

Modern Philosophy

I am in my office at eight-thirty, cleaning my glasses with spray and a cloth. My colleague Henry is walking down the hallway. He sees my door is open and looks in to say hello.

“Hey Jonah, why the suitcase?”

“I teach from nine to ten,” I tell him as I put my glasses on, “and then I’m going straight to the airport to catch a plane to a conference in Los Angeles.”

“What’s the conference?”

“It’s one of those organized by the Klass Foundation. A Klass Conference.”

“Oh yeah? I’ve never been to one of those. How do they work?”

I explain how the conference is organized and the topics of the sessions. While I’m explaining, I wonder whether Henry’s question has a subtext. The Klass Foundation has a definite political agenda, one that neither Henry nor I share. I justify accepting the periodic invitations I receive from them (all expenses paid, generous honorarium) by telling myself that their conferences consist of real philosophical conversation, that I learn from them things that improve my teaching and research, and that there is significant value in engaging with people who hold views different from my own. I have also resolved never to write or say anything with the intention of securing an invitation, nor to refrain from writing or saying anything that might prevent me from receiving an invitation. At the same time, I have friends who believe that accepting Klass invitations legitimizes forces damaging to public life, and that by attending such conferences I am lending whatever prestige my department, university, and profession have to those who are playing a long game of bending American academia toward their own ideology. Is that what Henry believes? After he wishes me a good trip and departs my office I replay our conversation in my head. I decide that whatever uneasiness I felt was due to my own ambivalence. I cannot recall any expressions or inflections that would suggest dubiousness on Henry’s part. It’s possible that he is dubious about the Klasses, but if so, he hid it well.

I collect my class notes, the assigned reading, and a whiteboard marker. I close up my office and walk out of the Humanities building toward the lecture hall across campus.

This semester I’ve been assigned to teach in the Chemistry Building. The room is a long narrow steeply raked lecture hall from the 1950s. The students sit in small rickety wooden chairs, the seats of which are sprung to store in upright position. If a student stands up in the middle of class and does not pay attention to what he’s doing, his seat will flip upwards and bang into the chair-back with a noisy crash. Attached to the right arm of each chair is a small piece of wood that hangs vertically. The students pull the piece of wood up and over the arm and twist it to the horizontal to create a desk-like writing surface. If a student stands up in the middle of class and does not pay attention to what he’s doing, the desk-like writing surface will flip back over the arm and fall to the vertical with a noisy crash. Between the first row of seats and the instructor’s stage is a high gray counter with two deep sinks and a Bunsen burner. On one wall is a poster of the periodic table.

At nine, half the seats are occupied. A few more students will trickle in, but over a third of the room will remain empty the entire period. I’m used to this. The only day every seat will be filled will be the day of the final exam, which I’ll find depressing because it’ll be such a visually clear reminder of how many students have stayed away from class the other days of term.

A few students are looking over the assigned reading, but most are glued to their cellphones. I attach the tie-clip microphone to my shirt and say, “Alright, let’s get started.” That’s their cue to put away their screens. I give them a few moments, but some stay glued. I find it demeaning both to them and to myself to have to say, “Class is starting now, so put away your phones.” At the same time, I find it distracting and insulting to look out over the room and see them absorbed in activities obviously unrelated to class. Every day I have to make a decision: do I admonish them to put away their phones and risk the creation of a middle-school dynamic, or do I treat them like adults and risk the educational enervation that classroom cellphone usage can effect? Today, I choose the latter

because today I'm covering one of my favorite topics and I want to stay positive. I'll try today to focus on the class-attentive and ignore the phone-absorbed.

The topic is chapter thirteen of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. A fantastic philosophical performance, it's the moment when Hobbes argues that the state of nature is a state of war, where the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Over the course of the next two weeks we'll look at his entire argument, but today we're focusing on just the first two paragraphs, where Hobbes says that nature has made all men equal. At the beginning of the period I ask the students about this claim, eliciting an inchoate version of the thought that Hobbes is here striking an early blow for the grand Enlightenment ideal of equality that would later drive the American and French revolutions. Then I have them examine the details of the first two paragraphs: what exactly does Hobbes mean when he says there that nature has made all men equal? It turns out he's not advancing a noble moral principle after all. All he's saying is that every human is capable of destroying, and of being destroyed by, every other human. Far from being the inspiring, elevated sentiment we find at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, Hobbes's equality claim is just that anyone can kill anyone else by bashing his head in with a rock while he sleeps. Moreover, the political system Hobbes ends up advancing is the most unequal imaginable: a sovereign holding absolute power, and subjects completely at the sovereign's mercy, without any right of resistance. So Hobbes's equality claim is not what we had thought it was, and in fact seems to be almost exactly the opposite. Going through all that takes about three-quarters of the class period. It's not the end of the story, however. When there are fifteen minutes left I ask the class how in the centuries before Hobbes royalty had justified its political authority. A couple of students eventually respond by mentioning the divine right of kings, and we discuss for a while the traditional belief that God has bestowed intrinsic authority on certain individuals — that there are in nature eternal and immutable political differences, some people inherently possessed of the right to rule and others inherently obligated to obey. With that thought in mind we return to Hobbes's text. And now we find that at the beginning of chapter thirteen Hobbes is developing a picture in which such intrinsic political differences do not exist. He is explicitly talking about how everyone can bash in the head of everyone, but a deep implication is that no one has any natural authority over anyone else. In the state of nature — which is Hobbes's way of talking about humans as they naturally are — there is no hierarchy. If convention and custom are erased, king and pauper are the same. Inequality is constructed; nature has made all men equal. So Hobbes's equality claim turns out to be what we initially thought it was after all. But not entirely. On one level he is delivering a flat-footed description of humans' abilities and vulnerabilities, which he will use to justify passive obedience. On another level he is expounding the natural equality of all people, which will be used by others to justify modern revolution. Right there, in that single sentence at the beginning of chapter thirteen, you can watch the history of Europe pivot.

I cannot tell how many of my students get the point. But I know at least two of them do. For I can *see* understanding brighten their faces at exactly the right moment. It's the same moment when my own spine tingles. I realize there's something narcissistic or self-aggrandizing (or self-something-ing, anyway) about getting spine-tingles from hearing myself deliver my own lecture, and I feel a bit sheepish about it. But the joy — of capturing a nuanced and super-interesting point, and of seeing two of my students grasp it — remains real nonetheless.

I leave Chemistry and walk back to Humanities.

