Friday Night lecture

Parents' Weekend

November 2, 2001

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WAYS OF NAYSAYING

No, Not, Nonexistence, Nonbeing, Negativity, Nothing—these words, the guideposts of my lecture, may seem like a dismal parade for Parents' Weekend. There's an old post-World War II song that goes: "You gotta accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative," and accordingly the more pessimistic particles, adjectives, nouns, have a bad name in our assertively optimistic country. But that aversion is a misapprehension. Almost nothing in our mental capacity is more life-affirming than our power of naysaying, and you might almost say that where there's No there's Hope.

So when our dean, Mr. Flaumenhaft, asked me to give a sort of higher book report on a volume I've completed fairly recently, called *The Ways of Naysaying*,* I cheerfully assented, thinking that it needn't spoil your evening. For the human capacity for negation does turn out to be a large territory—full of fascinatingly knotty intellectual problems but also of plain familiar human charm.

Now the book contains about sixty thousand words, while I won't keep you here even sixty minutes, so I'll have to pick and choose my negations. It will be hard, because all of naysaying has come to seem to me close to what I think of as the human center.

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* Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.

To explain what I mean by the human center I have to use a very unfashionable word, unfashionable at least among those who now write academic books about human beings. The word is "soul." Oddly enough the word is more acceptable in its Greek version "psyche." With the word "soul" comes, very naturally, the notion of a lay-out, a spatial topography. We speak of surface emotions and deep feelings, for example. A number of the authors we read at this college—Plato, Augustine, Freud—speak of the soul as a sort of territory with its own geography. And so I will feel entitled to use a similar figure and give our inner being a spatial expression. In my image, the soul has an outer margin, a front, where it is open to the outside world and its facts of sense, be they human or natural. And it has a background, deep behind, whence arise truths of thought. As we must not only deliberately keep our eyes open to see (though it is not the eyes that see but we ourselves) so we must go deep into these inner places to learn things the outside can't teach us. On reason why the Platonic dialogue *Meno* is so central to our program is that it tells a story and gives a demonstration about the way to that deep inner region where live not only mathematical but also moral truths.

Now I sketch for myself a middle territory where whatever comes through the senses up front and whatever thought we can dredge up from the depths behind meet, and where, incidentally, our feelings live most familiarly; it is where we come in those "sessions of sweet silent thought" Shakespeare sings of. This middle territory is a strange non-spatial space, a quasi-space. You can't measure its extent, but you can pace or fly through it. You won't find solid weighty objects there, but nothing is more lasting than its contents. In it is whatever you've seen or heard, except that it is not really there; and it contains besides much that you've never seen or heard, except that it is as if you had; and it contains above all the many scenes and people that are now far away or gone altogether, except that they are present in there. I've never read a more

accurate description of this middle soul than Augustine gives in his *Confessions*. He tells how he "comes into the fields and spacious palaces of memory" where he finds everything he's ever sensed and much more. "There," he says, "I have in readiness the heaven, the earth, the sea," though "not the things themselves but their images."

We are speaking of course of the imagination and that part of it which is time-affected, memory. In fact I thought I could show that the memory is the origin of our sense of time (and incidentally that there is no objective natural time beyond that inner time). It is when we flip through the files of our memory, so to speak, that time arises—the thicker the file, the longer the time. Now in meditating on the nature of the imagination and time, those inhabitants of our soul's center, I kept coming on "not" and "non-," on negative particles and prefixes. The imagination is full of presences of absent things; things that are there but *not* there themselves. These images are beings and also *non*beings, because when we say of a picture, "That's him all right," we also know that it really *isn't*. Images and imagining have their satisfactions, but who doesn't fly to embrace the friend in the flesh?

So too with time. What is a memory a memory of but what was once but is *not* now or *not* here? What is that forward-directed memory called expectation but dreams and fears of the "not yet"? Time consists altogether of what is no longer and is not yet, and these surround a vanishing now, the elusive present. Nothing in thinking about time hit me with a greater shock than the realization that time, which consisted of what was no more and is not yet, really didn't leave much time for anything to be present, to stand out of that stream of no longer and not yet. For this "standing-out," translated into Latin, is "existence," and so we seemed to exist on the cusp of two converging negations.

