
Alienation

Two of us professors sat in my office at Rutgers on a winter's day and enjoyed a rare moment of calm. We had finished our committee work, at least all of it we could accomplish; other members had not appeared. Unexpectedly, we had a few moments with nothing scheduled to do. As if we were ships that had idled their motors, a current, usually overridden, began to move us slowly in a strange direction. My colleague in the philosophy department reminisced, recalling wistfully a book he had read years before, *The Professor's House*. The professor in this story was accessible to visitors in his home which lay close to campus. Students went there when the impulse moved them. Singly, in large groups or in small, they discussed at leisure the items that concerned them as human beings.

We lapsed into silence. Finally, becalmed and drifting oddly, I mentioned that when I had gone into university teaching I knew that the pay would not be high, and that both the status and the power would be problematical. But I had expected that this would be compensated by a measure of freedom and tranquility, a life allowing untrammelled reflection as well as human contact on agreeable and significant terms. I would be "my own man." He nodded ruefully, uttered some amenities in a sigh and walked out.

Then a very peculiar moment occurred. It resembled the situation in which a sound that has been going on constantly suddenly stops, and only then does one become focally aware of what had been going on unpleasantly for so long. Except now it was not something external that flooded my awareness, but my own life. An habitual, thrusting, unspeakably close and intimate rhythm or pulse had suddenly stopped, and as my life rose before me, I saw something frenetic, haggard, and grey. Not a pleasant

spectacle, yet I felt enormously relieved, as if a great weight had been taken off my chest.

I seemed to float in my chair, finding myself looking out the window, noticing students passing by on the sidewalk nearby. And I really saw them! Which startled me, for I realized that I had gotten in the habit of not really seeing them—I a professor who was supposed to be a teacher in this university. I could now be aware of how they had appeared to me previously. That was spectral, and it recalled Descartes' description of a world in which the devil may be deceiving us in everything we think we perceive. Are those real people we see, or are they "hats and cloaks which might cover ghosts or automata which move only by springs"? Only in the driest, thinnest, intellectually correct but vacuous sense had the students appeared to me to be human beings.

I did not like what this told me about myself and my situation. Classes in the university met on time, lectures were delivered, tests and grades were given, learned papers were prepared and delivered by faculty members to each other, my salary was received. Everything was under control, tightly interlocked, but I detected a deep alienation which isolated things, people, and programs. I had been caught up in a machine, I feared, removed both from the life of ordinary human beings and from the life of the untrammelled mind. So everything was also out of control.

Is *this* what I had wanted so much and had worked so hard to get? Is this what my parents had raised me to be? Would I want my own children to attend an institution such as this one?

It is the State University of New Jersey, Rutgers, fall 1983, and about 150 undergraduates, largely freshmen and sophomores, are spread out before me, as if arrayed on a large funnel. I look up at them—vestiges of the Greek theatre. We occupy a new building and the chair backs are bright red. Students are vividly outlined against them: one leans her head on the chair top in front of her; others converse—faces close, animated, absorbed; one, nearly recumbent, lolls his head on the chairback and seems to sleep; several drink furtively from straws or eat as they look at me; one peeks out at me from behind his upraised newspaper; some persons whom I cannot see laugh loudly.

These are instants of first contact. I have slipped in and walked down the steps to the semi-circular base of the room nearly unnoticed. Or was there a drop in the noise level? The chance to sit behind the desk presented itself. Immediately it was rejected. It felt as if it would place me at an impossibly great distance from them, as if I could only gaze out across a gulf at another world, handcuffed, unknown. I elect now to deposit my briefcase gently on the floor, very slowly take off my coat, lay it across one side of the desk, and with the greatest deliberateness, hike myself up on the front of the desk and, with legs dangling, arrange my clothes slightly.

Quietly I survey the class. Not one face—of those I see—looks familiar. Perhaps none of them recognizes me either. Each instant is drawn out, pregnant with possibility, and slips beyond recall. If four instants have elapsed, then this instant is fully a fifth of our relationship. A round stone teeters on a ridge. Which way will it run down? A small thing, if one could see it from a cosmic perspective, but I could not look at it this way at that instant. The trajectories of 150 or more different histories meet at this point in time and space. Will the class which begins today amount to anything?

