

LOVE'S KNOWLEDGE

*Essays on Philosophy
and Literature*

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The defense of the novel-reading heart attempted here is of special importance for the overall project of showing what the novel as genre offers to moral philosophy. For the argument vindicates as morally central some of the major structural features of the genre—its passionate onward movement, its tendency to lure the reader into a world of enchantment—that do not figure prominently in Henry James's thought, and thus not in any defense of the novel based on James. Thus, the argument enabled me to begin to move on from a defense of James to the more general defense of the novel (in connection with a particular family of ethical views) that is begun in the Introduction.

The contrast between the Dickens of this paper and the Beckett of "Narrative Emotions" is of special interest. Beckett suggests that the novel is in league with an emotion-story at the heart of which is a judging and punitive father. He suggests that the emotions of anxiety, guilt, and disgust that are generated through and represented in that story are the mainsprings of our interest in novelistic plot. Dickens, by contrast, presents a novel whose emotional structures are shown to derive from the original experience of a beautiful, loving, protective, and yet vulnerable mother. The emotions generated through fantasies issuing from this experience are love, the desire to protect and to be protected, a delight in the beauties of life. These same emotions appear to be the mainsprings of the reader's interest in the novel. And novel reading and writing in general is represented as deeply opposed to the "gloomy religion" of the Murdstones.

Transcending Humanity

Odysseus tells Calypso, once again, that he is determined to leave her. Once again, she offers him a bargain that no human being, it seems, could refuse. Stay with me on this island, she says, and you will avoid all the troubles that await you. And best of all, living here, "in calm possession of this domain," you will be "beyond the reach of death," both immortal and ageless. The love Calypso offers and has offered is, itself, endless and ageless: no fatigue, no mourning, no cessation of calm pleasure. Odysseus replies, undeflected, choosing death:

Goddess and queen, do not make this a cause of anger with me. I know the truth of everything that you say. I know that my wise Penelope, when a man looks at her, is far beneath you in form and stature; she is a mortal, you are immortal and unaging. Yet, notwithstanding, my desire and longing day by day is still to reach my own home and to see the day of my return. And if this or that divinity should shatter my craft on the wine-dark ocean, I will bear it and keep a bold heart within me. Often enough before this time have war and wave oppressed and plagued me; let new tribulations join the old.¹

In this remarkable speech we see two elements of widely shared human belief, uneasily conjoined in Odysseus' account of his own thinking, as they are in what he implies about popular thought more generally. On the one hand, the desire to transcend the condition of humanity and to take up the life of a god with a god is, to Odysseus, a perfectly intelligible and even a highly reasonable desire. He assumes that anyone would understand it and, to some extent, share it. And he sees that from the point of view of that desire his choice to leave Calypso's island will seem perverse. On the other hand, he chooses the life of a human being, and a marriage to a woman who will both age and die, and who will either die before he does, or die after. He chooses, then, not only risk and difficulty, but the certainty of death; and not only death, but the virtual certainty that he will at some time lose what he most deeply loves, or else will cause, by his own death, great grief to her.

What, in the face of the recognized human attachment to transcendence, could justify such a choice? Odysseus has little to say. But what he does say makes it

1. Homer, *Odyssey*, V.215-24. The earlier quotes are from V.208 and V.209. I quote from the translation by W. Shewring (Oxford, 1980).

freely grants that from this point of view Calypso will be found superior. And he points to no superiority in Penelope that could counterbalance Calypso's divine excellence. So he is not, it seems, choosing a glorious prize in spite of the fact that he has to face death to get it; that is not at all how he sees the issue. He is choosing the whole human package: mortal life, dangerous voyage, imperfect mortal aging woman. He is choosing, quite simply, what is his: his own history, the form of a human life and the possibilities of excellence, love, and achievement that inhabit that form. What, then, can he say to make that choice intelligible, once the alternative of divinity and agelessness is on the scene?

And yet, to readers of the poem from ancient to modern times, Odysseus' choice *does* seem intelligible, and also admirable—the only choice we would have our hero make. In part this is because we are, as readers, already attached, before this scene unfolds, to Penelope and Telemachus; and we are not much enamored of Calypso, who seems to be a boring monotonous character. We want Odysseus to come home and to renew his love for those two; we want him to help them out. In part, too, there is an issue of loyalty and commitment. We will think less well of Odysseus for simply abandoning his family to gratify his own desire for immortality. (Though it is perfectly clear that this issue cuts both ways, since he is in the process abandoning a woman who saved his life, gave him everything a goddess could offer, and lived with him happily for many years.)

But there is also something more elusive, both in the speech and the reactions it elicits: the feeling that the other life would just not be comprehensible as a life for a human being with human virtues and human heroism. We don't quite know what it would be for this hero, known for his courage, craft, resourcefulness, and loyal love to enter into a life in which courage would atrophy, in which cunning and resourcefulness would have little point, since the risks with which they grapple would be removed, and in which love, insofar as it appears at all, would be very different in shape from the love that connects man to wife and child in the human world of the poem. The very possibility makes one uneasy: for where, and who, in such a life, would our hero actually be? Do we wish for him a good result that involves a transformation so total that he might not remain himself? The affectionate reader's preference is likely to be for a hero who goes, so to speak, where the action is, so that he can do and achieve the things with which human heroism is usually associated. And this seems to require the context of a human life that moves, in the familiar way, from place to place and time to time, from birth to marriage and children,² through risks and challenges, to, at some point, death. Our preference for Odysseus' life with Penelope over his life with Calypso actually stems, I think, from this more general uneasiness about the shapelessness of the life Calypso offers: pleasure and kindness on and on, with no risks, no possibility of sacrifice, no grief, no children. All we need to do to see this is to compare the

2. These are not the only significant elements of a hero's career; Achilles' friendship with Patroclus is stressed far more, for example, than his marriage and fatherhood. I mention these elements as the ones most significant in the *Odyssey*, and as important elements in its influence on later conceptions of the hero.

arching cavern they took their pleasure in love, and did not leave one another's side." That's the end of that; the poet can say no more; for they have nothing to talk about, since they have done nothing and nothing has happened to them. As for the human husband and wife:

The two in their room enjoyed the delights of love, then pleased one another with recounting what had befallen each. The queen told how much she had suffered in these halls, seeing always there the pernicious multitude of suitors who in wooing her had slaughtered so many beasts, fat sheep and oxen, and drawn so much wine from the great jars. The king told of the harm he had done to others and the misery he had endured himself. Penelope listened to him enraptured, and sleep did not fall upon her eyelids till he had told his tale to the end.³

It's perfectly plain that the human pair are, at least from the viewpoint of the human reader, more interesting and more erotic. A sexuality divorced from conversation, from storytelling, from risk and adventure and the sharing of risk and adventure, seems extremely boring; and we feel that it is a great tribute to the goddess's beauty that Odysseus retains his interest in her, after so much time.

And if, as readers, we begin reflecting this way about our hero and his possibilities, another fact begins to emerge as well. This is, that humanity, and the choice for humanity, is built into this story itself and into its transactions with its readers. For surely one reason why the choice for transcendence seems unappealing to the reader is that it would, quite clearly, bring the story to an end. When Calypso speaks of "calm possession of this domain," our hearts sink; for there's no story in that. When, on the other hand, she warns of troubles that await him on the sea, our mouths water, so to speak, for we know that this is how the story should go on, and, being by now lovers of stories, we want it to go on in that way. Stories have shaped and continue to shape the readers' desires, giving them a preference for onward movement over stasis, for risk over self-sufficiency, for the human form of time over divine timelessness. They play upon and nourish the emotions—fear, anticipation, grief, hope—that presuppose the form of life of a being both needy and resourceful, both active and finite—and that seem to have their point and function only within the context of such a life. What story would be left, if he made the other choice? Plato saw the answer clearly: no story at all, but only praises of the goodness of good gods and heroes. Unfortunately for Plato, readers brought up on Homer would be likely to find that prospect about as appealing as twenty-four books of description of Calypso's unchanging island. Readers, too, want to be where the action is.

3. *Od.* V.226–27, XXIII.300–09; see also the remarkable image at XXIII.233–40 in which the joy of the sailor who finally reaches shore begins as a simile for his joy at recovering her, and ends as an image for her joy at finding him. An excellent account of the entire passage is in J. Winkler, "Penelope's Cunning and Homer's," in his *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1990). For my review of this impressive collection, see *Times Literary Supplement*, June 1990.

Human beings want to be immortal and ageless. And, perhaps even more clearly, they want the human beings they love never to age, never to die. There seems to be little doubt of this. Who, given the chance to make a spouse or child or parent or friend immortal, would not take it? (I would grab it hungrily, I confess at the outset.) And yet we don't seem to know very clearly what it is we are wishing when we wish that. And we may well suspect that there is an incoherence lurking somewhere in the wish; that what we actually love and prize would not survive such translations. That we may be doomed or fortunate to be human beings simply, beings for whom the valuable things in life don't come apart so neatly from the fearful and terrible.