So having done a lot of scribbling first about imagination and then time, I seemed to be driven into tonight's subject. Imagination and time began and ended as enigmas and mysteries and here appeared a third, which seemed to emerge in thinking about both.

Let me take a little detour here to talk about enigmas and emergences, something particularly relevant to an audience of students and teachers devoted to tackling mysteries and making questions emerge, and to the parents who underwrite this strange enterprise. What is an inquiry of the sort we are most committed to? Does it begin with a problem, which is a brisk formulation of a topic to be attacked, and end in a resolution so that the problem goes away and the topic becomes untopical, no longer interesting? No such thing. It begins with some muddled thoughts and some talk that leads to an increasing unease, a sense of being at once stuck and at loose ends. Students quite often ask to have a conversation about something, but when we sit down together the topic isn't quite clear to them, neither the place they're at nor where we're intended to go. So first we figure out what we want to be talking about. Then people who are serious read up on the subject, and in this study they find different approaches and a whole slew of prepared problems and solutions. And then comes the real thinking, the kind that makes the question emerge, and new topics, new places to be. Now mere problems turn into true emergences and mysteries—I'll have something more to say about these at the end.

One question that can really only be answered late in the inquiry arose pretty soon: Is there something negation everywhere and always, and so to speak, essentially, is? Is there fundamental naysaying? It is a question to be answered, if at all, only through collecting the kinds, the ways of naysaying, though there is one linguistic fact that did encourage the expectation that all naysaying is at bottom one. This is the fact that no, not, non, nothing, negation, denial, denigration, and dozens of other refusing words all have the same root, *ne*. Nc

one knows what that root signifies, but there is a plausible if unprovable conjecture that goes back to Darwin, who was much interested in the signifying origins of human gesture. He thought that negation was expressed by putting up or wrinkling your nose at something in refusal or disgust, as infants do when they don't want their bottle, saying "nenenenenene" through clenched gums—and also as modern Greeks do when they want to express "no." To the confusion of the tourist they give a slight upward jerk of the head, as if raising their nose at the idea.

A related question was whether negation was essentially linguistic: Was language the locus of naysaying, as it seemed on the face of it? Could there be negation only for thinking and speaking beings?—for I accepted it as given that speech expresses thought. To be sure, there is mindless jabber and rote opinion, and conversely there is thought yet seeking expression. But when things are working right, we have a sense of the word neatly clicking into the thought. So if naysaying is primarily a verbal phenomenon, perhaps everything in the *natural* world is positive—as some people have certainly thought—and we humans (plus whatever spirits have speech besides us) alone say "no." And of course, I asked myself how negation got into our inner life, our imagining and our remembering, and our living through time by means of memory. Did it come from the nether parts of our soul's topography as an expression of our capacity to think negatingly, or was that middle part itself somehow receptive to nonexistent objects? And there was the same question only asked from within about the world without: Are there ghost presences, like our Liberty Tree, that half-millennium-old tulip poplar on our front campus, which fell victim to a hurricane in 1999 and which is still somehow visible in its absence, like Robert Frost's memory house

> . . . that is no more a house
> Upon a farm that is no more a farm

And in a town that is no more a town.

Are there nonexistences that walk the earth alongside or even in the same place as all the assertively solid, weightily positive beings that inhabit nature? Physicists talk a lot about negative forces and particles. It is said that when in 1747 Benjamin Franklin assigned the adjective "negative" to electricity gotten by rubbing a rubber rod with fur, while when a glass rod was rubbed with silk the electricity was called positive, he was being arbitrary. But is that true of all the oppositions of physics? Are they all arbitrarily positive and negative? Are there, furthermore, in that vivid, feeling-filled field of the imagination half-beings without physical weight but with all the gravity that belongs to human matters? And finally, does the region of thought contain nonbeings, objects of thought whose nature it is not to be?

These may seem to you weird—if perhaps wonderful—questions to ask. I have a certain justification for asking them in the fact that they are frequently answered without even *being* asked. For example, the tribe of logicians is frequently positive-minded; it comes to them naturally to think that the world is full of positive facts and objects, and that negation is a formal operation, which flips a positive proposition into its opposite. Then there are philosophers who define negation as opposition, a word that pits position against counter-position, this posited thing against that. The notion of opposition too is a kind of positivism.

