

Philosophical Faith in Action

An Interview with Cornel West

HRP: We were hoping you could start out by telling us how you got into philosophy and, in particular, into pragmatism and the philosophy of religion. Could you describe the history of your education?

West: I think it goes all the way back to family and church. I've always been obsessed with the problem of evil and I wrestle with various forms of unjustified suffering, unmerited pain, and unnecessary social misery. Early on it was Kierkegaard. We lived in a segregated section of Sacramento, California, and we had a little bookmobile—we didn't have libraries around—and when I first read Kierkegaard, I said, "My God! He's on to something very crucial for me," which was, how do you actually engage in forms of philosophical reflection that are inseparable from lived experience and concrete situations?

I'll never forget when I first arrived at Harvard. I knew I wanted to major in philosophy, and I walked into Bob Nozick's office. He was my tutor. [I told him I had read] Kierkegaard and the *Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durant, a popularizing, kind of philistine conception of what the major figures were, but *very* important for a young person, sixteen or seventeen years old. And Brother Nozick said, "Not bad, but we're going to introduce you to some high-powered philosophers." I said, "Oh, now that's interesting."

I think from there I continued on, obsessed with this same problem of evil, but had a chance to read some very, very crucial figures and texts. One, of course, was Hume's Part X of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, [where] you got a nice wrestling with a kind of existential analysis of pain and suffering as well as a powerful critique of forms of empiricist foundationalism. And then it was Kant's famous essay of 1791, "On the Failure of All Philosophical Theodicies." And then Schelling's great *Treatise of Human Nature*, which is probably, I think, one of the most powerful and profound wrestlings with the reality of evil and why German Idealist systems fail because they cannot deal with the reality of evil. And [finally] Schopenhauer. Those four texts really always sat at the center of my own wrestling, in terms of the modern European philosophical tradition.

CORNEL WEST is a University Professor at Harvard University and has taught extensively in the departments of Afro-American studies and philosophy of religion. He is the author of *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (Routledge, 1994), *Race Matters* (Beacon Press, 1993), and *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Univ. of Wisconsin, 1989). He is coauthor of *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (South End Press, 1991).

Now, [I was introduced to Pragmatism] under Israel Scheffler and then of course my good friend [Richard] Rorty, at Princeton. Pragmatism struck me as a way of making certain kinds of contextualist and historicist moves that relate philosophy to culture, history, struggle and so on. And it was there, actually, I discovered old Josiah Royce and so I became a kind of—never a card-carrying pragmatist, because I felt in *some* ways Royce was more profound than all of them. “Lecture Eight” on Schopenhauer, in the *Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, 1892, is to me still one of the great moments in American philosophy.

Brother Nozick said, “Not bad, but we’re going to introduce you to some high-powered philosophers.” I said, “Oh, now that’s interesting.”

So I come at it in a very, very unique, idiosyncratic—some people might say “confused” way. When you come in through the Kierkegaardian-Schopenhauerian route, then you get a very different set of concerns. But you resonate deeply with the critiques of, not just foundationalism and not just forms of ahistoricism, but really trying to relate philosophy to lived experience and understand it fundamentally as a quest for wisdom, the kind of thing Dewey does in “The Quest for Certainty,” the famous Gifford lectures of 1929. You really relate it to a quest for wisdom and that critique of the quest for certainty that you get.

HRP: You’ve identified Quine as a key figure in American pragmatism. In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, you write: “The genius of W.V. Quine was to intervene in the most sophisticated discourses of symbolic logicians and logical positivists with pragmatic formulations and Emersonian, i.e., human-making, sensibilities.” Some people might object that Quine’s move to replace epistemology with behaviorist psychology, however, is not particularly humanizing at all. How would you square Emerson’s view of radical self-reliance with a Quinian approach that sees individuals not as radically self-defining, but as a bundle of speech-dispositions?

West: It’s a good question. I view Quine first and foremost as a naturalist, rather than a pragmatist, but there are pragmatic elements in his naturalism, in the same way that I would view Nelson Goodman. The stress on human-making and world-making as a result of that human-making is, I think, continuous with the conception of Emerson’s concerns about human beings and human creativity being at the center of things.