In his valuable recent article on my book, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Charles Taylor asks me a tough question: what do I really think about the human aspiration to transcend humanity?⁴ In the Plato section of my book, he observes, I defend the aspiration to transcend one's humanity as a coherent and valuable ethical aim for and in a human life, and the life of godlike transcendence as a beautiful and valuable ethical norm. Furthermore, I argue that the negative motivation to escape from vulnerability and pain cannot suffice to explain Plato's position: for we must also take note of the positive draw of transcendence itself, a positive draw that is, I argued, not only intelligible without reference to inadequate or obscure metaphysical conceptions, but actually a powerful part of human ethical experience. Taylor accurately reports my view, presented in a chapter on Plato's *Republic*, and endorses it, saying: "We will never understand Plato (nor I think ourselves) without coming to see the force of this aspiration. To give a reductive view of Plato in terms simply of the negative motivations ends up darkening our own self-understanding."⁵

4. Charles Taylor, Review article on M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1988), 805–14.

5. Charles Taylor, p. 813. My account of Plato is also accurately characterized, in related ways, by Jasper Griffin and Bernard Knox in their reviews (Griffin, *Times Literary Supplement*, July 4, 1986; Knox, *New York Review of Books*, December 4, 1986), which offer valuable comments on a number of issues. A peculiar misdescription on this issue damages the argument of T. Irwin's review, *Journal of Philosophy* July 1988. Irwin states, "she seems to assume (without directly facing the issue) that Platonic metaphysics and epistemology are necessary supports for Plato's belief in the invulnerability of virtue" (p. 376). This is odd in view of the fact that I devote an entire chapter (chapter 5) to arguing that Plato's ethical conclusions can be understood without assuming that they rely on his metaphysical conceptions, as interesting and valuable ethical positions in their own right. (Indeed, here I was criticizing the claims on that issue made in Irwin's *Plato's Moral Theory* [Oxford, 1977].) In a later chapter (chapter 6), I argue, further, that Plato's ethical conclusions provide some, though not all, of the support for his metaphysics and epistemology. This is only one of many serious misdescriptions of my theses and arguments in Irwin's review. Another one that is pertinent to my immediate concerns in this essay has to do with Aristotle. On pp. 377–78, Irwin ascribes to me an argument in five steps: from premises concerning the views of Plato and Aristotle on the value of human agreements in reaching ethical conclusions, I am alleged to infer the conclusion, "Aristotle is not a metaphysical realist about his conclusions." Irwin then goes on to criticize me for not defending all the steps in this argument—not surprising, since these steps have no resemblance to the argument I actually make. Irwin fails to mention that the book contains an entire chapter devoted to the question of Aristotle's relation

On the other hand, Taylor also observes that I seem, in the Aristotle section of the book, and indeed in the book's overall conclusion, to endorse an ethical stance that defines its goal as "the human good," not the good *simpliciter*. And I suggest that a harmonious good life consisting in various forms of excellent activity and of love (*philia*) is, while still subject to impediment in various extreme circumstances, nonetheless "within the reach of any good and moderately fortunate man."⁶ This fact suggests to Taylor that my version of Aristotle, and I with him, repudiate the aim to live a godlike transcendent life as an inappropriate and perhaps even incoherent aim for a human being. In other words, to use a distinction he introduces, that I interpret the Aristotelian principle, "Let's have the whole human good" to mean "the good consisting in all the various forms of excellent human activity" leaving out, even perhaps repudiating, the aspiration to transcend human life altogether; rather than, "Let's have the whole human good," viz., all this plus the Platonic aspiration too, and plus whatever conflicts its inclusion will bring with it.⁷ (As Taylor notes, I do not deny the existence of a more Platonic side in some parts of Aristotle's writings; but he is correct in saying that I believe the passages expressive of this idea to be inconsistent with the main argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, on which I focus.⁸) So, Taylor wants to know, where do I myself end up? With what he calls "the inclusive view" of the good life—that is, with Aristotelian *eudaimonia* plus (and to some extent in tension with) the aspiration to transcendence? Or with what he, somewhat tentatively I think, calls "the narrower view"—that is, just Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and nothing besides?⁹

Charles Taylor has, with characteristic insightfulness, noticed an unexplained silence in the text, on an issue of real importance. He presents an accurate account of the text, and then raises a philosophical question that eminently calls for further examination. (In fact, Taylor's article is of far more substance and interest than the usual review article, and can be warmly recommended to anyone with an interest in the issues.) And since versions of the same question have also been raised, though less extensively, by two other especially perceptive reviewers—by Christopher (C.C.W.) Taylor in *Mind* and by Stephen Halliwell in *Ancient Philosophy*¹⁰—it seems time for me to say more about the issue.

tion that I describe as a species of *realism*) from premises concerning Aristotle's views about the status of logical and scientific laws; subsequent chapters then examine the implications of this general position for ethics. Irwin's criticisms are directed at a position of his own invention. On other issues, too, the review is similarly lacking in concern for accuracy of attribution.

6. Taylor, p. 813, paraphrasing *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b18–19 and my discussion of it, *Fragility*, chap. 11. Note that on my account bad luck damages the agent's attempt to live well primarily through impeding excellent activity. This is the primary emphasis in Aristotle's account and in mine of him (chap. 11); a smaller body of evidence that Aristotle may admit damage to character itself is considered in chap. 11, pp. 336–40.

7. Taylor puts the contrast this way on p. 812.

8. See *Fragility*, chap. 12, Appendix, concerned above all with *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6–8.

9. Taylor, p. 813. For my own response to Taylor's most recent book, see *The New Republic*, April 9, 1990.

10. C.C.W. Taylor, *Mind* 96 (1987), 407–14, a valuable discussion focusing on Aristotle and the question of Aristotle's Platonism; S. Halliwell, *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988), 313–19, an accurate and perceptive account asking some questions about the relationship between ancient trag-

My aim in this essay is, then, to begin to answer Taylor's question about where I myself do stand, philosophically, on this issue of transcendence. I shall, as I go along, make reference both to aspects of the argument in *Fragility* and to examples taken from ancient Greek thought, both popular and philosophical. But my aim will be not so much to clarify what I have said already—all of which Taylor states clearly enough—as to go beyond the book on one of its central philosophical issues.

To do this I must approach Taylor's immediate question somewhat indirectly, in order to make the relevant philosophical notions more intuitively precise. This I shall do by reflecting on Odysseus' dilemma and the questions it raises about transcendence and the godlike life. And this will lead ultimately to some related conclusions about philosophy, that peculiar activity so frequently hooked up with the aim of transcendence—about how it should speak to human beings if it is in fact the life of a human being, and not the life of transcendent gods, that it wishes to help us understand.

Two aspects of Taylor's complex challenge I shall not pursue. One is his suggestion that I might say more about my own view of Judaeo-Christian religion and about what strikes him—not without reason—as my own preference for Greek polytheism.¹¹ I suspect that Taylor and I do have some deep differences in this area, and that it would be interesting to investigate them. And I have certainly made no secret, in various published pieces, of my own strong objection to making the Augustinian idea of original sin the starting point for reflection about human limits and transcendence.¹² But Christianity is a protean religion; and (as Elaine Pagels has recently argued convincingly¹³) many of its forms have, in fact, begun from an idea of human helplessness that lies closer than Augustine's does to ancient Greek thought, and especially to Aristotle. So I shall defer serious engagement on that issue, and try, for the most part, to discuss the aspiration to transcendence philosophically, without assessing any particular modern religious form of that aspiration.

Nor shall I take up Taylor's historical claim concerning the consequences, within our human this-worldly life, of embracing the aspiration to transcendence as an aim of one's life as a whole. Taylor says that this aim "can turn us towards this life with a new attention and concern, as has undoubtedly been the case with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, with decisive consequences for our whole moral outlook."¹⁴ It would be unwise to try to answer this briefly. I do, in fact, feel some skepticism about Taylor's claim. I think "undoubtedly" is certainly too strong, and I have, in fact, some sympathy with Nietzsche's analysis of the many ways in which directing our aspirations toward a "true world" has led to a denigration of our actions and relationships in this one.¹⁵ There are related arguments in the

11. Charles Taylor, p. 813.

12. See "Narrative Emotions," this volume; "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 1988; Review of Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *New York Review of Books*, December 7, 1989.

13. Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York, 1988).

14. Taylor, p. 813.

15. See, above all, *Twilight of the Idols* ("How the True World Finally Became a Fable"), and many sections in *Zarathustra's Prologue*. *Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. R. C. Marsh (New York, 1908).

ancient philosophical debate—for example in Epicurean attacks on religion.¹⁶ But I shall not take up the whole question of consequences here, concentrating instead on the content and the coherence of the aspiration to transcendence itself.

II

A good place to begin this investigation is with a peculiar tension that one finds in the attitude of the ancient Greeks toward their gods—the tension that is present in Odysseus' speech, and in many other stories of the anthropomorphic Olympians, as these stories are told and retold, emphasizing now one aspect, now another.¹⁷ On the one hand, then, the gods are seen as gods: beings better than us, worthy of our worship and emulation. They are better than we are, above all, because they lack certain limits and defects that characterize human life. They are immortal, *athanatoi*, while humans are mortals, *thnētoi*. They are always healthy and vigorous; we suffer disease and debilitation. They are always in their prime; we move from the impotence of childhood through a brief flourishing to the impotence of age. Their lives are stable; ours are vexed by unanticipated accidents. They have what they want without effort; our life is characterized by painful toil. Their beauty is not undermined by fatigue or illness or anxiety; ours, prone to all this, is never as good. They understand everything; we are ignorant and limited. Their loved ones will be with them forever (unless they fall in love with mortals—on which more later); our loves end in grief and mourning.

