Agency, Identity and Technology:
The Concealment of the Contingent in American Culture

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America has become a spiritual wasteland. Three aspects of the human condition are crucial for human beings to recognize if they are to develop a proper identity and agency within the world: these aspects are finitude, contingency, and the spiritual (which follows from the other two). The notion of the spiritual can be filled out with an understanding of faith. American culture is antithetical to faith, as is demonstrated through a discussion of the basic human practice of conversation. In America, conversation works against faith because conversation has become brutal. Contemporary debate literally works against faith because conversation has become brutal. Contemporary debate literally works to annihilate the reality of others. These reflections support the conclusion that brutality is the antithesis of faithfulness.

I. Introduction

The philosophical puzzles concerning identity and agency are traditionally categorized as metaphysical and epistemological. Locke's questions and arguments on the topics, which still occupy a central place in the philosophical consciousness of the west, are usually construed as metaphysical. But questions concerning identity and agency can grow quickly, and in many directions, even with little philosophical nourishment. All they need are the elements of a healthy existential imagination. The direction of this essay is towards the normative, specifically the question: what is required in human development to achieve an identity and agency that are well suited to the basic realities of the world?[1]

Ethicists make a distinction between "thick" and "thin" concepts of identity.[2] The thin concept of identity might be construed as a Kantian capacity for pure practical reason as a sufficient condition for identity. The thick concept of identity requires the inclusion of our social relations as at least a necessary condition for identity. The normative element is easily seen in the notion of thick identity. A person with a distorted relation to her social world or a social world that consistently produces the conditions for distorted relations are, of course, going to interfere with the normative development of both identity and agency.

It may be the case that on the strictly metaphysical or conceptual level (say, what can be conceived); a capacity for "pure practical reason" is

enough for a base identity and agency. It is, however, obvious that human identity in the actual world is thickly relational: the nature of our relations to the social world and to other individuals shapes and ultimately constitutes elements of our identity. It is then entirely reasonable that questions concerning identity and agency would evolve into questions about how relations can be structured so as to develop identity in the right ways. It is entirely right minded, based on endless amounts of empirical resources, to suppose that human identity, "who I am," is grounded in how I am related to others in a social world. At this point, as Nietzsche knew, philosophy and psychology converge.[3]

That "who I am" and "what I am becoming" are broadly and thickly relational is an assumption of this essay. It need not be a problematic assumption because the actual argument of the essay is that the relations forged in the social world ("society" and "culture") are not the only, or even the primary, relations that are at the very basis of human identity and a normative agency (knowing how to act in the world). The set of relations that are most fundamental are our relations to brute physical reality, which is our relationship to the world.

The above thesis can be stated in a more subtle and interesting way. No doubt, the manner in which social relations and the social world are structured influences whatever relations that we have with material reality. But it does not follow from this that our relations to material reality are not basic to both identity and agency. It does not follow because the causal arrows go both ways. Our relationship to material reality can inform and influence the basic relations found within the social world. Hence, what we consider to be distorted relations between human beings on philosophical or psychological analysis might be the result of a distorted relation to material reality. The idea that our relationship to material reality can be distorted or concealed is a leading thesis of this essay. This thesis is then followed by the argument that such distortion and/or concealment are deeply problematic for the development of an identity and agency that are properly constituted for a good human life.

II. Identity, Agency, and Material Reality

It is the thesis of this section that human identity and agency is constituted, most basically, by three interrelated features of ourselves and the world. They are mortality (finitude), contingency, and, for the lack of a

better word, the "spiritual." I say that all three are elements of ourselves and the world because they are brute facts about the nature of our condition *in* the world.

Mortality, one might say, is obvious enough. But considerable discussion is needed in order to set the stage for how the brute fact of our mortality might be concealed. Mortality is, at first thought, just finitude—a certain life span followed by death. (Note, however, that mortality is already contained in "life span.") That we live a certain number of years and then die is an element of the human condition but it is also a fact about the world. And this just means that every living thing has a certain life span and then dies. Mortality is part of what it is to be a living thing.

What seems unique to the human condition is that the fact of mortality can be grasped or has to be grasped. Human beings are mortal, as are horses and dogs, but human beings are self-reflexively mortal. It is a tautology to assert that everything that is meaningful to human beings is at least conditioned by our mortality. The question, "who am I?" and the question, "how do I act competently in the world?" (identity and agency) are inevitably questions concerned with meaning. But if meaning is possible in any world or circumstance, it must be made possible by whatever is inescapable or inevitable. In other words, we can find meaning only within our basic condition and this is a tautology. The same argument can be made with a Kantian twist. While for Kant time is one of the forms of intuition, so a limited time is the form or backdrop for any particular human endeavor. Those endeavors with great meaning for human beings, "life projects" (generally), "raising children" (specifically) are what they are from the condition of a limited time. Childhood, for instance, means nothing when stripped of a temporal limit and as goes childhood, so goes the rest of human endeavor and human development.[4]

The point is not that an "endless life" cannot be conceived. The argument is instead that an endless life would entirely foul the meaning of each and every endeavor we engage in as persons. Our finitude is so deeply rooted in our being that it necessarily structures the meaningfulness of our lives. On the condition of an infinite amount of time in existence nothing would matter for persons. In short, we would be something else and this means, for the purposes of this essay, that we would be in the world in an entirely different way. Finitude is the necessary condition for the possibility of human endeavors. One cannot engage in human endeavors without being an agent and having an identity but engaging in endeavors allows for

the development of agency and identity. Human endeavors, we might say, are the existential condition for identity and agency.