There’s a certain ambiguity in understanding what we mean by “humanizing.” Quine certainly, I think, understands *science* and the *human* praxis enacted by *human* communities in that sense. And I think in that regard a certain kind of demystifying of certain older styles of positivism—but see, Quine remains a positivist in the end, I think. Part of that has to do with his deference toward physicists, his secular priesthood, as it were. And I do believe that the physicists have much to tell us, they have their own versions of world-making, to use Goodman’s language, and they predict better than any of the other groups. So we do defer to them when it comes to predictive powers. But there’s more to life than just predictive power, and that’s where I would go at Quine.

Quine and I used to have these wonderful discussions when I was an

undergrad. I would ask him, I would say, “Professor Quine, what meaning do you find in life?” He’d say, “Well, that’s a very interesting question, Cornel. I have hobbies, I collect rocks. I go around the world and I have a fascinating rock collection, and I find great meaning in that—to see the variety of rock formations in the world,” and so forth. I’d say, “That’s interesting. What is it about rock collecting?”

“It reveals intellectual curiosity.”

Aha! Interesting! “Is that intellectual curiosity linked in any way to issues of love, and death, and affection, and so forth?”

He’d say, “Sure, we all have these needs.”

I’d say, “Ah, are you planning to write more about that?”

“No, no, I’m not really concerned about that, you know.”

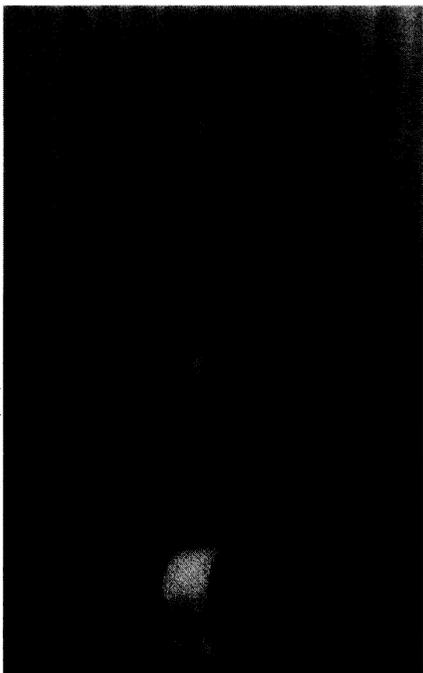
I was just trying to tease out the existential dimensions of his own life. He was quite open to it, but you don’t see it reflected in the writings.

HRP: In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, you point out that the very notion of a purely philosophical question, or a question only of philosophical interest, is an historical notion, one that really only comes about in the early modern period. Someone could read your emphasis on the practicality of pragmatism, its connection with lived life, as a move away from asking purely philosophical questions in that way. Would that be fair?

West: Well, so much hangs on what we mean by “purely philosophical.” I mean, there certainly are questions that ought to be asked that do not have immediate instrumental use or do not have immediate practical bearing. Those questions ought to be asked, and in some sense they are “timeless.” You see it in various cultural myths, narratives, stories, symbols and so forth asking these fundamental questions. What does it mean to be human?

What is the nature of death? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the origin of evil? These in some sense are timeless questions—they’re always couched within various historical forms, but they’re questions that do not have this immediate practical bearing that I think ought to be asked.

Here I follow Rorty: I really do believe that the way in which philosophy in the modern period emerges as an autonomous discourse, self-contained, autotelic, and so forth, is a story that’s worth telling. It’s a very complex story—nobody’s really got it right, but we know that something happens in which, for example, skepticism is viewed much more as an epistemic matter than as a way of life. It’s interesting. Royce used to talk about the spirituality of genuine inquiry, which is a way of talking about linking the philosophical to forms of, not spirituality in the



ephemeral sense, but a way of beckoning us or luring us to various forms of awe and wonder and curiosity. You see, I'm all for that. A lot of people would associate that with the purely philosophical. If that's what you mean, alright. But on the other hand I want to historicize the purely philosophical, and then we're forced into a story-telling.