In all these ways, then, the image of divinity is an image of human self-transcendence, the image of an anthropomorphic perfection made visible by imagining the removal of constraints that make human life a brief, chancy, and in many ways miserable existence. And of course when one follows out this line of thought, the best thing to wish for, for oneself or for a loved one, seems to be a translation to that life. Thus certain Greek tales of very unusual beauty and excellence culminate in that supreme reward: Heracles made immortal for his excellence and endurance, Ganymede for his amazing erotic loveliness. Odysseus knows that his refusal of that reward goes against a deeply held view about the human good, one that he comprehends and shares with most human beings.

On the other hand, as the Greeks pursued the thought-experiment of transcendence, being both highly imaginative and unencumbered by the excessive self-hatred that belief in original sin has so frequently brought with it, they saw another way of viewing the gods' life, a way to some extent in conflict with the first, though very often mingled with it. On this way of seeing things, the gods are not so much better than us as totally, strangely different. Their form of life, lacking, as it does, the characteristic movement and structure of human life, lacking the constraints imposed by mortality, lacking vulnerabilities of many kinds, lacking the demands and the finitude of the mortal body, will of necessity lack, as well, some of the forms of life that we now find valuable and pursue as ends. This thought experiment is complex, since so much depends on which limits are imagined away and

16. On these arguments, see my "Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, December 1989.

which left in place. Greek stories of the gods are not always consistent in this, and sometimes the gods appear less omnipotent and more vulnerable than at others. (We shall discuss this later.) But what does emerge clearly—especially in writers such as Homer and Sophocles,¹⁸ with their keen interest in a specifically human heroism and its natural conditions, is that many of the activities we now prize and consider fine will not figure in a divine life, consistently imagined. In some cases, it will be only the motivation to pursue the activity that will be lacking; in other cases, we have to grant that the entire activity will lose its point, will become unintelligible.

Take first what is perhaps the simplest, clearest case: the athletic contest. The Greeks, no less than contemporary Americans, praise outstanding athletic performance as a wonderful instance of human excellence. Young people are urged to cultivate this excellence, and praised when they achieve it. But clearly, such achievement has point and value only relatively to the context of the human body, which imposes certain species-specific limits and creates certain possibilities of movement rather than others. To excel is to use those abilities especially fully, to struggle against those limits especially successfully. But if this means that even races or contests between different animal species will usually seem pointless and odd, it means all the more that there will be no athletic excellence at all, and no meaningful concept of athletic excellence, in the life of a being that is, by nature, capable of anything and physically unlimited—able, for instance, to change its shape at will and to transport itself from here to there without effort. What would such achievement be, in a being for whom it is all easy? What would be the rules of the game?

We must be careful to say what these thoughts do and do not imply. They certainly have not been taken by people over the centuries to imply that, *within* the given species and its species-specific limits, greater limitedness yields greater possibilities of excellence. The fact that I have poor coordination and little natural strength does not open to me possibilities of achievement in tennis that are denied to John McEnroe. Nor do we suppose that our athletic contests would be made better and more interesting by starving the athletes, or beating them, or denying them regular exercise. Training is encouraged to do whatever intelligent training can to push back the limits of the human body. And there is absolutely nothing inappropriate about beginning with those who have the best equipment: with seven-footers in basketball, with young flexible spines in gymnastics.

On the other hand, there is in every sport in every age, from Homer and Pindar on to our own time, a notion of the unfair or “unnatural” competitive edge—exemplified most clearly today in the controversies surrounding the use of anabolic steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. There are certain ways athletes have of removing limits, certain ways of getting past the body’s boundaries, that seem to us to remove the whole point of the activity, to make the achievement

no longer an achievement. This thought appears in its most extreme form in the picture of the Olympian gods. The gods, we might say, are like athletes with not only supersteroids, but a whole array of shape-changing and nature-altering techniques. But this means that so long as they avail themselves of that unlimitedness, they can’t achieve anything in sports. The boundary seems to be set by a vague and yet powerful notion of the possibilities of the human species as such. Such possibilities, and the built-in limits that help to constitute them, are necessary conditions of that excellence. Much the same can be said for the dance, for musical performance, for many related bodily achievements. But then we can begin to see why a being who is attached to such excellences and defines his or her good life in terms of them would be puzzled by Calypso’s offer. For it now begins to seem like the offer not so much of a better life, but of a different life, with different ends and excellences. And if one identifies oneself with the ends one already knows, one might well wonder whether one could in any meaningful sense survive the translation to such a life.

Now let us move to a completely different sphere, but one in which the possibilities of human beings and divinities are also very clearly distinct: the sphere of political association. Aristotle states as a truism what indeed would have seemed so to most of his audience: that the human being, as such, is divided off from both the beasts and the gods by being a political being, and one who is capable of the ethical and social virtues. A good deal of *Fragility* was spent in developing this Aristotelian idea, and I have also developed it further in a recent paper.¹⁹ But now I want to look at its Homeric expression, which seems to me particularly clear. The Homeric gods do have some rudimentary form of political organization, to be sure: Zeus rules, the others are ruled. But this comes about, quite clearly, only on account of certain ways in which the gods are not truly godlike. They are, that is, limited by one another; and with respect to one another they have very human limits of resource and of knowledge. So politics has a role to play in regulating those interactions and dealing with those vulnerabilities—and, we must add, in keeping the whole crew safe from the Titans, who can menace them with painful, and possibly unending, punishments. On the whole, however, Aristotle is correct: beings who lack our vulnerabilities to hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and disease, beings who don’t need to educate their children, to raise an army, to arrange for the fair distribution of life-supporting property and other goods, don’t really have our need for politics. Politics is about using human intelligence to support human neediness; so to be truly political you have to have both elements. Beasts fail on one count, gods on the other.

It is in this area that Aristotle (as I interpreted him in *Fragility*) appears most resistant to the idea of transcending humanity as an appropriate goal for a human ethics. For at two crucial points in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, confronted by the possibility of a solitary good life that does not, *ex hypothesi*, need other humans because it does not have the forms of dependency and neediness that lead humans

18. On Sophocles, see Cedric Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951); Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley, 1964); C. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). Related material is discussed in my “*Psyché* in Heraclitus, II,” *Phronesis* 17 (1972), 153–77.

19. See *Fragility*, esp. chaps. 1, 4, 12, 13; also “Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics,” forthcoming in a volume on the philosophy of Bernard Williams, ed. J. Altham and R. Harrison, Cambridge University Press. Also my introduction to a new translation

to reach out for others, he simply refuses to allow that such a life could count as a complete *human* life. The self-sufficiency that a human ethics appropriately seeks is defined in Book I, as a self-sufficiency achieved in company with family, loved ones, and fellow citizens, "since the human being is by nature a political being."²⁰ And a similar appeal to our political nature is used in Book IX to reject the suggestion that a life without political ties and ties of personal love and friendship could count as *eudaimonia*, provided all goods were at hand and all needs satisfied. He reminds his interlocutor there that we are beings who think of these ties as not just necessary but also fine; not just a resource but also an intrinsic good. A life without them will not even be worth living—far less a candidate for *eudaimonia*.²¹ These goods can only be seen as goods, Aristotle freely grants, from within the human form of life with its structures of limit and finitude. He does not suppose that the gods will come searching for instruction in the political art. But he refuses to denigrate the political on that account; good activity for and to others is intrinsically fine and noble, as are the relationships of love and care that bind citizens together in families, and friendships of many kinds.

We can expand these observations by looking more concretely at the ethical virtues—which Aristotle denies to the divine life along with politics.²² For we see, when we do so, that each of them will seem pointless, more or less unintelligible, in the god's life; and yet, each has a claim to be an end in itself for a human life. Courage is the clearest. Homeric gods usually cannot and do not have it, since there is nothing grave for them to risk. On the other hand, courageous action seems to be a fine *human* achievement.²³ (We notice that as we introduce more and more risk we get closer and closer to courage. Thus Aeschylus' Prometheus is courageous, even though immortal, on account of the way in which he faces appalling pain. His immortality does not remove courage, but actually—given the endlessness of his torture—seems to enhance it.) Moderation will go out too, since for a being who cannot get ill or become overweight or alcoholic, there is not only little motivation to moderate intake, but also little intelligibility to the entire concept. On the other hand, moderation is a challenge and a fine thing in human life: there are so many ways to go wrong here, so few ways of finding what is truly appropriate.