Once the ground of meaning is located in finitude, we can also maintain that ethics, in the broadest sense of the word, is really a kind of ecology. The concept of human development, normative or ethical, has primarily to do with growth and change (maturing). The coherence and appropriateness of "doing x" as a normative or ethical judgment is inexorably linked with *when* we are "doing x." Cultures can, of course, imagine and construct different meanings for childhood, adolescence, and so forth, perhaps even leaving out some phase we would consider "real" but what they cannot leave out is development itself, change and growth and the normative judgments that go along with these existential realities. And finally, they cannot leave out the brute fact that any notion of development and growth that is acquired must stand in relation to death and finitude.

Change, growth and development, features of all living things in the world, all begin with finitude. We can't say what any of them would be without finitude. From this it will follow that agency is itself conditioned by finitude. Agency is always a matter of doing x at an appropriate time. There are only so many things it makes sense for me to do as a forty four year old man, living in such and such a place, etc.[5] We always endeavor to do what makes sense or is appropriate (in some fashion) according to our finite life: this seems written into the very nature of agency. It might also be the case that there is some way to make sense out of change, growth, and development for the "immortal" but this is the noumenal to a finite creature. We have no place to stand by which to make it comprehensible.

Human endeavors are inseparable from the world. And "immortality" wipes out any concept of a world that could matter to us. Our condition as human beings is as imbedded in the world and this is precisely because we are dependent on the world (according to what we think *and* what we do). Without the condition of mortality, there is no ground for dependence. In consequence, we imagine our immortal selves as basically a collection of selves (always in some bodily form) "independent" of a world but it remains totally unclear what sort of existence this would be. There is the further worry that other selves would or could not matter to our selves under the condition of immortality. Mortality is the necessary condition for the possibility of responsibility and care. The very idea of existence "independent of a world" really makes no sense to persons.

The notion of the "contingent" that I describe in the following is un-

mistakably mundane. This is as it should be. When properly brought to the light of day, any element that is constitutive of our reality ought to show up as mundane. Symmetrically, the manner in which it can be concealed ought to be disturbing and perverse. The "contingent" here means the ways that brute reality—including the inevitability of our own deaths—is often unpredictable and harsh. Material reality is not amenable, as if manufactured, for human flourishing. The presupposition of technology and the hope of progress according to a technological worldview is that the gap between the ways of the world and human well being (up to and including our wants and desires) can be gradually closed. The contingent then also includes the fact that material reality cannot be fully controlled or manipulated for human purposes, whatever they might be. Hence, mortality is really a part of contingency given that we often want more life of a certain sort or just more life, but the world dictates otherwise.

A sense of our embodiment is enough to indicate the reality of contingency. The first symptoms of a common cold are both the reality of contingency and the foreshadowing of more on the horizon. We soon come to recognize the many forces beyond our control that often visit us so harshly. And yet, at the same time, our embodiment contains the possibility of joy. Convalescence, healing, and so forth, makes us aware of the manner in which we are at home in a world of contingency. This is nothing more than the mundane point that we are susceptible to forces beyond our control and able, because we are part of the world, to sometimes deal with those forces.

What is "beyond our control" seems importantly related to change. The unpredictability and ceaseless reality of change defeats the possibility of complete control. When we add to this the sheer force and recalcitrance of material reality, its "inevitability", the real possibility of complete control over the world would, once again, alter the essential nature of our circumstance. And to alter the nature of our circumstance is to alter the nature of our being. The point takes its force from a purely naturalistic ontology. There is no way to grasp the reality of any creature without understanding the nature of its "habitat." Ontologically, this is to say that the nature of the creature cannot be ripped away from the nature of its world.

One other aspect of contingency, mentioned above, must be highlighted. That the world is often at odds with our wants and desires is to put the fact of contingency in both ontological and psychological terms. The very possibility of a coherent change or a "development" is directly connected to this fact. A world entirely amenable—in all respects—to any

one creature would cancel out the facts of change and development from both an evolutionary and ontological standpoint. In short, a world that was entirely amenable to any one creature would be static at least in that one case. But for the world to be static in that one case would alter the entire nature of the world.