HRP: In *Keeping Faith*, you comment on the depth and intensity of your “commitment to what I call a prophetic vision and practice primarily based on a distinctly black tragic sense of life.” There seem to be two parts of this commitment. There's the willingness to look at facts of death and despair, and to affirm moral agency in the face of those, and there's also a strand of Christian thought that is “so skeptical about our capacity to know the ultimate truths about our existence that leaps of faith are promoted.” Now, certainly there's a place for philosophy in the first aspect. However, while leaps of faith provide a subject-matter for philosophy, and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* certainly comes to mind there, it seems that as practice the second strand could almost be seen as anti-philosophical.

West: Yeah, or at least holding the philosophical at bay in light of certain conceptions of the limits of philosophical inquiry. “Anti” might be a bit too strong a claim, I think, because in some way “anti-philosophical” is parasitic on a certain conception of the philosophical which brings you right back in. When you're trying to hold it at bay because you're both using it and still concerned about the limits of it then that might put you in a very different discursive and existential space. And that's, I think, more what I have in mind. It's like, again, Kierkegaard—he doesn't really call for the crucifixion of reason, though at times he uses that language, but it's much more a use of all of the resources available, of rational reflection and acknowledging that it still has boundaries, borders, and limits, and so forth.

Now, it's also true, too, that one could say, well, aren't you making metaphysical claims about the nature of reality when you [speak of] the absurd, the Schelling's coming back... but he's not coming back as the old German Idealist, no, no, no. He's coming back as a meta-physician of evil.

by means of an analysis of human consciousness. And he ends up thinking, “God! It's darker than I thought! This preponderance of unreason, understanding nothing but regulated madness.” See, he's on to something: if in fact there is a certain ineradicable, unsubsumable, non-rational element, then how do we talk about it?

It might be a question of trying to relate metaphilosophical critiques through certain dramatic conceptions of the life of the mind and dramatic conceptions of living one's life. And in that regard I really do believe (here I think I agree with Brother Stanley Cavell) that there ought to be much, much more dialogue between, not just literary critics, because there are so many schools of literary criticism out there, but certain conceptions of the dramatic that we find in plays and

novels and so forth, and philosophical discourse that's concerned about lived experience.

You think about it, you know, Schelling died in 1854, wrote the text in 1809, never published a word after. That was *it*. Powerful. He wouldn't publish a word. That's a long time in exile, 45 years. Schelling's coming back, too. We talked about Schopenhauer coming back. But he's not coming back as the old German Idealist, no, no, no. He's coming back as a metaphysician of evil, to use Heidegger's language. The metaphysics I think have to be curbed, curtailed, demystified rather than deconstructed, but [they're] certainly coming back. All the philosophers of darkness, I think, very much like the artists of darkness, are going to be so relevant for the 21st century. Paul Celan's poetry is going to be central in the next century, Kafka central, Hardy central, the Schellings and Schopenhauers. Not because their conclusions are convincing, but [by] the nature of their wrestling. There's a sense in which in analytic philosophy we overlook the totality of the philosopher, and the Schellings and Schopenhauers and Kierkegaards will come back in part because of their totality, that chimes well with the *zeitgeist*, as it did in Europe in the '30s and '40s after the war, with Sartre and others. It's going to come back in a very, very different form—I mean, I'm just pontificating at this point, but still—that's where I'm headed.

HRP: It seems like Schelling and Schopenhauer would have something to say about the nihilistic threat that we all face.

West: Absolutely, as human beings. Globalization of capital, uprooting of various communal structures, community-based structures of meaning, deracination and rootlessness of individuals, it's going to be global. It'd be very interesting to see Schopenhauer in Africa. We know his deep interest in Eastern philosophy—reading the *Upanishads* every night, Buddhism has such elective affinities with his philosophy—but Schopenhauer in Africa, Schopenhauer in Latin America, not as the sole source of philosophical reflection but as a crucial voice. There's always going to be the more upbeat figures in the tradition, be it religious or be it secular. You have to have that balance, you need to have the balance.