Justice we have already explored in discussing politics. Aristotle seems right to say that the whole notion of the gods making contracts and returning deposits is ludicrous, makes no sense at all. The same seems to be true of the distribution of scarce resources, and other elements of human justice. And here we notice that the carelessness of the gods, with regard to human standards of fairness—a carelessness inseparable from their transcendence of our whole needy way of life, and their failure, in consequence, to see what is at stake for us in that life—leads them to act in ways that are not only different from our ways, but, where we are con-

cerned, just plain callous, lacking totally in the painstaking effort of mind and desire that is involved in human justice.²⁴ At the end of Sophocles' *Trachinian Women*, Hyllus reviews the terrible and painful events that have taken place; he ascribes them to the lightness, the lack of comprehension of human needs and human goods, that is Zeus and his transcendence:

HYLLUS: Take him up, servants, showing your great fellow-thought-and-feeling (*suggnōmosunē*) with me concerning these events, and knowing the great lack-of-thought-and-feeling (*agnōmosunē*) of the gods concerning the events that have taken place—they who, having engendered us and calling themselves our fathers have overseen these sufferings. As for the future, no one can see it. What is now here is pitiable to and for us, but shameful for them; and most difficult of all for the man who bears this disaster.

H. OR CHORUS:²⁵ Do not you, young woman, remain at home—for you have seen great recent deaths, you have seen many newly inflicted sufferings, and there is not one of these things that is not Zeus.

The human world is held together by pity and fellow-feeling. Human beings are in a sense worse off than the gods because they suffer; but they also know how to deal with suffering, and their morality is a response to the fact of suffering. The gods are better because they *can* simply overlook, look over, the sufferings of human beings, without involvement or response.²⁶ But precisely because they are better in this way, they simply don't fully see what is going on in our lives, they lack compassion, an essential ingredient of any human justice.²⁷ If, from our viewpoint, we prize compassion, we have to say that *in their dealings in our realm*, the gods are not just different, they are worse.

As we reflect on this point, we should notice what a profound response to this problem is embodied in Christianity. Although I promised not to get involved in that topic, on this one issue the temptation to do so is irresistible. For Christianity seems to grant that in order to imagine a god who is truly superior, truly worthy of worship, truly and fully just, we must imagine a god who is human as well as divine, a god who has actually lived out the nontranscendent life and understands it in the only way it can be understood, by suffering and death. If this is what Taylor means when he says that Christianity has turned us back to our own world with new attention and concern, I believe that he is undoubtedly pointing to

24. This aspect of the divine is especially prominent in the *Bacchae*, where the smiling mask of the god (referred to by the Chorus) takes on, as the drama unfolds, an increasingly sinister look. See the discussion in my Introduction (see n. 19) and see Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton, N.J., 1982), and Helene Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1985).

25. The assignment of the lines is uncertain.

26. *Ephorāō* refers frequently to the way in which the sun "oversees" the affairs of men—it looks over, looks on, without involvement or response (see LSJ, s.v.).

27. On the connection between appropriate emotional response and virtue, between both of these and practical wisdom, see *Fragility*, chap. 10, and "Discernment," "Finely Aware," and

20. EN 1097b7–11, discussed in *Fragility*, chap. 12, pp. 344–45, 350ff.

21. EN 1169b3ff, discussed in *Fragility*, chap. 12, pp. 350–51, 365–68. Both passages are further discussed in "Aristotle on Human Nature."

22. EN VII, 1145a25ff; see *Politics* 1253a8ff.

23. Virtuous action, we should remember, is, in Aristotle's view, chosen for its own sake, as a constituent part of the fully good human life. In this respect he seems close to the popular beliefs

something important. Surely, at any rate, the universal compassion for human suffering which one associates with Christianity at its best is difficult to imagine apart from the paradigm of human suffering and sacrifice exemplified in Christ.²⁸

As for that large group of the so-called "minor" excellences of daily social life, excellences such as generosity, generous hospitality, social graciousness, modesty, friendliness—all these, as Aristotle correctly suggests, are elements in our social/political nature, and deeply rooted, therefore, in the human form of life.²⁹ The Olympian gods don't have them in anything like the same form, because their social life is free-floating, amorphous, uninspired by need.

Now we must return to our starting place, and to Odysseus' choices regarding love, both sexual and familial. For the implication of his statements is, first, that human love is so different from a love that gods might share that there is no straightforward ranking or comparison between the two, however much one might in some obvious ways take the god's love to be superior. He just chooses his own form of life. And his choice implies, furthermore, that insofar as a human being *can* make the comparison, there is something perfectly intelligible about preferring human love. Take, first, the love of spouse and family. Here, we have to note, first of all, that the gods have none of the motives we have for caring about their children and for preserving the structures of family life as a context of nurture and education for children. They lack our anxious relation to our own future, our desire to extend ourselves through progeny; they lack, too, the more altruistic motives, the desire to nourish and protect that which is weak and fragile, the desire to contribute to the future of the world. Divine children are not really children; divine parents are not, therefore, really parents.

Next, we notice, as well, that their limits with respect to risk limit, as well, their ability to care for one another in anything like the human way. There is no room for taking risks or making sacrifices for the person one loves; no room for loyalty so strong that it confronts death itself. In consequence of these and other lightnesses, there is a kind of playfulness and lack of depth about the loves of the gods—and one finds in fact that it looks perfectly rational for a human being to prefer the human bond, with its deeper needs and stronger intensities. (Once again, the Christian idea that god is also fully human and has actually sacrificed his life is, if it can be made coherent,³⁰ a most important element in the thought that god actually loves the world.)

28. Here Christianity is not alone: for many pagan religions contain a divinity who dies (see below on Dionysus); but it is Christianity, above all, that links this conception to a new idea of the moral example God provides to humans.

29. For further discussion along these lines, see my "Non-Relative Virtues: an Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 1988; and also "Mortal Immortals" (see n. 16).

30. There is a remarkable reflection on the tensions between this idea and the idea of god's eternity and self-sufficiency in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). The hero Scobie perceives that his own profound sense of pity and responsibility toward the two women who depend on him is a moral attitude learned from his reflection on Christ's responsibility and compassion. And yet it seems to him to follow from what he has learned that he is not as responsible to Christ as he is to his fellow human beings, since these need him and Christ, perhaps, does not. He was desecrating God because he loved a woman—was it even love, or was it just a feeling of pity and responsibility? He tried again to excuse himself: "You can look after yourself. You sur-

In sexual life these same facts have weight, as we have already suggested; and the Boucher-like dalliances of the gods seem lacking in some element of searching and striving that gives human *erōs* its characteristic beauty.³¹ If we now add to this the element of conversation and communication, which we have noticed as a difference between the divine and the mortal couple, we find that it is not just brief intensities, it is the sustaining bonds of a long-term love, that will be lacking in gods—who, as Henry James noted, have nothing at all to talk about, except when, "for the positive relief of bored Olympians," perplexed, striving human beings and their fascinating stories are, or become, "mixed up with them."³²

And here we encounter an anomalous and significant feature in the Greek portrayal of divinity. For the gods, too, really fall in love. But not with one another. When they do so with deep intensity, the objects of their loves are mortal. This fact, fundamental to the entirety of Greek mythology, is the subject of countless poems and stories. Some of these suggest a diagnosis not far from that of Henry James, which we have just mentioned: the gods are stirred by the signs of specifically mortal excellence and its propensity for adventure. They long, it seems, for that which displays effort and longing, need and striving, achievement against odds. For (in the Euripidean chorus³³) the body of young Ganymede, sweating after a race well run. For the resourceful courage and guile of Odysseus. They attempt, these gods, to hold on to the beauty they love—and usually they fail. Odysseus chooses to leave. Ganymede, up there in heaven, carrying cups not running races, walks "softly,"³⁴ without effort or tension, becoming one of them. So the transcendent ones long, it seems, for a certain sort of transcendence: for transcendence of their own limit, which is to lack limit and therefore to be incapable of virtue.³⁵ Yet another reason to reject the aspiration to transcend humanity is here: for the life of transcendence does not contain, it now appears, all value, all excellence, all that one would long for—even from the constructed point of view of divinity itself. It comes as no surprise that Dionysus, the erotic divinity par excellence, is also the only divinity who dies, the divinity whose rhythms of birth, growth, death, rebirth inhabit the context of nature and have a close relation to human time.³⁶

This line of reflection does not exalt struggle itself into an end. It does not say that human life is best when it is most fraught with difficulty, any more than it says that an athlete's life is best when he or she has the greatest handicaps. Achilles preferred a short intense life to a long one; but so far as our argument here is concerned, that choice is still open, and we insist that brevity, pain, and struggle

second to these others." . . . and looking up towards the cross on the altar he thought savagely: Take your sponge of gall. You made me what I am. Take the spear thrust.

31. See my Comments on David Halperin, *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium for Ancient Philosophy* 5 (1989).

32. Henry James, Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, in *The Art of the Novel* (New York, 1907), 63–64.

33. *Trojan Women*, 820ff.

34. *Habro bainōn*, 820.