In my office, I put away my teaching stuff and pick up two philosophy essays that are resting on my desk. I've been tossing these essays into my backpack for months. They jostle in the backpack for three days, then I take them out. A couple days later I toss them in again. Each is twenty-five pages and stapled. Each has haphazard folds from all the tossing. I think the last page of one of them has ripped off and is scrunched up somewhere in the bottom of my backpack. The essays are on an obscure seventeenth century text I have been working on the last eight months. I believe I have a scholarly obligation to read them — but god I don't want to. I want to *have read* them, but the prospect of actually doing the reading feels like an extremely heavy lift. I've looked at the abstracts and glanced at the section headings. I have no reason to think they're worse than the

vast majority of twenty-first century peer-reviewed philosophy essays. The problem is that reading twenty-first century peer-reviewed philosophy essays is for me a chore I have to overcome an absolutely massive amount of inertia to accomplish. At some point, I will have to read them, at least if I plan to publish my eight months of work on the obscure seventeenth century text. Working on the obscure text has not been a problem; I love doing that. It's the scholarly requirement of engaging with the relevant secondary literature that fills me with lassitude. I toss the essays into my backpack. Who knows, maybe I'll get to them on one of the plane rides (probably not)?

I pull the handle up out of my rolling suitcase, position my backpack on top of the suitcase so that it will be carried along, lock my office doorway, and head down the hallway. When I am two steps from the exterior door, I hear someone calling my name. I turn around to see Cicely striding rapidly toward me. "I'm glad I caught you," she says somewhat breathlessly. "I wanted to talk with you." I'm pretty sure I know what she wants to talk about.

Cicely is a historian. For fifty years, the History Department and the Philosophy Department have been co-occupants of the second floor of the Humanities Building, Philosophy in the offices to the south side of the building, History to the north. Recently, History has been diminishing, as the fiery Marxist theorists who powered its heyday in the seventies and eighties retire and their senior salaries are parceled out to temporary adjuncts and teaching-intensive junior faculty. Philosophy, in contrast, has gained five new senior positions in the last four years, the result of spectacularly effective fund-raising by a professor of ours who has managed to acquire from wealthy businessmen millions of dollars for endowed professorships. There wasn't room for all these new professors in the Humanities Building, so they have been temporarily housed in an annex a quarter of a mile away. Last year the spectacularly effective fund-raiser also raised funds to start a new research center, to be called The Institute for the Philosophy of a Moral Marketplace. The hiring of an administrative staff for the new Institute created the need for even more space. As Chair of the Philosophy Department, I tried to impress on the Dean the need to house the new hires and the new institute in the same building as the rest of the Philosophy Department. I said that I would be willing to consider moving all the philosophy-people to a different building if it meant that we could all be under one roof. As it happened, I was not the prime mover of the decision about where to put the new hires and the new institute. The prime mover was the spectacularly effective fund-raiser. He met with the Dean, the Provost, and the President, and insisted that his hires and his institute be housed on the north side of the Humanities Building (spectacularly effective fund-raising buys you commensurate clout). This was my strong preference too. I told them I was willing to consider moving the Philosophy Department to another building, but I think *consider* was all I was willing to do. I'm not sure that any option that entailed moving the Philosophy Department to a different building would have been something I would have actually agreed to. Of course the only way for the new hires and the new institute to move into the north side of the Humanities Building is for History to move out. And yesterday the Dean announced exactly that: after fifty years in the same place a History Department full of Marxists now has to give way to privately endowed professorships and an institute for the (according to the Marxists: oxymoronic) study of moral marketplaces.

"So," Cecily begins, "we *heard* yesterday about our forcible *eviction*." Cecily is white-haired, stooped, and small-boned. She always carries a handbag. She wears white gloves. But the impression she initially gives of being a mild old lady vanishes as soon as she talks. She is razor sharp, prickly, each of her words individually articulated, many of them underscored. She's one of my favorite people on campus. "So we *heard*," she says leaning forward and placing her hands on my shoulders. "So we were *told*. And we are absolutely," looking me square in the eye, "*furious*."

"Cecily, I understand. I totally understand. I would be furious too. I'd like to talk with you about this, but..." I gesture first toward my luggage and then at the door.

"This is our *home*," she says. "This is where some of us have been our entire *careers*. And now we're being summarily kicked out, treated like third-class citizens, ghettoized in that horrible new building on the other side of First Avenue. Geography is destiny, you know, and we've been consigned to the *slag heap*."

I have toured the space in the new building on the other side of First Avenue. It's not so bad. It lacks any grandeur, but the offices are generally better designed than the ones in the Humanities Building. Humanities does have five or six wonderful large corner offices (one of which is Cecily's), but many of the others have been reconfigured from classroom space and storage areas, with decidedly irregular results: a window bisected by drywall, a single electric outlet across the room from the only place to put a desk, exposed pipes, unfinished ducts. Several of the Humanities offices are located next to large auditoriums that every hour disgorge hundreds of stampeding students who congregate noisily in the hallway for fifteen minutes after class. The offices in the new building are not large, but they were all built to be offices, with windows and outlets and bookshelves exactly where you want them. And they're in a quieter area, on a different floor from the classrooms with noisy hourly turnovers. I'm thinking that the new offices will be an improvement for all but the most senior History faculty members, but I don't say this to Cecily. This is not the moment (if there ever was one) to try to argue her out of her grievance.

"I totally understand," I say. "And I'd like to talk with you about this. But I really have to go right now, I'm catching a plane. Could we get coffee next week and talk? The coffee will be on me." I edge towards the door and try to speak with inflections that signal the wrapping up of our conversation.

"It's not *you* whom we blame," Cecily says, without any conversation-ending inflection. "What we blame is that deplorable new ... *institute*." She spits out the word. "It's *their* doing. *They* are why we're being evicted."

I now face a choice about how to respond. One option is to shrug sympathetically, say something non-committal, and make my exit. In favor of this option: I really do feel sympathy; I would like Cecily to think I'm on her side; I need to wrap up this conversation and catch my taxi (which I can see waiting on the street). Against this option: it would give Cecily the epistemic space to form the false belief that I am opposed to moving the other philosophers and the new institute into the north side of Humanities; I do not want to purposely deceive Cecily; if Cecily eventually found out that I had approved the move after initially coming to believe I had implied I hadn't, she would justifiably think ill of me.

I say, "Cecily, I have to tell you. I wasn't totally opposed to this. I wanted all the Philosophy faculty to be in the same building."

"Well of *course* you did, dear. That's what a chair *should* want for his department. But that's *different* from treating another department of colleagues with *contempt*. That's not you."

Cecily has thus absolved me, seemingly on the basis of her belief that while I wanted all the Philosophy faculty to be together, I didn't want to displace History. I might even have succeeded in giving her a more positive impression than if I had shrugged sympathetically and said something non-committal, because it now may seem to her that I am especially honest and conscientious, admitting as I have that I wasn't "totally opposed" to the decision even while not myself being responsible for History's displacement. At some level I may have intended to give her this impression. For consider: if I had really wanted to be entirely truthful, I could have said to her: "Cecily, I have to tell you. I was completely in favor of this decision. I wanted History to be moved out of Humanities so that the rest of the Philosophy faculty, and the Institute, could move in. As it turns out, I wasn't very involved in the decision-making process. But whatever influence I did have, I exerted in the direction of exactly what's happened."