Part of the greatness of Royce is that he's holding on to his Christian faith for dear life, very much like myself. But he knows that the truths that Schopenhauer and others are putting forward are *inescapable*, so what are you going to do? *What are you going to do?* Phronesis, practical wisdom, what does it require? How do you talk about courage, strength, endurance, struggle? Is it like the conclusion of an Aristotelian syllogism? Action? Well, no, it's more complex than that, but it has something to do with that. *What kind of person are you?*

HRP: Perhaps what a lot of people find very interesting in your work is the connection you're able to draw between philosophy on the one hand and action on the other. In particular, you had said earlier how some of these "timeless" questions with which philosophy has concerned itself have a lack of immediate, practical bearing. On the other hand, for instance in *Race Matters*, you identify the greatest threat facing black Americans as a "nihilistic" threat. You criticize liberal and conservative discussions of race as failing to confront this threat, and in particular you say that liberals ignore the importance of

identity for black Americans. Also, the idea of a “love ethic” is central to your answer. These notions of identity and moral reasoning seem to be very philosophical, or at least notions about which philosophy has quite a bit to say.

West: No, that’s true, it’s true. Got in a lot of trouble using that term “nihilism,” actually, because of course it has its own history, its own genealogy. I probably was linking it much more to a literary tradition, goes back to Turgenev’s Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, than philosophical discourse, in a way, and then was trying to apply it in a very postmodern context, chocolate cities, in light of various ways in which it has been constructed, given the history of segregation, given the disinvestment, the level of unemployment, underemployment, and so forth. And yet I would still want to defend it, because I think you’re right, I think there certainly are ways in which we can talk about that, where it overlaps with some of the philosophical concerns about meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Linked to lived experience, again. We’re much closer to the philosophers of life and will than we are analytical philosophers. At that point it does become very much an existential question, a historical question, and a political question, at the same time. The existential question has to do with what resources we have available to create some new structures of meaning and value, so that people will feel as if life’s worth living. The historical

You can’t generate agency and insurgency when people feel themselves lacking worth, self-respect, and so forth, and that’s been a deep problem, especially among people of African descent—who’ve been such a hated and haunted people.

question is, what various contexts are in place and can be created? And that has to do with institutional and structural analysis: the economy of information, nation-states, the culture, and so on. And then the political question, forms of agency and insurgency, from below but also linked to progressives in the middle and upper strata. That’s where the radical democratic project comes in, where you really have to have both vision and analysis, and try to make

that vision and analysis more visible and accessible to people, by any means—media, texts, teaching—and then come up with institutional vehicles that can carry it for you. And maybe at some point contest with state power, even if it’s just at the local level, and later regional and federal, at the end probably global level, given transnational corporate power and its disproportionate amount of wealth and influence around the world. All three of those have to be noted at the same time, and that in no way really comes through in that essay. I was simply describing the situation, not viewing it as the major [explanatory] causal factor.

You can’t generate agency and insurgency when people feel themselves lacking worth, self-respect, and so forth, and that’s been a deep problem, especially among people of African descent—who’ve been such a hated and haunted people. If you don’t talk about a love ethic for a people who’ve been hated for so long, they’ll never be able to conceive of themselves or ourselves as agents in the world who can make a difference in it. And of course that’s been one of the fundamental roles and functions of the black church at its best—it created that black space that

can hold at arm's length the white-supremacist bombardment to affirm one's sense of self, even if it was transcendently invoked. "God loves me, folks on the other side of town don't, for the most part. [Laughs] And those folk who are close to me usually linked to that same God also love me, hence I can get a different vantage point to view myself than what the media's telling me, what the churches are telling me, what science is telling me," and so forth, and so on. This is true for oppressed groups across the board. Women have had the same problem, in terms of 2,000 years of patriarchy and so on—where do you find those sources of self-affirmation, self-confidence, that views you as an agent-subject in the world. But what happens when those institutions themselves begin to unravel? That's part of

what that essay is about: the family, churches, apprenticeship networks in music, apprenticeship networks in athletics—those are four crucial sources for black self-formation in white supremacist America up until the '60s, when we finally break the back of American apartheid.