In fact, about five years ago my friends and fellow tutors, Eric Salem and Peter Kalkavage and I studied and translated the Platonic dialogue that deals with these matters more deeply than any work I know (except for the Hegelian *Logic*, some of which our seniors used to read—and should again). It is the *Sophist*. A sophist then and now is a professor, someone who professes to have teachable, usually trendy, wisdom but who has never gone deeply into

anything. In Plato's dialogue, it is a *type* whose nature the participants pursue, not a particular person.

The chief speaker is a stranger from the town where Parmenides taught. Parmenides was the first of those who wanted to think about Being, about that one nature displayed by everything whatsoever that comes to our attention. For whatever else it might be, everything *is*, when it might so easily (we sometimes think) be otherwise, when it might *not* be. Or if it seems unthinkable that certain beings could *not* be, these people who attended to Being wanted know why not. This inquiry, which Parmenides initiated, is called ontology, Greek for "the story of Being," and I will now boldly claim that there can't be many human beings who haven't come up against the question of Being in some way. They might just soberly have noticed that almost every sentence either has "is" or "are" or "am" in it or can be made to have it: "What *is* she talking about?", "Why *are* we sitting here?", "I *am* feeling sleepy." Or they might have felt that the things of this world are fleeting and deceptive and wondered what, if anything, *is* behind them.

Now this Parmenides, when he was the age of a college freshman, took a number of blazingly wild rides right into the heart of truth where a goddess spoke to him. She told him that there are two ways to think. And she said

> One way says: "Is" and that "Is not" is impossible.
> This is the road of conviction, for it follows truth.
> The other says: "Is not" and that it is fated that "Is" not be.
> This path I show you as altogether unlearnable.
> For neither could you know Nonbeing, since it is unattainable,
> Nor could you show it to anyone

. . . . . .

For Is-not cannot possibly be said or thought.

So this is the message the youth was to bring to all human beings: Speak only Being, and, moreover, know that Being has no divisions, no limits, no time, no discernible distinctions at all.

But you can hear and discern right away that the goddess is asking the impossible: to speak without making attributions and distinctions, and above all without saying "not" or "non-." For thinking and speaking is altogether articulating and bringing together differences. In every sentence this is said to be that or *not* that. If I say, as I must, that "Being is a mystery," you can and should puzzle from now till doomsday whether I am separating the mysteriousness out from Being or putting it together with Being. In fact the goddess herself uses these particles and prefixes all the time. She does worse: She puts into the human vocabulary a brand-new word, "Nonbeing." So she manages to accomplish what earnest prohibitions so often do, to name a proscribed thing and so to make it infinitely fascinating. This effect falls in the class of unintended consequences. Unintended consequences are best known in the realms of economic and social policy. They occur when you intend a very good thing and get a very sorry side-effect, such as trying to prevent inflation by hiking interest rates and causing a slow-down, or closing a number of all-black schools in the interests of integration and losing a large percentage of black principals. So here we have it in the realm of thought: This goddess wants to drive out all negation from thought and speech but incidentally lets loose among us the thought called Nonbeing.

So Parmenides and his pupils spend the rest of his life puzzling out what one could say without disobeying the goddess. At the time the dialogue takes place Parmenides is dead and one of these pupils, a stranger, arrives in Athens, and Socrates draws him into a conversation about

sophists as a type, and then he says no more. I think he knows perfectly well what mischief he is stirring up. The Sophist, a false or pretended or negatively wise man, who is himself a mere image of wisdom and a maker of mere images, can't be caught in speech without reference to Nonbeing. Nonbeing is, one might say, the ideal cause in thought of an incarnate negation like the Sophist; it is, taken in itself, the very thought of Non and Not, the thought we get hold of as an object to wrap our mind around when we think of the opposite of Being.

Now this stranger rises to the occasion by doing something wonderful and terrible that he himself gives a name to. He commits parricide; he kills Father Parmenides in spirit by showing that his goddess was wrong: Nonbeing *is* after all. He does this deed by thinking the thought I've already mentioned: The opposite of Being is indeed Nonbeing, but that Nonbeing is not an unthinkable and unspeakable nullity but just *other* being. When I say the real Sophist is *not* a genuine lover of wisdom, or to put it into Greek, is *not* a philosopher, I am not saying he is nowhere to be found and a nothing, not to be grasped.—That is exactly what the clever Sophist would like me to think, because then I can't catch him in my understanding. I am saying he is *other* than, diverse from, the philosopher. (In fact, he's in some ways pretty close.) This is the stranger's tremendous thought: Nonbeing is Otherness, and coversely, Otherness is Nonbeing. If you're tempted to think that this is mere wordage, ask yourself what is the most potent political sentiment in our country at this moment. I say it is what we all call "diversity," the idea that who and what we are *not* has as much proper Being as we do; what is other is only other, not less. And this powerful thought is first articulated in Plato's *Sophist*.