Disturbingly, some students still rustle, read, or loll, although some of this dissident group look away from me as if they want me to see them looking away. It is almost quiet enough for me to speak. What if it will not get any quieter? I am a little frightened. I must somehow enlist them in a joint effort, interweave our trajectories, rather than smash against them and deflect them in who knows what directions. At this point it could go either way. If it gets noisier, I may have to do something that simply imposes my authority, and their old habits of apparent compliance and inner resistance will be reinstated yet again.

The noise remains at a plateau. To abort the possibility of runaway increase I decide to begin. I read, in a fairly loud but matter of fact voice, the single description of this course as it appears in the university catalogue—one description to cover the ten or more instructors who, at one time or another, teach the course, each of whom has his or her ideas about how it is to be done:

Philosophy, 730:105, Current Moral and Social Issues: Examination of such issues as abortion, contraception, sterilization, capital punishment, sexism, racism, censorship, privacy, drug abuse and drug laws, consumption and scarcity of resources.

It is quieter. I ask them if this is what they signed up for and expect to study. Most of them look at me nonplused. It had never occurred to them to question this; they could count on some minimal reliability in the institutions in which they had been students.

I then ask them if they had read the more specific description of courses which had been distributed by the philosophy department to advertise its offerings. Only a scant few raise their hands. This was to be expected, because the distribution of these sheets was limited; each instructor was asked to distribute them at the close of the prior semester to each of his or her classes, and a pile of them was left in the departmental office, three miles from where we now were. I read from these sheets:

For section #5 of Current Moral and Social Issues—Prof. Wilshire—We will be concerned with the question of lying. What are its consequences for the self and its relationships with others? Is lying increasing in our consumer society? Does our work in the university presuppose a commitment to the supreme value of truth?

It was completely quiet now. Puzzlement appeared on some faces or wry amusement, blankness, anger. I told them that the general description, with its “such as” clause preceding the examples of topics indicated a broad, ill-defined area of subject matter, and that the topic of lying overlapped in any case with those of “censorship” and “privacy” which were listed in the general description of the course. I added that if they did not want to stay they could drop the course and add another.

“You mean you are not going to talk about sex, drugs, and abortion at all?” someone spoke out.

“Not hardly at all,” I said.

A dismayed silence settled over the class. One student’s side-long glance at me and furrowed brow suggested, however, that it was not so much the absence of sex, drugs, and abortion that bothered him, but that he had been deceived. I hesitated. A new path suddenly opened up. Instinctively I took it. The silence was

palpable and magnetic. "I have them, *this* concerns them, they're thrown off stride and believe they have been lied to," I thought.

"Do you believe you've been lied to?" I asked. "What can a person believe nowadays—right?"

I paced before the students and swelled with power and confidence. "This will bring the issue of lying home to them." Yet as I walked about in the silence, this emotion was soon joined by another which vied with it for control. Another student's disgruntled face touched it off. My only recently laid plan buckled slightly beneath me. The plan, of course, was to interest students in lying by suggesting that they had been lied to. But on the periphery of my consciousness, a question encroached: Could anything justify a university professor in allowing even the suggestion that lying to students was going on? The question had not dawned on me in the prior instant. Suddenly it was upon me. [Now I would handle things differently than I did then.]

As they sat, somewhat stunned, and I continued to pace, looking at them, I brushed the encroaching question aside with what seemed to me at the moment a brilliant thought: "At an opportune time in the course, I will discuss this issue of my own conduct and they will become deeply interested in *that*." Besides, a student sitting on the side aisle still read the newspaper and drank from a can of soda which he tilted to his mouth so as to leave one eye clear.

I pressed on, maximizing my advantage.

"How do you know that I'm Professor Wilshire? How do you know that I'm a professor at all?"

They remained quiet.

"How do you know that I'll teach a bona fide course even in lying? Why couldn't I be an actor paid by a group of social psychologists to participate in an experiment to determine how gullible students are in the university?"

One student spoke out without waiting for her hand to be acknowledged:

"We could take your picture and go to the chairman of the department and ask him if you are Professor Wilshire."

"But what if he's in on the act, in on the experiment, and lies to you that I am Professor Wilshire?"