Fifty years ago, the only space where black people could find some sense of fairness was a boxing ring. Joe Lewis took on *tremendous* weight and gravity, because every other sphere of American life had a structure of unfairness; but at least that referee, he was going to be fair! If Joe knocks Max out, Max is down! It's not where, if you're white you've got 20 counts and if you're black you've got five. No, it's ten for everybody. If you hit him below the belt—you better not do that! "It's a black man, I can do whatever I want to a black man." No, we're in the ring now, this is fairness. Jackie Robinson, same thing. And so, of course, athletics will play a fundamental role, as will apprenticeships in music and entertainment play a fundamental role in terms of sustaining black self-confidence. How do you translate that into the other spheres? That has been the challenge of the last 25 years. And if the institutional buffers that once provided a source of self-confidence themselves waned, what happens? There are some young black Americans wrestling with that in a serious kind of way. Because the levels of self-loathing, self-hatred, self-doubt are running amok, with the result of self-destruction, destruction of others, and so on, and it has implications for the country as a whole. It has implications for the prospects for the American republic, the future of American democracy, which a lot of Americans don't realize, but it actually does. Race is bringing down the curtain on the American experiment. That's another issue, but it's a crucial one.

It's striking to me that when you look at philosophical discourse, most American philosophers have been reluctant to say a lot about race. You think of the great American philosophers, what did they write about race? Royce wrote a book on race, *Race Questions*—the only one. But the great William James, who of course was probably more sensitive to issues of race... his famous letter to a Springfield newspaper condemning lynching is the only example we have of a philosopher during the golden age who took a stand on race. John Dewey, of course, who was one

of the founders of the NAACP, was quite active against racism, but he never writes about it. When you turn to a Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, first edition, *race everywhere*. Mark Twain, of course. Melville, *Benito Cereno* and *Moby-Dick*. The great figures in literature have had something to say. Faulkner, oh my God! You can't get too much deeper from the white side of town! Toni Morrison, black side of town. And we can go on and on. Philosophers—a Martian could come down and read great philosophical texts in America and not even know they had a race problem.

There are black philosophers around now who are really forging a fascinating critique of a lot of the mainstream, and it's important. We don't know exactly where it's going to go, but it's very important, and begins to overlap with some of the very powerful feminist critiques that have been at work, the Sandra Hardings and others, also the homophobia and heterosexism that's also at work. It'll be very interesting, the next 20 or 30 years, how this spills out, what form it takes.

HRP: You mention the crisis of belonging that faces black Americans. This seems to be one of the problems that afflicts black intellectuals. Certainly the crisis as a whole goes beyond the academy. What changes do you think might be made in the academy to make it more hospitable to black intellectuals?

West: That's a good question. We've made some breakthroughs, of course. I wouldn't be here 25 years ago. The great Du Bois, who's probably the greatest black intellectual of the twentieth century, couldn't set foot in a Harvard faculty context, though he was the first black Ph.D here. So we've made some breakthroughs, no doubt about it. I think that one of the challenges of the black intellectual is a philosophical one, which is the courage to be themselves. You have a Harvard, you respect the richness of its tradition, both keeping track of good and bad, you much more shape Harvard in your image than try to shape yourself in

In the end the courage to be is a human thing, across the board: you can be upper-class, WASP, male, and still have no courage to be.

Harvard's. Which is to say, be yourself—in a self-critical way, not in a self-righteous way. I think that's true for a number of groups that have been excluded: the anti-Catholicism, the anti-Semitism, the anti-women practices that have been part and parcel of Harvard's history at its worst. But when they arrive, if it's simply a matter of wearing a mask and assimilating in a cheap sense, then you're going to be in deep trouble, in terms of intellectual creativity, in terms of existential sustenance. But in being yourself you recognize that Harvard will be a part of you.