So how should I respond to Cecily's absolving comment? My thoughts on this are interrupted by two blasts of the taxi's horn. "Cecily, I'm sorry, that's my taxi. I really do want to talk more. But I have to go."

She gives me a reassuring pat and says warmly, "You go. Have a good time. I just wanted you to know: while we're absolutely *furiosus*, we don't blame *you*." She waves with her fingers.

"Coffee next week," I say over my shoulder as I head out the door.

I roll my luggage down the walkway and make a complicated gesture that I hope indicates to the driver that I'm the one he's picking up and that I'm sorry for having kept him waiting.

I feel bad about giving Cecily the false impression that I did not want History to be moved. I am also aware, however, that I feel good that she still thinks well of me. I'm relieved she has not decided I am in league with those elements of the university that would allow a fundamental academic discipline to be displaced by an institute with external corporate funding. But aren't I in league with those elements after all? I might think of myself as being more aligned with Cecily's values, but I have done nothing to discourage the activities of the spectacularly effective fund-raiser. On the contrary, I have praised and rewarded him, and have gladly accepted the benefits his fund-raising has produced. I tell myself that in my role as Chair I am obligated to do what is in the best interests of the Department, and that given how the world of higher education is run these days, the only way a Department can thrive is by cultivating external revenue streams (witness what happens to departments, like History, that disdain such things). But I can just as easily see my conduct as venal hypocrisy: acting against my values in order to advance my own academic clan at the expense of others. But what's the alternative? Renounce the spectacularly effective fund-raiser, rip open a rift among my faculty, and court the Department's demise? And then again, do I really know enough about human nature and how economic systems work to be so sure that the values of the spectacularly effective fund-raiser (rather than Cecily's) aren't what's best for humanity in the long run?

The taxi driver takes my suitcase with one hand and pulls open the back door with the other. He gestures toward the back seat with his chin. "Hop in. I'll put your bag in the trunk."

The inside of the taxi smells of old cigarettes. When the driver gets in, it smells of new cigarettes. The vinyl upholstery squeaks as I squirm around to find my seat belt.

Mounted in a holder on the dashboard is the driver's iPhone. You might think it is there for purposes of communication and directions, but in fact it's now playing a video of a stand-up comic, at top volume. The comic is doing a routine about pornography, with many explicit details about exceptionally degrading sex acts. The routine also involves anti-Jewish stereotypes. The driver chortles as he drives along. "This stuff bothers some people. But he's just making jokes."

Does this stuff bother me? The comic is plainly offensive. I think the world would be a better place if this routine did not exist. I believe that the driver should not be playing it in his taxi. But am I bothered? In the sense of having an occurrent, affectively negative response, I'm not bothered. Intellectually, I'm opposed. Emotionally, at this particular moment, I don't feel anything. I *am* bothered by how loud it is. But telling him to turn it down without telling him to turn it off would be an implicit statement of the acceptability of the routine itself. I say nothing.

As we pull out of campus, I reconsider. Even though the routine isn't actually affecting me right now, and even though expressing disapproval would require engaging in a personal interaction I am completely not in the mood for, I can see an argument for why I nonetheless ought to tell the driver to turn it off. Other people will be emotionally disturbed by what the driver is playing. And it's reasonable to think that allowing the normalization of this sort of thing has deleterious effects on society as a whole. By telling the driver that I want him to turn it off, I would decrease the likelihood that he will play such things in the future — since he must have at least a self-interested motive to make his riders happy, and my telling him to turn it off will be a bit of evidence that such routines make a segment of the taxi-riding population unhappy. This in turn may play some small part in chipping away at the attitudes of the driver and any other riders who think there is nothing offensive about such routines.

Then again, honestly, how much good is my telling the driver to turn it off really going to do? Is it realistic to think it will play any appreciable role in changing attitudes or preventing harms? Does the slight possibility of a slight benefit obligate me to turn my taxi ride into something significantly more unpleasant than it would otherwise be?

We are now at the onramp. The comic comes to the end of his routine. The driver turns off the iPhone and speeds up to join the freeway.

He catches my eye in the rearview mirror. "Going to the airport, huh? It's a lot better these days than it used to be, you know. They've redone the entranceway there, and they've kicked out all those religious nuts and protesters and faggots who used to always be hanging around."

Okay, this is obviously bad. I definitely have to let the driver know that I think it's unacceptable for him to speak like that to riders in his taxi. I am clearly obligated to object. That I still don't actually feel affectively upset — that I continue to be emotionally unmoved — is no excuse for my not expressing disapproval. Not immediately apparent to me, however, is what I should say. "Excuse me, but I do not appreciate your using that kind of language when referring to homosexuals"? "Hey mister, knock it off with the 'faggot' talk, willya"? I imagine gushing with lispy flamboyance and an excited hand-clap, "Oooo, where did they all *go*? Do tell!" and I'm simultaneously amused by myself and terrified by the possibility that some day other people will realize I think such things.

"I got the call to pick you up while I was out on my chopper. The other driver fell through at the last minute and the dispatch called me desperate. That's why I'm in my leathers. I rode right over to the garage." He looks over his shoulder and changes lanes to pass a semi. "My chopper's silver. On a gray day like today I worry that people won't see me. But I keep it loud, you know, so they'll hear me coming."

"How loud?" I sit up straighter in my seat and crane my head to try to see the driver's face. "I understand that some bikers make their bikes loud because they claim that 'loud pipes save lives.' But that's no excuse for amping up the volume way past what anyone can claim is needed for safety." I loathe super-loud motorcycles. Whenever a super-loud biker motors down the street, it's my fervent desire to yank him to the side of the road, demand apology and restitution for the violence of noise he's inflicted, and force him to listen to a lecture on the universalizability formulation of the categorical imperative. "It's rude and inconsiderate, it's just plain immature selfishness, when the sound of a motorcycle makes everyone's teeth rattle and shakes all the windows and can be heard for blocks in all directions. Safety doesn't require it. When someone's bike is that loud, it's not safety that's motivating him. I don't know for sure what is motivating that kind of decibel level, although I have my guesses. But it's not safety."

"Well, sure, you need to have *some* kind of muffler, sure. I just keep my chopper loud enough so cars next to me can hear."

We drive the rest of the way in silence. I give him a fifteen percent tip, which is low for me. I almost always give twenty. That'll teach him.

I roll my suitcase toward the sliding doors of the airport. I see the driver's reflection in the glass. He's leaning on the hood of his car, using one hand as a guard against the wind and holding a match with the other. At the moment he puts match to cigarette, the doors slide open, the scene behind me disappears, and I am in the airport.