She had no answer to that. She began to retort, mentioned something about the dean but broke off, for it probably occurred to her that to go to the dean would be no help, because he too might be in on the act.

“How do you know that I am Professor Wilshire?”

I called on a student who looked at me sullenly.

“My friends and I could pin you and take your wallet and see if you have the right papers.”

The question stopped me for a moment, but only the merest instant. I had not been a professor of philosophy for over 20 years for nothing.

“But, surely, you see that we might have mugged Professor Wilshire and taken his wallet. That’s not so hard. Or, that we counterfeited an I.D. Card. But you students wouldn’t know how that is done, would you?”

Great laughter broke out.

I was immensely pleased. Not only had they become interested in the question of lying—many of them at least—but they were being led to an involvement in the question of identity of self. To ask about the consequences for the self of the practice of lying presupposes that we know something about the self—or think that we do. And a little further questioning disclosed their belief that they are owed the truth just because they are persons or selves, and not because of any particular merit, social standing, or racial characteristics. So what *is* a self? I pointed all this out to them in a quiet, didactic way, and they seemed to see. I paced for awhile again in silence.

“But what if we pinned you, took your fingerprints, checked them against Wilshire’s—assuming Wilshire’s are on file someplace—say on his birth certificate stamped by a hospital?”—a young woman blurted out.

Quietly I praised her, indicated how the discussion might continue, and the class was in the palm of my hand—at least for that day. [But I had won their attention at a cost I will no longer pay.]

At intervals during the course I brought up the questions of my identity and my intentions. This came in handy when we tried to describe just how we feel when somebody lies to us, and why we feel this.

“Isn’t there a difference between reasonable and unreasonable anger?”

“Isn’t it reasonable anger we feel when somebody lies to us and we find out?”

“What if the chairman and the dean came into class on the last day, instead of me, and informed you that—much to their shock—your “professor” had been a fraud, the real Professor Wilshire had not appeared, and that therefore, since the course was not genuine, no credit could be given to you for taking it?”

This evoked the defensiveness, the fear, the sense of things falling apart. [Later I concluded that my performance contributed to this unwittingly.]

We read a little Aristotle and very little Kant. We read all of Orwell’s masterpiece on lying and violence, *1984*. I hoped I had weaned them from talk to reading, but soon it became clear that they found it difficult to read anything with any comprehension, even *1984*. I experienced the truth of what others have observed: that most students have sat far longer before TV, video, and movie screens than they have in classrooms, for untold thousands of hours. These screens communicate through flashes of images which may exhibit a kind of continuity, but not the kind possessed by the written word. Short, evocative spans of attention are cultivated, rather than the protracted ones necessary for following the narratives and reasonings of trains of words on a page. TV in particular instills a deep passivity: a spectacle produced by merely pushing a button—consumption at practically no cost. Not even the presence of the viewer is required at the scene which is viewed (and unlike the movies, no presence is required at any public place). The actors are unaware of those looking; I sometimes see students looking at me as if they thought I could not see them, as if I were just somebody on their screen. Students are no longer trained to work hard reading books. The words in their school books do not coalesce with the flashy images before their eyes.

Because of this they do not live in history and inherit the past in the way my generation does. When I first saw TV in the 1940s it looked unreal, strange—the images playing fitfully on the little screen in the big box. Now, to a generation that has never known anything else (and many of whose parents have known nothing else), *I* must look unreal, strange—I with my lec-

ture notes in hand, or reading from a book and speaking in a loud voice in this cavernous room. Where are they—where are they as body-minds that must interpret themselves as coming from somewhere, I thought, and going to somewhere?

To face a group of 150 undergraduates in a typical state university, and to try to communicate something from the history of civilization, is to confront a lumpy, heavy incoherence that nevertheless seems to float: it is temporally without depth, rootless, like a cloud—better, like an image in a dream. Until recently the primary educator was the home, and the stock of books, large or small, which it contained. TV is today an intrusive presence in the home, glamorizing the values of consumption and display which hold in the present “epoch”—“epochs” succeeding, eclipsing, and burying each other every few years (and we should not forget that some of the students now in our classrooms come from homes that are illiterate, analphabetic, or nearly so). In most families the grandparents are off somewhere, and the parents, when at home, typically spend little time seriously conversing with their children (unlike a radio, playing as we speak, TV leads us not to look at each other). By this time the parents themselves may have little of the cultural tradition to communicate, but even if they do, its transmission is impeded. Though they may bring a “B” or “B+” average from high school, the majority of students emerge from home and the “lower” schools and appear in universities intellectually and personally impoverished, their reading, writing, and conversational skills appallingly poor.

