DON'T WANT TO BE THOUGHTLESS

Annotated monologue by a university professor / essay by a neighbor
The air around me is light, moving through my hair and along the collar of my sweater even though it is zipped up tight. Cars far off accelerate, and brake. Finally their swell subsides. The moon makes pale patterns on the voids of earth in the deep blue grass.

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The textbooks sit silent back in my apartment, beaten at the tip of the spine. Grades and credit hours, the loan debt numbers of my students tighten my memory. Can philosophy be learned in the classroom?

I can breathe, here, now, but there is no security with what we’re doing. Big children shell inside genitals that work as pumps and motors. We’ve done this; we do this. I teach “virtue” without any of us growing. These aren’t score, I mean scare, quotes. They are something merely mentioned, seldom used. For the life of me, I am not singling people out. I accuse myself. The form of schools, of my classrooms—even the progressive ones arranged in a circle—are not virtue prone. They are misshapen verbs. If virtue is above all a habit, to teach virtue without habituation is not to teach virtue. Plato’s Ἀκαδήμεια wasn’t this way. It, it was hylomorphic.

The personal and the professional peer at each other across the thin, black line of a contract. When do the soldiers leave the trench? In second grade, my stepson fills out bubbles, boxes and half-written lines. Under-surface your mind. Later, Sunday, he runs onto the diamond with my old, leather glove, the opportunity he fields. Sunlight is everywhere, kids colliding.

“Exercise” comes from the Greek asksēs, the root of ascetic. Wiki will tell you that. What are professors for? It depends on whether we are only laborers of industrial theory. Form delivers content, a game of sudden opportunities within lazy life. Run and run, until your shins are green and the glove bends away from you with
swollen weight. Lopsided, what’s consistent. The form of a credit hour learns the game. Old white man clicks the Powerpoint.

What is powerful? The Ἀκαδήμεια put the form of a way of life into practice: call it “hylomorphic.” Is there an orchard in the mind beneath the mind? And how do we walk in it?

You’re on board a corporation, schooled in the midst of commerce, professor to the test. BP wants PR; professors, orthodoxy. We need right belief, not BP’s appearance. But it is possible neither appearances nor propositions are the scene of learning—a strange and demanding thought. Suppose ethics were a groove in the body, before and beyond abstraction. Am I concerned with “ethics” or with ethics itself?

The moon makes pale patterns on the voids of earth in the deep blue grass.

Sometimes, I feel as deranged as a cubicle in industrial theory. I imagine hylomorphs running their backs along the underside of the floor, quieter than the city in an office high above the ground. I can’t tell what the university is after. Only the universe we sense. Theory’s point becomes power. Where is truth in our limbs? If I were concerned only with propositions, I would be content with concepts. If appearances quieted me, I would hear voiceless words. In my body, the reason is so silently inscribed. When the couple danced on the dance-floor with her hair run down their arms, no proposition spoke the truth of it, though they danced as blue truth in the depths. Knowing how, not knowing. And so knowing. Words fly out the room.

The context, the city. The industry, the globe. To grow, I need to approach learning personally, in a way that allows me to be, or to become, a person. No soldier shout: ethics taken ethically, philosophy philosophically. The space of the person— it will be hollowed out. Can writing serve original academics?
My point is that someone concerned ethically with virtue will be concerned with virtue itself. The point of virtue is to live excellently, or well, and, for a person concerned with being ethical, the point of investigating virtue is not to know virtue, but to become virtuous. That Aristotle took this as self-evident shows he took his investigation ethically. The point of learning is growing. The thing itself, philosophy, wisens. Erosion until curves. It’s more weather pattern than mastery. And I see no difference when it comes to love or to democracy. Braking even won’t do. Step out of the car. I want to study original academics, just as musicians study music by playing it.

Forms of life are more important than any point in theory. Something is more important than this point. King, no clanking of concepts around personless space.

**Industrial theory**

Now I am back in my apartment. I have to read my neighbor’s attempt at philosophy. What was he thinking?

Philosophy’s not the love, but the appropriation — the making personal — of wisdom (Schürmann 2003, 634–35, n. 26). In its ancient form, the point was to wise up.¹ People wise up, not footnotes, not rabbits. Rabbits learn how to go through the fence, evade predation. Footnotes, we chisel them into shape! Neither develops the triangle of conscious thought, unconscious body, and the mixed zone of our longing. The question is whether theory, and in general the theoretical life, seek the same goal as philosophy and the philosophical life? If they do, then the life of a theoretician seeks to become wise above all, and the practice of theory has in view wisdom in all instances.

¹ See Hadot (2002, 220–31, 42–50), where, for Socrates, wisdom appears as an unattainable ideal driving one onward.
The conclusion is a simple consequence of the relation of means to their ends, the end being wisdom.