I am on the plane. Our approach to Los Angeles has begun. Over the P.A. the captain says, "Buckle up, folks. There's a storm coming into southern California this evening, and we're going to experience some turbulence in landing."

I catch a taxi from the airport to the conference hotel. It's right across the street from the beach. After taking my information, the check-in clerk hands me a folder with the conference information inside. Also in the folder is my nametag and several flyers advertising books recently published by the Klass Foundation Press.

I take the elevator to the fifth floor, let myself into the room, and deposit my belongings. I briefly use the facilities. Then I head straight back to the elevator to go downstairs. I want to see the ocean.

On my way through the lobby I see a man finishing up his check-in. He is handed the same Klass Conference folder I received. I direct my eyes away from him toward the door and keep walking. Once I've exited the hotel, I cross the street to the beach.

A quarter mile south of the hotel there's an unadorned fishing pier: wooden trusses, wooden plank walkway, guardrails, some table-like surfaces for preparing bait and cleaning fish. The storm the pilot talked about is still at sea, but you can feel it coming. The sky is complex: parts are bright blue, parts have high wispy clouds, parts are gray, parts have fast-moving low clouds. The surf

is out, but the waves are already big. They break under the pier, white foam flows around the trusses. People traverse the pier singly and in pairs. A woman in her sixties power-walks. A teenage couple strolls slowly, leaning into each other kissing and laughing. Individuals rest their forearms on the railing and look out. At the end of the pier an old man is fishing with a very long line. I ask him what he typically catches. "Skate," he says. "Sometimes shark." Has he caught anything today? "Not yet." I watch him for a while. To see him catch a stingray or a shark would, it seems to me, be a kind of miracle. He doesn't catch anything while I watch.

I walk back along the pier, cross the street, and head into a corridor of restaurants and boutiques and galleries. Some of the buildings are new and well-appointed, but others look to be refurbished shacks. With some imaginative squinting you can envision the scruffy surfing village this place must have been fifty years ago. Lining the street are palm trees that are all the same height.

My walk through town takes me near the hotel. Coming out of the lobby is the man who was handed the Klass Conference folder earlier. He has brown hair, is wearing a brown suit jacket, and looks to be about thirty-five. He stops when he reaches the street and gazes around uncertainly.

My instinct is to keep walking. I am not naturally a friendly person. But I think I should act friendly, both because he looks like he would appreciate company and because I myself will probably be better off overcoming my default reluctance and engaging with another human being for a while. I approach him.

"Hello," I say. "I'm here for the Klass Conference. You're here for that too, right?"

He looks genuinely happy. "Yes, yes I am." We shake hands. "Very glad to meet you."

"I was just going to get something to eat," I say. "Would you like to join me?"

"That'd be great. I was going to do the same thing. Do you know some place that would be good to go?"

"I don't really know. But I did see a café in that direction that looked like a possibility."

"Perfect. Let's give it a try."

We talk as we walk. His name is Tim. He's an Assistant Professor on the east coast. This is his first Klass Conference.

"Anything in particular I should know about how these things operate?" he asks. "From the outside, they've always seemed somewhat intimidating. By invitation only. It feels like I'm getting to enter something rarified and exclusive. I don't want to make a wrong step."

"Well, you might be disappointed by the lack of any sense of initiation into a secret society. They're not that special. And once you've been invited to one, you'll probably get invited to more. I guess if there's one thing to know it's that you're expected to be in attendance for every part of the program. Don't miss a second. And it's good to have something to say at least once each session. They want to see that you're involved in the conversation."

"How do they know?"

"A representative from the Foundation attends everything. They take notes."

"Oh."

"I didn't mean to scare you! It's not that sinister. Really, the main thing is to enjoy yourself. If you're enjoying the discussions, and getting something out of them, then you're doing what you're supposed to do. It really is supposed to be for your intellectual benefit."

The café has six tables and all of them are filled. For a minute Tim and I stand half in the café and half out. Then an older couple beckons to let us know they're about to leave and we can take their table. We wave back a thank you, and try to stand close enough to indicate to others entering the café that we're taking the table but far enough away to give the older couple the appropriate personal space to gather themselves to leave. It takes a while.

"Say there," the man says as he finally stands up. "That's a pea-coat you're wearing, isn't it? I used to have one just like it. What a great coat."

I often get compliments such as this. I used to find it odd, because the coat wasn't issued to me while I was in the navy, or inherited from a great uncle who served in the merchant marines, or anything like that. I bought it new from The Gap in the year two thousand. Presumably lots of other mall-goers purchased the same item. Even so, on a regular basis, people comment as though

it's something noteworthy. I guess there is a non-negligible population of pea-coat admirers out there, and the Gap product looks authentic enough to fool them. I understand their desire to say something. When you realize you have a bit of knowledge (what a pea-coat is) and that someone else (a person wearing a pea-coat) will appreciate that you have it, it's natural to want to tell him. And real pea-coats really are great things. I owned one once, got it from Sunny's Army Surplus in southwest DC when I was seventeen, and the bodily memory of its weight and texture still satisfies.

But the pea-coat compliment does present a dilemma. On the one hand, I don't want to validate the assumption that I'm possessed of a physical and historical heft that in fact I lack. It would be pathetic to try to pass a Gap product off as an artifact-garment that sailed the seas in WW2, and choosing not to disabuse people who have formed that misimpression is just a milder version of the same thing. On the other hand, one should accept compliments gracefully, not try to refute them. And who exactly would I be benefiting by turning the complimenter's joy of enthusing with a fellow pea-coat lover into forced acknowledgment of an inability to distinguish a real pea-coat from a chain-store knockoff?

The way I normally handle this situation is the way I handle it now. "Thanks," I say. "Actually, this one is from The Gap. But I did have a real pea-coat once, and you're right: they're great coats."

The man laughs and says he was taken in by the buttons (each of which is embossed with an anchor, which is ridiculous when you consider the provenance). He then goes on to talk about his own pea-coat from the fifties: how warm it was, how magnificently it kept him dry in the rain.

The pea-coat affair takes a few minutes, during which there is nothing for Tim to do but stand awkwardly at the edge of the conversation. When the older couple finally departs and we sit down I consider apologizing for the hold-up. I decide not to. Whether or not Tim is annoyed, my apologizing will pretty much force him to say he isn't. That is, regardless of what he actually feels he'll have to respond with something like: "Oh I don't mind at all." And while that might make me feel excused of social inconsideration, I can't see that it would do much for him. I could try to build all of *that* into my apology, but then the main effect would probably be to convince Tim that he's out to lunch with a crazy person.