But here's the rub. This parricidal Stranger doesn't quite succeed with his reinterpretation of Nonbeing. For though the Sophist is now unable to escape capture by going to ground in utter nothingness, he's still not the genuine article, still a faker, still the mere image of the honest

thinker. So if Nonbeing is just Otherbeing, how will we account for true inferiority, truly mere images, a true decline and fall from what we usually call reality? For an image isn't just other than its original—it really is not quite up to that particular original, though in a way it is, namely insofar as it has its looks. An image is usually hopelessly *less* than its original; few people prefer a photograph to its sitter or a fake to the genuine article.

Do notice that all I've just reported is really a very deep treatment of the question I posed before, asking whether negation is just something we think and say or whether there is real, genuine, true negation in things themselves, be they thinkable or visible. Thus for me Parmenides' goddess with her rejected Nonbeing was at the center of the whole inquiry, and that is where she appears in the book I'm telling you about. Notice too how important the practical consequences of the answer are. Those theologians who make most sense to me all think that evil, in the world and in the soul, is the effect of an infirmity of Being, of an inferior or lesser existence. When we meet badness incarnate, face to face, it may appear as positive, even vital evil, but when we try to think our way as best we can into the badness of a soul we always find something missing, a lack, a poverty, a kind of Nonbeing. But if we deny this analysis then evil is either perspectival or positive.—It is either the effect of our subjective ways of naysaying rejection or a powerful and therefore possibly respectable and often fascinating way of positive being. You can see that to me it is important that the external and internal world should not just be a tissue of positive facts—as the school called positivism in fact claims. But I'm not one hundred percent convinced I can have it my way, though as I will shortly show, I've got another good reason, even closer to my heart, for wishing to acknowledge non-existent objects.

Let me now return to one of my many questions, the first one, which was to be answered only toward the end, after having gone some way into the inquiry. The question was: Is all

negation fundamentally one? The mere etymology of all the *no* and *neg-* words in terms of turned-up noses doesn't get us very far, so the next thing is to try to discern the kinds of naysaying and nayspeaking there are, and then to see what they might have in common. I'll hurtle through them, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if in the question period you will add some I left out.

I began where our life as persons begins, with toddlers, those two-year-old terrors of negativity. This propensity of the terrible twos for naysaying will ring a bell with parents. It's No! to everything, often for the sheer compulsion to negate. I once minded (in both senses of the word) a little fellow who actually said to me: "I want not to want . . . ." Or ask a kid in the throes of negativity: "Do you want some of my baloney sandwich?" "No!" he says, and he gets on your lap and takes it away from you.

Now at least in our Western world there are three great crises of individual development: One is the mid-life crisis, which ought to seem very remote to students; the second is adolescence, of which they come as accredited experts; and the earliset is the "terrible twos," which they have probably totally blanked out. But this was when they first grew from lovable animals into respect-demanding persons. In its rebellious assertiveness it is very similar to the second transition into independent humanity, the one that occurs in adolescence. The momentous happening for babies is the discovery of their will, the negative will that repels the outside and defines the child as a separate human being. The briefest, most independent kind of naysaying, just "No!", is here willful, and it is an open question for me whether human negativity doesn't always preserve a trace of self-assertion. I might add that from naysaying babies I go in the first chapter by a natural and easy transition to negating devils and demons who are in permanent rebellion against their divinity.

Whatever the case of personal naysaying may be, there is an opposite kind of denial, expressed by the particle "not," which can be as impersonal and objective as human rationality is capable of being. This is the negation of the logicians, the negation that is tied to sentences, statements, and propositions. There are many deeply interesting questions to be asked of logical negation, for example, how what is known as the Law of Excluded Middle got built into the fundamental standard logic—the law that says that there is no third possibility between affirmation and denial. Or whether positive and negative are logically coequal, or the positive is always the original position.