For human beings contingency is, of course, a particularly troubling set of issues given that what is "amenable" to flourishing is going to be complex. One can say, for instance, that the habitat of the elk is entirely amenable to its survival and even to its flourishing if that means that its habitat contains what is necessary and sufficient to its flourishing. If this were not the case then there would be no healthy elk. But what is never guaranteed is that any particular elk (or even the species) will, in fact, flourish. Here we run directly into the reality of contingency.

The issues become complicated for human beings. For one, there is no simple and easy way to outline human flourishing and its relationship to the world. What is clear—historically at least—is that "flourishing" (in any sense) has been denied large number of human beings. We can say, with considerable justification, that the world is amenable to human flourishing because *some* people have flourished. The issue for our condition in the world is, however, that we have no idea what the world holds in store for us (either as individuals or groups). The element of contingency, here meaning quick and "improbable" destruction is a problem for flourishing in general. The condition of human life in the world presents the possibility of flourishing barring all accidents. But it is the ceaseless reality of accidents that makes all of existence essentially problematic.

The last basic constitutive element of human agency and identity—the human condition in the world—is "the spiritual." While this term might seem unlikely or out of place, we can come to see why it is both likely and coherent as we look back at contingency. Freud, as is well known, argued that the terrors of nature were one of the foremost reasons for primitive man's supernatural leanings. Human beings have to deal with mortality and contingency in self-reflexive ways. The other side of Freud's coin is that the hostility, recalcitrance, and unpredictability of nature are the necessary conditions of any spiritual life. Nature, and the world, can only be a spiritual place for human beings insofar as it is both something we are imbedded in and depend on in ways that are fundamental (inseparable from our nature) and, at the same time, are out of our complete control. Imagine if "flourishing" were not, in any sense, an issue. Ultimately, our orientation toward

reality would become fully "self-referential." That is, given no distance or gap between the world and what we wanted or desired, there would be no reason to break beyond the human self. It wouldn't just be religion, but science, art, philosophy, literature and so on that would never have had an origin. It is even unclear if we would ever even notice the world at all. Where there is no gap between the ways of the world and human flourishing, human beings would literally "own the world": we would conflate the world with ourselves.

The beginning of any destructive selfishness is the illusory sense that the self is firmly without need from others or the world. In a case where human beings "owned the world" in the above sense, we would lose *all possibility* of "giving thanks" which is the fundamental act of spiritual life. The way I have described it, the possibility of the spiritual is contained within contingency. What is needed beyond contingency is the self-reflexive capacity of human beings.

A world that we do not "own", a world where there is an ineradicable gap between our wants and desires and the world itself, does not strictly determine the nature of the world. In other words, we might still choose the word "homeless" to describe ourselves in the world even if the world contains the ground for spirituality. As many have said before, and correctly, the world isn't just recalcitrant to our wants and needs, it is often quite hostile to those wants and needs. We might say that what has been given so far is not so much the reality of a spiritual life but only a ground for a spiritual life. And each person living in the world needs some degree of luck and good fortune to fulfill a spiritual life. There are also competing notions of the spiritual and these are usually something to do with the "transcendent." Insofar as these competing notions are not anchored firmly in the undeniable facts of our existence in the world, they ought to be rejected as ontological vapor. But it may very well be a tautology to say that all notions of the spiritual are anchored in the undeniable facts of our existence in the world. Even the transcendent notions have to start somewhere and, it seems to me, they usually start with the gritty realities of human life. One might ask: where else could they really start?

While some might take the recalcitrance and hostility of the world as a kind of hopelessness (especially when cut off from any idea of the transcendent), it does not follow that we cannot form an agency and identity that is, as far as possible, well suited for such a deeply problematic world. The very same features of the world that eradicate the plausibility of theodicy

are the features that provide for the possibility of depth in the human self. We might be able to work our way up from the basic ground of spirituality to something more detailed and complete. Being well suited for a deeply problematic world—in our agency and identity—far outstrips any bare notion of "getting along."

For instance, a totally untamed river is both daunting and out of the control of any individual. It may be the object of fear, a place of tragedy, destruction, death, and so forth (what wild river isn't all of these things?). But these very features also make it an object of amazement and wonder, the very ground of any aesthetic. But the relationship between human being and river need not stop here. For "amazement" and "wonder" to broaden out into something deep and lasting for human identity and agency, we need the element of engagement. As Albert Borgmann discusses it, to "engage" the river with competence that we can clearly acquire through practice, and which does not lead to "control over the river", is to reveal the deeper properties of the river.[6] Competent engagement allows for a full existential experience of the river which cannot be provided by looking at the river, being swept away by the river, or giving a mathematical expression of the force of the river. On the other side, competence builds and reveals the depth of the human self: a competence at dealing with pieces of reality that cannot be controlled. Practice opens the world to the self and the self to the world and this is possible only under the conditions of contingency. Skill within practice just is competence in the face of the contingent, while the processes and procedures of technology aim at annihilating contingency. In the last analysis, these seem to be the basic options for a self-reflexive and intelligent creature in the face of a deeply problematic world. They are not mutually exclusive, one can practice and make use of technology, but it is the case that process and procedure have come to dominate in American culture. And this is the basis of the concealment of the contingent.