We look over the menus. A waitress takes our order. We talk about the stupendous location of the hotel: right on the beach. We talk about the day's travel: what time we left, flight connections, delays. We talk about the incoming stormy weather. I ask Tim if he's teaching this semester.

"Am I ever," he says as the waitress brings us iced tea. "It seems like I'm doing nothing but. Two entirely new courses. Every teaching day, two new preps."

"Why two new courses in the same semester?"

"I didn't do much teaching as a graduate student, so almost any course I teach is going to be new for me at this stage. I taught the two classes I had taught before last semester, so this semester I had to start on new ones. I liked all the Fellowship money I got as a graduate student, but I'm paying for it now."

"So your graduate program was generous with Fellowships?"

"Not exactly. Most of my time off teaching was funded by a five-year scholarship from the Dunston Foundation. I'm not complaining! That's what made it possible for me to finish in five years. And we all know how much the Dunstons are doing to help our work."

The political orientation of the Dunston Foundation dovetails with the Klass Foundation, both of them promoting views I oppose. I don't hold this against Tim, and I have no inclination right now to raise objections to the Dunstons or the Klasses or to anyone receiving funding from them. But I detect from Tim the assumption that I am in the same camp with him and the Smiths and the Klasses. Given my presence at the conference, that's a reasonable assumption to make. And I'm wondering what to do about it. That he mistakenly thinks I share with him a certain political orientation doesn't bother me in and of itself. If he were a stranger I was talking to on an airplane, our paths never to cross again, I might give it no more than a passing thought. But over the course of the conference we'll talk and get to know each other, and it's likely he'll come to realize where I

stand on certain issues. I wouldn't want him to look back on the conversation we're now engaged in and have reason to feel awkward or misled.

(In graduate school I was once with a friend who got a bit of ranch salad dressing on his chin at the beginning of lunch. Because I didn't want to interrupt something he was saying about his work I didn't call his attention to the schmutz when it first appeared. Later on I couldn't figure out how to mention it without its seeming weird that I hadn't told him before. When I got back to my apartment after lunch, there was a semi-seriously angry message on my machine: "For christ's sake, Jonah! Why didn't you tell me I had salad dressing on my chin!" Another time, in college, I was waiting in line for basketball tickets with this guy I knew only moderately well, when the guy started telling me about how he had just realized how deeply he had fallen in love with this girl from his sociology class, and how he was thinking of breaking up with his girlfriend so he could ask her out. By the time I realized that he was talking about the girl I had slept with the night before, he was right in the middle of bearing his soul. Rather than halting him before he went any further, I froze. He continued to bear his soul. Later, when he found out, he declared me an asshole.)

At the same time, I don't want to make any ham-fisted declaration of allegiance to a particular political agenda. The best scenario would be for my views to emerge in a conversationally organic manner, as something that both produces an accurate picture of what I think and would be natural for me to express entirely independently of the Dunston/Klass context. I ask Tim about his area of research.

"Well," he says, "I just finished a book on the hierarchy of value."

The waitress arrives and places our plates on the table. Tim ordered a roast beef sandwich. I have a kale salad, and a hunk of brown bread with oats baked onto the crust. The salad needs more dressing. We settle into our lunch. After swallowing and taking a sip of iced tea, Tim starts again.

"Yeah, so I have a book that's just coming out. It's on the hierarchy of value. That's what I wrote my dissertation on. It's based on that, but there is, you know, also stuff that I've written since I've been out, and it's got a different overall structure from the dissertation. But it is based on the dissertation, a lot of it does come from there."

"Values occupy a hierarchy?"

"Right, yeah, that's what I argue. There are multiple distinct values, right? There isn't just one value that everything else reduces to. And those values can come into conflict. But there's always a principled way of deciding what to do when there's a conflict of values, right?, because there's a hierarchy."

"A lexical ordering."

"Yes, exactly, a lexical ordering. It's basically Rawlsian, right? But for morality as a whole, and not just justice and institutions. There are strict ordering rules that determinately tell us what to do whenever values come into conflict."

"What's the content of the hierarchy? What value has ultimate trumping power?"

Tim nods as he finishes chewing a bite of his sandwich. "So, liberty, right?, is on top. That's the value that we always have to live by, no matter what it might come into conflict with. And I construe liberty in a basically Nozickian way, right? Non-interference, basically. Next is promise-keeping, being true to your word, living up to contracts, fidelity, that sort of thing. You always have to live up to your contracts, right?, unless doing so involves violating someone's liberty. So those are the first two."

"How many are there? What comes next?"

"Well, it's not as clear after the first two, right? I mean, I don't claim to have a completely ordered list of every value. But promoting happiness and cultivating beauty are definitely on the list somewhere. And promoting happiness has priority over cultivating beauty, and both of them are lower down than liberty and contracts. So you should promote happiness unless it involves violating liberty or breaking a contract, right? And you should cultivate beauty so long as doing so doesn't harm anyone or violate liberty or break a contract. I'm not sure, though, whether something else, like maybe self-development, comes between contracts and happiness, or between happiness and beauty. I don't claim to have a full ordering."

“This is a lot like Ross’s prima facie duties, isn’t it? With seven or eight basic moral duties that don’t reduce to each other?”

“Yeah, you *could* think of that way, yeah. But I don’t want to associate too closely with Ross, right?, because I want to stay away from his intuitionist epistemology.”

“Ross thinks conflict between values is a constant feature of human life. He thinks that in virtually every situation you will ever face, there will be one reason to act one way and a different reason to act in an incompatible way. Do you agree with him about that?”

“He holds that? Really? That’s bizarre. Why would someone think that *every* decision we face involves reasons for acting in incompatible ways? That sounds neurotic. And exhausting. It happens, but surely it only happens now and again, right? And that’s what the ordering rules are for, right?, to tell you what to do in those unusual situation in which you see that you’ve got reasons for doing both A and not-A.”

“So that’s another thing you differ from Ross about. Ross denies that there’s a hierarchy or ordering. He thinks that liberty might sometimes override promise-keeping and happiness. But in other situations promise-keeping might be more important. And in still other situations maybe you should promote happiness even if it means violating liberty or breaking a promise.”

“Yes, I definitely disagree with Ross about that. That’s my main point, actually. When you have reasons for doing incompatible things, there’s always a clear rule that tells you what’s right to do.”

The waitress reappears to fill our iced teas and ask if everything is delicious. “Sure,” I tell her. “Great,” says Tim. We take a few more bites to prove the point, we gulp some iced tea.

“Why does there always have to be a rule?” I ask. “There are cases in which respecting liberty is the most important thing. But aren’t there at least *some* cases when happiness or even beauty is more important? And is determining your duty always so easy? When you face conflicting reasons, don’t you sometimes just have to grope around in the deliberative dark to try to figure out what you ought to do rather than simply turn the crank on some determinate ordering principle?”