Does the life of theory seek wisdom above all else? The answer to this question requires a definition of theory and a definition of wisdom. Theory seeks a comprehensive concept of things, a grasp anticipating (and so not needing) fact, the mental handle that in fact organizes fact. By contrast, wisdom speaks to us entirely and in many voices: goodness (for deciding), truth (for believing), and beauty (often hard won and taking work in the most important things, our relationships). The different lights of action, knowledge, and connection. Listening for far off sounds in the grove where the traumatized and eccentric Plato tried to learn something different by talking with friends and exercising the body around that talk, should we understand attunement as beauty? Only if we are willing to de-aestheticize beauty, a noble goal (Harries 1998). Goodness. Truth. Beauty? Theory is at most a third of wisdom. A third of wisdom, theory-industry. At your best, you want to understand comprehensively and to seek truth. But wisdom.

I am deranged tonight. I am a fool. Once you realize the logical point of philosophy, it is obvious that a theoretical life needn’t be a wisdom-seeking one unless it is taken philosophically. Whereas wisdom implies an acknowledgement of theory’s place in the pursuit of a life well lived, one could pursue theory without pursuing wisdom. Welcome to the industrial university, certainly the desert of the ideal. The grove outside ancient Athens would be an oasis, today, a shimmering mirage (and my hand, mirage-writing).

If you are a theorist trying to do philosophy, the question to ask yourself is whether you aim to become wise. If you do, then you do philosophy. If not, then you do not. And this is a separate question from how students learn “philosophy”—that subject—in university. What classroom leads one to take theory philosophically? The
textbooks sit silent, beaten along the tip of the spine. (The hand that threw them)

**Weathered being**

In the context of being ethical, my worry about industrial theory is not that it’s useless, but that it’s *pointless*. Theory can certainly be useful. But theory seeks the true. Ethics, by contrast, seeks the good (then, in morality, the right). Theory concludes in truths (or realizations that truths are not forthcoming, a move in the space of the true). Ethics concludes in *deeds*. If I am trying to become ethical, to approach virtue merely theoretically is to make a category mistake, and — from an ethical standpoint — it is to risk the vice of being abstract with oneself, perhaps even self-deceived. Another way to put this concern is that if I want to do the right thing, it won’t be enough for me to think about my character. I should *do* the right thing, make it my *way of life*.

How do we study philosophy philosophically then? Think about what *ethos* itself is; it is a way of life, it is character. If *ethos* itself is X, then a discourse that does not develop X does not develop *ethos*. Let us say, then, that *ethos* itself is — among other things — a living form of responsiveness in the body. And let us include the mind as an expression of the body here, a way of thinking as a way of doing or being. Why not call this “habit” and not put down habit as if it were merely bourgeois or as if it were something rigid, thoughtless and fixed? Even scholars of antiquity have come to understand that the habit that was implicit in classical philosophical conceptions of virtue is something *improving*, growing, as an artist grows in her craft (Annas 2011). Then a discourse that does not develop *ethos* as a living habit does not develop *ethos*, period. You’d have to develop virtue’s bodily groove to study virtue ethically. What kind of study is that? It would be more like a musical étude than a textbook.
Suppose that philosophy is a living habit just as ethics is a groove within the body. Aristotle distinguished between two kinds of ways that thoughtfulness can become a living part of us. These ways could be idealistic, expressing an inclination weathered into us to become wiser. This weathered being was ethos. It consisted of virtues of thought and virtues of character (Aristotle 1999, 1103a5–11). The distinction corresponded to parts of the soul. Aristotle believed that a part of our psychology is purely intellectual, another part intellectual and part emotional. A failure to grasp logic due to a blunt mind is a different kind of failure than a tendency to erupt into angry outbursts. The outbursts are part of one’s character, and Aristotle apparently thought that only matters of character are habits (1103a14–15).

This doesn’t give enough body to mind, though. Aristotle was of the mind that only character requires habituation. Habit made quasi-rational emotions stay in place serving reason. Character needs a kind of behavioral reinforcement, whereas intellectual excellence is simply in the mind once learned (1103a14–15). Really? Aristotle wrote that the emotions must learn to obey (1102b36). Habit? Habit is obedience for unruly hearts. But he thought that the mind does not need to obey reasons—it just needs to see them. Aristotle created this picture of humanity: truth belongs to intellect; but emotions must be weathered into us.2

Is this anticipatory industrial theory? Learning how to think requires habituation, just as learning how to be courageous does. It doesn’t take the arduous task of writing the Critique of Pure Reason to see this. Being objective—for instance, seeking criticism of one’s own position—that is a habit of mind just as even-temperedness

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2 But notice how Aristotle himself throws the division between mind and heart into question at 1144a29–1144b1 and 1144b31–2. The virtue of intelligence as well as wise judgment both require habits of the heart.
is a habit of heart. I discipline myself to analyze arguments and consider objections using much the same kind of method—a practice—as I do when I discipline myself to stay level headed around disrespectful people. The practice results in habits: look for reasons; detach oneself from the goad of impulsive reactions in one’s heart. On this one point, Aristotle’s picture of the intellect is too disembodied, too unemotional. Grooves of the body run all the way down beneath the mind.

Suppose, then, that we say simply: We will take learning personally. Suppose that the learning that we seek forms the person. Then the learning that forms the person is personal. The way of relation would underlie truth. We’d change our way of being when we truly learn. We’d grow up.