35. See also "Pouchē in Heracles, II," and "Mortal Immortals."

36. See my Introduction to the *Rachos* with bibliography, and discussion of . . .

are not valuable in and of themselves.³⁷ The excellent activities are ends, not the struggle they involve: athletic and musical performance, just activity, courageous activity, the other virtuous actions, love—these are the things that are ends. But we are saying that in general, as in the athletic case, those ends, intrinsically valuable in a human life, are values in and for that context—which, like all contexts (including, we now see, the context of putative limitlessness) contains and is structured by limits as well as capabilities. Human limits structure the human excellences, and give excellent action its significance. The preservation of the limits in some form—and here, as in the athletic case, we can only fall back on a vague and yet not so unclear notion of the normal human life—is a necessary condition of excellent activity's excellence. And concerning excellence in the universe in general, apart from the contexts of specific forms of life, we can, as Aristotle argues well, say nothing with real content.³⁸

III

What, then, becomes of transcending? And how does, how should a human life put together the two elements of the apparent contradiction that Odysseus describes and that most of us exemplify in one or another form? Which of the views that Taylor describes does this argument support? The view that our proper human goal is activity according to complete human excellence plus some form of transcending? Or the view that, in order to pursue appropriately the whole human good, we must leave aside our desire for transcendence? It may appear that I am in fact supporting, as Taylor suspected, the second view. But I believe that matters are more complex.

First of all, there are various forms of transcendence. And there is a great deal of room, within the context of a human life as this argument has characterized it, for a certain sort of aspiration to transcend our ordinary humanity. For, although I do not believe that human beings are originally evil or sinful, it is all too plain that most people are much of the time lazy, inattentive, unreflective, shallow in feeling; in short, that most human action falls well short of the fully human target of complete virtue set up by Aristotle's view as I have described it. Aristotle holds, on the one hand, that the completely virtuous life is "common to many: for it is open to anyone who is not by nature maimed with respect to excellence."³⁹ But he holds, as well, that acting virtuously requires not only going through the motions of correct action, but doing so with the appropriate thoughts, motives, and reactive feelings. And he holds that this is a very difficult business, requiring much experience and practice, much flexibility and refinement of thought and feeling. The point of imagining the virtuous choice as a "mean" is not to suggest

37. This is an important, if subtle point, and an important distinction between the Greek view, as I describe it, and certain romantic views; the distinction is missed in A. A. Long's review, *Classical Philology* 83 (1988), 61–69.

38. For discussion of the numerous passages in which Aristotle insists that the subject matter of ethics is the human good, see *Fragility*, chap. 10, pp. 291–94.

39. *EN* 1099b18–19; see *Fragility*, chap. 11. The discussion of "bestial vice" in Book VII seems to show that Aristotle did not think very many people were naturally so "maimed": for it

that it can be mechanically plotted—not at all. It is rather to place a tremendous emphasis on the difficulty of finding the point of rightness among all the many points that would be wrong. As Aristotle himself says, "There are many ways of missing the target . . . and only one way of hitting it; so one is easy and the other is hard."⁴⁰

This is, more or less, the view I hold of our relation to the specifically human good. In this view there is a great deal of room for transcendence of our ordinary humanity—transcendence, we might say, of an *internal* and human sort. It is for this reason, among others, that I have taken such a deep interest in the writings of Henry James and of Marcel Proust, and in their explicit claim that the artist's fine-tuned attention and responsiveness to human life is paradigmatic of a kind of precision of feeling and thought that a human being can cultivate, though most do not. Neither has the slightest interest in religious or otherworldly or even contemplative transcendence; both aim at transcendence nonetheless, and exemplify it in their writing.⁴¹ For I believe it is no accident at all that both James and Proust, apparently independently, compare excellent literary works to angels that soar above the dullness and obtuseness of the everyday, offering their readers a glimpse of a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world.⁴² That is a view about transcendence. And I believe that it is extremely important to make the aspiration to that sort of transcendence central to a picture of the complete human good. There is so much to do in this area of *human* transcending (which I imagine also as a transcending by *descent*, delving more deeply into oneself and one's humanity, and becoming deeper and more spacious as a result) that if one really pursued that aim well and fully I suspect that there would be little time left to look about for any other sort. And I confess that I much prefer Jamesian angels of fine-tuned perception and bewildered human grace to the angels of the religious tradition—who, as Aquinas most perceptively saw, would not be able to get around in our world at all, since they lack imagination and the ability to perceive particulars.⁴³

On the other side, what my argument urges us to reject as incoherent is the aspiration to leave behind altogether the constitutive conditions of our humanity, and to seek for a life that is really the life of another sort of being—as if it were a higher and better life for *us*. It asks us to bound our aspirations by recalling that there are some very general conditions of human existence that are also necessary conditions for the values that we know, love, and appropriately pursue. It asks, further, that in the light of this fact one should at least moderate one's rage at and hatred of these limiting features, including death, which one would still appropriately fear and avoid.⁴⁴ And this would undercut, one supposes, the negative motivation to pursue various forms of alleged transcendence within human life—forms that involve withdrawing love and concern from that which cannot be sta-

40. *EN* 1106b28–32.

41. See the discussions of various aspects of their work in the essays in this volume.

42. The James passage is from the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, and is discussed in the Introduction, in the section entitled "Expressive Plants, Perceiving Angels"; the Proust passage is part of Marcel's description of the death of Bergotte.

43. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1 q.89 a.1.

bly controlled, or admitting as valuable only that which is immune from change and alteration. (Such forms of alleged transcending were among the primary targets of critical scrutiny in *Fragility*.)⁴⁵

But the line between the appropriate (internal) sort of transcending and the other sort is not and can never be a sharp one. For human striving for excellence involves pushing, in many ways, against the limits that constrain human life. It is perfectly reasonable, within the human point of view, to want oneself and others not to be hungry, not to be ill, not to be without shelter, not to be betrayed or bereaved, not to lose any of one's faculties—and to strive as hard as one possibly can to bring all that about in life. In fact, one of the merits of focusing on the internal sort of transcendence is that it tells us that such things really matter, that these jobs are there for human beings to do, for politics to do.⁴⁶ Some forms of the aspiration to extrahuman transcendence have indeed, as Marx and Nietzsche both in different ways saw, undermined people's love of and commitment to these struggles against limit. It is also perfectly reasonable to strive to increase life expectancy, to eliminate as many categories of disease as possible, to strive to prolong any single life as best one can. And again, external transcending seems to undercut the motivation to push hard in this direction. If one thinks that the really important thing is to get over to a different sort of life altogether, then this may well make one work less hard on this one. Though I would concede to Taylor that Nietzsche made this point too simply against the Christians, it seems to me that he did have a real point.

The puzzle then is, when does the aspiration to internal transcendence become the aspiration to depart from human life altogether? There is, and should be, no clear answer to this question. Its answer can only be given in and by human history itself, as human beings look at the limits as their own struggles have constituted them. Human life now has a somewhat different shape in time because of medical and scientific progress—at least for those who are able to avail themselves of this progress. It is somewhat longer, and safer in certain ways; though other unforeseen dangers have arisen. It would be a disaster for humanity if the type of argument I am presenting were taken to imply that the desire to push our limits back further was an illegitimate desire, and that we should just live on the earth as we find it. We shouldn't, perhaps, imagine that we can coherently wish for immortality. And yet it seems reasonable to fear death, for oneself and for another, and to seek to avoid it, at any time when active living is still going on in a valuable way.⁴⁷ It is reasonable to feel that death at any time is a tragedy for the person who has died. (I have defended this at some length in discussing Epicurus' arguments, and I shall therefore not recapitulate here.) Especially tragic, perhaps, when death is, by "normal" standards, premature, but, especially since such standards are always on the move, that notion does not and should not have decisive

weight with one who is mourning another's death, or fearing her own. The larger problem has, it seems, something like the same shape as the paradox of the athlete. She shouldn't wish to be without the human body and its limits altogether, since then there is no athletic achievement and no goal; but it seems perfectly reasonable, in any particular case, to want, always, to be better, stronger, faster, to push against those limits more successfully. It is the paradox of a struggle for victory in which *complete* "victory" would be disaster and emptiness—or, at any rate, a life so different from our own that we could no longer find ourselves and our valued activities in it.

What is recommended is a delicate and always flexible balancing act between the claims of excellence, which lead us to push outward, and the necessity of the human context, which pushes us back in. It is not easy, in this picture, to say where a line is drawn. But the ancient Greek conception of *hubris* provides, perhaps, a useful guide here. There is a kind of striving that is appropriate to a human life; and there is a kind of striving that consists in trying to depart from that life to another life. This is what *hubris* is—the failure to comprehend what sort of life one has actually got, the failure to live within its limits (which are also possibilities), the failure, being mortal, to think mortal thoughts. Correctly understood, the injunction to avoid *hubris* is not a penance or denial—it is an instruction as to where the valuable things *for us* are to be found.

Does this mean that one should actually not want the people one loves to live forever? Yes, and no. One is to hate and fear the thought of their death, to try to prevent it by any means one can—and yet to know that a mortal life is the only life in which the people one loves could actually be. This tension, which is close to being a contradiction, seems to be a part of the best human life. It is difficult enough to understand it, far less to live it. In this sense, the best human life in my own conception contains more tension and conflict around this issue of transcendence than Aristotle's best life, in which the fear of death plays a very small role.⁴⁸ Not enough, perhaps, to make it Taylor's "inclusive view." But more than his "narrow view," insofar as he identifies that with Aristotle's.