I would be dishonest if I said that Harvard wasn't a part of me. My undergrad years here, I was so liberated, empowered, emancipated, I can never deny that. But liberated, emancipated, empowered into what? Not into just another typical Harvardian, but to a unique kind of hybrid figure of which Harvard is a part as well as a whole lot of other things: black church, black street, James Brown, George Clinton, all that, together. I think in the end people have much more respect for that kind of honesty and candor, so you end up not imitating or emulating, but just having the courage to be. And I think when black students see that, they say, this

place can be as much mine as it was Harry Wolfson's in the '30s and '40s, though you must be willing to change. And of course you will change it. When there are figures who exemplify that kind of hybridity, then I think it opens the possibilities for black students coming through. Because, in the end, we're really talking about young people, who represent the future.

And of course it has implications for non-black students, white, brown, red, and yellow, and so forth. Because in the end the courage to be is a human thing, across the board: you can be upper-class, WASP, male, and still have no courage to be. You can think you ought to be black, black proletarian; nope, you're not black proletarian, you're upper-class, WASP, male, it's nothing to be ashamed of, if you have enough courage to be, to wrestle. If you just want to wear a mask and assimilate downward, same problem. And so in that sense it becomes a lesson not just for black intellectuals or black academics, but it becomes a human lesson that cuts across the board.

HRP: There's something you touched on a little bit, something about the individualistic component of a lot of the views we've been discussing. You point out in *Keeping Faith* that there's something in American philosophy of religion that takes individualism more seriously than Marxism in the context of, as you say, modern globalization, international capitalism. What is the state of, or the fate of, individualism? Is the early-pragmatist emphasis on it too much, is it something we need to realize in a different way?

West: One would want to keep in mind that, let's say with Emerson and James, you get the stress on *individualism*. Pierce and Dewey had rich notions of *individuality* which are very different than the kind of individualism you get out of Emerson and James. And yet, I'm deeply wedded to the notion of individuality of persons constituted by communities, even a notion of personality, which is not the same, but also one that connects individuals to lived experience, [such as] processes of socialization, acculturation, and so on, which makes them historical beings. But what happens these days is very sad.

You know who actually is quite profound on this is Robert Penn Warren, who is again a very overlooked major American writer, poet and novelist, probably the greatest poet and novelist we've ever had. What Robert Penn Warren understood was that de-culturalization went hand-in-hand with a lack of history and a lack of connection to tradition, and the lack of historical consciousness, and the decoupling of individuals from traditions makes it very difficult for people not just in getting rich and getting their footing and bearings and so forth, but leads them much more into very cheap forms of conformity.

HRP: Of course the interesting thing about Penn Warren is that he's a student of history.

West: Absolutely. You're thinking of the great novel [*All the King's Men*]. Indeed, and that's one of the great novels, no doubt about it, a political novel. And poor Warren, you know... He hasn't received that much attention. My good friend Harold Bloom calls Robert Penn Warren the most un-Emersonian of American writers. Of course that's a compliment for Penn Warren—for Bloom it's a put-down, but he appreciates Penn Warren's work. And in relation to your question: namely that, ironically, without the sense of history and connection with tradition, all the rhetoric about individuality becomes more and more empty because the individual becomes simply a certain moment within the conformist project, usually for market purposes, fashion, fads, and so forth. At that point, even Emerson and James would thoroughly object, because their notion of individualism is all about nonconformity. It's all about cutting against the grain, as it were. *Self-Reliance* is about abandonment, and [for] James, individualism is always holding [it] at arm's length: "I hate bigness, I can't stand those prevailing paradigms, that Ph.D. octopus system reproducing these graduate students, giving them the stamp of professionalism, I can't stand that." And of course as a Christian for me that is *fundamental*; as a radical democrat, *fundamental*, because conformity is a certain form of authoritarianism, if it runs amok—power imposed, arbitrary power, unaccountable. It's not just a question of peer pressure and so on. It has deep implications for anti-democratic self-formations. We can't have democratic cultures without some source of democratic personalities, democratic individualities.