But let me propose to you a preliminary question not quite so deep but just as interesting: Where in a sentence does the "not" properly come? Let me give you the possibilities. You might say (I hope):

1. "This lecture is-not boring." Here the *not* is attached to the copula "is." The thought-coupling or connection between my lecture and boredom is broken by the operation of negation.

Or 2. "This lecture is not-boring." Here the "not" goes with the boredom, and puts the lecture into the infinitely large class of non-boring speeches. This is not so much a negative operation as a positive classification into a negative class, a class that is itself a negative object.

Or 3. "It is not the case that this lecture is boring." Here the negation is to the whole proposition. The curious possibility of denying a proposition lock, stock, and barrel led to a new logic early in the last century. This is symbolic logic, for which the sentence itself shrinks into the symbol p or q, one whose relations of implication can be studied quite apart from any sentential meaning. Here negation is nothing more than a flipping function. If p is true, then not-p is false and the reverse, if p is false then not-p is true. It is the most colorless negation there is. Its definition is nothing more than the rule just stated; no one really wants to say what true and

false, T and F, means in this formal context, though in ordinary speech negation and falsity seem to be closer than negation and truth. Thus those Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels*, which the Juniors read about, call "saying the thing which is not" a lie, though it might well be the truth—if the thing really *is not*.

There is a fourth possibility: 4. "This non-lecture is boring." This sentence suddenly has an altogether different quality. ("Quality" is the term used of the positivity or negativity of a proposition). It is not a negation at all, but the affirmation that a predicate belongs positively to a subject, though the subject is itself negative.

So here we are back to the question raised before. *Are* there non-subjects, non-beings that can be subjects of assertions, at least in thought? Here is a way to think of this puzzle. Almost everyone agrees that when you think you are thinking *about* something. I say "almost everyone" because there are alternatives: There might not be separable objects for thought and speech to be about, but thinking and speaking might just be about themselves. But let that be, and let me here suppose that the question "What are you thinking *about*?" makes sense. Then one might argue that the sentence "This non-lecture is boring" is nonsense, but it isn't straightforward nonsense. Or one might even argue that it is straightforwardly false. There are, that argument would go, all sorts of non-existent objects that make a sentence false when you try to make them the subject, since you can't talk of non-beings and shouldn't try. There are golden mountains that happen not to exist, though they might; there are round squares that can't exist because they are self-contradictory in concept; there are unicorns that are imaginable but not as an existing part of nature. All these are nonexistent objects; add to them the legion of human beings who live in epics and novels, for example, Odysseus who lives in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Now, however, let me introduce to you Mrs. Pringle, an acquaintance of one philosophically inclined logician. Mrs. Pringle teaches high school; it is a good school because they read the *Odyssey.* She wants to test if you've read carefully, so she asks: "What is the color of Odysseus' hair?" If you have in fact read carefully you know Odysseus has auburn, reddish-gold hair, and that when he comes home to Ithaca it's a little silvery and a little thin. That's all in the poem. So if you say "auburn" on the test she marks it T and if "brown" it's F for false, and your grade is F as well. So it's clearly not the case that all sentences about the fictional, imagined, nonexistent Odysseus are false—not to Mrs. Pringle, who's not to be fooled.

The Englishman Bertrand Russell, one of those who think that the world is composed of positive particulars and also the man who was the co-discoverer of symbolic logic, made the claim, clearly connected to these opinions and discoveries, that propositions about nonbeings are just false. He had an opponent, whom he respected highly and who wrote at about the same time, the beginning of the last century, the Austrian Alexius Meinong. He squarely faced the fact so clear to Mrs. Pringle, that sentences about nonexistences and nonbeings can be both true and false, and moreover he took it as a basic feature of thought that it always is about something, that without fail we intend something when we think. So he made the following paradoxical but unavoidable claim. He said: "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects." It was a way of saying that there must be objects, objects that we think of or imagine, that are indifferent to existence, that are outside of existence. Meinong says that such objects have "Beyond-being." Among them are the mathematical objects, the theories we have in mind, and also beings like Odysseus, Penelope and Telemachus, Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa and even unicorns. So the standing of the creatures of the imagination seems to be saved and we can talk

about them. They can be subjects of sentences. They don't exist but they have a kind of Being, Beyond-being.

