrowed shell. But the hurt I give is a temporary, surgical hurt on the way to deeper healing.

Surgical questions have to search me out too. I have to find where I am alive. All too easily I can relax and begin once again to quote things I've read and said before. At that moment I stop listening. I hear nothing and I don't see how to respond. I have no intelligence whatever, because I am not present to perceive anything.

Preparing for a class I prepare to be *present*. I can't merely assemble a script of thoughts to quote later. When I arm myself against questions that might embarrass me, I hold myself behind ramparts. No longer am I open to what other people might wonder about. No longer am I very willing to investigate surprises from the reading. Shields thick enough to protect me are thick enough to hold me away from the conversation. They keep me absent, not present.

Whatever thoughts come to me as I get ready for class, they have to be where I begin, not where I end. My preparation isn't done till I discover where my thoughts, like questions, invite further thoughts which might give them help. Not until then do my thoughts *speak*.

If I stop short, I let my thinking stand still, unable to join what

others may say. Then my thoughts can't take part in the discussion. Whatever I say intrudes. Even if I've had years of experience reading our books and talking about them, I'm expert only in the way a mechanism is expert at doing what it does. I'm outside the discussion. My conclusions do not fully expose themselves to its dangers. Walled off from it, I can't hear. The openness of being able to listen is closed. So I don't listen. Stubborn as a burglar alarm out of control, I loudly go on insisting that everybody stay with issues my conclusions over the years have told me are important. Rolling over other people's perceptions, I crash ahead. The room fills with frustration or limp passivity, the wreckage of my violence. No one can work.

I see I can't do that. My own ideas are destructive when they're finished off, shut down, turned into formulas I can repeat. Getting ready for a class must take me past formulas.

At first, of course, I have to meet what's on the page of the book. I must follow as best I can the story being told, whether the story is literary, philosophical, or mathematical. But then the real work begins. What strikes me? What hunts me down in memory after I close the book? What discovers where I am and enters to find me? I must have the stillness to receive what comes. I can't grab impatiently for the cleverest thing to think. The choice is not mine. I can't simply choose what I see. The perceptions come on their own.

In too much of a hurry though, I can often confuse perceptions with the quotations that press themselves on me from the shelves of my memory's library. I need the silence to listen closely so that I can tell the wooden clack of formulas from the live stirring of something fresh in this moment that is speaking to me.

The moment of perception is everything. It is itself the instant of conversation when I am spoken to and I hear. At that moment I look toward what comes. I look forward rather than back into what I already have. Turned backwards I don't have to be open for what might present itself. It's all in order, on file like cards in a card catalogue. But when I'm surprised by a philosopher's revelation or by a candle flame dying under a bell jar, I come to life. The sight reaches into me where I have no knowledge. That I understand all quotations is touched. For here is where solid mechanisms break down. The fabric of quotation tears. Here is darkness. The darkness is me not knowing. And here, in that darkness, light cannot be overlooked.

When I perceive in this way, I see objects real as any bone or sinew Anaxagoras would point to. I see them just as sharply. But now, rather than closing me out, these facts offer me shelter. Lighting up in the direction my questions turn me, they join what I have asked. They join with me as solidly as the wide building in which I move. Like lunchtime or a cool day in autumn they make up a world in which I have a place. My questions are answered, not ignored.

I see walls and doorways. Telling me where I can go, they locate me. In front of a wall I do not try to go through. Walls are real. The pain of broken knuckles is real. Seeing a wall puts me in my place. I don't have the freedom now to want just anything at all. I don't want to go through the wall. Its thickness shows me too clearly what will happen if I try. Here my freedom of choice narrows to channels that fit where I am. A discipline enters. There is a rigor I have to obey.

When people quote, choice is wider. They can quote at will. Able to speak out anywhere they want, they can release so-called 'lines of argument' that proceed along tracks like little electric trains. Usually nobody's

in these trains. It doesn't matter whether anyone actually holds the views argued for. They're mere hypothetical possibilities.