It is certain that there is a breakdown in the fund of common knowledge and abilities deposited by history. I could not assume that most students could answer questions such as these: Lincoln was President of the U.S. before Jefferson—true or false? The Mediterranean: (a) animal, (b) vegetable, (c) mineral? Christianity is fairly ancient, but Buddhism is fairly modern—True or False? A galaxy is (a) a group of moving picture executives, (b) a system of stars, (c) a flock of sea birds? The Song of Solomon is (a) a Rock group, (b) a book in the Bible, (c) the confession of a mobster? Many did not know that Mexico, with its masses of impoverished and desperate people, bordered on the United States. They could not learn much of what I wanted to teach

them, because we shared no basis from which to begin. They are “culturally illiterate,” and I see many graduating after four years who remain such.

In a real way, students are lost, both in space and time. Good instruction in geography and history, which builds cumulatively over the years, would help, and this they seldom get. But the problem is larger. Students live in a society so rich and powerful technologically that most of us need only “punch in some numbers” to get what we demand. We merely look *at* things—a few things at that—to satisfy some obvious needs or whims; we need not look *around* us. But, as John Dewey pointed out repeatedly, we are organisms and cannot escape our surround. To be uninvolved emotionally with that, not deeply coordinated with that, is to lose vitality at a primal level. The educational task is to draw students out into the world so they perceive that there are difficulties in living well, and so that they freely take up the challenge. This I was *trying* to do.

But it is not just the students’ problem. I wondered: has our society lost its ability to retain its past and keep itself oriented in the world? Has the university any chance at all of rectifying this? Haven’t all previous societies had some way of preserving their basic traditions? How could we grasp securely any possibilities if we rattled around in a disconnected present—a Cartesian point-instant? Although we seldom notice any longer, the very money in our pockets bears witness to a commemorative dimension even in our commercial dealings. The coins and bills are engraved with the images of our nation’s past leaders (as they used to be engraved with Liberty, the goddess). This “mere” piece of paper can be exchanged for that valuable piece of goods because the near-numinous force and value of our whole tradition backs the transaction and makes the two equivalent. We trust our history to empower our dealings with each other. But even our most recent history is barely audible or visible to us. Plastic credit cards threaten to expunge the images, to make money obsolete, and economics a purely quantitative study. But what does this do to our image-inations, our sense of the depth of time, our directedness, the substance of our lives?

The numbness and stasis and disconnectedness so often seen in students are palpable and need to be explained and addressed.

There seems to be no sense of being part of history, of sharing a common venture with humankind—at least no sense of sharing a venture with those in power. The disintegration of a sense of historical community is amazing. It is not just that key dates are missing, hooks upon which prior generations have hung a panoramic and coherent view of time and existence, however skewed or biased. Missing is any sense that anything is missing. Few students have a clear awareness that there might be segments of human development which, when laid down, lead up to themselves and point beyond, and for which they have responsibility as the group of living human beings. Few students have any sense that they are missing empowerment and stabilization which comes from identifying with revered persons in the past; as if there were a constant voice which said, These are our sources, our very substance, and we can count on them! The erosion of trust is nameable and nameless.

To sustain an interest in a project presupposes one's belief that something good will come of the effort, and that there will be a future for us. A group of psychiatrists reports that many young people do not believe they will live out their lives, for there will be the ultimate betrayal of trust: arsenals of atomic weapons will be fired by the managers of the earth, and will burn and poison our world. One child reported that being given life was like being given a broken toy for Christmas.*

I tried to sort out the reasons for their apathy. How discouraged were they by the nuclear threat? I asked students both in class and out. With the fewest exceptions, they did not seem to think about it at all. The threat had been with them (and with most of their parents) all their lives. I speculated that if they had ever been anxious about it, the effect now was just a dulling of their sensibilities, or a settled search for distractions. As Robert Lowell wrote, "We've talked our annihilation to death."