But here's the trouble: Recent logicians have blamed Meinong for making a "slum" of nonexistents, a "breeding ground of disorderly elements"—though that's their problem, not mine. My trouble is that Meinong's Beyond-being is more the acknowledgement of a need than the solution of a problem. Beyond-being is a courtesy title for objects that it is very easy and natural to be acquainted with and very mystifying to get to the bottom of. The beings that arise in our imagination, or that transmigrate from someone else's imagination into ours by way of a work of fiction, don't exist, to be sure, at least not in their full specificity. They are not flesh and blood and yet they are more vital and more vivid than much that has respectable existence in the real world. Fictions coinhabit our lives as models and companions and they have more staying power than human beings—Odysseus is, after all, well over three thousand years old. Their power seems to derive from the mysterious way in which an airy nothing has assumed a habitation and a name. The term Being both does and doesn't apply to them, and Meinong's Beyond-being is a brave acknowledgement of that fact, but no more.

Now I have given examples of willful No, logical Not, the Nonbeing that arises unwittingly with the inquiry into Being, and the Nonexistence that concerns philosophically inclined logicians. There are two more ways of naysaying that I'll dispose of quickly. One is Negativity itself, considered not, as is negation, in terms of a fixed positive judgment pitted against a negative judgment where one says: "I say this lecture *is not* boring," and the other, whose understanding is the opposite, says: "Yes, it *is*." This more fluid negativity was discovered by Hegel; it is known to the seniors as it appears at work in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. This late in the lecture is no time to talk seriously about that kind of negativity, but let me

describe it briefly and give an example—perhaps it would be better to say, let me try to induce a taste of it.

Summarizing once more, I've spoken of the negation that is the expression of an act of repelling will, and the negation that is an operation of logical thought and the negative object that thought is about. Hegelian negativity is neither an operation of the mind nor a mental object that holds still for thought. It is instead the life of thought in which the activity of thinking and the stable object that thinking is about meld and fuse together. Thus the object is, as it were, animated, while the thinking is not yours or mine but emanates from the thing itself. Assuming that the word Being has some meaning for you, hold it in your mind and receptively watch it; immerse yourself in it. Being will reveal itself, just as Parmenides's goddess says it must. But what it will reveal about itself is that it has no shape, no weight, no limit. It has no features, and the thought of Being is altogether negative, a tissue of no's and not's. So in being thought and in animating thought, Being turns out to be Nothing or Naught. The story of Hegelian negativity begins here, for Nothing under this scrutiny of thought, or thought under the influence of Nothing, turns into yet another, a third thought-object, namely Becoming. Hegel calls these animate thoughts "concepts" and the whole universe of subjectively active thought and stable thought-substance develops as an organic whole. Hegel's name for this development is dialectic. It became more and more a problem to me why it begins with Being rather than Nothing, for Nothing seems even more rudimentary than Being, and, when watched thoughtfully, it too turns into its opposite, namely Being.

But leaving that problem aside, I was next confronted with what seemed to me the most final and absolute kind of negation, the thought of Nothing. Nonbeing was always relative to Being, the negation of and alternative to Being. But Nothing is independent and absolute. Indeed

the Nihilists, the "nothingists," as they call themselves, do deny reality and being, do seem to negate all that is and say that everything is nothing, comes to nothing, is worth nothing. But that is only because they find themselves in an illusory world, and so they begin by opposing the naïve and deluded believers in this world. Thus it turns out that they do acknowledge something, even if it is something illusory. What they really maintain is the absolute primacy of Nothing. So the great question becomes why there is anything at all and not only nothing, now that small stain of illusion appears upon the vast pure plain of Nothingness. Nihilist passion can be powerfully political and nihilist metaphysics deeply subtle, but, to tell the truth, I don't know what to make of it: The fly in the nihilist ointment seems to be the nihilist himself thrashing about in a very positive way.