Another type of internal transcendence enters in at this point; and once again, it is a type that lies at the heart of Greek thought about mortals and gods. It is the transcendence of creation. Homeric heroes imagine their appropriate goal to be not immortal life, but the creation of a deathless record of excellence, of deeds or works through which they do in a sense make the world as it will be ever after. This type of transcending, says Aristotle in the *De Anima*, is the "first and most common characteristic of the living, in virtue of which life belongs to all that has life."⁴⁹ In lower animals it takes the form, simply, of biological reproduction. In human life, however, as not Aristotle but Plato's Diotima points out, this desire to propagate oneself is expressed in other ways as well. Human beings make the world, and make themselves in the world, through politics, through science, through teaching, through personal love, through virtuous speech and action. In

45. See especially chaps. 3, 4, 6.

46. See my "Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 1988.

47. For some related contemporary discussions of the demented elderly, see Dan Brock, "Justice and the Severely Demented Elderly," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 13 (1988).

48. In this sense, Aristotle does not seem to be a faithful recorder of the emphases of Greek popular thought.

49. *De Anima* II.4 415a74-75. Here he is creating of the common mortalities of the living.

all these ways human beings seek to live on, leaving in the world some expression of themselves, some continuation of their identity.⁵⁰ Diotima plausibly says that it is only when one gives up on the aspiration to external transcendence—realizing that one is not going to be immortal—that one will begin to pursue (with good results for the world) the other sort. Odysseus' life on Ogygia would not have contained the creative deeds through which he made himself historically immortal.

This type of internal transcending supplements our other type. For, as the Greeks insisted, one does not get the immortality people seek through *bad* deeds, (even spectacular ones), or through mediocre works;⁵¹ indeed, one does not get it through bad children either, a constant worry of ancient Greek ethics. So trying for the internal transcendence of virtue is the only way to get, as well, the internal transcendence of leaving a mark on the world. And, properly pursued, it will usually be sufficient. Here we should insist, with Thucydides' Pericles, that Achillean individual heroism is not essential.⁵² Being a part of a group that, as a group, does fine deeds can be sufficient; and frequently this is a more effective way of making the world in the image of one's own virtuous action.

IV

We have said nothing so far about the place of philosophical activity in this debate—and we must now do so. For the claim I investigated in my discussion of Plato's views on transcendence, in *Fragility* chapter 5, was the claim that a certain sort of philosophical activity is the way, and apparently the only way, in which a human being transcends humanity and manages to live a divine life. This claim, as I described it, grew out of an old tradition in Greek religious thought—beginning probably with Xenophanes—according to which a truly divine and unlimited being will do just one thing: it will think. The argument goes like this. If we really, consistently, imagine a perfect unlimited being, a being truly divine and worthy of worship, we will not imagine this being as doing the usual human things that the Olympian gods do in stories—having love affairs, lying, changing shape, and so forth.⁵³ The godlike form of life is still further from our own than such stories imagine. Our own reasons for doing such things come from our need and our imperfection; so what reason *could* a real god have for doing them? On the other hand, so the argument goes, there is one thing we do that we can imagine an unlimited god doing, out of pure positive love of the activity. This is thinking—thinking about, probing, contemplating the nature of the universe.

There are many ways in which the thinking of god has been imagined, from Xenophanes through Plato to later Platonisms.⁵⁴ Sometimes learning is stressed.

More often, as in Plato and in the Platonic part of Aristotle's account, contemplation is preferred, since learning seems too suggestive of limit and imperfection. And god's contemplation has usually been taken, quite plausibly, to be directed at universal essences, not at particulars. For the essential structure of the world, not its contingent history, would be, it is claimed, the feature that would arouse the perfect being's interest and love. And a being who didn't have experience of worldly ways of life could hardly single out or notice the salient particular features of worldly histories. (The Aristotle–Aquinas tradition holds, of course, something stronger: that a being without a body, such as an angel, would simply not be capable of the perception of particulars. This thought is used by Aquinas in a number of striking ways, in argument about the importance of the resurrection of the body.⁵⁵)

So our ability to perform abstract reasoning and to contemplate universals (as, for example, to contemplate a mathematical proof and its deductive logical structure) has been taken to be *the* feature of our current lives in which we live divinely—the one thing we do that a perfect god would also have reason to do, just out of joy and love, with no pressure of need. In *Fragility* I did express some uncertainty about this idea—for the question what motivates, and can motivate, one to think philosophically seems to me a deeply obscure one; and the question what a perfect being would find reason to pursue hardly less so. And yet, I did find it at least conceivable that philosophical thinking of the sort described might have the feature Plato ascribes to it. And I found a plausibility in the idea of a thinking god that I could not, either then or now, find in the idea of an athletic god, or an erotic god, or even (leaving to one side the Christian account of god's dual nature) a loving or a morally virtuous god. So this is, clearly, one more sort of transcending that requires investigation. I am not sure that it is the one that Charles Taylor finds appealing; nor am I sure that the idea of the philosopher/mathematician as divinity would answer at all to his conception of what is better than the human. But in order to complete the argument of this paper I need to say more about where I myself stand on this particular sort of transcending. Is the life of philosophical contemplation, or rather the life devoted to the maximal attainment of this, in which all other pursuits are viewed as merely supportive or instrumental, the best or highest life?

Now first of all, I am not sure that I should have conceded as much to this argument as I did in the book. For it now seems to me that the thought experiment that delivers the result that a perfect being would perform intellectual contemplation is more obscure and indeterminate than I suggested there. We don't clearly understand what it is that leads us to try to understand our world, to philosophize in the sense of reaching out for understanding. But it seems conceivable that it is, as Aristotle suggests in *Metaphysics* I, something specifically human about us, connected with our responses of wonder and bewilderment before the strange world in which we find ourselves.⁵⁶ And so it seems to me possible that a being for whom nothing was puzzling would not philosophize at all. A great part of the later Platonist tradition, and Plato himself, speaking as Diotima, agrees with this:

55. See n. 43.

50. For an excellent discussion of the *Symposium*'s position, see A. Kosman, "Platonic Love," in W. H. Werkmeister, ed., *Facets of Plato's Philosophy, Phronesis Suppl. II* (Assen, 1976), 53–69.

51. See G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore, 1979).

52. Thucydides II.41–43.

53. See Xenophanes DK B 25, and Plato, *Republic*, III, esp. 387–88.

54. For an excellent account of these debates, see R. Sorabji, "Myths about Non-Propositional Thought," in *Language and Logos*, ed. M. Schofield and M. Nussbaum (Cambridge, 1982), 295–314.

"No god does philosophy."⁵⁷ As for contemplation, even that may be hard to motivate, if one separates it altogether from the ongoing search for understanding. The Olympian gods did not understand serious sustained reflection any more than they understood serious sustained love. And I am now disposed to think this image of the divine at least as persuasive as the one developed by Xenophanes and Plato. Power in all things breeds *agnōmosunē* in all things. And the "over-looking" that really needless gods do in the universe seems likely to be less the intense contemplation imagined by Plato than another, more Sophoclean sort.

But let me waive these objections for the time being. Since the idea of a perfect thinking god *has* seemed coherent and persuasive to quite a few great philosophers over the ages—to Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Spinoza, to name just a few—let us proceed as if they are right to find in contemplation a special case of human/divine intersection. What follows from this for Taylor's question about the best life?

In the book, I made three claims about contemplation as an ethical goal. First, I claimed that the sort of reasoning that the tradition links (plausibly or implausibly) with transcendence is an inappropriate style of reasoning for ethics: inappropriate, that is, where our aim is adequate understanding of and good action in our human social world. I defended Aristotle's claim that practical wisdom is distinct from theoretical understanding, since it is concerned with historical particulars in a way that theoretical wisdom cannot be.⁵⁸ All this is well articulated by Aristotle and even by Aquinas; I have spent a good deal of time unpacking these claims, and shall not articulate them further here. So, since we all need practical wisdom to operate well in our world, this gives us a good reason not to fail to cultivate the specifically human ends and desires and forms of perception that it requires.

Second, I argued that the best and most complete total way of life for a human being would not, in any case, be the life maximally given over to theoretical reasoning, subordinating other ends to which Aristotle ascribes intrinsic value. It would include theoretical activity as one component in a life that also ascribes intrinsic value to friendship, to morally virtuous activity, and to the other intrinsically valuable ends of a specifically human life. In other words, the transcendent character of theoretical reasoning, if and insofar as it has that character, did not seem to give a *human being* a reason to give it predominance or to subordinate to it other specifically human ends. The fact that these ends are ends only within a human and not a divine life did not count against their claim to have intrinsic value within a human life.⁵⁹ The arguments of the present paper reinforce that claim.

Third, the fact that human beings pursue theoretical reasoning, insofar as they do pursue it, along with other specifically human ends, within the context of a specifically human life, seems to alter the way in which theoretical reasoning itself will be best and most appropriately pursued. For instance, both Aristotle and

57. Plato, *Symposium*, 204A.

58. *Fragility*, chap. 10; see also "The Discernment" (n. 27).

59. See *Fragility*, esp. chap. 12 and Appendix. *EN* X.6–8 clearly has a different view; but I argue that these chapters are incompatible with the main line of argument in the *EN*.