I tried the hypothesis that embedded in the apathy is cynicism concerning educated intelligence. If so many educated people in the most "advanced" nations have behaved so foolishly that the survival of life is at risk, why take the trouble to become

*Helen Caldicott, M.D., *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War* (New York: 1984), p. 310.

educated oneself? Most students seem to sense that beneath the veneer of argumentative speech and nicely arrayed information exhibited by most authorities—East and West—lie raw, uneducated emotions: fear, confusion, chauvinism, selfish ambition, fragile self-love, foolish pride, childishness. Why study for future benefits when our most brilliant thinkers—or so it would appear—our technocrats and professionals are marching lock-step toward annihilation? Why listen to adults with the emotional age of ten-year-olds? And I was not sure that most of the students had much confidence in their professors either.

I thought more about the ideology of consumerism as a reason for their numbness and detachment. After spending their lives barraged by images equating buying with goodness, they seemed deeply to believe (if they believed anything deeply) that anything good can be bought, and without ever looking closely at the images on the money. A college education meant a degree, and this is a commodity which can be bought by paying fees and serving time. The possibility that knowledge could only be earned through diligent and at times drudging effort to come up to standards native to the enterprise of knowing itself, had apparently never entered most of their minds.

Faced with those serial rows of usually blank faces I could better understand them, I thought, if I imagined large, drowsy-eyed infants sucking at a copious breast—one which they brought with them somehow to the classroom. It is true that there is activity of a sort, a minimal activity of sucking, of cutting into an infinite flow. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari put it, “Each . . . flow must be seen as an ideal thing, an endless flux, flowing from something not unlike the immense thigh of a pig. The term *hyle* in fact designates the pure continuity that any one sort of matter ideally possesses.”* My first—and perhaps last—job was simply to wake them up. Thus I explained myself to myself and tried to justify my methods.

Overshadowing all the factors which might account for their numbness and detachment was a constant: most students did not

*Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: 1983) [*Anti-Oedipe*, 1972].

believe that their work in the university would help them know what was good for them to do and to be. Doubtless, their protracted exposure to advertisers' exaggerations or flim-flam, and to endless accounts of various politicians' and executives' shading of the truth, contributed to their scepticism. In any case, they had no confidence that truth about the human condition could be discovered. Either that or they felt no need to discover it.

As I brought up the question of truth itself I saw that they were utterly unequipped to deal with it intellectually. Asking them to raise their hands if they had ever studied the question in twelve or more years of formal schooling, only one raised his hand. They lacked confidence in their own minds, and the joy that goes with this, to overcome their instinctual tendencies to believe in conventional ways. Most refused to treat my conduct as a game which challenged their wits and kept them on edge. I was probably Professor Wilshire, and that was enough to still their minds. There was some interest in truthfulness—the intention to communicate what one thinks is the truth—for they could feel, again instinctively, the pain and hurt of being lied to, and the reassurance that comes with the conviction that one is being honestly dealt with. But when I attempted to extend this interest to an intellectual level, and raise the question of truth itself, they typically lost interest. Why? Because they appeared to have little intellectual grip on how truth could be possible, so why expend much effort on how truthfulness is either possible or desirable?

Indeed! Perhaps a person seriously intends to convey what's true, but if truth itself is highly problematical, perhaps we're not being given it, despite good intentions to communicate it. Did the students begin sucking somnolently on that immense breast because they believed that all the professor's intellectualizing and arguing and learned references to books had no chance at getting at any verifiable truth, even if he was being truthful? Or, were they just incredibly smug, and believed they had all the truth they would ever need?

I should have grasped this aversion to inquiry into truth more firmly, and I tried to make up for lost time. After endeavoring to fix in their minds the distinction between truthfulness and truth, I kept asking them what truth itself is. It was easy to

give examples of persons who desire to communicate truth, but who in fact communicate what's false. Ignoring those students who were somnolent, most of the faces of those who were paying attention were blank.

Was I doing something wrong?

Clutching at any straw, I said, "Take this desk I'm sitting on. To say that this desk *is* a desk is to grasp the truth, isn't it?"