“No, no. Morality is fundamentally action-guiding, right? And in order to be action-guiding, there have to be clear rules for resolving conflict. That’s essential for any view of morality, right? That’s my main point.”

“I don’t know. Is what morality is really that clear and consistent? Maybe there’s some sense in which we think morality will always give us determinate guidance, but maybe we *also care* about things in ways that lead us into value conflict there’s no determinate guidance for.”

Tim shakes his head. “No, no, I just don’t see how that can possibly be a coherent view. That sounds like that view of meta-moral pluralism defended by...” He stops. He points at me. “Wait a minute. You said your name is Jonah, right? Jonah Rice? J.S. Rice? Duh. I didn’t make the connection. Sorry! I’ve read your article on this. I didn’t realize you were you.” We laugh. “That’s your view, right? That we think morality will give us determinate answers, but that we’re also committed to values that conflict in ways there’s no determinate answer for? That we’re condemned to grope around in the deliberative dark, as you say.”

“Yes, more or less.”

“It’s an interesting view,” he says in a neutral tone.

The waitress is at our table again. “Are you finished with that? Can I interest you in dessert?”

Tim and I look at each other and through eye contact communicate that we don’t want anything else from the café. “I think we’ll just take the check,” I tell her.

“When do we have to be at the opening reception?” Tim asks as we finish up our lunch.

“Six.”

“So we have three hours. What are you going to do? I think I want to walk further into town to see if I can find a decent cup of coffee.”

“I’m going back to the hotel. I want to use the gym before the reception.”

“Very virtuous!”

I shrug. “Plane travel and conferences involve a lot of sitting. I’d like to get some exercise when I can. Listen,” I say, “when you’re on your walk through town, you should make sure to go down to the beach. There’s a pier.”

When I get to my hotel room, the first thing I do is open up my computer and go to the Amazon page for Tim’s book. I click on “Look Inside” and search for my name. I assume other people do the same thing when they learn that a new book has come out on a topic they’ve written about: look to see what the author has said about them. I hope other people do it, anyway, and it’s not just me. I’m mentioned once, in a one-sentence footnote at the end of a paragraph on action-guiding-ness: “J.S. Rice’s meta-moral pluralism is vitiated by a failure to understand this basic point about the concept of morality.”

I change into shorts, a tee shirt, and sneakers, and head for the hotel’s Fitness Center on the third floor.

The Fitness Center is a smallish room with two treadmills, an elliptical trainer, and a recumbent stationary bike. In one corner is a set of weights. There are mats for stretching, and a water cooler by the door flanked by a dispenser for small paper conic cups. The place smells of cleaner. Nothing is out of place, which seems to be the result less of impeccable housekeeping and more of lack of use.

The aerobic machines all face a large flat screen TV that is showing a movie about people working in the kitchen of a fine restaurant. The sound is off but it’s easy enough to imagine the dialogue as the head chef throws a poorly-prepared plate into a garbage can and yells furiously at a hapless line-cook.

I want to change the station — a European soccer match would be ideal, but I’d settle for tennis or college basketball — but I can’t find the remote control. I search the entire room, on top and below every machine, on the floor, by the water cooler. No luck. I examine the TV itself, but I can’t discern any buttons. So not only can I not change the channel to something I want to watch, I can’t turn off the chef movie either. You might think the obvious thing to do is just ignore the movie, but I’m one of those people who, when a television is in their field of vision, find it impossible not to watch.

I mount one of the elliptical trainers, push the buttons to set the levels on high, and begin the ridiculous loping lunge-run motion the machine demands. I start fast, and then I go faster. The first few minutes I am warm; the next few minutes I get hot; ten minutes in, I am pouring sweat. My preferred work-out strategy is to push myself as far into overexertion as I can possibly manage. It’s not a pretty sight. I have recently seen some press about the health benefits of maximally-strenuous work-outs. That’s not why I do it. I do it because when I am in the throes of utter gasping exhaustion, I become incapable of thinking about anything.

The movie is showing exquisitely complex food preparation, with close-ups of chopping and whisking and plate presentation, and a great many fast cuts intended to make the view feel the stress and rush of a high-pressure dinner service. Then it breaks for a commercial for testosterone treatment for older men. The pitchman has the head of an eighty year old and the body of a thirty year old. We see him lift weights and smile knowingly at young women. The commercial goes on and on. It’s more like an infomercial. When the movie finally comes back on, the chef is storming out of his kitchen. In the alley behind the restaurant he has an angry conversation with an implausibly attractive sous-chef. Some other stuff happens I can’t make sense of: a ride in a limousine with a well-dressed elderly lady, a shouting match in an apartment, fisticuffs with a thug. Now it’s very early morning, the sun is just beginning to rise, and the chef is in contemplative repose at a fish market on the waterfront. At this point another long-form commercial cuts in, this one for a cooking pan with a magical copper surface so durable and non-stick that you can use it to stir-fry marshmallows with a fork.

After thirty-five minutes I’m at the point at which it does not feel possible to elliptically train any further. That’s when I make a mistake. I continue to lunge-run as hard as I can for another ten minutes. Why is this a mistake? Because when I push myself beyond a certain point I court an

exertional headache. An exertional headache is not always the worst thing in the world. If I drink a few glasses of water, take aspirin, and lie down for a while, it usually goes away. But it doesn't always go away. Sometimes it lingers for an hour or two, and then, rather than fade, blooms into a full-blown migraine. It's four-thirty. The conference starts at six. I don't have five hours to let a migraine run its course.

When I get back to my room, I turn the air conditioning to very cold, close the curtains, take two aspirin, and lie perfectly still on my back with a damp washcloth over my eyes. I can manage the evening with the headache as it is now. My concern is that it will get worse.