I can't talk hypothetically any more. I see I have to speak from what I directly perceive. Only in my perceptions am I truly present. Developing an argument I don't believe is quoting something not mine. Like any mechanism the quotation silences me. Arguments made objective as machines *are* machines. They don't do anything but destroy. When I speak hypothetically, not participating in what I say, I am taken in nowhere. No building reaches around me, lining me up along its corridors. Without landmarks I am lost. I can't see where to go. In my blindness I can run into other people and knock down pieces of our building. I become dangerous.

I see I have to stay in my own perceptions. Each one is like the wall I discover across my path that puts me somewhere. It puts me, namely, in front of a wall. In turn I give it a place. My motion forward, now blocked, makes it the barrier in front of me. Other features like outline, color, and texture are its meeting with the ways my eyes see and my fingertips touch. The thing I perceive will compare, roughly, to the size and capacities of my sensing body. Anything more comes from new contexts built with the help of instruments and thinking.

This wall I look at, then, owes its character both to its own presence and to the me I've been till now. The two of us combine just as water and life combine when they achieve what they say together in metaphor.

Perception is a metaphor. It is a conversation. More and more I realize it is the only genuine conversation. What I see belongs to a lifelong discussion I am part of. It's a place that keeps forming as metaphors keep growing. Contexts grow. The world itself grows that is *my* world, the large neighborhood that's my home.

When people tell me of a tradition I belong to, I hear it now as the context made by a discussion continuing for centuries. Writers of the tradition's important books perceive in much the way I perceive. Beginning from what they are familiar with, they ask questions and in perception gain answers. The answers are as true as anything a scientist could verify. Asking, the writers looked. Looking, they saw. One saw the earth revolving around the sun. Others saw the behavior of light. Yet others found truths of the human heart too evident to doubt.

Perceiving such things, they wrote, and perceiving, I have to read. Without putting myself into conversation with them, I will turn them into mechanisms too far beyond me ever to touch my understanding. Out there in the distance they can never make a difference to the scope of my life. They can't teach me. Only by joining in a discussion with them do I become part of the tradition they make. Until I'm in a discussion I have no insight, and only through insight does the full truth emerge.

Now it sounds as though I'm making myself as responsible for the tradition as they are. Is that sane? Aren't they geniuses, vastly wiser than I? At the moment I enter a discussion, ready to perceive, I know nothing. How can I make myself equal in rank to the greatest seers of the ages? For exactly this is what I must do. Just as sides of a metaphor, water and life, teach each other equally what they say together, I must stand as tall as Homer, as Plato, as Shakespeare or Newton.

How can I possibly do that? Haven't they and other writers like them given me the thoughts I think with? Don't they make my thinking possible? Aren't they its very cause?

Causes have higher rank than the effects they allow to occur. Standing where ranks are equal, I seem to stand where no causing takes

place.

I have to stand here. What I see gives me no choice. When thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, explore in their own ways what a possible thing is and what manner of causing makes it possible, I have to read their writings from inside the discussion in which the thinkers themselves perceived. I have to ask them what they fully mean by 'causing.' I have to understand better what this thought says to them. It's not enough to quote their findings blankly, with the shallow comprehension of an Anaxagoras detailing the physiology of each thinker's system.

Though they and their fellow writers have given me much of the vocabulary I understand with as I read, they give it just as the heritage of the English language gives me the words I use when I talk. Some English words are old as Abraham. But each word is open as the water ready to join life in a metaphor born now. New meaning begins. Like water is every piece of my vocabulary, the familiar quotations I begin with--words, thoughts, familiar colors, shapes, sounds. As these open to what joins them in conversation, the opening that I am is born. Here I do not yet see clearly. Here I look and listen. Here I ask questions. I am here, nowhere else.

I use my vocabulary for the metaphors in which I perceive and speak. Speaking, I use my words as decisively as I use the bones and sinews of my body when I sit. The English words old as Abraham speak out with the meaning / express. They say what / mean. I live in these gifts of vocabulary as I live in my body. I am their life just as I am my body's life. When I perceive and speak I am not an observable object distinct from them. Rather I am this life that incorporates them, giving them their point and their ultimate meaning.