Plato (in the *Phaedrus*) argue that human beings think best when they think in cooperation and affiliation with others, in the context of a relationship that is close, affectionate, and long-lasting, and is viewed as an end in itself. They appear to differ as to whether the relationship should also be erotic; but they agree that affection, as well as respect, will be an important part of its contribution to thought.⁶⁰

All of this means that imitation of the god, even in the sense it has in this intellectualist tradition, is in a number of ways a bad and misleading goal for a human life to take for itself. It will lead to the denigration of other valuable ends, which will be downgraded because of their specific humanity; to a style of ethical understanding that is better suited to angels than to human beings; and perhaps also to an inadequate pursuit of contemplation or theoretical reasoning itself. It is a little hard to say where this conclusion fits in relation to Taylor's distinction between the "narrow view" and the "inclusive view." For we include theoretical reasoning as one component among others in a complete human life; but we include it *as* a specifically human activity, not counting its alleged divinity as a special point in its favor. And we certainly do not encourage the thought that it is good because it is a way of transcending our humanity.

V

At this point there is more to be said about philosophy's role in and toward the human good. I want to conclude this discussion of transcendence with some observations about its implications for philosophical method and style.

In the tradition of thought about transcendence that I have just briefly characterized, the fact that a certain style of human thinking was allegedly the one performed by god and thus the one in and through which we transcend our humanity seemed to many to be a powerful reason for preferring that style of thinking—abstract, detached from one's immediate context and from the bodily senses, concerned with universals, deductive and mathematical in its form—as the style best for philosophizing. It seemed to have about it a special nobility and dignity. To be sure, some unusually sensitive members of this tradition, such as Aristotle and Aquinas, did not so quickly conclude that the godlike style was always the best and most appropriate. Angelic thought was beautiful enough, but quite useless and inappropriate where ethical and political deliberation for this world was in question. Each realm and form of life demands an appropriate method and style of reasoning. Nonetheless, other thinkers, following Plato (and, later, Spinoza) did conclude that the godlike style of reasoning was always and everywhere the most philosophically appropriate. And even for those who resisted, the failure of ethics to measure up to the godlike seemed to be a point against it. Frequently it came to be ranked below mathematical and scientific reasoning, precisely because it was less easy to see how one might do it in a transcendent way.

If detached, purely intellectual, abstract, deductive reasoning about universals was the winner in this transcendence-oriented tradition, it is easy, too, to see who the losers were. The losers were stories, and the storytelling imagination and emo-

60. See *Fragility*, chaps. 7 and 17.

tions. As we mentioned in introducing Odysseus' story, there seemed to be an interesting connection between our preference for Odysseus' actual choice and the fact that we were viewing him as the hero of a story. As readers of stories we are deeply immersed in the messy impure world of human particularity; and we learn, as readers, to ascribe a high importance to events that befall our particular heroes and heroines as they move through the world of contingency.⁶¹ The fact that a godlike Odysseus was not appealing to us had much to do with the fact that we were already viewing him as the hero of a story we were expecting to follow and to care about. Thus the idea of a life in which nothing happens—or rather, in which nothing that happens has importance, since the being to whom things happen is self-sufficient—was an unappealing idea. Our preference for people whose sexual life is combined with narration was not unconnected with the fact that we were ourselves, at that moment, deeply immersed in the storytelling life.

And furthermore, the very emotions with which we react to a hero's story—fear for his danger, grief at his losses, delight at his success, suspense and anxiety about uncertain outcomes—all of these reactions, central to our experiences as readers of stories and mainsprings of the interest stories generate in their readers—all these, we can now begin to see, were bound up with a view of the world according to which things that human beings do not fully control have serious importance for their lives; a view that is incompatible with the pursuit of complete transcendence as the best end. For if we really thought that the best life was a life in which the human being finally succeeded in transcending his or her human dangers and uncertainties—in which, therefore, nothing that simply happens would have any more significance than a crop failure on Olympus—we would be likely (as Plato saw) to imagine our heroes as, themselves, transcendent beings. And we therefore would not relate to them as we currently do, through our fear, our longing, our pity, our delight, our anxious concern about their unfolding story.

Numerous philosophers have objected to the use of emotion and of the storytelling imagination inside philosophy. But it is important to examine the grounds on which they have done so. There are, indeed, some philosophers who have thought of the emotions as rather like hunger and thirst—as bodily feelings that have no cognitive content and that are bad and misleading because, when one is engaged with them, one cannot think deeply or clearly. But on the whole this is a relatively superficial view—one that we usually do not find in the works of major thinkers who have devoted a great deal of their best philosophical effort to the analysis of the emotions.⁶² And it is a view that has by now been shown, with compelling arguments, to be unsustainable. In philosophy, in cognitive psychology, in anthropology, and psychoanalysis—thinkers who agree on little else occur in rejecting it.⁶³

61. On all this, see the Introduction, "Discernment," "Flawed Crystals," "Finely Aware," and "Perceptive Equilibrium," this volume.

62. The most distinguished in this group is Hume; but his analysis of the passions is severely limited by the possibilities of the theory of impressions and ideas, and it does not seem to me, despite its many subtleties, to be the best part of Hume's philosophical work.

63. For references to the modern literature on this point, see "Narrative Emotions," and Intro-

Where we do find the combination of profound, sustained reflection about the nature of the emotions with a call for their dismissal from the pursuit of wisdom and understanding, a very different line of argument predominates—an argument closely connected with our interest in transcendence. Thinkers as otherwise diverse as Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, and Spinoza are in agreement that the emotions (such as fear, grief, love, pity, anger) are not simply bodily feelings or blind animal urges. They are either identical with or partly constituted by judgments of value—judgments that certain worldly items have great importance, items that the agent does not fully control. They are webs of connection and acknowledgment, linking the agent with the worth of the unstable context of objects and persons in which human life is lived. Fear involves the belief that there are big important things that may damage us, and that we are powerless to prevent that damage. Love involves the ascription of a very high value to a being who is separate from the subject and not fully controlled; it cannot be love if the response is fully controlled. When the world damages or takes from us something we love, we experience grief. When an item of great value is damaged by someone else, we feel anger. And so forth.⁶⁴

All these are agreements between enemies of the use of emotions in practical reasoning and one supporter (Aristotle, to whom we shall return). Let us now consider the further argument of the enemies. There are many differences among Plato, the Stoics, Epicurus, and Spinoza about the precise analysis of the relationship between emotion and belief. But all agree that the emotions have at their core certain value judgments, according to which the human being is in a rather incomplete and needy position in the world, has hostages to fortune. And they agree on one thing more: that the person who aims to live a godlike life, transcending his or her humanity, must do away with them. For after all, a transcendent life has no hostages to fortune. A self-sufficient and complete person, in short, has nothing to fear, nothing to grieve for, nobody to love in the usual human sense, the sense in which love implies incompleteness and the absence of control.

In *Republic* II–III and X, Plato puts this view to work in his proposal for the education of the young, with the notorious result that all of conventional poetry—Homer and tragedy above all—must be eliminated. For as Socrates very correctly observes, these works form a relationship with the reader that teaches and nourishes emotions such as grief, fear, and pity. They represent heroes such as Achilles as grieving and fearing, and they teach the young not only to pity and fear for them, but at the same time to identify with their non-self-sufficient behavior. The Stoics follow Plato here, and repudiate the literature-making emotions just as completely. They do seem to permit a certain sort of moralizing literary depiction, in order to show "what happens when chance events befall fools"—Epictetus' definition of tragedy.⁶⁵ But the complicity between hero and reader, the emotions of hope and expectation that propel the reader on in the story—all of this is thoroughly repudiated. Spinoza, again, repudiates the emotions as acknowledgments of incompleteness: "God is free from passions, nor is he affected by any emotion

64. For an account of this tradition, and sympathetic argument in its favor, see "The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions," *Apeiron* 20 (1987) 179–75.

of pleasure or pain." And he connects this view with his own decision to write about human beings *more geometrico*: "I shall regard human actions and desires exactly as if I were dealing with lines, planes, and bodies."⁶⁶

What is especially important to see is that the rejection of stories and of emotions from philosophical thinking, in these authors, does not depend on any view that the emotions are unintelligent or unclear or merely animal. In fact such arguments against the emotions begin by establishing that they have a very important cognitive dimension, are ways in which we organize the world for ourselves. They are "irrational" *not* in the sense that they are without reasoning—but, rather, in the sense that they involve what is, from the point of view of the aspiration to transcendence, a false and pernicious reasoning.⁶⁷ They are acknowledgments of the importance of things that have no true importance. They are teachings about specifically human values that are powerful rivals to the teaching that urges us to the pursuit of godlike contemplation. Confronted with our reading of Odysseus' story, the tradition would surely say that that's the result you get, if you let stories and their emotional structures into philosophical argument. You get a merely human nontranscending philosophy. A philosophy that is mortal and thinks mortal thoughts. That, of course, was exactly what they did not want philosophy to do or to be. And they would not have supposed that anything so closely bound to the mortal, in its form as well as its statements, could really be philosophy. If we shun stories and stick with abstract intellectual argument about universals, maybe we can get back to the godlike life, and see, as complete, the values that this life discloses.