I have a prescription for pills that would eradicate the headache. These pills would not only eradicate the headache, but also make me feel great: happy, smart, friendly, interested in the world, able to see the funny side of things. Two of those pills plus a gin and tonic and the evening would be a pure delight. And it would end in eight hours of deep sleep from which I would awake more refreshed than I ever feel after one of my typical fitful nights. But I do not have any of the pills with me. I purposely left them at home. This is because I worry about their long-term effects. The evening I take them is delightful, for sure. Invariably, however, the night after that is worse than normal: greater anxiety, longer self-playing blooper reels of things I wish I hadn't said, worse insomnia. If I take the pills two days in a row, then the third night will be worse still. So why don't I take the pills every night? Because they're not designed for that. If you take them often, you'll end up needing higher doses to achieve the same result. And frequent use can lead to boomerang headaches, migraines that arrive like clockwork after the pills wear off. I have experienced boomerang headaches myself. Those are reasons enough not to take the pills more than once or twice a week. Not only am I aware of those reasons, however, I am also aware that my physician is aware of those reasons. He may, consequently, deny re-authorization of my next prescription if I use up my current one ahead of schedule. Then I would either have to go without any pills at all while waiting to catch up to the normal prescription schedule, or be required to speak with my physician about why I've gone through the pills so quickly, which could lead to various outcomes I'd rather not consider. And I have to confess to something else: I don't take the pills only when I have headaches. Sometimes I take them just because I want to feel delightful. Usually I tell myself that I can detect that a headache is about to start. But sometimes willful self-deception — the wishful thinking of a kid who tries to convince himself he's sick so he can stay home from school — is involved. Knowing all that while I was packing, and knowing how many pills were in the bottle and where I was in the prescription schedule, I made the conscious decision not to take any with me on this trip. Of course I regret it now, when less than an hour before I will be required to hobnob at a conference reception a real headache is dangerously lurking. But even while I truly do wish I had the pills with me and I would definitely take them if I had them, there's also a part of me that is chuffed by the thought that by not taking the pills now, when they are actually indicated, I am buying the opportunity to take them at some future date when I don't have a headache but just want to feel delightful.

After half an hour of lying still in the dark, I get out of bed and start to prepare for the evening.

Twenty-five years ago, when I first started going to events like this, it was commonplace for men to wear ties and jackets. I liked wearing ties. I liked having a reason to shop in thrift stores and vintage clothing emporia, where you could always find a worthwhile tie for ten dollars or less. Wearing ties gave students something to wonder about and try to predict before class: what kind of tie is he going to wear today, classy or crazy? It gave the children something easy but useful to buy on Father's Day and Christmas. Even bad ties could be kind of good. In the nineties, however, going tieless became increasingly accepted. In the aughts tielessness became the norm. In the teens wearing a tie became an affectation, similar to what wearing a bow-tie had been a generation before: something a man does either because he's foreign or because he's consciously affecting an eccentric persona. So I stopped wearing ties. But the Klass Conferences are an exception. At the Klass Conferences — alone among any of the academic milieus I can think of — it is still the custom for men to wear ties and jackets to the opening reception.

I take a shower, iron a shirt and trousers, and pick out a tie from among the three I've brought. I don the nametag that came with the registration materials and look over the schedule to make sure I've got the time and place right. I go to put on my jacket. I don't have my jacket. I've left it at home. I know how it happened. The night before I packed all my clothes except the jacket, which I left on its hanger in the closet. While I can iron all the other clothes, I can't iron the jacket, and I wanted to minimize the time it spent smushed in my carry-on. Then, in the rush of the morning, I forgot.

Wearing a tie with no jacket looks odd and unfinished, like someone who doesn't know how to dress. Going with just an open shirt is too informal for this setting. I put my pea-coat on over my tie and look in the mirror. Not great, but better than just the tie by itself. I check the clock. Ten minutes before the reception is supposed to start. I unpack a bit. I make sure I've got all the papers and notes I'll need for tomorrow's sessions. I look out the hotel room window across the street to the ocean. Whitecaps everywhere. Bigger waves.

Klass Conferences always hold their receptions in a "Hospitality Suite." A Hospitality Suite is a double hotel room from which the beds have been removed and in their place installed a help-yourself bar prodigiously stocked with expensive liquor. The Hospitality Suite is kept open the whole conference, for participants to mingle in before and after sessions and for socializing late into the night.

Four or five participants are there when I arrive. I recognize one from previous conferences. Melinda is my age and teaches at a liberal arts college in California. She is talking with a woman who looks to be in her early thirties. Both of them are drinking martinis. Melinda sees me and waves. I wave back and point to the bar to indicate that I'll come over and talk after I get a drink.

There was a time when I would have been pleased by the sight of so much expensive liquor laid out for the taking. But I don't drink much these days under the best of circumstances, and it would be very foolish to have even a drop when I am battling a headache. I fill a glass with ice and pour into it ginger ale, which fizzes in the atmosphere around my hand.

At the end of the bar I spy a small bowl with pimento olives and another small bowl with cocktail onions. I have this sense that eating vinegary, pickled things may help quash the incipient headache. I spoon out two olives and two onions and pop them in my mouth. While I am actually eating them, the headache disappears. Once I finish them, it reappears. I glance around the room. Satisfied that no one is watching me, I spoon out and eat three more olives and three more onions. Same thing: it makes me feel better, but only when I'm actively eating them.

"Hi Jonah!" Melinda says when I approach. "Great to see you! This is Anita, from Berlin." We exchange handshakes and greetings. "What are you drinking? Is that just soda? And you're wearing your coat. Are you sick? Do you have that virus that's sweeping the country?"

"I am fighting something off," I say.

"My youngest got that virus," Melinda says. "But he had the lead in the school play, so we pumped him full of vitamin C and sent him on stage anyway. Meanwhile my other son's soccer team was in the state championship that week, so we had to keep the two entirely separated so the older one didn't catch it. You can just imagine."

"I hope it all went okay," I say.

Melinda makes a motion with her hand that is halfway between a push and a wave. She closes her eyes for a moment and smiles serenely. "Oh yeah. It all went great."

"Where in Berlin do you teach?" I ask Anita.

"In fact, I am not teaching at the present time. And I am not in Berlin. I'm from there, but I am at present on a post-doctoral fellowship in New York."

"She works on Hume," Miranda says. "Like you."

"What part of Hume?" I ask.

"I am working on personal identity. I am interested in the relationship between Hume and ideas of self in Buddhism."

“You mean how there really is no self? Just a bundle of perceptions that appear and disappear without any single thing that’s identical across time?”

“Yes, that is it exactly. I am working on how this is both a Buddhist and a Humean idea. Self as a fiction, the absence of any underlying substance.”

“So,” says Miranda catching my eye and winking, “an early modern Scottish thinker who was raised entirely on Western philosophy and never left Europe was a Buddhist in Edinburgh in seventeen thirty-eight?”

Anita says, “Hume was visiting places in France where there were persons who were traveling to places that were Buddhist. He could have been talking with them.”

Miranda catches my eye again before responding. I guess she wants me to know that we are together on the inside of something like a joke. “Isn’t a better explanation just that Hume’s entire philosophical project was to show that many things we think we have ideas of, we actually don’t? We think we have an idea of persisting external objects, but when we closely examine our impressions we find that in actuality we have no such idea. We think we have an idea of a causal power, but when we closely examine our impressions we find that in actuality we don’t. We think we have an idea of self, but when we closely examine our impressions we find that we don’t. And so on, and so on. All of that can be explained by good old-fashioned Western empiricism. Explanations based on Buddhist influences are surplus to requirements.”

I say, “That not all that matters, though, is it? Wouldn’t it still be interesting and important if two different traditions converged on the same astounding conclusion that our deepest conviction that we are a persisting self is a mistake?”