What I am filling out is not only what I take to be the grounds of spirituality, but I am also working towards what can be self-consciously done to imbed identity and agency within the reality of the world. At least since Hegel and Marx, many philosophers and thinkers have realized the potential of an alienation from our basic condition. Hence, while it may be true that human beings are imbedded in a material world, complete with the conditions of finitude and contingency, it is just this reality that might prompt concealment. Such concealment can only exaggerate the "problem of evil."

Practice that connects us to the very nature of the world as recalcitrant and difficult, but at the same time allows for a tenuous competence and skill in dealing with that reality is the act of self-consciously imbedding our agency and identity in the world. It is also the basis for any authentic spiritual life because it connects us to our "home" in ways that reveals the nature of ourselves and the nature of the world. The web of social reality that also helps to form and focus identity and agency can encourage or discourage human practices with material reality. A spiritual life takes form when a person realizes, through practice (a know how) that the world is not so much amenable to our flourishing but that it contains the raw materials for the possibility of ever developing depth in the human self. This depth can only be described as ways of dealing with the brute reality of our human condition. Those persons who become capable in these ways are as close to "being at home" in the world as possible. We must, of course, remember that the ever developing depth is only a possibility because of the constant truth of our finitude.

The possibility of being at home in the world, through practice, is multi-dimensional. Both mental and physical labor (an ultimately artificial distinction) holds out great promise as practice. Dewey came to appreciate labor through the example of building.[7] Along the way he provided what is at the heart of the distinction between practice and procedure. In a practice, such as building, the activity is focused on the present in relation to a future state. Laboring within the present is to be made directly aware of contingency and it is also to develop skills in dealing with contingency. The process and procedures of technology are focused exclusively on "outcomes." In other words, they treat the present state as a mere means to the end. In a procedural world we are constantly living for outcomes and so the endeavor is to eliminate contingency as far as possible. One might think about how building has become more technological in the above sense. "Floor systems" that snap together generally do not reveal anything of the nature of the material in ways that craftsmanship does. The whole point is that "anyone can do it." In consequence, not much in the way of practical knowledge is required from the laborer. If there is a problem with the floor system we need to go back to the procedural steps. Hence, the labor does not teach the laborer about dealing with the contingent: whatever comes up can be resolved procedurally. The appearance of the finished material is "perfect" in a way that reveals a lack of craft to the trained eye. This is the glossy and superficial reality that Borgmann discusses.[8] Here we lose the opportunity

of imbedding our agency and identity in the world and we also lose the opportunity to reveal the world to ourselves. In this very simple example, we might also be able to see how impatience and frustration are likely when the "procedure" fails to produce the "perfect" outcome.

The "depth" of the world, because of its endless and unforeseeable contingencies, can never make a limit for competence. Inasmuch as our own nature is embedded in reality, competency can be in a constant state of becoming (within the limits of finitude and imperfect capacity). Whatever symmetry does exist between material reality and human beings, the actual extent to which we are "at home in the world", depends on the skills and competence we acquire in dealing with material reality. These skills cannot be taught procedurally. They can only be learned through cooperation. And this point can help us see more of the spiritual within practice. Human co-operation only has depth as it is found in practice. In fact, it is hard to see how cooperation can be anything at all in a procedural system. In the case of the "floor system" we can cooperate according to the procedure. What I have in mind is, however, a cooperation that is part of the possibility of practical knowledge. For the initiate to learn how to lay a floor requires human cooperation, which means facing the contingent together with skill and patience. When outcomes are all that matter, and where outcomes can be had through a strict procedure, cooperation is irrelevant. The main point of a procedure, as opposed to a practice, is simply to procure an outcome.

Faith is the attribute I have in mind in order to fill out the spiritual. The common mistake is to radically separate faith from knowledge when, in fact, faith is only possible in relation to knowledge. This thesis is plausible as we shift our focus from "knowing that" to "knowing how." Awareness, found through practice and competence, of a world that is entirely distinct from our own wants, desires, or needs makes way for the possibility of faith because it opens the possibility of being "faithful to" the reality of the world. The bitterest defeat for all spirituality is a world manufactured for our needs and wants, a "self-referential world." For example, a world in which indi-viduals cannot see or comprehend that the food source is at least partially outside of human control is "self-referential." Who do we have to thank, or better, what do we have to thank, for our food is an empty question: we have only ourselves to thank. The procured chicken, wrapped tightly and literally grown for our taste, brings with it the ontological reality of animals made for human consumption. Without effort, with complete ease and convenience, these things are offered up for us. How does a world beyond human manipulation enter our horizon?