Again, I think it takes us back to issues of courage, strength, endurance, sacrifice, cutting against the grain. Once the sources of the courage begin to wane, you get cowardliness, cowardice, the real raw stuff of authoritarian politics, and so on. Cowardice goes hand-in-hand with hatred. Christians talk about love, about *Love, love, love, have the courage to love, the courage to be, go down fighting. Whew!* courage. Kierkegaard shows Christian life is living dangerously—ah, proto-Nietzschean, but he's got it under Christian auspices, right? Bernard Shaw says hatred is a coward's revenge to

being intimidated, so that you can't deal with otherness, you can't deal with strangeness, in the courageous way that trying to relate, commune—it's almost Levinas-like. No, what you do is you're intimidated by it, you're fearful of it, and therefore you either want to dominate it or associate that difference with disgust and degradation, which becomes a rationalization for hierarchy imposed upon it, as forms of subjugation, you see. And so in a very interesting kind of way the issues of courage, love, cowardice, hate go hand-in-hand, and we've got a lot of cowardice spreading rapidly. It's always been there, no one could argue, but it's even more so, especially when you have alternatives that are hardly credible. People can't believe that there's really an alternative to the present, they figure they just have to fall in, lock, step, and barrel, because—no chances. There ought to be a few who will take a chance even when there's hardly a chance, because it's right, moral, and just, and so forth. That's a form of courage.

We know, philosophically speaking, that intellectual courage puts philosophy at its best. Socrates—if we believe what Plato and Xenophon said about him—

has intellectual courage in a deep way. And for me, of course, Jesus is not so much intellectual courage, but it's courage as compassion, which I think in the end is much more profound than Socrates; Socrates never weeps the way Jesus weeps. Jesus weeps uncontrollably; we don't have Socrates crying or laughing, which is interesting, gives me a hint that he missed out on something, a lot of things. What I also want to encourage is compassion, that would lead to weeping. And that takes us back to Chekhov, because you really do have Socrates, Jesus, intellectual curiosity, scientist, medical doctor, and deep Christian backdrop but agnostic in belief. Christian temper without the Christian consolation, see, that's good stuff! All that love and compassion, courage, but still Socratic, in terms of intellectual engagement, go wherever the conclusions take you and so forth, but you're still loving. Look into the abyss, whew! That's Chekhov. See, Chekhov's got all that Schopenhauer in him, but yet he's still able to use it in such a way that he ends up sounding like my grandfather. Love, love, love, have the courage to love, the courage to be, go down fighting. Whew! That's Chekhov's announcement, no doubt about it. There's never been another like him.

You think of the philosophical analogue of Anton Chekhov, who do you think of? Is there such a figure? I don't think there is. Wittgenstein probably could have been, but he was too cowardly in his life. He was courageous in his thought, but he couldn't live a life. I tell you, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the great genius of the twentieth-century, become a philosophical dialogue within his life. He just couldn't muster the courage to love another. Brutal, cruel, beating his students and so forth. Relations with the brother, he was a gay brother, relations with the brother, he didn't have enough courage in his life. And it's not his fault in any petty, personal way, he was shaped by a lot of different things, but he's just in no way comparable to someone like a Chekhov, who didn't just invest his genius in his work, his talent and his life to what Oscar Wilde talked about; it was both. Almost meets the Nietzschean criteria of making his life a work of art, even as he's producing literary works of art, though he's primarily a doctor during the day. Unbelievable.

I think in the end, if there's something to aspire to, it's to be the philosophical analogue to Chekhov. This means that you have to be a kind of blues man, because Chekhov certainly had the blues, and his works in some ways sing the blues to hold the blues at bay. But he had a lot of other things going on in terms of his sheer curiosity, wonder, courage to go on, it's quite rare. Chekhov's really not taught in philosophy departments. You get some dialogues, Shakespeare, Sophocles, Aeschelus, and so forth, Chekhov not at all. It's very interesting. He deserves, really, to be thought about philosophically. φ