Ancient philosophy had a tradition of writing that accomplished the complex, formal goals of philosophy suggested here. One school—the Stoics—called it “the examination of conscience” (Hadot 2002, 198–202). Like a shoot working toward the light, original academics—originally spoken—took this form of writing, moving

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3 Consider Dewey (1916, 142) on this point, remembering Greek gymnastics: “It may seriously be asserted that a chief cause for the remarkable achievements of Greek education was that it was never misled by false notions into an attempted separation of mind and body.” Here, there is a gymnastic insight that a trained mind is habituated like a trained body, a point Thomas Jefferson also held.

4 Happily, many ancient philosophers shared these assumptions. Generally, ancient philosophical schools aimed to train the whole character of people. According to Pierre Hadot, the primary method was “ascetics”—exercises designed specifically to develop virtuous habits in someone (Hadot 2002, 189–90). Wisdom came in the form of these “spiritual” exercises, which ranged from gym to dialectical drills and had at their center such things as the examination of conscience (Hadot 2002, passim). The most famous written examinations of conscience in the history of philosophy can be found in Seneca’s Letters and—interestingly—in Descartes’s Meditations (themselves modeled on Seneca’s Letters?) (Hadot 2002, 264–65).
from the grove of the Ἀκαδήμεια to the orchard beneath the mind.

I am so upset this evening at the university and at myself! The hylomorphs are quiet in the night. I hold these papers in my hands, my neighbor's thoughts washed out by moonlight and carried back under my lamp. Why? Why give them to me, the failed professor? I imagine that under the tree cover and between the slats of porches around the park across the street from my apartment, the hylomorph's cold, green eyes blink.

**Hylomorph**

“I do not try to change much in the world. But you have to be a decent person if you want to live a decent life. So if I wrong someone, I change my plans and make things good. And I have had some bad habits; I've tried to change them. These reasons are why I think that I am basically responsible.

“But I am confused. There have been times when I tried to do the right thing and had no idea what that is. Like ligament and bone, two things I thought I had to do pulled against each other. I'd want to protect my friend from pain but know I had to respect his freedom. These kinds of tensions are normal. Maybe some strain remains, but it fades after some weeks as we work through the consequences. This is not really confusion.

“Recently, I've encountered something different. I do not know what to do at all. I feel that something is wrong. My heart is bothered in the way that a series of hot nights build up slowly stripping away sleep, making me a little more, and then some more, irritable. I feel I have a mosquito buzzing around me, waking me up when I drift off. The mosquito is so small that while it keeps me dimly awake, it does not make me sit upright and deal with it. I feel edgy.
“Today I decided to deal with this junk building up in my body and gradually scattering my mind. I have time. It’s the weekend, and my kids are gone for a funny dad day with my husband. (I’m the serious dad.) The church a few blocks away just sounded ten A.M. It’s early June. A fan keeps me cool. I am going to do something I learned from the Jesuits. I am going to write for discernment. The technique goes back to Seneca.

“I want to make some progress figuring out what I am supposed to do. I am going to try to quiet my mind in decision.

“I turned off my computer. My phone is set only to let through my husband. I do not need to fix something around the house that doesn’t need fixing. The run can wait. So can the Internet. I want to shift things in me now.”

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“What bothers me came in flashes—not newsflashes, but antiseptic stories buried deep in the science section. Like far off lightning hidden high up behind the clouds, I knew something was there but did not focus on it. Oddly, these stories lit up something in my chest and stomach momentarily and then overlaid each other until a residual feeling kept. I came across them trawling the Internet, scanning magazines lying around the office, or in snippets of talk before lunch arrives and between the weather and sports: “hey, did you hear?” And I picked up one of my daughter’s course books when she was home for Spring break. The author—a professor at New York University—wrote:

Many biologists believe that the sixth major wave of extinction since life began is now occurring, and that this one, unlike the other five, is being caused by human action (Jamieson 2008, 6).
“My mind has been on mass extinction. I feel that we are undermining our home. I don’t want to exaggerate. At the same time, I do not like to think of humans as ultimately destructive. Mass extinction seems to point to our basic destructiveness. This reminds me of original sin all over again, but I left the church years ago in part because of the doctrine of sin. I believe that we can change the social world to protect our Earth inheritance.

“Over the last months, I did some amateur research and found that there is a range of estimates for the number of species that will go extinct during this century. Neither end of the range leaves me comfortable. The worst estimates say the planet will become like Mars with only 200 million humans left on it. That is insane. In such a scenario, most of our inherited life on Earth will have been wiped out, mostly due to climate change. I don’t trust these predictions — not because our technology couldn’t wipe us out, but because one thing I learned in my science classes was that there is a lot of uncertainty when we get to the level of the planet. Science is neither certain nor unstable.

“A more moderate estimate by a celebrated biologist at my nation’s oldest and most renowned university suggests 25% species loss over this century. Then there is a much-cited United Nations report from 2002 predicting that 25% of the world’s mammals will be extinct by 2032. And there are dire things to say about other kinds of species, too. One report discussed in National Geographic in 2004 put 1,000,000 kinds of land plants and animals extinct by 2050 due to global warming. Finally, on a more cautious note, I have heard of 20% of all species at “increased risk” of extinction over this century if the planet warms as it has over the past 50 years. But these old figures are superceded and adjusted all the time, almost always for the cautious worse.