Faithfulness is not, however, precisely synonymous to truthfulness. The point is that faithfulness to things as truthfulness to their reality has to occur over time and through practice while there are numerous temptations to obscure that reality for a narrow self-benefit. To use Heidegger's example, the river could simply become our energy source, a thing reduced (altered and changed) to our needs and desires.[9] This is a great temptation as human power and technique are developed. Remaining faithful to things is then going to require actions and dispositions and not just some bare epistemic standpoint. Remaining faithful to the river, at least to some extent, will require whatever it takes not to be tempted, whatever dispositions and actions that work against the conflation of things with our wants and desires.

Religious persons might object to the above understanding of faith, but there are some ways to bridge the gap. The basic Christian view, for instance, begins with God's faithfulness to us. And this begins with God's forgiving recognition of our stark reality as sinners. Human faith is consequently generated by God's faithfulness which stems from the truth: sin and the need for redemption. Symmetrically, we will only see our own need for redemption as we are willing to be faithful to ourselves and the relations we actually have to things and other persons in the world. In this secular notion of faith, if we can stand to be truthful in recognizing the independent reality of things and persons we will, at the same time, be able to see how human action has obscured the reality of those things. Faith is essential to bring back the reality of things and to restore the right relations that safeguard the reality of things. And, once again, it is primarily the endeavor of practice and know-how that reveals the nature of things.

Bridging the gap between the secular notion of faith and a religious notion of faith (whatever that is exactly) might be taken up in another way. The example used in the above concerning the origins of our food, presents the great potential of "breaking faith" with a large segment of the world. These apparently small processes, such as going to the market for getting whatever we want easily and conveniently, are radically inconsistent with a great portion of the world's population. Some people in our culture find anything but a total ease and convenience in acquiring food an affront, while people in many other cultures struggle for survival. Keeping faith with others around the world might begin with rolling back our incredible expectations. We ought to recognize, at the same time, that it is only the transition from agricultural practice to a brutal agricultural procedure that has made the ease and convenience in acquiring food possible. Furthermore, the notion that

technological procedure has eliminated contingency from food production is a grotesque untruth; if anything, it nourishes contingency in multiple ways. What is entirely clear is that the procedure makes our dependence on the world (and other persons) opaque. Food acquisition that requires actual practice, while often horribly difficult, makes the connection between our selves and the world transparent.

The secular notion of faith as truthfulness might ultimately be consistent or complementary to a rich notion of religious faith. What has to be ruled out is the idea of faith as merely belief, which is absurdly restrictive for a deep value. Secondly, any supernatural starting point must also be ruled out for any number of reasons. It is the view here that any human value must originate in essential facts of the human condition and these are more than just knowable: they constitute the parameters of human life in all respects. I suspect, though I am far from certain, that "religious faith" in any significant sense will flow from a manner of being in the world and not from a set of beliefs. In this sense religious faith is consistent with what I am describing as a secular faith. Truthfulness, in the outline above, is a manner of being in the world. It is the endeavor to make our relations to other persons and the world transparent wherever possible.

On the other hand, religious faith could very well stand in contrast to faith as truthfulness. These are hard issues, but the idea of "human beings as sinners" often has the flavor of a truth that has come from up above. We have been told that we are sinners and we repeat it over and over again in church according to the creed. Hence the religious narrative and all the metaphysical baggage that often comes with it. On the strictly existential level, given the usual series of experiences and a mature understanding of the self, "human beings as sinners" is a gritty tautology. It needs no metaphysical support whatsoever: all it expresses is our moral imperfection in a world full of contingencies.

III. Faith and Brutality

A culture with a procedural and instrumental outlook on reality, equipped with the capacity to create the illusion of control over the limits of the world, and with a grotesque wealth, can have very little in the way of a ground for faith. The double bind here is, of course, that this sort of culture is in great need of faith but its need cannot be fulfilled because it is this sort of culture. The instrumentalist/procedural culture cannot emerge with

real truthfulness towards others because the organic conditions are missing. Control and procedure seem to eliminate contingency and contingency is the ground of spirituality. For the status quo, for the way the culture flows from day to day, being truthful to the conditions of others doesn't matter primarily. What matters is acquisition in the instrumentalist sense and this requires others and the world as instruments.

One might reasonably ask: how is it really possible to generate a pervasive reality of wealth, as in American culture, (including actual capital, luxury, items, commodities, etc...), without looking at the world and its contents as a pure means to an end? It is at just this point that the radical disconnect between self and world becomes possible. Could it be that we are immortal? After all, we haven't just subdued the earth and our immediate material circumstance, we have created a world that we control and guide. But such a "created world" is a false reality and so cannot be sustained. The brutality of forces that have brought about this created world, which holds back the inevitability of reality only on the surface of things, are necessary elements for this created world. No illusion can be this strong and bold without such brutality. I would characterize it as the endeavor to make the world a means to an end in the strongest sense: that is, fully amenable to first our needs, then our wants, and then finally our whims. The created ("self-referential") world is wanton. And here I have the urge to speak with a bluntness that is consistent with this obliteration of reality. Could it be anything else besides a spiritually deadening brutality (of going about in the world) for someone to assert that she "needs" a brand new luxury S.U.V.? There may be no more blunt and overt example of "breaking faith" with the world and other persons.