Since they are no more dead objects outside me than my hands are,

they have no time of their own outside mine. *Always* these words have meant me. Abraham himself was part of the tradition that has sent me the words I use. Abraham himself pointed to me as I speak right now. Before Abraham was, I am.

This is not gaudy blasphemy. It is a kind of sacrament. Saying the words that Jesus of Nazareth said, I take into my body the body of a teacher living still as he speaks so that I hear. To be taught truly, I have to join with him. If my work is to be more for me than it has been, I cannot go on being intimidated by objective facts so enormous and complicated they shrink me to nothing. Unless I join with them as an equal, I will stay thirsty. My work will never be alive enough.

Go down to the water of life, something in me says.

In this and in everything else I say tonight, I do nothing but confess what I see. You may see none of it. I can't try to persuade you. But if any part of what I've said meets you anywhere, it will be like water meeting life. What I confess I see and what you confess you see will merge into the same thing. In the metaphor water *is* life. Nothing divides the two.

Joining what I say, if you do, you'll in effect be speaking with me in conversation. From our language of discussion springs insight, and in the moment of insight truth takes hold. Without this shock of perception--the shock of living metaphor--truth withers to a mere quoted slogan, a dry husk empty as a dictator's promise.

Unless I am free to discuss, there can be no contact. And only in contact does the truth live. Truth unfolds in an encounter, like water not revealing a true identity until it encounters, say, a chemist, a thirsty chemist, or a boat. Water is not alone. Nothing is alone.

If an eagle and I are thrown without parachutes from an airplane, we

each encounter several thousand feet of empty air. For the two of us the fact is different, yet each version is true. No one will come along to kick my remains and say, "Get up. You're not dead--that's just a subjective impression." The eagle and I are questions put to that empty air. Its truth is the answer it joins to the question asked of it.

Objectivity has taught a way of truth which separates an insignificant observer from the all-important object observed. But the truth that I see does not separate. It joins, as a stick joins its own two ends, each as vital as the other. Break an end off, the stick instantly replaces it, connecting the new end to the remaining tip.

I imagine you saying to me, "You make everything depend on perception, but look at that chair over there. All right, close your eyes. Do you claim the chair will vanish? Has it no true existence outside your seeing?"

Now you've broken off the end of the stick that's me. But even with my eyes closed I can see I have simply been replaced by you. The chair existing sturdily on is the answer to the perceptive question you ask. Two ends of the stick remain joined.

When water joins chemist, boat, or life, the context gathers which offers perception a direction. Discussion begins. As long as I remain awake to discussion's real work of inviting a fuller context, I can never see one side of the encounter as its determining ruler. Conversation will not let the chemist, say, in his original scientific discussion with nature decide alone what water will do. His suppositions must swim. As with the sides of a metaphor, each end of the partnership has a say.

So though chance circumstances may combine to give standpoints that begin a conversation, the discussion moves on from these beginnings by way of question and answer, invitation and response. Starting standpoints turn

into words having more to say than they said at first. The standpoints become more than they were to begin with. This is the motion called 'learning.'

Seeing the motion, I realize I can't announce views intended to remain as they are, safe from further development. I can't claim something, as though urging you to accept my view as the final, completed word which ends discussion. I don't make claims. Allowed to stand inertly, claims don't say anything. They don't enter into the conversation, furthering by giving more to build on. They tear down the ongoing encounter that is discussion itself.

My perceptions have permanence, but they are as vulnerable to response as water to its partners in metaphor. When water meets life and gains new meaning, it does not contradict what it formerly was. Formerly it was water. Now it is water. But that water has become like an ear that hears. It hears life and in turn becomes a word expressing the sort of life *water* can hear. Water does not change. It continues as itself but continues in a conversation, hearing and speaking like someone alive.

For my perceptions to live on in this way, they need the partnership of responses that meet them. I have to help those responses come. My insights and questions have to open further discussion, or what I say won't be answered and won't endure in the answers that take it up anew. An unanswered claim does not endure. It moves on nowhere. Like a corpse it lies where it is, every bone and sinew turning slowly to dust.

But when a perception continues like a living person--undeniable as water--it has what can be witnessed in Homer and Plato, in Shakespeare and Newton, in me and in you.

That abiding life is the truth.