“The general picture is clear, and it troubles me. There is a trend. Sometimes it grows less alarmist and
sometimes not, but its conclusions come through with increasing clarity. It goes like this: we as a species are pushing out of existence the species that came with us into our geological era, our inherited home. We have colonized the living world and squeezed out whatever we do not use in our system. We have off-loaded our waste, our unseen form of life, onto other lives—and we are killing as we do.

“The respected biologist thinks that we will lose at least a quarter of all life forms throughout this century. That is staggering. All I have to do is go outside or look through my window and imagine that out of every four varieties of plants, insects, birds, and the occasional mammal I see, one will no longer be found on Earth by the time the grandchildren of my grandchildren see the light of day. Certainly as I have read, many of the species that will go extinct include odd forms of life I never see: strange insects and remote salamanders—even things no human eye can see. But that doesn’t help. I find these beings fascinating and part of life. Who am I to play God and say that they are worthless? We all came out of this stuff; we are all in some—very—extenuated sense kin; we are all part of a process so vast and ancient as to exceed human imagination. The least I can do is be amazed.

“I think about these things, looking at my hands paused over this paper, and the day becomes strange. A car rolls down the street, techno out its windows. My neighbor experiments with his electric clipper. Dogs bark. The lawn of my backyard is flat, green, and uniform to the eye, and I am erasing with my mind’s eye one out of every four species.

“As I look into the thick, green texture of summer here in Central New York, instead of the four kinds of leaves I see, there might be only three found on this planet at century’s end. Which one goes? All of them are pleasing to the eye and fascinating to look at more closely. And they overlap each other on this lush, summer day. I want
my children to see them. We can study them together and make comparisons.

“Of course my subtraction doesn’t make sense. Species don’t disappear in strict proportion. I’ve learned that species loss occurs mostly in ‘biodiversity hot spots’—areas such as coral reefs or tropical rainforests where life-forms co-exist densely. Also, I’ve learned that mass extinction will not work as proportionally as I’ve imagined due to the way that in mass extinctions, entire ecosystems disintegrate. Syracuse may not be affected so severely, whereas biodiversity hotspots around coral reefs already are. People at the United Nations talk about ‘uneven development.’ Ecologists should talk about ‘uneven extinction.’ A sizable chunk of estimated extinction concerns insects, amphibians, and so forth—‘ugly beings.’ I am showing my ignorance when I subtract species from my backyard. My backyard is already species poor compared to a wetland.

“As I did my research a little bit better, I found out that we cannot know for sure whether we are in a mass extinction. Even my favorite museum in New York State, the Museum of the Earth in Ithaca, got this wrong. The celebrated biologist at Harvard is an alarmist. Mass species extinction developed with paleontology and was understood through evidence from the fossil beds of former seas and oceans. There, water creatures with shells hard enough to fossilize left their mark and then disappeared from one thousand years to the next. To call something a ‘mass’ extinction implies a marked disappearance of ‘durably skeletonized sea creatures’ well above the ‘background rate’ of normal extinction. But the alarm currently being sounded comes from other kinds of evidence. We haven’t had time to see a new fossil record emerge! So we can’t know whether we are in a mass extinction.

“But this indeterminacy does not help. I am trying to imagine something unimaginable. Take the songs of birds I hear nearby. One of my favorites is the cooing of
wood doves. Will it go? Climate change throws off the hatching cycles of birds and insects, sometimes making it harder for birds to find the insects they need. Also, without birds and insects, much of life comes to a halt. Plants aren’t pollinated as readily. And on the back of plants, so much life rests. What will protect the dove, or any of these sounds that remind me I am part of the vast process of life and shouldn’t be self-absorbed? What will make me human by taking me out of the human?

“Should it matter whether my favorite species are still around if we humans have been massively destructive? And is it fair to pin this issue on our species? Isn’t the problem my industrial civilization, my shortsighted, industrial economy? Why, too, think of these things as mine? Also, the fact that I have such ignorance about ecology—and that my society has even more—this bothers me. I am not representing things well. My science is a jumble. It is like I do not know or care for my home.

“I think these things. But I am unclear about what I should do. I don’t hear the people on TV or around me at work talking about the unknowable risk of mass extinction—not beyond the brief blurb or casual remark by someone who picked up Kolbert’s book. Extinctions weren’t an item of politics in the 2008 or 2012 presidential election—and good luck for the 2016! There’s a disconnection. My society is off. There are only 10,000,000 recorded species, but apparently countless more unrecorded. One weekend naturalist I ran into at a dinner party told me recently he’d read that there are as many as ten times more. Even if we lead a quarter of the known species to extinction, that is over two million species killed. I do not know how to think about this. I do not know my responsibilities here. I do not hear people discussing these problems in everyday life.

“Life flows about me in a wave. I love being part of it. But I feel that I am in a dream. Is this life we’re living in the United States of America the anti-life?”
“My hands are tired. I sat on the porch for a while. It’s afternoon. I realized that I am writing this for you, Amina and Rasaan. You are my kids. I love you.