And yet the above example is not entirely satisfactory. For one thing, no individual is so shallow as to admit that all of life is simply about acquiring objects. For another thing, to acquire and live well are and have been reasonable and sometimes moral goals. What matters about the example is the cultural undertow. The question concerns where we can find a fixed place to stand, from day to day, by which we can evaluate our actions and attitudes. Given that there is no real "conversation" in America, this really becomes a difficult problem. The reality of the created world, seen from the outside, where the truths of contingency and finitude are all too real and vital, is immediately punctured. From the inside, with enough buffer and apparent distance from contingency and mortality, the reality of the created world seems deep. It then sponsors the notion that "nothing bad can

happen to us" not as some historical miracle but as the way of the world. And yet, to sponsor this notion is to rub up against the basic elements of all existence. This is, of course, a contradiction.

The self-referential "created" world that I have been discussing conceals the realities of the world by virtue of a technological buffer. Freud's understanding of religion as an illusion is similar, though in this case concealment must be through reference to another world, a transcendent reality. We know, however, that this is oversimplification. Religious systems and religious consciousness are often connected to the contingencies of the world and human existence. Religion then comes to manifest itself by penetrating the world: hence the myth of providence and the fantasies of theodicy. A culture or society of just plain misery, with no outward signs of success, is one that becomes hard to justify on religious grounds; it must have somehow fallen out of God's favor.

A culture, however, that has a far-reaching success, a pervasive wealth, along with a technological buffer from the harshest realities of the world is one where a most toxic mix is quite possible. The outward signs of success, taken along with (apparent) lack of misery (the buffer) make for a strong, perhaps subconscious, sense of "destiny." All those who stand opposed to such a culture must be "evil" because those within the culture must be good. Something has gone terribly wrong with the world, something is terribly out of joint in the metaphysical sense, if something calamitous happens to us. This is spiritual death. It is a tautology to say that every culture could be and ultimately is wrong. That American culture would be wrong is nothing more than contingency and finitude working together. (In the religious language, *all* human beings are sinners.)

In order to really demonstrate that brutality follows from a loss of faith, we must first carefully describe a basic human practice. The reason why this is the case will soon be apparent. By "basic" practice, I mean something that human beings can't really avoid doing; a practice, in other words, that is constitutive of our humanity. Such a practice ought to be so built into our existence that missing its spiritual importance is relatively easy.

The practice I have in mind is conversation. Not necessarily some far reaching discussion into the nature of the universe, but what might be characterized as really noticing the lives of other human beings. There is nothing more available to any human being as a fundamental resistance to self-induced misery than conversation. A whole world, one might say, is condensed in the other, and not just her "psychic world" but the manner in

which she has lived in the world. In other words, reality is inevitably imbedded in each human being. We can explore other human beings in much the same way we can explore the world. Any such exploration requires faith; that is, a determination to hold sacred the reality of others and not to conflate that reality with what we want or desire. The act of "listening" that is, of course, required for authentic conversation necessarily depends on faith.

The act of listening as a practice also presupposes the possibility of change. We might change as a result of listening to another in any number of ways, and she might change because someone listened. We cannot say for sure where the conversation might go, and we cannot perfectly predict the words and thoughts of our companions. In this way, contingency is built into the art of conversation. The self-awareness that "I might change" as a result of conversing with another person or that I cannot know exactly what that other person is going to say are elements in the respect for human dignity.

Since conversation sometimes depends on or includes truth claims, the authentic conversation will also be built on the possibility that "I am wrong." There is symmetry here with the exploration of the world. The climber thinks she knows exactly what to expect from the mountain, the builder knows exactly what to expect from the materials. Experienced climbers and builders know that this is false. The world always holds out the constant *possibility* of the unexpected. The only real question is whether or not we are as prepared as we can be, although we are never perfectly prepared: hence, the depth of the world and the great possibility of depth in persons. Of course, we sometimes do predict what someone is going to say just as the climber can predict, in general, what the mountain has in store. Some plausible and reasonable expectations from the mountain and from other persons are also presuppositions of practice. But there is here the greatest of cautionary tales. In thinking that we *know,* the unexpected gets buried in consciousness. For the climber, the outcomes can then be tragic. For the person engaged in conversation, the outcomes are spiritually deadening: everyone in the world is as I predict them to be. This is just another way in which we can obscure the reality of others.

Self-awareness, perhaps the most difficult of all spiritual undertakings, is crucially related to conversation and in that relationship we can see another way in which the contingency of the world is built into conversation. We cannot control our mental life, our thoughts, beliefs, emotions and so forth, any more or any better than we can control our health and well-being. The world impinges on our persons and not just on our bodies. How precisely

is it that our mental life is not within our control? One answer to this question is "introspective." As we actually track our thinking, our mental life, it seems obvious as a simple matter of fact that all sorts of ideas enter and exit our minds without our consent. We should supplement the fact with an explanation of the fact. Many elements affect our mental lives and not just what we are directly aware of. Some of these elements are certainly the result of conversation. At the very least our mental lives are altered through conversation in ways that we do not detect, and our "internal conversation" is modeled on our conversation with others.