Now I happen to believe that this tradition has the correct overall view about the nature and structure of the emotions: that they are closely related to value judgments, and that the relevant judgments are judgments about the importance of things we don't fully control. This view was displaced for a while, during the ascendancy of empiricism and related psychologies. But it is firmly reestablished now, and its credentials grow stronger every day. So far, this work on cognitive dimensions of emotion has not really pursued the connection between emotions and the acknowledgment of the importance of external undependable things, preferring to pursue the general connection between emotion and belief. I have pursued a part of this other project in some historical work on Hellenistic philosophy.⁶⁸ What I want here to point out is how closely a certain ethical view is linked (or ought to be, if we think well and consistently) with a certain style of doing philosophy. If we are content to follow the tradition according to which philosophy should above all be the godlike activity, the one in and through which we transcend humanity, we should certainly follow the instructions of this same Plato-Spinoza tradition concerning how philosophy should speak to its reader. We should allow the call of theoretical reasoning about universals to draw us

upwards, away from the cognitive and emotional responses typical of the merely human being, and seek pure intellectual deductions such as a god might perform. Above all, we should avoid appeals to emotion, and we should eschew storytelling.

But suppose, on the other hand, we are not so enamored of the pursuit of transcendence, for some of the reasons given in this paper. Suppose we think that there is something to the suggestion that, being mortal, we should think mortal thoughts. Then we might well conclude that philosophy, as the art of our thought and the pursuer of truth about us, had better speak mortal speech and think mortal thoughts. In this case, we will instruct the philosopher not to be seduced by the lure of the unaided intellect—for one can surely speak of seduction here⁶⁹—and to think and speak more humanly, acknowledging in speech the incompleteness and neediness of human life, its relations of dependence and love with untrolled people and things. The Stoics and Spinoza believed that such acknowledgment was sufficient for emotion: if emotion wasn't there, that acknowledgment was not fully there.⁷⁰ This would mean, in our argument, that the emotions, and their accomplices, the stories, would be not just permitted, but required, in a fully human philosophy.

Aristotle's approach to ethics, the one with which I have most sympathy, takes as its subject matter the human good. And its investigations into matters of value are at the same time investigations into the form of life of a being both needy and resourceful, with certain capabilities and certain sorts of incompleteness, and a certain sort of body in which all of this takes place.⁷¹ They are attempts to describe the limits and possibilities of that species-specific form of life, saying where, within those, good is to be found. This suggests, then, that good Aristotelian writing in ethics should call upon emotions, and upon narrative structures, enlisting their illumination—for through all of this we trace the outlines of our dependence and express our attachment to things outside ourselves. Indeed, it seems that Aristotelian philosophy will be incomplete without these elements.⁷²

Aristotle fulfilled this demand by turning for illumination to works of literature, whose narrative structures and emotional forms of engagement promised information concerning these aspects of a specifically human good. Our pity and fear for imperfect heroes, and our fellow feeling with their story—elements of literary experience despised by both the Platonic and Stoic traditions, in different ways—become ingredients in the recognition of human value.⁷³

If we want to pursue this project in a contemporary setting, there are many ways in which we might do so. We need to attend first and foremost to our own philosophical writing, making sure that the statements made by its formal and stylistic features do not negate the insights of an Aristotelian nontranscendent inquiry. These insights, we claimed, are especially fully and fittingly expressed in the formal structures characteristic of certain types of literature; so we need to make sure that our own writing is suited to be an ally, rather than the enemy of literature. I

69. See "Reading."

70. See "The Stoics on the Extirpation" for a sympathetic defense of this.

71. See "Aristotle on Human Nature."

72. For further arguments along these lines, see Introduction, this volume.

66. Spinoza, *Ethics*, V Prop. XVII on god, III, opening, on style.

67. This distinction is missed by Galen, discussing Chrysippus' view of the emotions in *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*; for he makes fun of the fact that Chrysippus, on the one hand, locates the passions in the rational part of the soul and, on the other hand, calls them *aloga*, "irrational." See "The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions" for further discussion.

68. "The Stoics on the Extirpation," "Mortal Immortals," and also "Beyond Obsession and Disquiet: Lucretius' Genealogy of Love," in *Aneiron* 22 (1989). I will present a more extensive

have said much more elsewhere about what this would involve, and I have argued for the importance of such an alliance.⁷⁴

But one very important part of the further project, closely allied to Aristotle's interest in tragedy, would surely be to bring the literary works themselves into philosophy, studying them as inquiries into the human good. Aristotle chose tragic poetry above all. And that is a valuable choice, whose implications need to be investigated further. I have argued elsewhere that, where our contemporary situation is concerned, it is perhaps the novel, above the other available genres, that will provide further illumination. For the novel as genre is committed, in its very structure and in the structure of its relationship with its reader, to the pursuit of the uncertainties and vulnerabilities, the particularity and the emotional richness, of the human form of life. The *Odyssey*, which might with some justice be said to be the first novel in the Western tradition, shows, as we have seen, that the literary project itself repudiates the choice for divine life, and invests itself in the choice to explore the values peculiar to the human form of life, the norms of practical intelligence, love, and virtue that we can expect to find and to realize within such a life. Indeed, by enlisting the reader as a concerned participant in the adventures of the characters, novels take our common humanity for their theme, implying that what is at issue is not merely some idiosyncratic event that actually happened, but a possibility or possibilities for human life. The emotional structures in which they implicate the reader involve, themselves, fellow feeling with the characters, and a sense of shared possibilities.⁷⁵

In these ways, I suggest, novels conduct a philosophical investigation into the good of a human being. Their many more concrete Aristotelian contributions—their rich exploration of the noncommensurability of the valuable things, their concern for particular context-sensitive judgments and for particular loves, their allegiance to the emotions as sources of insight⁷⁶—seem to derive, at some level, from the choice they make along with Odysseus, the fundamental choice to live as human, and thus to take on the riskiness and incompleteness of a mortal life. To live as *Odusseus*—a name suggestive of suffering and struggle⁷⁷—rather than to accept the offer of *Kalupsō*, whose name means “She who conceals,” and who would indeed have concealed, forever, the hero's character as hero, as the resourceful man and man of suffering. If we wish to develop a human ethical philosophy along Aristotelian lines, I suggest that we would do well to study the narrative and the emotional structures of novels, viewing them as forms of Aristotelian ethical thinking.⁷⁸

74. See Introduction and essays in this volume, especially “Love's Knowledge.”

75. See Introduction and the essays on James, this volume.

76. See Introduction, this volume.

77. For the etymology, connecting the name with being the recipient of anger and therefore undergoing adversity, see *Odyssey* 19.407; also 1.62, 5.340.

78. I am especially grateful to Charles Taylor for setting these thoughts in motion. This essay was delivered as the William James Lecture at the Harvard Divinity School. I am very grateful to audiences there, and also at the Atlantic Provinces Philosophical Association and the University of California, Santa Cruz, for their helpful comments. At Santa Cruz, the paper was read just after the death of John J. Winkler, one of the most extraordinary classical scholars of our generation and a wonderful friend, of complications arising from AIDS. As I did on that occasion, I

Endnote

This essay, the most recently written in the collection, links my work on Greek philosophy with my concern for novels. And it also points to a link of a different kind. In a series of papers on Aristotelian political thought (references in the endnote to “Perception and Revolution”), I have stressed, with approval, Aristotle's use of the general notion of the human being and the human form of life to provide a direction for ethical and political thinking. I have defended this emphasis against various forms of subjectivism and cultural relativism, and also against liberalism that attempt to choose principles of justice without relying on any theory of the good. I have argued that they yield a distinctive form of social democracy. And yet, at the same time I insist on the importance of particularity for good ethical judgment. “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach” (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1988) said something about how these two ideas fit together. In asking about how the good of a human being is to be promoted in a certain context, one must always be very sensitive to the historically concrete circumstances of that context. Yet, since it was always for the person as a *human being* that the good was being sought, one must not lose hold of general notions of human functioning and human capability, which can frequently be used to criticize local traditions as inimical to human flourishing. Despite these connecting remarks, one might still wonder whether there was not a tension, rather than an illuminating dialogue, between the particular and the general in such deliberations.

This essay suggests that the interest in historical particularity and the interest in focusing on the notion “human being” as the organizing ethical notion, are not opposed, but have a common root. Particularity and historical context are not visible to the godlike intelligence (see the paper's discussion of Aquinas); and the importance of context and particularity for us as we are is inseparable from the fact that we are bodily finite beings of a particular sort, beings who go through time in a particular way. In short, it is only when one focuses on the human and the differences between the human and the bestial, the human and the divine, that we begin to understand why particularity and history—and particular love—matter to us as they do.

And we see, as well, that narratives, especially novels, manifest the same connection. For they speak to the reader as a human being, not simply as a member of some local culture; and works of literature frequently cross cultural boundaries far more easily than works of religion and philosophy. And as they speak to the humanness of their readers, they immerse them in the characteristic movements of human time and the adventures of human finitude—in a form of life in which it is natural to love particular people and to have concern for the concrete events that happen to them. They cultivate the forms of vision and concern that inhabit the human form of life generally, and would be unavailable to beasts, uninteresting to gods.

In this way we see from another direction what was argued in “Perception and Revolution”: that social democracy and the art of the novel are allies. Their focus is the human being, seen as both needy and resourceful; and their dominant pas-