“As I’ve read, the main causes of extinction come from our population growth, transportation, consumption: mining and logging, fishing and monoculture, clear-cutting and real estate development. Then there is climate change, ocean acidification, nitrogen run off, increased UV radiation from depleted ozone. As we reach 9,000,000,000 by mid-century and continue an industrial form of life in a poorly politicized capitalist economy, our effects spread into every nook and cranny, depth and shoal of planet Earth.

“Yet a good portion of people hold life to be sacred, rare, respect-worthy, magnificent, or wonderful. We school our kids in it. For instance, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus all agree that non-human life is worthy of reverence. The indigenous nations of this state—the ‘People of the Longhouse’—are grounded in it. Reverence for life would appear to be justified to a large portion of humankind. So the duty to treat life decently is certainly known. What are we doing then?

“When I think about these things, I feel drained. My morality and my life do not connect. Am I just selfish? Is this how my society raised me?

“But I know that we do care, and I am not going to personalize the problem this way. People are roughly conscientious, and I take pains to do the right thing. So where does the problem lie? I am not wicked. But I am part of what’s wiping out so many processes of life.”

“When I look at the life-processes we call ‘species,’ I realize that there is a moral split between species and individual living beings. It’s like thought goes in different
directions. The individual life calls out for the attention that anything living deserves, while the species elicits something different—awe. Here is a process patterning over generations, slowly changing, then one day fading from time.

“Suppose a living being crossed my path, a kind I’ve never seen. It has a strange set of traits. Its skin is as smooth as a worm, but it has legs. They are soft and malleable, unlike an insect’s legs. In addition, it has a coloration unlike any worm or millipede I have ever seen. I am so surprised that I take a picture with my cell phone.

“At the same time, this thing is going to get smashed on the sidewalk. I am not the kind of person who leads an ant outside the house when I find it inside, and maybe it’s better for this weird thing if only those members who don’t walk on sidewalks survive! But still. I think twice before going on my way. In this case, I don’t see why I shouldn’t usher it off the sidewalk. I don’t think it is the kind of thing evolution will help not walk across sidewalks. The sidewalks are our obstacle here. Too much thinking. I lead if off with a twig to which it attaches.

“I have a friend a few blocks away. He’s a weekend naturalist who is also a philosophy professor. He moonlights in entomology and knows scientists. Imagine he showed the picture I took around to colleagues, and imagine it seems I saw a mutant, what people a thousand years ago called a *monstrum*—an individual without a species. Does this mutant being species-less make it any less respect-worthy?

“I do not think so. If anything, its uniqueness calls for more consideration.

“As Spinoza said, every living being has its *conatus*, its drive to be. Why should I overlook the striving individual when the universal kind—the species—is abstract?

“Then what of species? The species is an abstraction. It’s even a biological convention. Species are rough place-holders of an organizational process happening between
ecologies and individuals through genetic lineages over millions of years.

“Could we say, then, that my concern for individuals involves justice—an attention to them—but my concern for species involves wisdom, an awareness of what matters? Take this geological process, ‘life.’ On our planet, it arose—seemingly singular of chemical events. Order constellated over millions of years—biochemical systems and evolving rules of life as my philosopher friend describes them. There were crashes in the system, mass extinctions a hundred million years apart for various reasons, and then life redoubled in their wake. Life is fecund as our planet is. All human beings are just a moment in its time. Here is a moral feeling—why?

“I am bothered by two things. I am bothered by our unintentionally and thoughtlessly killing—our civilization a ‘maelstrom of killing’ as this guy Rolston wrote. And then, I am bothered by the scale of extinction—an industrial scale even—by the way we have managed to jar the planet, interrupt its flow, shift geology itself. Yes, it is either alarmist or inaccurate to claim we are in a mass extinction, but we are doing massive things, things that on a smaller scale would concern me, but which on an industrial scale unnerve and trouble me.”

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“It is late afternoon, and I am just getting to the core. I have read arguments claiming widespread species extinction is bad because of what we might lose when losing species. Suppose a species provides the future cure to cancer, but we make it extinct now. Therefore, we should protect species from going extinct in order to protect potential but at present unknown benefits to humankind.

“But this argument’s reasoning can be used against it. Any species could be useful to us at a later point in time. Yet protecting a species might block the way for
new species to come into their own, and the new species might just as easily help us, even better than the ones we protect.

“The deeper problem is that these kinds of debates do not grasp the gravity of a true mass extinction cascade. One scientist I talked with at the Smithsonian when I visited there last year said matter of factly that if a true mass extinction cascade begins, first, we won’t know it until it is too late, and second, the human species is almost certainly doomed. He wasn’t alarmist in tone. He said that the rules of life are so profoundly rearranged during periods of mass extinction that you cannot expect the ecological order on which species depend—even especially dominant ones—to remain stable.