"But that's too easy," a bright student joined in. "We all know that what you're sitting on is really a desk, so it must be true to say that it is. Take something important, take human beings, political systems, or the nature of goodness and badness. Who is to say what the reality is?"

I retorted, wanting to *involve* them: "As you or I or nearly anyone are the ones to say that this is a desk, because we can see those essential features that make it a desk, so the ones who know most about the technical features of this desk are the ones to answer the technical questions about it and to say what the less obvious features of it are—engineers, carpenters, metalworkers, physicists. The ones who are in a position to know most about what it really is are the ones to tell us the truth about it. What is goodness? We must ask those—living or dead—who know most about who we *are*, and what makes our lives vital and meaningful."

The same bright student continued, "You're going in circles. We asked you who is to say what the truth is, and you say the ones who are to say what the reality is. But you've gotten nowhere. Who is to say what the reality is?"

"But are all circles bad ones, vicious ones?" I shot back, proud of myself, putting her down [but I would later rue it]. "The persons who are to say what the reality is are just the ones best equipped to look at it attentively and to mean something relevant about it and to test this meaning through ongoing dealing with it, experimenting with it. And if what they mean about the reality is confirmed through further experience, this meaning is the *truth* about *reality*."

"But they might be wrong. And even if they happen to be right, they grasp only a small bit of truth."

"Sure, they *might* be wrong. But even if they are, they can be only if you suppose that sometimes they, or you, or some

persons are right—or else how could you ever *know* that sometimes some people are wrong? And so let's suppose that sometimes some people grasp only a little bit of truth, given the whole universe, but they do grasp some truth."

But my slight fit of gloating was cut short. Perhaps ten percent of the class showed any interest.

The vast majority did not care at all about questions of truth or reality, at least not that I could tell. They must have thought that even to raise these questions in this public place was needless or futile. I could arouse their instinctive interest in reality, particularly in their own reality, and in that of others to whom they were related intimately or practically. But their personal interests did not cohere with any ascertainable intellectual interests. Life in the classroom was unhinged from their personal lives. They were drowsy in class because it all seemed to them an uninteresting (or threatening?) dream. This is where basic educational effort should gear into students.

But anyone who looks can see that the university, as presently constructed, cannot make this effort. I was reminded that many professors have nothing to say about truth, regard the general question as "philosophical"—and therefore to be dismissed—and that many others expend great efforts to knock the instinctive attachment to truth out of students' heads and hearts and to inject skepticism about most questions. They will sometimes say that they are trying to narrow students' attention to questions fruitfully raised in the disciplinary field at hand, but they do not consider how their attack on the students' instinctual attachments and convictions may be affecting these students' ability to live. For these primal commitments are the ones that orient, root, and empower us in the encompassing, background world; and it is this that these professors have, perhaps, weakened.

It's as if most students' selves were split. In order to maintain some vital, instinctual attachment to truth, they isolate their critical intellects from their instincts and feelings. Why? Apparently because they sense that only skepticism or cynicism could result from exercising their intellects freely: only undermining of their grounding—only pain, confusion, and disorientation within the enviroing background world. So they drug their intellects and

dumbly accept skepticism on the intellectual level. In effect they say, No contest!, and leave the field; for if they disengage and drug their minds, their minds cannot harm them. Instinctively great numbers shun the laser beam of university specialism and professionalism. And I seemed to have done little to counteract their aversion.

Of course, some of the apathy seems to be smugness: they do not believe that any more truth is needed to get what they want—a professional career with some power and wealth. But I think I detect in many cases a defensive aspect to the smugness, a fear cropping out that what they have may not be sufficient for life's problems; so the question of truth is disturbing and should be suppressed. That must be why they suck on the immense tit.

I think that many students come to the university with at least one dogma firmly ensconced, and it shields them from disappointments: "When asked about serious matters of moral concern, one can only think, There is no truth about them." (At least this holds in public, when they must defend their beliefs intellectually.) One can point out to these students that this is a contradiction, for to hold it is to believe that it is *true* that there is no truth. But, alas, it is such a life-denying and self-stultifying position that it numbs the mind which holds it. That is, it incapacitates the mind's ability to reflect upon its own activities and to discern that something is wrong.