The nature of thinking is clearly shaped by relations. Self-awareness of my own thinking comes to maturity and fruition just as I recognize that my perceptions of my own thought are conditioned by and related to a world. A person held entirely to "conversing with herself" can only be a matter of degree. As someone slips into this mode, we call it "narcissism" and we recognize it as grossly distorted. But a pure self-reference is really the same as just lacking any self at all. By analogy, a cultural narcissism is also possible through a "conversation with our selves." The culture might, for various reasons, fail to take into account the reality of other cultures. The narcissistic culture is one where "we can't be wrong" because there is nothing else to really listen to. In both the narcissistic culture and narcissistic individual "thoughts" become relics or "isolated finalities."[10]

Others are crucial to my thinking and to my emotion because they can pay attention to me in ways that I cannot pay attention to myself. "What could be contained in my thoughts?" is a question that is not just for me to answer. The same is true concerning my emotions. The fact that I cannot see my own gestures and facial expressions is not remedied by looking in a mirror. The gestures are what they are according to how they are taken up and interpreted by others; that I "can be wrong" about my own emotions is part of the very nature of emotion. Thoughts, like everything else in the world, have an environment, and they come to fruition as they are understood and interpreted by others. An ongoing conversation between persons is an unpredictable sort of affair insofar as the thoughts have to be engaged and interpreted. What "I meant" by what I said is a constant interaction within the field of interpreters. Hence, we need others to think at all. The dysfunction of self-reference or individual and cultural narcissism is possible only because there is recognition of others and then a denial of others. Faith fails to find a hold. But in full self-reference, where there is no distinction between "I am thinking" and "all thought," there is no way to generate a

notion of self at all. Narcissism of the individual and cultural sort always involves a dose of bad faith. Of course, some narcissism is worse than others; it is always a matter of degree. Insofar as the culture or the individual approaches the conflation between "I am thinking" and "all thinking" they run the risk of wiping out both self and other. A lack of faith is diminishment of self and other, of our own society and the society of the other.

To maintain our health we must be able to understand what is good for us over the short and long term. Hence, our understanding of the world must be stable enough for the possibility of health. Likewise, we have to be able to reasonably anticipate the thinking of others in a conversation. Contingency is, however, always present. All one has to do to see this is to consider that without it there would be no motivation left for having a conversation. If I always knew what others were going to say or I already knew what they were going to say was wrong, then I would never have any reason to converse with them. The narcissist takes up this posture but is ill because it can only be a posture.

Given the multiple forms of conversation, in combination with human needs, one might say that motivation for conversation is ever present. There is, for instance, always motivation for a transactional conversation: where we enlist others for their help to get something, information perhaps. Albert Borgmann, in numerous works, has given us good reasons for thinking that much of our conversation is transactional.[11] The sheer amount of time spent watching television in America or other kinds of entertainment technology, leads one to the strong possibility that recreation is mostly singular and passive. As Borgmann points out, listening to music from a C.D. player is categorically different from either playing music or attending a concert.[12] These entertainment technologies are of great interest because they take up time that might otherwise be dedicated to conversation and because they follow a pattern that is entirely antithetical to the basic practice of conversation. In short, the entertainment technologies may have great implications for the possibility of conversation.

In many, if not all respects, technological recreation is procedural. I determine the beginning and the end. I am in control. Self-reference and the elimination of the need for significant interaction with others is part of the attraction of much of technology. There is very little room for the development of cooperation with others. Any sort of deep cooperation between persons is a measure of the reality faced; cooperation is possible only where contingency is present. What I have been calling "transactional conversa-

tion" only requires the most superficial sort of cooperation between persons; it mirrors, in other words, the elimination of the other found in much of technology. A very simple example of transactional conversation is asking someone for the time. And it does not matter what person we ask for the time; as long as he or she has a time piece and can talk, any individual will do. This is clearly not the case with what we might call cooperative conversation. It takes time and patience to learn how to deal with the authentic contingency that the other presents; in fact, it requires what I have described as faith, and at the same time practicing at cooperative conversation builds faith. A procedural world, bent on allowing us constant (apparent) control over everything from our food source to our moods is not the sort of culture conducive to the development of faith. The reality of things in a procedural culture is an inconvenience. In such a culture, transactional conversation may be overtaken by constant shrill assertion.

Transactional conversation is obviously necessary for human beings but it is also obviously insufficient for human beings. A person who engages in nothing but transactions with others seems to fail our inchoate criteria for personhood. In any case, it is likely that conversations in any culture will take up the basic trends of that culture, and American trends and routines are clearly bent in a direction against faith. Authentic conversation, instead of skimming the reality of persons, focuses intently on bringing that reality to light. Conversation, when practiced with faith, demands the presence of the self. Everything within conversation is a matter for practical judgment and not procedure. For instance, authentic conversations don't simply come to an end when we want them to nor are the ends dictated by a step by step process. The persons involved have to cooperate according to an open judgment from within a context.