“Should we be debating our self-destruction?! But even if we are not yet in a mass extinction, not yet lost, I am concerned with how we are being, not just what we are causing. Saying extinction is bad because of what we might lose doesn’t get at what our actions say about us. Our obliviousness to what we cause, including our potential self-destruction, including our moral relations with species and living individuals—that obliviousness is also a problem! We should not be oblivious to abuse. After all, if species can be useful to us, it doesn’t matter whether we put them at risk or something else does. The risk is bad all the same. But there is a moral dimension to what we are doing that is different than the risk caused by mass extinction—from us or from a meteor strike.

“I do think that if half of the world’s species go extinct, it will hurt us. I believe that it will destroy us over a long, slow death increased by wars over what is left. The United Nations Environmental Program predicted in 2007 that by mid-century, we will see 150,000,000 people fleeing environmental problems in the world. These refugees will suffer, and the political and economic instability they are likely to cause will expand the circle of suffering beyond them. Where do you go when there’s no more livelihood or food? Whenever there is massive
species loss in the history of life, a point comes where food chains and then whole ecosystems collapse. This kind of collapse—what ecologists call ‘trophic level collapse’—is risky for us depending on how widespread it is. Think of our imminently deserted oceans. The UNEP report was focused on climate change—and so rising oceans and desertification—but you just have to iterate the problem out with a mass extinction cascade to imagine how bad things could become.

“Yet even if these warnings end up being alarmist, even if we head off the worst that we could do to ourselves, what bothers me is what we are doing to other forms of life, not just to ourselves. The beetles and bees, the microscropic lives in the sea, the many plants and birds—I am in awe of them whenever I stop to look closely.

“Friends have told me to stop being sentimental. They say it is ironically egocentric. They say that the narrowing of life’s lushness now leaves room for future life, for life-blooms then. Just as we emerged out of the shadow of extinct dinosaurs, so a mass extinction would clear the way for future development, for new lushness! There will be new awesome beings in another ten million years. What we do to life on Earth is insignificant from the standpoint of geological time unless we destroy the Earth itself. Life keeps going! If form gives way to form, devastation shouldn’t bother me. I should get over it.

“Is it just that I am attached to this world, to my species, to what has come to be? It seems arbitrary to hang the protection of species on what I happen to like, even deeply. Am I simply being selfish for the sake of my kids? Yet I am bothered by the scale of our destruction, and that destruction takes in countless species of which I do not even know, much less feel attachment.

“I am bothered by what all this says about us, about my society, and so about me as a part of it.”

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“A thought occurred to me while writing. My speaking of ‘us’ is problematic. Who is this ‘us’? Your dad is African American, and I am Irish American. There are many indigenous people in this land—right here in Onondaga country—who do not deserve in any way to be part of this ‘us’ that is being cited as clueless in my writing today. Onondaga society is structured by a different kind of thinking that is mindful of future generations and has space in it to discuss mass extinction much more thoroughly than the United States of America, which colonized—and still colonizes—the Onondaga Nation and its sacred lake. We see this lake, ringed by private property, a mall, remnants of the industrial economy that polluted it. That’s ‘us.’

“Even your funny dad would have a different viewpoint, because to be black in the United States of America is to see how domination’s disrespect for lives works. I need to get to the bottom of something bothering me in the mainstream culture of my society’s economy and politics.”

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“I haven’t solved my problem, and I haven’t dissolved it either. I don’t have a clear conscience. When I try to turn to the species themselves and find a reason why they ought to be part of my reverence for life, counterexamples muddy the stream of my reasoning and prove that I do not have a sound position for revering species just as they are over future ones. I feel that my instinct to protect them comes down to my attachment to them, and yet I also know that my conscience suggests that I am doing a moral wrong—not simply a denial of my preferences—by participating in the cause of the increased rate of extinction on our planet. I feel groundless, and yet worry I am being unreal, misguided by abstract reasoning away from what any decent person would see looking at the scale of destruction we are slowly causing.
“So I am going to forget dinner and push on. You kids and your dad are still out having fun. Maybe I can be a little lighter by the time you all get home.

“What would a decent person see looking at the civilization I am in causing so much extinction around the planet? The speciation process is indistinguishable from the history of life. It is astonishing. Just there, on its surface, it thus deserves some respect. What kind?

“Decent people do not destroy thoughtlessly. They are not what we would call ‘destructive’ people, even if they at times have to take or destroy for well thought-out reasons. I think decent people would approach the loss of species through the prism of a vast, inherited order bearing the work of countless past human lives and bundled together through the ecological transformations of countless species that have evolved alongside us humans. I think this awareness of a vast, inherited order would allow decent people to grasp the gravity of species loss as it is currently happening.

“Countless species and the work they have done to create their environments form the historical and ecological order of the world as we’ve inherited it, an inheritance also inseparable from the vast amount of human labor it has taken to find a way to make a home on Earth, to develop agriculture, to figure out how to interact with the planet and its species. It’s not that everything we have inherited is perfect—or even good. Some things are awful—and life is largely inhuman, often cruel, and certainly indifferent in countless ways. But we have a fairly stable and workable world, an environment we can call ‘home,’ because we have not destroyed it but have rather integrated it with our flourishing in imperfect but some powerfully good ways, too. It’s this order that my civilization is playing with, risking an ecological collapse through the loss of species.