The object of this hurtling race through the various negations that I discerned was to ask what they might have in common. What, if anything, do willful No, logical Not, fictional Nonexistence, ontological Nonbeing, dialectical Negativity, and absolute Nothing have in common? Well, the first thing that came to mind is also the last. What they all have in common is that they start from a position, a place maintained, and develop from that an op-position, a denial of that place. Willful No opposes what I want to what I repel, sometimes just because it's not *my* idea. Logical Not rises above my subjective position to see a field of propositions that are affirmed and couples itself with these as their denial, their negation. Nonexistence is a ghostly doppelgänger that opposes its own related Existence, where that term is used of what is posited as here in place and now in time. Nonbeing is what opposes Being, where Being means all that *is*, in or even out of place, in and even out of time. Negativity is the movement of thought as it watches its object develop into its opposite. And finally, Nihilism is the claim that the natural human position, which is in the positive, in Reality, Existence, Being, and in Yeasaying, must be

reversed and that Nothing is the original affirmative position to which Something is negatively opposed.

That negation is fundamentally opposition is not news: many books on the subject say so quite incidentally and smoothly. But when this understanding arises not as an obvious and easy assumption but as a haltingly thought-out conclusion it comes as a revelation. Mine and thine, this and that, here and there, now and then are discernible, discriminable, distinguishable not as mere diversities and differences but as related position and counterposition, as bonded opposites. Each kind of naysaying is a specific response to what first comes to sight or to mind; all naysaying is parasitic on and shows up the configuration of a positive object, the sense of an affirmative thought which it cancels and yet somehow keeps. It is slightly less obvious that there might be things that are in themselves negative which are inferior by reason of their nonexistence or nonbeing. And it is a very unobvious reflection that some nonexistences and nonbeings are more potent and more important to us than the most positive reality.

It's, as I say, no great news, and yet it is a revealing insight with which to live, this ability of ours to keep and cherish what absence, passage of time, inherent nature, circumstantial impossibility or opposing thought has canceled.

And so I want to end with a little disquisition on the results and uses of inquiries of this sort, the kind we encourage at this college. The chief question, the one that drove me into the investigation, led me only to mystery upon mystery, as I will show in a minute. By hard-nosed standards I got no results to which a well-informed reader of philosophical and logical books couldn't say either: "Well, we knew *that* to begin with" or "That's against common sense." And the only use these results seem to have is to make everyday occurrences strange and confusing.

But you might as truthfully say that they make dully ordinary mundane things remarkable and wonderful. Indeed, the discovery of a mystery is least of anything the sowing of confusion. A mystery is not an unsolved problem awaiting expert resolution in the course of progress. But neither is it a swampy indeterminacy that sucks in all attempts at clarification. Nor is it one of those notorious unanswerable questions from that deep pit about which we think we know, by some magical insight, that it has no bottom. A mystery in my meaning is a beckoning question to which one can discover very precise approaches and very definite answers, only to find that there are ever new routes of inquiry and that each solution contains new questions. In the course of this enterprise the mystery develops specificity, and we develop the conviction that there is really something stupendously wonderful there for us to pursue—something to which all serious attempts at inquiry do bring us closer, but that we can never simply undo and discard as a question in the way we resolve and leave behind a problem. Moreover, we acquire the faith that our inability to finish the question off for good does not lie in the murky bottomlessness of the mystery but in the insuperable finitude of our thinking. In sum, here is what I think: The pursuit of a mystery is the prescription for a pretty interesting life.

And now to the real end of this lecture. My main question was: How do we account for our strange and wonderful ability to live by and with things that are no longer and things that never were, these being the formulas for our temporal and imaginative life? Well, the truth is that I've come on a number of ways to ask the question, and a number of ways to answer it, but no one way or one answer. Instead I have developed a powerful conviction that there is an articulable mystery at our human center. Out of the background of our soul come discerning thought and its distinction-making language, which is always explicitly or implicitly a kind of naysaying; they inject themselves into the broad fields and beautiful palaces of our strangely

spatial middle soul. There thought and speech meet the deliverances of our physical façade which come by way of our frontal senses, especially sight and hearing, by which we face and confront the external world. And between these two, sense and thought, on the field of our imagination, there arise presences that are also absences: existences that are nonexistences too, beings that are nonbeings as well. Among these are the memories of what once was in time but no longer is, the remembrances from which our past, our histories are made. Among these are as well the present images of what is absent in space, the imagined completion of our sensually limited world. And among them are, finally, the enchanting visions of what never yet was but might yet be in the real world, the hopeful images that spur and guide our actions. I commend this middle mystery to you as a good companion for life, both to cultivate as an experience and to pursue as an inquiry.