"Context in conversation" is a redundancy of sorts but it might reveal something else of importance. Many persons seem to yearn for "meaningful conversation" so much so that it becomes a cliché. But we should always pay attention to the mundane. Any conversation is meaningful to us if we understand the words, but obviously "meaningful" has another and deeper sense. This deeper sense can be caught, I think, in the manner in which our finitude at the same time allows for and limits the "meaningfulness" of conversation. To simplify with an example, what is mere "small talk" to me could be of the greatest importance to a sixteen year old boy or girl. This is not to say that we cannot have meaningful conversations with others who are at a different stage of life. What it does mean is that I cannot expect to enter

into a conversation between two sixteen year old boys and find everything to have a deep meaningfulness. This would make me absurd or ridiculous. Again, we should be wary in "applying" this idea. One measure of a good and useful person within a community is how well she can imaginatively stretch to others at a different place in life. If any conversation could, however, be meaningful to us in the deeper sense then there would be no need for imagination. Finally, at the deepest level of the possibility of meaningful conversation is the *revelation* of our finitude. There is always the possibility that someone else could change our minds and that any conversation could continue toward a finer picture of the truth. That it is possible that some conversations could go on and on is nothing more than the recognition of our finitude.

The details of private life and private conversation are difficult to discern. In the above, I tried to follow up on the hypothesis that conversation would follow trends of culture. On the other hand, it does not take a contemporary de Tocqueville to notice that American culture is currently dominated by a belligerent, confrontational, and finally brutal form of public conversation. The idea that others could change our minds, contribute to our growth, or say something surprisingly intriguing is dismissed. Conversation is, however, one of the most basic ways in which we connect with other human beings and in doing so recognize the other and our mutual human condition. It is a spiritual activity that requires and develops faithfulness. Current American culture, with its brutal forms of conversation, is a spiritual wasteland.

The above assertions need some measured and controlled arguments. The spiritual death of America can be measured by the distance between groups. It is hard to tell if the distance causes the brutal conversation or if the brutal conversation causes the distance. All things considered, it is probably a mutual causation. What is the distance I am talking about? The land of pervasive wealth, the land of the "gated community", has also become the land of the homeless. Many Americans own homes and even automobiles that are worth more than what whole segments of society will earn in a lifetime. It is also the land where some enjoy the greatest health care in the world and others, including many children, cannot even get health care. The distances, which sound like clichés only because they are so starkly real, can be described in another way. Some members of American culture seem entirely buffered from the contingencies of the world, while others are literally thrown into the harshest realities of the world. It is only under an

enormous substructure of technology that these distances are possible. The gated communities I mentioned are self-enclosed technological marvels. But what is the nature of the conversation regarding these distances between persons and groups? Any observer of this culture is forced to say one of two things. There really isn't any meaningful conversation about these distances at all, in which case many people are being fully ignored. To be ignored and poor in a land of pervasive wealth is brutality. The other possibility is the ever present and ever growing angry voice of many wealthy Americans that they are doing more than enough to deal with these distances. This is bad faith in the sense that it is the opposite of the virtue of faith I described.

If the reader is familiar with the "gated communities" I mentioned in the above, then I can finish by using this reality as a metaphor. The gated community just *is* the suffocating fog of self-referential conversation. We cannot lift away the living conditions and the manner in which material reality is experienced from the way in which human beings interact. Those in the gated communities can gain status and at the same time sheer away the reality of others by living life in a certain style or fashion. The thoughts that occur in this vacuum of self-reference are, in Dewey's great phrase, "isolated finalities." How America can or will connect its parts is obviously a matter for further discussion. But we should avoid, at all costs, any sort of idealistic assumption that a spiritual wasteland must destroy itself. Philosophers and historians ought to avoid fortune telling, but if we follow the course of history what seems likely is that America will change into something even more brutal.

Notes

[1]   Much of the inspiration for the main question of the paper came from Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 113-202.

[2]   Lawrence Hinman, *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory* (Belmont,CA: Wadsworth, 2003), p. 346.

[3]   See Neiman, op.cit., p. 212.

[4]   Bernard Williams, *"The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality"* in Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 90. It should also be noted here that Williams helped me a great deal in developing the ideas on finitude.

[5]   See Williams, op.cit., p. 90.

[6]   Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 213-240.

[7]   John Dewey, *"Human Nature and Value"* in *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, edited by James Gouinlock (New York: Hafner Press, 1976), p. 97.

[8]   Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), pp. 87-88.

[9]   Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* translated by William Lovitt (New York, 1977), p.45.

[10]   John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study in the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (New York: Minton, Balch&Company, 1929), p.260.

[11]   Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 128-129.

[12]   Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), pp. 92-93.