“I have an intuitive respect for order, unless good reasons apply to change it. Not only is living order more complex than what our best science can yet fathom,
living order is an especially wonderful thing on the whole. I don’t know how to think of home or humankind without some awareness and gratefulness for it, including the order of species that have co-evolved with us. It’s not just that this order is useful to us. It’s that humankind is bound up with it and has made a home in it. In this way, the species around us are more like our kin than our objects. But my civilization seems to treat them as objects to be used up or as things that can be disregarded, like gravel on the side of its road.

“Being of this vast order myself, I feel moved by it as one moved by distant kin. The mass extinction of species is not simply a reduction of life as we know it. It is the destruction of our hard-won and hard-worked home. When we lose many forms of life, we lose their interrelationships, which make up the order we’ve inherited and on which many forms of life depend. We lose the efforts of living history that have profoundly shaped who we are. We undermine our own ancestors’ having worked so hard to make a home in this world. In other words, we destroy the quality of life, not just its quantity. We are like descendants who dance on the graves of our parents by dancing on the graves of species.

“As I’ve said, there may be reasons to think that the species themselves that we render extinct might be balanced in some sense by future species that will evolve, that a new kind of sound will coalesce millions of years from now. Yet we are not presently considering the loss and the intervening silence. We are not discussing the loss of history, losses in the macro-order of life. We risk dead seas, deserts, and silent Springs—a world that is so unstable it is hard to know how to consider it except with dread. A decent person would therefore see that we in the United States of America—and in the global economy more generally—are chaotic. It’s our thoughtlessness about all this that is most troubling. We thoughtlessly destroy an order we are lucky to have worked well to inhabit, and do so without a whimper.
“What does it mean to be a destroyer? It has taken millions and millions of years for the world of life as we know it to evolve, and in the last tens of thousands of years humankind has worked unimaginably hard and long to fashion a home in the world, to pass on wisdom about how to do so mostly through practices and technology. The forms we have inherited—including our own—are survivors of chance, ‘momentary cosmic accidents’ as Stephen J. Gould wrote. And we are also hard workers who have made the Earth together—not just us alone, but the order of life around us, with us, and within us, too. Even so, we hardly understand how this order of life fits together. We learn more about it every day, and we have more to remember about how our ancestors and fellow nations have learned about it, too. This vast order of life currently threatened by the risk of mass extinction is beyond anything we have ever created. We should show some reverence.

Reverence is awareness of human limits….You’re in the grip of something vaster than you are (Neiman 2008, 232–35).

“I read that long ago—it was recommended in the New York Review of Books. It describes what strikes me as a decent attitude: awe and humility before the complexity of life and the sheer effort it has taken for us to get here. That this order has come about both by chance and by unimaginable work is even more reverence-worthy. So at the least, hurtling thoughtlessly toward—even the risk of—the sixth mass extinction is wrong, because it is irreverent—of the life out there and of us.

“Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that conscience is the love of order, understood by him as a kind of hard won harmony of practice. Irreverence is seen in how we unintentionally tear apart, hard-won, fortunate order. It is shown in not really talking about and deciding together what we are doing, what should be changed, what can
be lost, and what should be kept, including kept off limits. These omissions show a flawed, societal conscience. We’re not taking things in.

“Order that

feels
stirs
moves
breathes
swims
flies
grows
spreads
reproduces
blooms
drifts
becomes
labors
stabilizes
considers
interacts

..."

“If a species led to the death of much human life, there would be a reason to render it extinct. If, collectively, we have good reasons to change our environment, we have good reasons—but are they good enough to respect our fellow humans on Earth? There is a big difference between this kind of justified, deliberate destruction and chaotic, thoughtless destruction. Our public sphere has almost no serious discussion of what we are doing, and there is very little awareness of the extent of the spread of extinction. My point is precise: thoughtless, without a thought.

“Especially since the industrial revolution began, in the space of only two hundred years, some societies have managed to set in motion a massive rending of our world’s fortunate order. They (we) have done this on the backs of other, colonized societies, and without regard
for what most of the world thinks. Even if I can’t argue that each living species today has a reason that it must be preserved, and even if chance will absorb our destructiveness in its branching proliferation of time, the way we in my nation are acting legitimately bothers me. It is shocking behavior, the kind I would never permit you or myself. Too much is at stake, we know too little about what we are doing, and we haven’t stopped to think together.

“The manner of our living, the way we are heading into the unknown area where even serious scientists start shouting ‘mass extinction!’—that is the problem. The thoughtlessness of how we act displays obtuseness to something meaningful in so many ways.

“Early this morning, I wrote that most people are conscientious and that most have reverence for life. Now I see how the problem goes deeper. We in the United States of America are acting chaotically. Our convictions and our behavior disconnect. But responsible people do not act this way. We shouldn’t believe one thing in our hearts, then contradict it.