When a few select students get a glimmering of the difficulty that their protective skepticism lands them in, most of them attempt to disguise their instinctive aversion to mental effort. Some even suggest that any claim to know truth about any controversial matter is vaguely reprehensible. Why? If they can be prodded into articulation the answer seems to be, "Because it is undemocratic, totalitarian, intolerant of others' beliefs, both in our culture and out. We must try to understand others' points of view."

"'Understand'?—but then you mean that you try to grasp the *truth* about others' views of things."

But the undermining of self-reflection recurs, as do the rationalizations, such as, "You're older than I and better with words." In effect: "You're a bully." [I now see there was a grain of truth in that.]

I have found, as I said, that the response of fellow professors in the university is often on the same swampy, bleary level. Skepticism about truth, tacit or manifest, mindless or half-articulated, is widespread (although there may be tacit overconfidence in the powers of *one's own* field to discover it). This skepticism about truth—nihilism—occurs particularly, but not exclusively, in English, comparative literature, and various fine arts departments. The typical response of fellow members of the philosophy department is to lose themselves in thickets of technical thought about truth—epistemology—and to lose a sense of the human significance of the philosophical problem of truth that surrounds them everyday: people wander about without moral guidance within cramped or empty horizons, a lived-world which is anaesthetizing, stifling, or falling apart. Outsiders typically lose all sense of the significance of the philosophy department—and of philosophical thinking itself.

The problem for professors today who are educators is that nihilism, cynicism, and mindlessness are most rampant in the university itself. To evaluate our efforts we resort to arrays of numbers in boxes, but the numbers contact the human realities at stray points only. In the main they float detached, because we do not believe that we can discover the truth about what we ought to do and be—about what education should be. We cling to the floating boxes, for they seem to be better than nothing.

The course, Current Moral and Social Issues, is now over. How would it be evaluated? Good? Bad? Indifferent? What would the standards be? Against what background would the judgment emerge? How could anyone tell (“Who is to say?”) what each—or most—took away as the trajectory of each life continued in some way, perhaps feebly, or sputteringly. Something had been appropriated from the course, I supposed: a joke of mine? an expression or shrug? the issues of truthfulness and truth that I wanted to be central? Surely the true/false and multiple-choice test which I gave to the large class told me pathetically little. Their notebooks which I had read until my eyes smarted—that invitation to speak personally about their experience with lying? Were they being truthful in those notebooks? Maybe they were just trying to arouse my interest?

Did they grasp some truth about their lives? I had to suppose that they did know something, and that also truthfulness was exhibited in some of the cases. The archaic background demanded this of me.

The course is now over, the classroom empty. How fast it has all come and gone! Along with some quiet satisfaction are feelings of regret, confusion, and suspense. As I sit behind the desk, a gulf between me and the students threatens to open to an impossible width. I summon them back into my mind, and think, so as to convince even myself, "I have made mistakes, but I have not been merely an image on a TV screen which you could wipe away. At least I have been as real as I can be, and concerned in my own way, and we have tried to figure out a way to live sanely!" And there were those gratifying moments in which their urge to form and transform themselves was touched, moments I thought belonged with real education.

But the actual impact of all this? Are the trajectories of their lives any more lively, sustained, directed, hopeful? How can I tell? I will walk outside to a world-politics, a university-politics, and a field of professional philosophy that have shown little interest for most of the century—all of them—in asking educational questions of educators; they are weirdly removed from the human work we professors are paid to do. It is a world unhinged from the young and the unborn that seems to have gone somnambulistic in its tunneling vision and constricting concerns.

And behind all these questions, on the dim margins of my consciousness, I sensed others—just enough to make me deeply uneasy. Why did I have to continually "bomb" students with stimuli to keep their interest? Trying to counteract the passivity of their TV watching, had I become like a TV performer myself? Why did I still feel so alienated from the students? Was it the sheer size of the class (might I have occasionally broken it into smaller groups and encouraged initiative)? Or did I not want them to get any closer to me? Was I really as interested in those students as I told myself I was? Was I deceiving myself? Was I really a good teacher?

I had questions about the structure of the university, the state of the world, and myself. I felt a twinge of hopelessness.