“Yes,” says Anita, “that is what I am also thinking.”

“There’s nothing new under the sun,” says Miranda. “Any idea someone has can always be found some other place.”

I say to Anita, “I wonder, though, how much the Buddhist and Humean views on self really are the same. They start out the same, but there might be a way in which they end up very different.”

“Hold that thought,” Miranda commands. “I want to hear this. But I have to use the ladies’. I hereby forbid you from talking about this any more until I return. You may, in the meantime, engage in idle chitchat.”

While Miranda is gone, Anita and I talk about the conditions of her post-doc and her plans to apply for tenure-track jobs next year. As we talk, I try to piece together my thoughts on Hume and Buddhism. It’s something I’ve thought about before but never tried to explain out loud, maybe because I often run with a stridently analytical crowd (e.g., Miranda).

I see the connection Anita wants to draw. Like the Buddhists, Hume’s story starts with the absence of an original impression that could be the basis for a self identical across time. But Hume then builds his entire account of the passions on each person’s intimate consciousness of his own self. I think he thinks we get the idea of a self because the minds of men are mirrors to each other. You form an idea of me as a single thing, just as you would any other external object. Then I notice how you see me, and I form an idea of your idea of me. My idea of your idea of me becomes my impression of self. The Buddhists think this is an illusion whose grip we should strive to free ourselves of. But Hume never says that. He seems to think that our impression of self is essential to every meaningful aspect of human life: of bad stuff like malice and selfishness, sure, but also of good stuff like benevolence, virtue, and justice. If we annihilated our impressions of self, I’m not sure what would be left. And I wonder whether Hume thinks it’s even possible. Believing in a self might be a mistake born of our compulsion to see ourselves as others see us, but it might be a mistake we’re psychologically incapable of undoing. According to Hume, there are no rational grounds for believing nature will always behave in the future the same way it did in the past, but it’s still impossible not to believe that if you step out of a tenth story window you’ll fall to the pavement. Maybe it’s the same with self. Even if we have no rational grounds for believing we are real persisting substances, it may be that we cannot help but think of ourselves that way. No matter how much we may want to.

Miranda has returned. “Okay, I’m back. So now we can hear it. Ready, set, go!”

I take a breath. “Okay, here’s what I was thinking…”

It is at just this moment that the organizer of the conference strides over. His name is Jack Paul. He’s a big enthusiastic guy. “Melinda! Anita! Jonah! Great to see you! So glad you’re here. Jonah, take off your coat and stay a while, ha ha! Your glasses are almost empty. Fill ‘em up, fill ‘em up! That’s what we’re here for. Have you met Bernard Moreau? Bernard, come over here and meet some people. Bernard’s just arrived from London.”

Greetings and introductions are exchanged. While Melinda and Anita go to the bar to get another drink, Bernard and I talk about air travel from London to Los Angeles, and about the irony of leaving London when it’s sunny to arrive in Los Angeles when rain is expected. When Melinda and Anita return, I wait a couple of minutes for the conversation to gain traction without me, and then lift and shake my empty glass as the reason for excusing myself and heading to the bar.

My headache is gathering forces. I eat three more olives and three more onions. I futz around with a bottle of ginger ale and the tongs and the ice bucket, with the idea of looking occupied enough to explain my lack of engagement with other members of the group.

Jack Paul taps his glass with a spoon. “Attention! Attention! The conference is now beginning. Welcome all of you, to stormy Los Angeles. Thank you so much for coming. I think we’re going to have a wonderful three days. There are some people I wish to thank for making this conference happen, and there are some ground rules I want to go over…”

His introductory speech lasts ten minutes. He concludes,

“Thanks once again to each of you for coming. And thanks for indulging me when I know that what you’re all really thinking about is food. Well, I’m finally done. So: let’s eat!”

There is some applause, some vocalized affirmations. The donning of coats. A funneling toward the door.

“This way!” says Jack Paul. “The restaurant is two blocks to the east and half a block to the south.” We follow him out of the hotel grounds and toward the main street.

When we are halfway there large drops start to fall. Everyone rushes laughingly, getting to the restaurant just as sheets of rain begin in earnest.

The entryway to the restaurant is warm with an open fire. The mad dash to beat the storm’s onset followed by the jumbled entry into *gemutlichkeit* has left everyone flushed and happy.

The restaurant does not have a table big enough for our entire party, so we split into three groups. I end up at a table with five others. Seafood appetizers are served. I am allergic to seafood. The conversation turns to contemporary politics. I try to participate, but my headache has worsened, bringing with it nausea that makes it difficult for me to talk. I feel like I can avoid vomiting only by concentrating very hard on not vomiting, and that if I start talking freely my concentration will slip. Moreover, I have no relish for these conversations about contemporary politics. They almost invariably follow the same script. It’s not that I necessarily object to what’s being said. It’s just that I’ve heard it all before. I make conscious efforts to form my face into expressions that are appropriate responses to others’ comments, and to make noises of agreement here and there.

The main course is served. I try to take a bite but quickly realize that eating anything would be a very bad idea for me right now.

Anita, who had been seated at one of the other tables, comes over. “I am sorry we were interrupted before.” She pulls up a chair and places her hand on my forearm. “I did not get to hear what you had to say about Hume and Buddhism. And I am wanting to hear it. Can you explain it to me now?”

In my throat there is a rising lump. “Anita, I would love to talk with you about this. Honestly, I would. But I am feeling really poorly right now. I am very sorry. I hope we can talk about this tomorrow. Right now I have to go.”

I stand up and head to the Men’s Room. The Men’s Room is occupied. I knock. Yes, it is occupied. A minute later it is still occupied.

I walk out of the restaurant. I vomit on the sidewalk.

It seems to me that I should make some kind of effort to clean up the sidewalk, but I have no idea how I would go about that. I also realize that I have vomited in sight of the restaurant

window, and it's likely that some of the people in the restaurant have witnessed the event. I direct my gaze in the opposite direction. Better to avoid letting the people in the restaurant know that I know that they know I've just vomited. I walk west.

The wind is gusting and rain is falling sideways. Awnings are flapping furiously. From the palm trees that line the street fronds fly loose and spin to the ground.

I am at the beach. The sand is wet and heavy. I bend forward from the waist to continue walking through the wind. My eyes are streaming. When I get to the water's edge I stop, take off my glasses, and look out.

Rain and sea-spray batter my face. The waves are black and crashing white. Wind and rain and sea and sky: everything is in motion, all is perfectly still. My headache dissolves into nothingness. The waves churn black and white. Time goes by but I don't know how much.

My headache dissolves into nothingness. The waves churn black and white. Time goes by but I don't know how much.

Eventually, however, I put my glasses back on. The headache re-forms, and I turn to walk toward the lights of the hotel.