“If the problem is a failure of responsibility itself, the problem is located behind conscience, before we ever listen to it or think that we do. We have, first, to be in the habit of stopping and thinking for conscience to guide us. We have to be in the habit of listening to conscience. Irresponsibility undercuts both habits. Irresponsible, we’re not in a position for having conscience. And when it comes to alarms about the sixth mass extinction—or simply widespread, planetary extinction—we show that we’re in no such position. We have not stopped to think, not as a people, and nowhere in the capitalist global economy where I’ve lived. I am beginning to revise my view that we’re conscientious, because I don’t think we appear to be in a position to be conscientious. But that is an even worse kind of socially organized irresponsibility.
“Where is the source of the chaos I’ve been feeling these past weeks? I think the root disconnection is between effect and cause. Consequences matter when they convert our actions into something we don’t want them to be. The effect is widespread extinction, and we in this global economy are the cause, because we support this economy, because we support the business as usual of the United States of America and many other nations. But we are not owning up to the effect, taking it as our own, because the effect emerges from all of us in poorly organized society. We are acting as if we were not acting. Though the rumors of our effects have been in major media sources now for over a decade, we do not hear them and then go to confirm or to disconfirm them. Practically speaking, they do not matter to us, for as a Russian philosopher wrote (your dad had a t-shirt with this on it when I met him):

Do not listen to what they say — look at what they do!
—Vladimir Jankélévitch

“Alerted to the effects of our actions, until recently, I did not bother to find out if the rumors are true. I did not think I was causing anything, even by supporting something off. I did not have time. And politics is so difficult and so filled with corruption.

“But decent people resist. I’ve been mindlessly contributing to a society that destroys the vast order that our ancestors made into our home. This society shows little thought collectively, does not even attempt a deep discussion and qualified justification. Its idiots and moguls enter the elections, but we have to change this.”
Aporia

“What a good sleep follows the examination of one’s own self! How tranquil, deep, and free it is, when the mind has been praised or warned, and has become the observer and secret judge of its own morals!”

—Seneca 1995; in Latin, III, 36, 1–3

Will I sleep tonight? I feel like a fraud. See: Non-academics do think—while I’m complaining about students who are legitimately scared. Should this come as a surprise, king? His exercise is not rhetoric, while mine often is. His goal is living itself. He is thinking about his kids.

I’m not thinking. But I should be: about the form of questioning. Hylomorphic, questioning that seeks know-how and reconnection is different than questioning seeking only knowledge. The living person thinks, rather than simply the intellect. The living person thinks.5

I could put it this way: the important thing is not just to make a person think, but to make sure that the person thinks.6

There is a world of difference between thinking about a detached intellectual problem that does not emanate from our hearts and an intellectual problem growing from disquiet deep in the chest, if I may put it like that.7

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5 Cf. “No longer are my intimate impressions ‘personal’ in the sense that they are ‘merely mine’ or ‘subjective only’: they are footprints of hyperobjects, distorted as they always must by the entity in which they make their mark—that is, me” (Morton 2013, 5).

6 I remember here bell hooks (1994), whose story of how classrooms compartmentalize ourselves within ourselves struck me.

7 One might object that a neurotic theoretician can feel heart-felt disquiet at a purely intellectual problem with no clear relation to wisdom. True, but I would say that he is approaching the problem philosophically, although making a mistake. He thinks his problem makes or breaks the world. Protecting the world is a good motive, but he is mistaken that his problem actually does that.
My neighbor’s exercise came from—and seemed to orbit—heartfelt disquiet. That is its form of questioning. In so doing, his exercise made sure his reflection brought in his whole existence, rather than just some part of it that can easily be compartmentalized as an intellectual pursuit and forgotten. But by bringing in his whole existence, he was already seeking practical and relational wisdom, whereas my so-called “academic work” appealing just to our intellects does not imply seeking any kind of knowledge of how to live. Existential connection is then key.

Theory can have a practical effect on a person. But it is another thing to take theory in such a way that is has a practical point and a personal connection. That is what taking theory ethically—thinking out of an existential connection—does. Sometimes it’s good to take things personally. If in philosophy the point of theory is living, taking theory personally is a requisite for using knowledge to become more human.

So the point of the exercise was in the writing, not in the reading. The ancients shared their spiritual exercises to spur each other to do their own. Keep your own notebook, said Plutarch. A reader can take most anything ethically, but in making the distinctions I have, I have focused on what the writing seems to do. It had a

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8 An existence that seeks some view of the good. See Aristotle (1999, 1095b15–17).
9 This is a point Kierkegaard understood well (1988, 1983), making his writing far more fitting for virtue ethics than most virtue theory. He called his style “upbuilding”. See especially Either/Or (1843), vol. 2, “A final ultimatum”, where the style was first attempted. Also, note especially his invocation of the heart’s disquiet in his most mature and elegant work, esp. The Sickness unto Death (1848), preface. Kierkegaard learned to write either from disquiet or from love. In either case, he wrote from conscience. Whatever the merits of his theology, his understanding of the point of virtue ethics, like Nietzsche’s, is unparalleled today.

Again, see hooks (1994), too, on the role of personal emotions in the classroom space.
transformative point. If the writing aims, then, at wisdom itself, it proves that aim in the form of questioning. Thus, these pages from my neighbor are a different kind of thing than, say, a science textbook taken ethically by a reader or that same textbook happening to have an unintended ethical effect on a reader. They are deliberate work on his life in society.

Oh god, maybe I can go to sleep.